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Female Genital Mutilation in Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Switch*

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Female Genital Mutilation, Clitoridectomy, Circumcision.

This article explores the representations of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Switch* (2016). In this article, I investigate why the fictional communities depicted in the selected novel engage in FGM practice. The key method used to obtain data is a close reading of the primary text. The secondary texts of both print and electronic forms from relevant works were also consulted. The data was collected with the guidance of the research objective. The study involved the examination of documents guided by a textual checklist as the major research instrument. This study adopted the cultural feminist literary theory. In the study, I discover that different communities engage in FGM as a way to regulate their women's sexual behaviour and as a norm to transform them from childhood to adulthood. The author has tactfully used techniques like diction, setting and description among others to clearly bring out her message.

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores the representations of Female Genital Mutilation (hereafter FGM) in Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Switch* (2016). In this journal, I investigate why the fictional communities depicted in the selected novel engage in FGM practice. By so doing, I hope to add my voice to the criticism and fight against FGM through literary praxis.

Mary Busingye Karoro Okurut is a member and founder of the Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE). She has published various literary works, which include; *The Curse of the Sacred Cow* (1994), *The Adventurous Sisters* (1994), *Child of a Delegate* (1997), *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), *The Official Wife* (2003), *The Switch* (2016) and a collection of short stories entitled *Milking a Lioness and Other Stories*.

Definition of Key Terms

In this journal, the key terms hereunder have the meanings herewith attached to them:

- FGM (Female genital mutilation) also known as female genital cutting and female circumcision, is the ritual cutting or removal of some or all parts of the external female genitalia.
- Clitoridectomy is the surgical removal, reduction, or partial removal of the clitoris. It is rarely used as a therapeutic medical procedure, such as when cancer has developed in or spread to the clitoris. It is often performed on intersex newborns. Commonly, non-medical removal of the clitoris is performed during female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin from the human penis. In the most common procedure, the foreskin is extended with forceps (in pre-pubescent children, its adhesion to the glans must also be broken with

a probe), and then a circumcision device may be placed, after which the foreskin is excised.

The purpose of this journal is to explore the representations of FGM in the selected novel. The main objective is to investigate why the fictional communities in the selected novel engage in the practice of FGM.

Scope of the Study

My exploration focused on *The Switch* [TS] (2016) as the primary source. The rationale for selecting the novel is that it has FGM as a central thematic concern. Secondly, *The Switch* is one of East Africa's most recognised and studied novels. I argue that the themes and fictional communities represented in this novel sufficiently reflect the real-world situation (familiar occasions) of not only East Africa but Africa in general.

Justification of the Study

My study intends to explore the representations of FGM in the novel by investigating why the fictional communities in the selected novel engage in the practice of FGM. This is in relation to the cultural feminist literary theory. The concept of FGM is a central one in the selected work and therefore requires a unique analysis which I have done to bring out its relevance and significance in contemporary contexts.

Significance of the Study

I am hopeful that the study will enrich the criticism and fight against FGM. My findings will hopefully be used by literary critics and other scholars in their effort to investigate and understand the trauma evidenced by females, especially in my selected literary text, and this will enhance their fight against FGM in their communities.

I also hope that it will serve as a reference for further research to be conducted by other scholars in this area. This study's findings will hopefully guide the policymakers and non-governmental organisations in designing and setting up new regulations focused

on promoting women's rights by addressing Female Genital Mutilation as a major issue in women's rights violation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the cultural feminist literary theory. Feminist literary theory uses the principles and ideology of feminism to critique the language of literature. This school of thought seeks to analyse and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male domination by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within the literature.

More so, Clarke (2015) adds that everyone has the right to sexual autonomy and the ability to make decisions about when, how and with whom to conduct their sexual life and further examines the universal images used by women writers to uncover the unconscious symbolism women have used to describe themselves, their world, female society across time and nationalities to uncover the specifically feminine language in literature. New Feminist literature and criticism minimise the focus on male influences and disruptions in a woman's text by socio-political hegemony to better uncover the universal unconscious of the female mind in its own context. Therefore, the feminist theory has been significant in this study since it has acted as a guide as I further explored the representations of female genital mutilation in Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Switch*

