

## FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

*Darja Marinšek*

### Abstract

The article builds on the existing dispute between African and African American women writers on the competence of writing about female genital mutilation (FGM), and tries to determine the existence and nature of the differences between the writings of these two groups. The author uses comparative analysis of two popular African and African American novels, comparing their ways of describing FGM, its causes and consequences, the level of objectivity and the style of the narrations. This is followed by a discussion on the reasons for such differences, incorporating a larger circle of both African and African American women authors, at the same time analysing the deviance within the two groups. While the differences between African American writers are not that great, as they mostly fail to present the issue from different points of view, which is often the result of their lack of direct knowledge of the topic, African authors' writing is in itself discovered to be ambivalent and not at all invariable. The reasons for such ambivalence are then discussed in greater context, focusing on the effect of the authors' personal contact with circumcision as well as their knowledge and acceptance of Western values.

The author concludes by establishing the African ambivalent attitude towards FGM, which includes different aspects of the issue, as the most significant difference between their and African American writers' description of this practice.

### INTRODUCTION

Female genital mutilation (FGM) first became a matter of considerable international concern at the 1980s Women's NGO forum in Copenhagen, when the practice was portrayed as barbaric and cruel by western female advocates for women's rights<sup>1</sup>. The African delegation thought this an imposing of a subject poorly known, yet critically judged, and responded by refusing financial aid offered by the Western governments to abolish the practice. Thus, two opposing camps were born and FGM continued to stir heated international debate, in spite of the disapproval of the African circle. These world-wide conferences initially dealt with the various ways of preventing FGM among

<sup>1</sup> The pre-established topic, agreed on also by the African delegation, was substituted for the topic of FGM, as proposed by the French chairman upon receiving a report of the practice. This was done without prior warning to or consultation with the African delegation, and regardless of the participants' poor familiarity with the subject.

immigrants in western countries (thus, supposedly protecting their rights), but eventually outgrew the western borders and invoked in a discussion about the general harm of FGM and reasons for its worldwide eradication.

This approach further upset the African intellectual and activist spheres, with African activists feeling their peoples' rights were being violated and their ancient traditions imposed upon. A clash arose between the Western and African activists in their treating of the topic of FGM; the former claiming it should be eradicated and the latter feeling the Western sphere should not impose their views.

The opinions about the rightfulness of FGM within the African circles vary from those who strongly believe the practice to be harmful,<sup>2</sup> to those who do not feel qualified to judge local tribes' traditions, or even adhere by some of the reasons stated by FGM practitioners. They are all united in one belief, though: the question of whether FGM should be allowed or persecuted is not an issue the West should have any say in.

In the following years, this dispute spread on to fiction literature, when FGM became a popular topic with African American writers, whose portrayal of this practice was continuously criticised by African feminists and writers.<sup>3</sup> While the former argued their African descent entitled them to a critical discussion of FGM, the African camp depicted their way of FGM portrayal as necessarily biased. The reasons for such accusations mainly quoted unfamiliarity with the subject, unreliability of data, subjectivity of a purely Western attitude, and thus exclusively Western terminology, all supposedly setting African American portrayal of FGM apart from their African counterpart.

The following article will therefore try to establish the complexity of this issue by comparing African and African American texts dealing with FGM, and discuss the essential differences between their ways of describing female genital mutilation. This treatise is a cross-section of a longer study on six African and four African American novels.<sup>4</sup>

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE DEPICTION OF FGM IN AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS

We must begin by pointing out that, some major differences between the two groups of writers notwithstanding, all the novels discussed in this study, African and African American alike, depict FGM in a negative way. Although their level and instruments

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<sup>2</sup> This idea is supported by many activists, i.e. Nawal El Saadawi, Asma El Dareer, Olayinka Kosothomas, Awa Thiam, Efua Dorkenoo.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that while the African feminist, activist and literary sphere is divided in their perception of FGM, their disapproval of African American dealing with this topic is nonetheless unanimous.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the differences is based on a more detailed analysis of twelve novels, which, apart from the ones, mentioned in this study, also includes four African novels: Waris Dirie: *Desert Flower*, Mende Nazer: *Slave*, Fauziya Kasindja: *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* and Jacyee Aniagolu-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*. The quotations from Dirie's *Desert Flower* were translated from Slovene to English by the author of the study. Cf. Marinšek, Darja. *Female Genital Mutilation in African vs. African American Women's Literature*. Ljubljana: Faculty of Arts, 2006.

of criticism vary, the African way of describing FGM can not be regarded as positive, since most African writers discussed offer both positive and negative views, while at the same time trying to avoid personal opinion on the purpose of this practice. The reasons for this kind of writing originate in the FGM-practicing cultures, where this custom is considered a taboo, that is a forbidden topic, not to be spoken of by its members. The African authors included in this study have broken this cultural taboo and by this, already show 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.

