

Feminist Theory and the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

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Introduction

Feminist theorists over the past 30 years, while rejecting any sort of univocal trajectory in coming to “grips” with constructions of the body as a site for material and social practice in culture and literature, have generated and embraced a pluralization of bodies of knowledge concerning the female body. Among these pluralizations of bodies of knowledge, as theorized by post-structuralist theoretical feminists such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and by feminists of the Anglo-American tradition such as Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler, the body is read consistently as a symbolic/semiotic construct. The trajectory of all of these feminist scholars is adumbrated and permeated with the specter of Gayatri Spivak, a scholar whose own contributions are vested throughout the theoretical scaffolding of these prolific feminist thinkers. Spivak (as a feminist deconstructionist) is relentless in her questioning of hegemonic forms of discourse – a hegemony that she interrogates on a global scale.

In questioning hegemonic forms of discourse and their impact on constructions of the body, Spivak raises the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) – a global cultural practice that, according to the World Health Organization, mutilates between 100 and 140 million girls and women the world over and continues to affect more than 3 million women each year. FGM is the direct result of a particular hegemonic discourse wherein the body, especially with regard to sites on those bodies that are mapped as sources of pleasure, is construed as a challenge to the phallic economy. Perceived as a threat to that hegemonic discursive field, these female bodies (here I will focus on a specifically female body), and the sites they maintain are systematically damaged, mutilated and/or destroyed.

Feminist Scholarship on the Body

Investigations regarding the body as symbolic/semiotic

construct were, one might argue, inaugurated (in what would appear to be an oblique fashion) by the debut of Spivak’s introduction and translation of Jacques Derrida’s *On Grammatology* (’74). This move, wherein deconstruction found its link with feminist theory, was quickly followed by three French publications. These three texts: *The Laugh of the Medusa* (’75), *The Newly Born Woman* (’75) *The Sex Which is Not One* (’77) – the first two written by Helene Cixous and the last by Luce Irigaray – codified a good deal of thinking through difference and the female body. Cixous would go so far as to say that a woman’s unconscious is wholly different from that of a man (though women’s writing is accessible to certain male writers such as Jean Genet), and accounts, at least in part, for *The Laugh of the Medusa*’s iconic reference as a feminist manifesto. Irigaray agreed with Cixous in claiming that women were psycho-sexually different from men, and both Cixous and Irigaray specified and explored women’s discourse, not simply as a wholly different form of writing, but also as a means of overthrowing the hegemonic (patriarchal) order. From Cixous’s perspective writing was vulvomorphous in establishing a syntax that lay beyond the binary of (historically male) representational discourse. Irigaray considered female writing as labialinguistic in so far as women’s writing seeks the interiority of a specifically female entry onto plenitude and excess. Both writers sought to queer discourse on the female body; appropriating and harnessing its power (in difference) for their own feminist ends.

Discourse in, on, and around the body gathered momentum in the 1970’s through a decidedly gendered frame with post-structuralist theoretical feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray, but the decade of the 1980’s took a different turn, and feminist theorizing of the body was taken up by scholars such as Nussbaum and Kristeva, the former of the Anglo-American school of feminism, the latter also regarded as a post-structural theoretical

feminist. Nussbaum and Kristeva explored discourse, not as restricted to the female gender per se, but as open to men and women alike. Nussbaum's investigations into constructions of the body are grounded on the work of ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle. In her earlier work, *De Motu Animalus* ('78) she explored Aristotelian thought and Aristotle's notions of desire and hylomorphics (the dynamics of 'pneuma' which he thought were functionally embedded in matter) as well as her notion of unified awareness (wherein one's embodied perceptions of the world, be it through imagination, bodily sensations, irrational/rational encounters, etc., must be taken into consideration to account for empirical data).