LITERARY SCHOLARS ON FGM

There are many literary scholars who have tackled female genital mutilation and some of these include; Nawal El Saadawi in her book *Women and Sex* (1972). In their works, they reveal how the African feminist, activist and literary spheres are divided in their perception of FGM. Stephen Bishop (1992) also handled FGM in his article "Oppositional Approaches to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in African Literature. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez's (2000) "Mother as a Verb:

The Erotic, Audre Lorde and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), dwells on the injurious practice through theorisations of female sexuality and eroticism. In her work, she majorly concentrated on how females are sexually exploited and exposed to all sorts of sexual torture including FGM, which leaves them in a sorry state. Asma El Dareer (1998) in his work *Female Genital Mutilation in Modern African Novels*, points out that most novels, both African and African American depict FGM in a negative way. These studies reflect FGM practices which reconnect to my study area, but their discussion on the issue is brief and they thus leave out very important aspects of the practice. This study therefore intends to analyse the FGM practice in depth by exploring critical issues like reasons why the fictional communities engage in FGM practice.

The four African novels: Waris Dirie: *Desert Flower*, Mende Nazer: *Slave*, Fauziya Kasindja: *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* and Jacyee Anigolu-Johnson: *Mikela. Memoirs of a Maasai Woman* and two African American novels: Rita Williams-Garcia: *No Laughter Here* and Tracy Price-Thompson: *A Woman's Worth*. All these works reflect women to be in a miserable situation as they are deeply inflicted by the effects of FGM. This study intends to discover whether such challenges are still reflected in the works under study. Naylor (2010), in her novel *Bailey's Cafe*, collects seven different women's stories, each dealing with a specific type of abuse, namely domestic violence, sexual exploitation and FGM inclusive. Although Gloria Naylor analyses different abuses, her treatment of FGM does not extensively show how characters and communities are affected by FGM and thus prompting the researcher to carry out this study in order to fill this gap. FGM plays an important part in the story of an Ethiopian girl Mariam, concentrating on her ruin and the role circumcision has had in it. Walker's (1992) *The Secret of Joy* does not hesitate to offer the eradication of female circumcision as the answer to the challenges that result from FGM. One of its

passages suggests that failure to eradicate FGM will bring more pain to the victims. This has prompted the researcher to carry out this study in order to discover the strategies being put in place by the community and individuals as they try to eradicate the FGM practice.

In addition to the literary ones, there are other scholars who have tackled the issue of FGM and these include feminists from the 1970s to date. The Egyptian physician and feminist Nawal El Saadawi criticised FGM in her book *Women and Sex* (1972); the book was banned in Egypt and El Saadawi lost her job as the director general of public health. She then created a complete chapter entitled “The Circumcision of Girls” in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (2007), which described her own clitoridectomy when she was six years old. This study intends to identify the age at which girls are usually exposed to FGM and further identify the community response towards the individuals who advocate for the abolition of FGM practice. El Saadawi’s works expose how FGM is practised in Egypt and the Arab community and although the study helps to bring out the dangers of FGM in the Arab communities, it leaves out other parts of the African continent which are also affected by FGM. However, based on the already established findings from the works cited above, my study is different because the findings from this study and the data collected from the two acted as a basis for the comparison of how FGM is practised in the two communities, the Arab and the African. This expounded on the understanding of FGM practice from a wider perspective and helped me make a proper comparison between FGM in East Africa and the entire world.

Hayes (1975), an American social scientist, became the first female academic to publish a detailed account of FGM, aided by her ability to discuss it directly with women in Sudan. Her article in *American Ethnologist* called it “female genital mutilation” rather than female circumcision and

brought it to wider academic attention. Edna Adan Ismail, who worked at the time for the Somalia Ministry of Health, discussed the health consequences of FGM in 1977 with the Somali Women’s Democratic Organization. Unlike Edna’s article which concentrated on FGM in Somali, my study concentrated on the practice in Ugandan and Kenyan literature texts.

According to Bishop (1992) in his article “Oppositional Approaches to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in African Literature”, literature is an ideal vehicle for discussing a wide range of issues, including feminism, human rights, and religious and political fundamentalism. My study embraces the above assertion not only by using feminism theory to discover how relevant such a theory is in relation to FGM practice but also by exposing the contribution of feminists in the fight against FGM basing on the selected texts under study.

Asaah’s (2006) “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Ambivalence, Indictment and Commitment in Sub-Saharan African Fiction” investigates the treatment of FGM in selected African narratives. To him, FGM requires sustained scrutiny and debate until it is abolished because it is a sensitive, emotional issue. Similarly, to this, my study seeks to identify the perception and angle from which the author depicts FGM in their works.