Thus, it is very difficult to speak of a purely »African« perspective of FGM, as it is probably at least partly marked by Western values. Accordingly, the differences between the two groups are many times very subtle, and generally do not hold true for all writers, sometimes even revealing a closer connection between writers of different groups than between writers within each individual group.

With this in mind, we will first analyze the differences between the African and African American portrayal of FGM, and then discuss the discrepancies in the authors' attitude towards and description of FGM within each individual group.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The following analysis deals with two African novels, i.e. Nawal El Saadawi's *The Circling Song* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, as well as two African American novels, that is Alice Walker's *The Secret of Joy* and Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*. A detailed study of all researched novels has shown that the more prominent differences between African and African American portrayal of female circumcision lie mainly in the importance FGM plays in the literary work, the way the practice is described, the choice of terminology, a tendency towards generalization or the lack of thereof, a tendency of assigning blame, the list of reasons for and consequences of FGM, and finally, the author's view of the future of this practice.

The first major difference between the two groups can therefore be seen in the role FGM plays in the novels. Both African novels present a life story of a certain African girl, where circumcision is only one of the many events in her life. Thus, in *Efuru*, an African girl's biography, the observation on circumcision is almost casual, touching upon the subject merely as a part of the girl's wedding preparations. Likewise, El Saadawi's *The Circling Song* tells the story of the miserable life of an Egyptian brother and sister, Halim and Halima, where again, the girl's circumcision is only one in a series of cruel events she has to endure throughout her life.

On the contrary, Alice Walker's *The Secret of Joy* is based on portraying negative consequences suffered by the novel's circumcised heroine, in fact representing her gradual development from a naive supporter of circumcision to a strong opponent of the practice that has ruined her life. Similarly, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* is a collage of seven different women's stories, each dealing with a specific type of abuse. 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.

Another difference can also be seen in the instruments the authors use in describing FGM. While Flora Nwapa and Nawal El Saadawi mostly touch upon the subject indirectly, avoiding explicit western terminology, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor's novels often invoke in direct description and detailed explanation of this ritual, using critical western vocabulary.

Flora Nwapa's choice of names for this practice involves more subtle expressions, i.e. »to have a bath«, sometimes also »circumcision«, but never »mutilation«, which is on the other hand common for African American writers.<sup>5</sup> The following passage offers an example of Nwapa's use of neutral expressions:

One day, Efurú'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 want you to have your bath before there is a baby. It is better that way. It is safer really.'  
'All right, mother. But my husband must be told and he will come from the farm before it is done.' (Nwapa, 11)

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi's descriptions of this practice avoid explicit terms, such as clitoris, vagina, infibulation, using instead innocent child vocabulary, i.e. »bud«, »newborn bird«, which agrees with the blurred retrospective narration of an innocent girl, with which circumcision is described. The practice itself is given the name "purification", offering an indirect comment of the author's view of FGM in a sarcastic and subtle way:

The razor-blade moved over her head; her soft, thick hair fell into the pail. The razor dropped to her body, and passed over her skin, uprooting the hair. When it reached the pit of her lower stomach, moving through the patch of black hair it stumbled upon the tiny white bud that looked like a newborn bird. It plucked the bud from its roots, leaving in its place a deep wound in the flesh, like the scabbed-over cleft. (In those times, this surgical operation was called 'purification'; its goal was to 'purify' the human being by removing and remaining sexual organs.) (El Saadawi, 67)

This neutral tone is even more obvious in the description of circumcision as offered by Flora Nwapa; instead of on Efurú's pain, the narration is focused on the reactions of the villagers, who sympathize with the girl, but do not condone the practice, as can be seen in the next quotation:

The woman went to the back of the house and there it was done. Efurú screamed and screamed. It was so painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. It will soon be over, my daughter don't cry.'  
Meanwhile Efurú's husband was in his room. He felt all the pain. It seemed as if he was the one being circumcised. (...)  
'It's being done now,' one of the neighbours said to the other. 'Oh, yes, that's it. I saw the woman when she came. Efurú is having her bath. Poor girl, it's so painful.'  
Efurú lay on her back with her feet apart. She was not crying any more. But it was still very painful. (Nwapa, 13-14)

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<sup>5</sup> The English term Female Genital Mutilation has been the official western name for this practice since 1989.