Nussbaum's Aristotelian investigations were followed by a series of works in the 1980's (*Fragility of Goodness* ('86), *Love's Knowledge* ('90), *Therapy of Desire* ('94) wherein she explored the nexus of desire, the body and ethical action, and how works of literature (Henry James, Charles Dickens, etc) could be read as sites for one's own exploration of ethical issues within the body of the text (whether male or female). Kristeva was also publishing during the 1980's, and her *Desire in Language* ('80), *Powers of Horror* ('82) and *Revolution in Poetic Language* ('84) demonstrate her inquiry into the language of the maternal 'chora,' a pre-oedipal language that (for Kristeva) exists in the semiotic realm – before the onset of representation in the language of the father, and known in Lacanian terms as the language of the symbolic. Kristeva's investigations took her to Lautreamont (Isidore Lucien Ducasse), Stephane Mallarme, and James Joyce whose works she applauded and held as exemplary of a maternal, semiotic language characteristic of the pre-oedipal stage. For Kristeva, the semiotic (as a trans-signified emotive language) is experienced and recoverable for both men and women as found in the play of hand gestures, zoosemiotics (animal talk), music, silence, and poetry.

Butler wrote prolifically during 1990's and sits atop this triangular sketch for the development of feminist critical theory. In her works, beginning with *Gender Trouble* ('90) followed by *Bodies that Matter* ('93) and *The Psychic Life of Power* ('97), Butler figured the material body as that of a discursive body. Her claim took her into the materiality of the body and to a position (always under negotiation) wherein the body is not bounded form, but a site of constantly changing

boundaries in which discourse is always embedded. For Butler, materiality as sign serves to deploy discourse as both constraint and opportunity.

Over the past three decades it would seem that discourse on, in and around the site of the material body has become more self aware of its own constructs, its own embeddedness in discursivity and the self-reflexivity of a feminist project. While post-structural theoretical feminist criticism has been criticized (see Jane Gallop in particular) for its move to incorporate essentialist notions of the female (not every female finds their jouissance and their enjoyment in the figure of their bodies, and l'écriture feminine may be no more instinctual than the act of writing itself), nonetheless, as a lens and as a partial view, the writings of post-structural theoretical feminists are useful in understanding the theoretical moves inherent in discoursing on the body. Spivak, whose early work stood at the inception of feminist thinking, continues in *Other Worlds* ('88) and in her article on the subaltern among others, to think through the body as a site for cultural practice, and continues to remind readers that, in opening up queries into discourse of the body, we must not rest with a reversal of the hegemony of the binary, but must always enact a displacement so as not to ascend to the position of the hegemonic – the very position that the feminist project seeks to derail in the first place.

Feminist Theory, Clitoral Economy and Female Genital Mutilation

In *Other Worlds* ('88) Spivak brings up the notion of female genital mutilation in the context of her conversation with a graduate student who refers to the practice as that of a 'female vasectomy.' Thinking through the (specifically) female body is an exercise wherein this symmetry of male and female bodies is called into question – in the first place, because the clitoris is referred to (in this symmetry) as a penis, which clearly, it is not. The clitoris is not functionally a part of the reproductive process of the female body (as in the case of a penis). The clitoris is a site for pleasure – pure pleasure, and its removal does not compromise the reproductivity of the female, but serves, not only to create pain in the female body through its removal, but also to permanently obliterate one of the sites for pleasure that constitutes that female body. In certain discursive communities this (tiny, invisible) piece of anatomy is vested with so much power in symbolic/semiotic

constructions of the female body that its presence must be systematically removed from the bodies of 3 million women every year (World Health Organization).

As such, and in thinking through academic feminist concerns, the clitoris in these discursive communities is 'read' (by men and women) as a threat to the hegemonic, phallic economy. Spivak uses the site of the clitoris as a point for her departure in her ruminations on the failure of Karl Marx to take into account the presence of a 'surplus economy' (pleasure in terms of discourse on the body) in the form of housework or 'women's work.' Lest one imagine that these notions of the valueless nature of house work are the result of old-fashioned, "primitive" thinking; witness the (perhaps forgotten) controversy surrounding the figure of Martha Stewart – a woman in a Western, highly industrialized capitalist country who made her own attempts to render 'women's work' meaningful (valuable) in a Western capitalist economy and, as a result, made a (very) noticeable fortune implicating women in the value of house work. I recall a cartoon in 2004 that represents Stewart with her hair in disarray and an alligator clutched under her arm. Cixous, perhaps, would not miss the reference to Medusa (snakes now replaced by alligator) and to the representation of a phallic female who is so inconceivable (in making house work valuable in a phallic economy, Marxist or not) that she is represented as monstrous, and subsequently removed from circulation (imprisoned).