Abdulrehman (2023) also identifies mixed reactions to FGM among African writers. Some are positive, while the majority are negative. A small fraction of these authors avoids showing their opinion on FGM practice in their works. The reasons for this kind of writing originate in the cultures that practice FGM, where this custom is considered taboo. It is a forbidden topic not to be spoken of by its members. The African authors included in this study have broken this cultural taboo, thus defiance of this tradition. They have furthermore had at least some contact with the Western culture and its view of women’s role in society, which undoubtedly caused them to compare and question the African tradition.

I intend to identify the extent to which tradition contributes to the FGM practice and establish the standpoint of the selected authors towards FGM. Abdulrehman's (2023) study made me relate their perception to the community in which they originate. The above-mentioned study helped me to establish why communities engage in FGM, thus contributing to my study findings.

This dictates regard for the complexity of this issue and thus an ambivalent approach of the majority of African writer's vs a partial, one-sided approach of the majority of African American writers. The latter is best explained by their second-hand acquaintance with this topic, along with the influence of their own cultural values and education, as well as a different understanding of women's social roles. It is interesting to observe that, compared to the African American unified one-dimensional view of FGM, the perception of this practice is divided; the African approach to this topic is usually ambivalent, intertwining indirect, blurry descriptions with a direct portrayal of consequences, and apologetic passages, explaining the reasons behind the practice, with statistic quotations of FGM's wide presence in the world. This study is carried out as a strategy to show and describe the complexity of the FGM issue and at the same time, reveal the author's dilemma as they try to either justify or refute FGM as a traditional African custom, and this acted as a basis for my study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is basically descriptive, employing a qualitative approach. I established why fictional communities in the selected novel engage in the practice of FGM. This kind of description helped me to vividly describe the data that I collected.

Procedure for Data Collection

I had a close reading of both the major text and other relevant works such as newspapers, articles, magazines, journals, and research reports with the

guidance of the research objectives and research questions so as to discover what takes place in the selected texts regarding issues to do with FGM

Sources of Data

The main source of data used is *The Switch* (2016). Journals, relevant texts, and research reports were sought from different universities and libraries that I accessed. Some other information was attained from the internet.

Data Collection Methods

The key method I used to obtain data is a close reading of Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Switch* (2016) and related works on a daily basis. The data was collected guided by my research objective and research question. The study involved the examination of documents guided by a textual checklist as a major research instrument. The checklist comprised aspects that helped me to internalise the key variable, which is female genital mutilation.

Data Collection Instruments

Notes were written in the researcher's notebook, provided they corresponded to the study objective. Such information was then broken down into a structured printed textual checklist to make it easy for the researcher to understand and attain the set objective.

The recording method that I used was note-taking. The researcher summarised the content from both the primary and secondary texts. Paraphrasing was then done; the researcher would restate the collected material as a way of attaining detailed notes on specific passages which would not need the exact wording. Some information was quoted and transcribed accurately using quotation marks and accurate page numbers. This was done with the help of note cards that I created. This entailed both the ideas that support my argument and those that are against it.

Finally, personal notes were made. I wrote notes on the note cards during the research process, and these were important in supporting my arguments at the stage of data presentation, analysis, and discussion.

Data Processing

I obtained data through thorough reading and exploring the available relevant sources guided by a textual checklist. The data was recorded and edited on a daily basis. After all the required data had been attained, checking and editing of the entire lot took place. The raw data was then checked for completeness, accuracy, and uniformity to eliminate obvious discrepancies and other mistakes in the recording. The large amounts of data were reduced to manageable proportions. All this was done with the guide of the textual checklist and the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis

I used the textual analysis technique to interpret and categorise the collected data during both the analytical and discussion stages.

Data Interpretation and Discussion

Data were categorised into themes and sub-themes derived from the objectives of the study. The data analysed were categorised and edited to suit the set objectives. Such information was then interpreted and discussed and a conclusion whether the study had achieved the set objectives or not was made.