Similarly, in El Saadawi's novel, immediately upon the beginning of circumcision, the author distances herself from the girl and her pain, which is demonstrated by her use of a third-person narrator in the FGM description in the following paragraph:

Hamida did not feel the pain. Her eyes remained dry, and she abandoned herself to the dirt floor, lying there passively, while from beneath her thighs came a long ribbon of blood, its dark red hue glistening in the sunshine. (...), she raised the gallabiyya from her legs. The familiar appendage was not there; in its place she found a small cleft, which looked just like that old, closed-up wound. (El Sadaawi, 47-48)

However, looking at the next quotation from Alice Walker's *The Secret of Joy*, we notice a difference in the style of her description:

Then, one day, my mother had to circumcise the girls in my age group. (...) 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 (...) She barely nicked me there. But the other women saw.

What my mother started, the witchdoctor finished. (...) the witches who taught him had been put to death, because they refused circumcision and were too powerful among the women to be left free, uncircumcised. He showed no mercy. In fright and unbearable pain my body bucked under the razor-sharp stone he was cutting me with (...). (Walker, 206-207)

Here, the author has chosen a first-person narrator, focusing mainly on the pain and fear of the girl being circumcised. The description uses explicit references to the cutting of the outer and inner labia, as well as the circumcising tool.

A different example of FGM description in this novel is the following quotation, where the process is being described in retrospect by a girl who has observed it:

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, though to me they seemed not so little. They were all a few years older than me. Dura's age. 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. And then I saw M'Lissa shuffle out, dragging her lame leg, and at first I didn't realize she was carrying anything, for it was so insignificant and unclean that she carried it not in her fingers but between her toes. A chicken-a-hen, not a cock-was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their own ordeal over, lay. M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, (...) gobbled it down. (Walker, 70-71)

Although this narration is similar to the ones of African authors, in so far as it avoids direct description of circumcision, but rather creates a distant approach from outside of the hut, the effect is not that of a neutral observation but rather the contrary. The narration is accompanied by a sense of mystery, a feeling of unknown, which, along with the powerful description of the sounds in the hut and Tashi's feelings, gradually turn into a sense of terror.

An interesting way of describing the process of circumcision is offered by Gloria Naylor, who does this by using a metaphorical allegory of cutting a plum. In avoiding

direct description of FGM, the author's tactic is very similar to the ones of African writers. Nevertheless, as the following paragraph will show, the clever parallel drawn between the cutting of the plum and the cutting of a woman's body, gradually undertakes a dramatic effect, and the scene loses its neutral tones:

The fruit looked tender and soft. The reddish black skin was so thin you could already smell that the flesh would be sweet. (...) Eve took the plum from the counter and cradled it gently in one hand. Fruit that tender will bruise easily. With the tip of her fingernail she traced the faint seam that ran from the little round dent in the center that looked like a belly button. It was perfect and whole, with the seam dividing the front of the plum into two plump mounds. Without warning, she squeezed it quickly and the seam opened. (...) It was only a slight opening, but clear juices were already beading up from deep within the middle. And down within its fleshy walls was just the glimpse of a hard little nub. Eve held the split fruit between her fingertips and, this time, demanded the knife. (...) Eve's eyes never left mine as she held the open plum and squeezed again. The fleshy walls were spreading wider apart and its juices began to drip onto the counter. Inside, it was deep amber and red; veins swollen with sugar ran through the soft flesh. A firm tip was pushing up through its center, moist and fragile (...). She was positioning the fruit, lining up the exposed head of the pit with the tip of the blade. (...) Eve plunged the knife quickly into the middle of the split fruit. With one twist of her wrist, she cut out the large pit. It carried ragged pieces of dark amber flesh with it as it fell to the counter. (...) Juice dripped from the lightning blade, and bits of plum clung to Eve's wet fingers as she scraped away at the meaty sections left inside each half of the open fruit. (...) Small chunks splattered as they kept falling rapidly to the counter. The plum was cleaned of everything but its delicate outer skin. She held what was left in her sticky palm and it was already beginning to curl inward like a petal. (Naylor, 145-151)