Spivak notes that Marx fails in his theorizing to take into account the value of women's work - including, but not limited to, the birthing and raising children, as well as the reproductive power of the womb. In exploring the notion of a 'clitoral economy' (as a figure for surplus economy) Spivak serves to draw attention to the plight of women whose bodies are being mutilated in a social text where sign systems (discourse on the body and discourse on marriage) are being contested. That the clitoris is 'valuable' is not 'readable' in certain social texts, and this unreadability of a surplus economy is not limited to the landscape of the African continent, but is symptomatic of thinking through the female body as a transnational site.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

The practice of disfiguring the female body and destroying sites of pleasure as mapped onto that body occur all over the world, but are most commonly practiced in areas of Africa, the Middle East and in

parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. These mutilations are classified as Types I - IV (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). Type I, also referred to as clitoridectomy (the subject of Spivak's discussions), involves the excision or removal of the clitoral hood, with or without removal of all or a part of the clitoris. Type II, also commonly referred to as excision, involves the excision or removal of the clitoris, in addition to part or all of the labia minora (the inner vaginal lips). Type III is referred to as infibulation and is also known as pharaonic circumcision. Type III involves the excision or removal of part or all of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minora and labia majora) followed by a stitching or narrowing of the vaginal opening, leaving a very small opening about the size of a matchstick that allows for the restricted flow of urine and menstrual blood. Type IV, also referred to as introcision, is a general category for FGM and involves any picking, piercing or incision of the clitoris and/or labia, including, but not limited to, the burning or cauterization of the clitoris and surrounding tissue, the scraping or cutting of the vagina or the vaginal orifice, stretching of the clitoris and/or labia, as well as the introduction of corrosive substances into the vagina to cause bleeding or the introduction of herbs into the vagina to tighten or narrow the aperture. As a general observation, it would seem that the majority of all forms of FGM involve, at the very least, the mutilation and/or removal of the clitoris (Type I).

Type III is extremely severe and, after mutilation, the young women's (in most cases female children) legs are bound for approximately a month in order to allow for the formation of scar tissue across the genital area. The development of scar tissue creates a barrier or a "chastity belt of skin and scar tissue" that prevents any access across the body periphery with the exception of the minimal passage of urinary and menstrual fluids (Hanny Lightfoot-Klein '94). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 85% of female genital mutilation consists in Type I and Type II operations. Type III is common in Somalia, Sudan and in parts of Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

Type II and Type III forms of genital mutilation not only involve the removal of the clitoris, but, to varying degrees, all external genitalia involved in the production of pleasure. Neither Type II nor Type III expressly

inhibit reproduction, though Type III renders the female body incapable of insemination or reproduction (if these women have not died as a result of Type I – III procedures or been rendered sterile) without more cutting to enable intercourse and birth. Under the sorts of phallic economies that sanction FGM, women and children who have undergone Type III FGM are infibulated before marriage, cut to allow for sexual relations after marriage, re-infibulated to await childbirth and re-cut when the child has been weaned in order to allow for further sexual relations. This painful and horrendous process of cutting and re-cutting (policing the womb) is repeated so long as the woman seeks to bear children – the only role she is allowed to fill in these rigid gender-based societies (Lightfoot-Klein '89).

FGM is at the nexus of a highly complex series of cultural and discursive practices in which female and male bodies that remain intact in these discursive fields are marked as incapable of controlling (the surplus of) their desire. Dominance in this discursive field is mandated as the regulation of excess (desire) and is exerted by the ability to inflict pain upon the female bodies perceived as generating this surplus. In the highly gendered societies such as Sudan where FGM occurs, female bodies are prohibited from showing any form of pleasure (excess/surplus) during sex, as the woman must remain “like a block of wood and participate in no way whatsoever. She must exhibit this unnatural immobility, for her being sexually active would be regarded as ‘being like an animal.’ Only such immobility will enable her to manifest the demands of modesty imposed upon her” (ibid). In these ideological structures modesty is the outward display of an internalized repudiation of excess. Desire, and the sites that constitute the performance of desire on the female body, whether genital or otherwise, are construed as outside/unregulated and uncontrolled through the economy of this ideological regime, and are therefore read as an excess that must be policed by men (over women) and women (over themselves).