Data Analysis

I used a textual analysis technique to interpret and categorise the collected data. During both the analytical and discussion stages, the study particularly considered the quantitative elements of recurrence and frequency with regard to the identified variables initially indicated in the textual checklist.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Data was categorised into themes and sub-themes derived from the objectives of the study. The data analysed were categorised and edited to suit the set objectives with the help of the textual checklist aspects. The information attained was then coded and grouped; this helped me to give an overall view of the given data that entailed the textual checklist aspects with their frequency within different set objectives of the study. Such information was then interpreted and discussed. After doing this, a conclusion about whether this study had achieved the set objectives or not was made.

Discussion of Findings

Why the Fictional Communities in the Selected Novels Engage in the Practice of FGM

Communities in *The Switch* (TS) take part in the FGM practice in order to uphold their cultural values and help to control women from engaging in prostitution acts that make them be unfaithful to their husbands and families. This is revealed by Adeni (A kidnapper of Daisy, minister Chelimo's daughter);

..... *We shall not allow you to kill our values, to turn our women into prostitutes and unfaithful wives. To help you out of the way, we have, as I speak now, your daughter Daisy, in our hands and we are going to do to her exactly what you are saying should no longer be done to our women* (p. 40).

From the above quotation, according to Adeni, FGM is used as a strategy to control and regulate the behaviour of women and make them more manageable as per the Sabiny tradition. This is why traditionalists like Adeni and his colleagues believe that they have to uphold this cultural practice if they are to have well-disciplined generations and proper marriage material according to their culture. Thus, they have to capture Daisy, the daughter of Minister Chelimo in order to stop her from proceeding with

her campaign of fighting against FGM, the practice they cherish most.

In addition, FGM helps to control the libido of women and girls. The circumcised women have limited sexual desires and they are thus settled to make families and be faithful to their partners as it is revealed;

...they think that FGM ensures premarital virginity and inhibits extra-marital sex, because it reduces a woman's libido. But the truth is that it's too harsh, not only to the woman but even to those around her (p. 172).

It is therefore used as a strategy to uphold families together and maintain their cultural norms alongside their stable families. They believed this could only be achieved through FGM practice.

In some other context, FGM was a sign to show the brevity that women had. Though it was considered compulsory to the entire society, few of the girls would pass through this process successfully without causing mistakes that would prove them to be cowards or sometimes lose their lives. The survivors would thus be considered brave and fit to be called complete women. As stated by Chelimo's mother in *The Switch*;

..... in life, some things are like that. But it is also our pride because we are not cowards. Some tribes have cowardly women, we are not cowards (p. 67).

The mother encourages the daughter that all will be well and even promises to be by her side to give her the courage to go through it proudly. The quotation above reveals that circumcision was a great sign that women were brave and thus able to handle different tasks ahead of them as wives and mothers. They therefore took part in circumcision as a way to prove their worth.

According to this study, different families and characters encourage their girls to take part in FGM because they have a strong love for their children and would love to see them being considered full women. Sabiny community in *The Switch*

encourages their children to undertake FGM practice as a way to transform girls into mature and recognised women. This is in relation to Kaplan (2015) in his article "Life history theory and evolutionary psychology", in which he reveals that the FGM practice is internationally recognised as a violation of the human rights of girls and women, constituting an extreme form of discrimination against women; however, it is out of mothers' love and cares for the future of their daughters that the practice is perpetuated, bringing ethnic and gender identity to the girls.

In regard to how FGM affects characters individually and collectively, this study discovered that FGM is a strong challenge to married couples most especially women, since they are unable to fully enjoy their marital obligations. FGM causes both physical and psychological damage even when the physical wounds recover, the damage put in their hearts and spirit can never recover. They are permanently destroyed beyond repair. This relates to Abusharaf (2006) who reveals that there is always psychological pain suffered by circumcised women.

Most girls have lost their lives in the process of FGM. Characters like Chemtai in *The Switch* are unfortunate that they end up succumbing to death due to the injuries of FGM. It is out of this that the uncircumcised girls live in fear all the time for they are not sure what will happen to them.

Uncircumcised girls like Cheptoyek in *The Switch* are forcefully circumcised. This makes them lose their pride as young girls and they end up living a life of disillusionment which makes them escape from the communities in which they have lived for quite a long time. They surely pay a heavy price of humiliation and torture.

This study discovered that different communities tend to use the diction to identify women/girls who have not undergone female genital mutilation practice with different names in their local dialects. In *The Switch*, FGM practice is referred to as *rotwet* such terminologies relate to Althaus (1997) who

reveals that the choice of words the authors use to state their negative views of FGM, taking advantage of shocking, dramatic terminology, comparisons, metaphorical language and whole stories, a very self-righteous tone or even the choice of narrator, which results in their sometimes overly exaggerated and one-dimensional FGM descriptions. This single-perspective approach can be noted also in the description of the consequences of FGM as evidenced in the way Karooro applies the use of words to depict her message to the reader.