This passage contains numerous analogies between the plum and Mariam; i.e. »black skin« could represent the girl's black skin, »cradled« could refer to the too-early age of Mariam's circumcision. Similarly: »Fruit that tender will bruise easily.« could be a metaphor for the psychological consequences circumcision can leave on a young girl. The plum's core is already referred to as a bellybutton by the author herself, and the fruit's description resembles the description of a woman's buttocks. The plum's interior is also named by expressions pertaining to a human body: the colour of the interior is red, full of »veins« and »flesh«. On top of all this, Eve's cutting of the plum bears a great resemblance to the cutting of the girl: while the girl is cut open and her clitoris 'hollowed out', Eve cuts the plum's surface and hollows out its pit. The red juice that runs out resembles the blood, the pit still bears some pieces of 'flesh', and Eve goes on to scoop out the remains of the plum's interior, a process described with the same words, other authors use to describe FGM. Eve's crushing and discarding the plum in the end describes what according to her happens to a circumcised girl: she is psychologically, if not also psychically ruined.

Compared to the tone of El Saadawi's metaphorical description of circumcision, where the critique is expressed in a very subtle way, the above quotation clearly shows the different effect of Naylor's narration; although the writer avoids a direct expression of opinion of FGM, the comparison still produces dramatic effects, which can not be described as neutral.

Another essential difference between the two African and African American novels can be detected in the tendency of the latter towards generalization when discussing FGM, which is not present (at least not to such an extent) in the African novels. Therefore, the two African writers concentrate on the personal story being described, keeping their presentation of FGM within the context of that individual narration. Looking closer to first Gloria Naylor's novel, we see a different approach; the narration presents a society that enforces female circumcision, and the heroine Mariam is an example of such society. Moreover, the very first description of Mariam's culture creates a distance, separating her "world" from the reader's: »In a nation that time forgot, a nation ringed by mountains, they are hemmed in by huge stone churches but have clung to the God of Abraham and the Law of Moses.« (Naylor, 146) Further on, Mariam's tribe is depicted as a fanatic religious sect, living in isolation, suppressing women and circumcising girls, which helps create an indirect comment against FGM and its cultural context.

Moving on to Alice Walker's novel, the writer begins by describing individual experiences of circumcision, which then slowly melt into one general critique of FGM. Here, more than in Naylor's narration, the reader is aware of a critical stance on a trans-cultural, general level, offered from an exclusively western perspective. This, so-called distant approach, can also be seen in the following passage:

They do not want to hear what their children suffer. They've made the telling of the suffering itself taboo. Like visible signs of menstruation. Signs of woman's mental power. Signs of the weakness and uncertainty of men. When they say the word 'taboo' (...) are they saying something is 'sacred' and therefore not to be publicly examined for fear of disturbing the mystery; or are they saying it is so profane it must not be exposed, for fear of corrupting the young? Or are they saying simply that they can not and will not be bothered to listen to what is said about an accepted tradition of which they are a part, that has gone on, as far as they know, forever? (Walker, 155)

At the same time, this quotation expresses the culprit of FGM, as pointed out in several places of the novel; that is the ignorant African culture, holding on to tradition at any cost, and its men who, as the superior gender of this culture, suppress the powerless women.

Assigning guilt is thus another characteristic, specific of African American writing, which usually points the finger at patriarchal society, where women are not strong enough to rebel against cruel tradition. This idea is also expressed in the passage quoted above, and appears throughout Walker's novel. Similar ideology can be seen in *Bailey's Cafe*, expressed indirectly through the writer's stressing the importance of circumcision as a prerequisite for marriage, as the single goal of a girl's life.

At the same time, assigning guilt is connected to the reasons for circumcision, offered in the novels, where we can see another distinction between the two groups. This is one of the most important differences, since it clearly marks the complexity of the issue, as well as the writers' (in)ability of encompassing different views of this tradition. Thus, Flora Nwapa and Nawal El Saadawi's novels try to voice both sides, also giving reasons for FGM as expressed by its advocates. As mentioned before, Walker's narration tends to concentrate on the western interpretation alone, usually offering control and subordination of women as the major reasons. Nevertheless, we should point out at least one example, where the writer approaches the issue from the other, the African

side, i.e. offering an ancient African legend as the beginning of this ritual. However, the passage ends with the following comment, expressing the heroine's opinion of the myth: »Even so long ago God deserted woman, I thought, staying by her just long enough to illustrate to man the cutting to be done.« (Walker, 166) The advocates' reason of tradition is therefore given, but at the same time rejected.