One of the most frustrating dynamics of these hegemonic fields and the dynamics that characterize their discursive structures is the remarkable degree of subjection experienced by men and women who participate in these regimes – as indicated by the degree to which victims are complicit with the demands of their aggressors. Ceremonial cuttings and surgical operations to insure FGM are most often plotted by women elders

(the grandmothers). Among the populations in which FGM is practiced the notion of a woman who has not undergone some form of FGM is quite literally inconceivable. The epistemological invisibility of an intact, reasonable (in the theatre of desire) female body is a reminder of the power that these symbolic/semiotic constructions have over the hearts and minds of the men and women who inhabit these ideological structures. Should an intact female body appear in these discursive fields, her body marks her as slave, prostitute, outcaste, and/ or as unclean/ unworthy of continuing in the family lineage; i.e. participating in any recognized societal structures. The female body, as represented in these sorts of discursive fields, runs a risk to her safety and well-being in *not* undergoing some form of FGM.

It is women themselves who most often perform FGM on other women. A woman who has not undergone some form of FGM cannot secure her value in society by securing a bride price for her family. No family who participates in these discursive structures will pay a bride price for a woman who has not undergone FGM, as FGM is construed as a means of policing the female body in order to assure that she remains “clean” and/or “pure” (Lightfoot-Klein, '89). Celibacy is valuable in this discursive framework for it would seem that as long as a woman is marked with a lack of desire (through FGM), she will be desired. A woman who undergoes Type III FGM (infibulation), in which the opening to the vulva is closed, will be prevented from experiencing any form of penetration (sex) before the bride price has been secured for her intact (and mutilated) body. Neither men nor women of these discursive communities can conceive of an intact (whole) female body rendering meaningful contributions to their societies, and as such, both sexes are complicit in concluding that what has been performed upon their bodies and the bodies of their loved ones has been necessary, is to their personal benefit, and must be continued at all costs.

Conclusion

That there is ‘value’ in pure pleasure is a notion that is having an impact on cultural studies as scholars are beginning to incorporate into their intellectual apparatus the notion that pleasure is not to be devalued as that which animates the (inert/dumb) material body and which is therefore uncontrollable, in excess, and unable to be recognized and measured for ‘use’. The practice of FGM is

a call to Western (academic) feminists (men and women) not only to halt the practice of FGM, but to continue to 'think through' (a discursing on) the body in order to provide some resolution to the issue of a women's right to pleasure. That a woman's clitoris and other genital apparati are (figured as) justifiably removable because these sites signify a threat to the hegemony through which reproduction is sanctioned to occur constitutes a site for negotiation, not a site from which to exercise another form of hegemony.

These same sites of pleasure in question hold the potential to draw men and women away from the bonds of a hegemonic, phallic economy and as such, operate as both constraint (FGM) and opportunity (to redefine discursive fields and re-cognize constructions of an unmutated female body from trouble maker to contributor.) Efforts to prohibit FGM (exerting another form of hegemonic discourse) have only served to drive the practice further into secrecy and/or to mandate cutting young women at younger ages in order to avoid detection under increased surveillance. Negotiation across (pluralization of) discursive fields has proven more promising – as in the creation of alternative rites of passage designed to respect the ideological structures of these discursive communities.

For women in these discursive fields, their own pleasure is unrecognized and at the same time unacceptable, while their bodies are mutilated in order to remain intact. These double binds are the stuff of academic feminism, and are the impetus for the growth and trajectory of feminist theory in the first place. There are good reasons why some feminists are also practicing psychoanalysts (Kristeva and Irigaray) as the body figures so importantly in the way we as human beings think through our being in the world. Thinking (as well as acting) through the deployment of our bodies as sites which are embedded in discursive structures is crucial to re-cognizing our thinking as transnational beings.

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フェミニスト理論と女性性器切除 -多文化公共圏センター記念日を認めている為-

モリソン バーバラ

<要約>

1970代からフェミニスト理論家（特にガヤトリ・スピヴァク、エレヌ・シクス、リュス・イリガライ、マーサ・ヌスバウム、ジュディス・バトラーとジュリア・クリステヴァ）は身体に関してさまざまな理論を提供した。これらの理論の中ではフェミニスト理論家が、主に身体が記号論的な構成であると主張していた。私達一人一人の身体をトランスナショナルな領域と見なすことで、この論文は特に女性性器切除の言説体系を分析している。

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