It is in *The Switch* where the author directly refers to female circumcision as “Female Genital Mutilation”, thus contradicting Flora Nwapa’s (1966) assertion, which reveals that the choice of names for FGM involves more indirect expressions, like to have a bath, sometimes also circumcision, but never mutilation.

According to this article, the author uses male characters to be at the forefront of supporting FGM practice. In *The Switch*, male characters like Adeni and Arthur are the schemers to ensure that Daisy (Chelimo’s daughter is circumcised). This approves Althaus (1997) who reveals that the culprits and implementers of FGM are ready to protect their tradition at any cost. Men utilise their cultural superiority to suppress powerless women. It is expressed indirectly when the writer stresses the importance of circumcision as a prerequisite for marriage and a main target for girls. At the same time, assigning guilt is connected to the reasons for circumcision offered in the novels. This relates to Miller (2007) in her work *Effects of Stereotypes About Feminists on Feminist Self-Identification* as she outlines the difficulties and much critique feminist literary theory has been subjected to. These works have made a difference in the practice of anthropology hence making a contribution to feminist thinking. This theory exposed underlying patriarchal tensions within the selected novels and interrogated the ways in which basic literary assumptions about such novels are contingent on female subordination. These works helped me to

understand the intersecting points of femininity and guided me in interpreting most assumptions on gender politics by accessing different categories of identity that involve race, class, and sexual orientation.

The author uses vivid descriptions to illustrate how FGM is practised. Yapsiwa in TS describes different forms of FGM. She, however, supports the second form of FGM. She explained that it involved cutting the prepuce, clitoris, and labia completely. Such description that the author uses is significant in that it helps the reader to clearly understand how FGM is done in the Sabin community compared to other societies which have other forms of FGM. This relates to the World Health Organization (WHO 2022), which defines FGM as ‘all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or another injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. It still approves the feminist theory, which asserts that; Feminist literary theory has many aspects like; sexual oppression, sexism, harassment, and beautification, among others (Franke, 1997).

Walker (1992) in *The Secret of Joy* reveals that eradication of female circumcision is the answer to this FGM issue and further emphasises that failure to eradicate FGM will only bring more needless victims; this study discovered that such advocates do exist in all communities under study; however, the researcher discovered that these members of the society who do not embrace FGM as a tradition are isolated and mistreated by the communities in which they lived. Such individuals and families would be discriminated against and isolated. These advocates exist in all three works under study.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it is apparent that female genital mutilation is vivid in the selected novel; different communities engage in FGM as a way to regulate their women’s sexual behaviour and as a norm to transform them from being children to adulthood. Different individuals and communities are affected

in different ways; some individuals have lost their lives while others though they may heal from physical wounds, have stayed damaged psychologically while such a practice has created space for diseases like cancer and fistula to destroy the FGM victims. The author has tactfully used techniques like diction, setting and description among others to clearly reveal the message.

The researcher observed that the novel under study depicts FGM from a negative perspective and henceforth tries to advocate for its abolition. This corresponds with El Dareer (1998) in his work *Female Genital Mutilation in Modern African Novels* in which he points out that most novels both African and African American, depict FGM in a negative way. It is, therefore from this conclusion that the researcher believes that her study objectives have been fully exploited.

Recommendations

This article explored the representations of FGM in Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Switch* (2016). This was done in order to investigate why the fictional communities in the selected texts engage in FGM practice;

However, the researcher recommends that;

- NCDC (National Curriculum Development Centre) should make the texts set books in order to sensitise the students on Female Genital Mutilation.
- Human rights advocates should sensitise the communities on how best they can ably control female genital mutilation within families.

Area for Further Study

This article explored the representations of FGM in Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Switch* (2016). However, this is not all, more articles can be done in areas like;

- The Depiction of Female Genital Mutilation in the selected East African drama.

- Examine Female Genital Mutilation in other fictional works like Rita Williams-Garcia's *No Laughter Here* and Tracy Price-Thompson's *A Woman's Worth*.

This would be important in ascertaining the degree to which female genital mutilation is reflected in East African works.

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