On the other hand, Gloria Naylor's approach is more representational of both sides, and offers the FGM supporters' reasons. Her narration explains the importance of marriage in the described African tribe and defends Mariam's mother's decision to circumcise the girl, as can be seen in the following quotation:

You do understand, Eve said, how much she loved her daughter. And she couldn't deny in her heart that the girl was always going to be slow-witted. Finding her a decent husband would be difficult with so many other virgins to choose from, and that is why she had the midwives close her up that tightly. It raises a woman's value. (Naylor, 152)

Nevertheless, compared to the next passage, taken from Flora Nwapa's novel, where the reasons for circumcision are presented in a conversation between the villagers and the midwife, we can see the difference in style and tone of narration:

You know (...) Nwakaego's daughter? (...) She did not have her bath before she had that baby 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.' (...) (Nwapa, 13)

The difference, as shown in the passages, lies in the inherent critical tone with which Naylor describes the reasons for circumcision, giving the reader a sense of disagreement with the tribal culture, whereas Nwapa's description is offered entirely from the tribe's point of view.

Here we have already touched upon another important distinction, which lies in the style of narration, indirectly affecting the reader's view of FGM. Again, Nwapa and El Saadawi's novels seem to strive more for the presentation of the complexity of the issue at hand, mostly by constant interweaving of apologetic passages, explaining the African view of circumcision, by the choice of vocabulary, when dealing with the description of FGM related topics, as well as by the ideological stance<sup>6</sup> of the narration itself. Nawal El Saadawi never offers a direct personal opinion of the things her story criticizes: her FGM depictions are unclear and presented purely from a foggy retrospective of a psychologically exhausted girl; enumerated simply as one of the many hardships the children endure.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the author seems to be simply stating the facts, as if they were obvious. She does not provide Halima or Halimo with a voice to express their suffering. She offers no appeal to condemn the described tradition, no

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<sup>6</sup> I.e. the author's general view of FGM, the position she has taken in her perception of the practice, that is, whether her position is more positive, negative or neutral.

<sup>7</sup> In the novel *The Circular Song*, both the girl and the boy are circumcised.



criticism of patriarchal relations, guilty of FGM,<sup>8</sup> no over-generalized worldwide attack on FGM, no protagonist eager to educate others about FGM's true character and achieve its eradication. El Saadawi is simply a voice that describes, and then allows for the reader to decide, according to his/her own beliefs.

The regard for the complex nature of FGM in Nwapa's narration has already been shown in revealing the rather insignificant role circumcision plays in her novel, and the mild tone used in its descriptions.

On the contrary, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor often rely on their choice of words when stating their negative views of FGM, taking advantage of shocking, dramatic terminology, comparisons, metaphorical language and whole stories,<sup>9</sup> a very self-righteous tone (esp. Walker, whose fictional novel at times seems almost an activist's mission) or even the choice of narrator,<sup>10</sup> 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. Here, the difference shows in the way African American narrations do not avoid direct presentation of the negative consequences of FGM, opposed to the African narrations, where these are either left out or only touched upon, avoiding their direct description. Therefore, the heroines in both African American novels are sentenced to death. Tashi, the protagonist in *The Secret of Joy*, is crippled by her circumcision, has difficulty walking and bathing, can not have intercourse and loses the will to live. In her desperation, she return to Africa to murder the midwife who circumcised her, paying for the murder with her own life. A direct description of the negative consequences of FGM is given in the following quotation:

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body, and had nowhere to go. There was an odour, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off. (Walker, 61-62)

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<sup>8</sup> Although I have to mention a passage that, along with Halima's father's decision to kills his daughter, could be interpreted this way: »Yet, even though she saw a female viper, Hamida knew that anything which kills, must be male (...).« (El Saadawi, 62)

<sup>9</sup> This was already shown in the case of Gloria Naylor, and can also be noted in the following passage from *The Secret of Joy*, where the author compares women's subordination in African culture to the so-called White Ant, a type of African termite, which is believed to have been copied by Africans in their hut-building. At the same time this is claimed to be the origin of the male view of the woman as a creature offered by god for pleasure and food; namely, since this creature's colony is based on the hierarchy of the queen, whose sole function is reproductive; her cut wings disable her escape and when her egg stock is finished, she is devoured by other ants. " This, Madame Johnson, is your dark tower. You are the queen who lost her wings. It is you lying in the dark with millions of worker termites (...) You who are fat, greasy, the color as you have said of tobacco spit, inert; only a tube through which generations of visionless offspring pass(...) You who endure all this, only at the end to die, and be devoured by those to whom you've given birth. (...)" (Walker, 216)

<sup>10</sup> Naylor's choice of »an innocent child«, repeating throughout the story a single sentence ('No man has ever touched me'), creates a dramatic effect with a powerful message.

The psychological pain, suffered by circumcised women, is further described in M'Lissa, the woman who circumcised Tashi, as shown in her personal confession in this passage:

I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later, and dragged herself from the initiation hut and finally home, was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again. (...) I have never cried after that, she said. I knew in the moment when the pain was greatest, when it reached a crescendo, as when a loud metal drum is struck with a corresponding metal stick, that there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women. (...) I finally see her, she says, astonished. (...) The child who went into the initiation hut, she says. You know I left her there bleeding on the floor, and I came out. She was crying. She felt so betrayed. By everyone. They'd severely beaten her mother as well, and she blamed herself for this. M'Lissa sighed. I couldn't think about her anymore. I would have died. So I walked away, limped away, and just left her there. (...) She is still crying. She's been crying ever since I left. No wonder I haven't been able to. She has been crying all our tears. (...) I have been strong. (...) Strong and brave. (...) In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are. But who are we but torturers of children? (Walker, 205-210)

In the above quotation, Walker cleverly presents the psychological consequences of circumcision, using the midwife, who has been up to this point in the novel, represented as (the only) advocator of female circumcision. And here, it turns out that underneath the cruel numbness, caused by the horrors of endless circumcisions (imposed on her as a tribal duty) there is an innocent, helpless and scared little girl, who has been suffering all her life due to her own initiation. This makes the reader feel sorry for M'Lissa, while angrier at the ritual and the men behind it.

This passage was greatly criticised by George Olakunle,<sup>11</sup> who opposes the way in which Walker, in order to convey the wider idea of women's oppression in all patriarchal systems, according to him, draws all characters as representations of stereotypical figures, which she slowly connects throughout the novel and joins in a unified circle. Olakunle chooses the example of M'Lissa and Tashi to demonstrate his point: »In the account of her experience, M'Lissa is rendered as archetypical woman whose emotional numbness is a way of coping with old and unrelieved pain. (...) At this moment, M'Lissa's and Tashi's experiences of genital mutilation converge. The text signals the convergence in the way their two voices become fluid and indistinguishable as each confronts her pain.«<sup>12</sup> Through the clever use of the pronoun 'she', the image of the crying young M'Lissa becomes the image of every crying circumcised girl. And even more: ».....Tashi is confronted with her 'self' in an earlier generation ... In dialogue with M'Lissa Walker figures Tashi as archetypical woman in dialogue with archetypical mother, who is therefore her potential cultural self. The operative conceptual category here is woman-across race, class, or time itself.«<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In criticizing the ideology behind Walker's novel, Olakunle quotes Spivak, Lionnet and Sunder Rajan, and their critique of identitarian universalism, since "collective identity is never unitary and undifferentiated." (Spivak, Lionnet and Sunder Rajan qtd. in Olakunle: *Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction*: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3612/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3612/is_200110/ai_n8955377))

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Gloria Naylor's description of the consequences of FGM is less explicit, but still fatal for the protagonist. Mariam becomes pregnant and, in accordance with her tribe's beliefs, feels »unclean«; wishing to wash herself in a deep chasm, confusing it for an enormous lake, she jumps in and dies. Naylor further describes the consequences of FGM in the case of Mariam's mother, telling us of the severe pain of afterbirth and the difficulty of intercourse following the delivery. The latter particularly, can be seen in the following passage:

Her mother tells no one how hard she begged Adonai for the firstborn to be a girl. She knew she would remain unclean much longer than with a male child, and so there would be more time to heal before returning to her husband. Even in the hut of childbed there has been so much blood. (Naylor, 148)

The author is faithful to her generally indirect way of dealing with FGM and only expresses this idea through the mother's preference for a boy, which allows her more time before having to have intercourse with her husband.

Looking at the description of the consequences of FGM in *Efuru*, though, we see an even more discreet approach. The circumcised girl is introduced only a day after the operation, when there is no impression of Efuru experiencing awful pain; it is clear that she has already undergone the operation and that the worst is over. Moreover, she receives such amount of attention, we are under the impression that the circumcision has made her privileged:

'How are you, my daughter?'

'I am well. (...)'

'Is it very painful?'

'It is much better now. It was dreadful the first day.'

'Gbonu, my daughter. It is what every woman undergoes. So don't worry.' (...)

Efuru's mother-in-law saw to it that she was very well looked after. She was to eat the best food and she was to do no work. She was simply to eat and grow fat. And above all she was to look beautiful. She ate whatever she wanted to eat. (...) It was said that she was feasting. On market days, her mother went to the market and bought her the best. When she prized something in the market other buyers gave her way and asked her how the feasting woman was getting on. (Nwapa, 15)

Similarly, Efuru's post-operation descriptions show how the villagers now see her as more beautiful and worthy; i.e.:

Efuru grew more beautiful each day. (...) She looked very plump and appealing to the eyes. Now that the wound had healed, she went out with other women who were circumcised like her.

When they went out, they tied a wrappa dyed in camwood from the waist downwards. Then they had another one laso dyed in camwood which they used in covering their breasts. (...) They were objects of attraction; men, women and children stopped to watch and to admire them. (Nwapa, 17)

Later on, when Efuru gives birth to a girl, her delivery is not too painful and uncomplicated; there are no mentions of re-stitching or any circumcision-caused side-effects.

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi avoids the description of the consequences of circumcision. When in the end Halima dies, the blame is put mostly on the poverty and the constant physical abuse the girl was exposed to, and the author does not hint towards circumcision as the exclusive reason for the girl's death, nor does she describe any physical or psychological consequences.

Finally, another major difference lies also in the proposed dealing with FGM, which often comes out in the way the novels end. In Nwapa's novel, this vision is very subtle<sup>14</sup>, offering a metaphoric comment on the women's position in the described society in the following passage on Efuru's dreams about the most respected tribal goddess Lady of the lake:

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 healthy. 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? (Nwapa, 221)

The rhetorical question implies that the symbolic meaning of the Lady of the lake is the fact that it is a goddess who does not stress the function of motherhood and child-bearing as the only accepted and praised values of a woman in African culture. The women worship her precisely because she represents an ulterior function and role for women in their society. This passage shows that the author, who throughout the novel avoids any criticism of FGM, does not promote women's submissiveness to all ends, but is an advocate of women's strength and economic as well as social independence. This even suggests that she does not perceive circumcision as a destructive element in African women's social position, and more importantly, does not advise any anti-FGM action, apart from the indirectly expressed idea that, same as everything else, African women can handle it on their own.

Nawal El Saadawi's approach is even more cautious; while her novel is an obvious critique of Arabic society and its cruel obedience of tradition, she avoids expressing an opinion on the future of circumcision. She rather opts for a metaphorical analogy of all the children in the world, who are exposed to various cruelties, and does not suggest the eradication of FGM.

While both African authors thus seem to treat the future of FGM along with its complex cultural background, linking it to other violent (cultural) practices, and avoid single-solution propositions, this is less obvious in the case of African American novels. Therefore, Alice Walker does not hesitate in offering eradication of female circumcision as the answer to this issue. The following passage from *The Secret of Joy* suggests that failure to eradicate FGM will only bring more needless victims: »I felt it is cruel; but that it is only the cruelty of truth, speaking it, shouting it, that will save us now. If we do not, Africa may well be depopulated of black people in our grandchildren's lifetime, and the worldwide suffering of our children will continue to be our curse.« (Walker,

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<sup>14</sup> The analysis of the novels included in the whole study has shown that the suggestion most often offered by the writers in the African group is education, and by this, spreading awareness, which should with time result in the Africans' themselves making changes. Cf. Marinšek, Darja. *Female Genital Mutilation in African vs. African American Women's Literature*. Ljubljana: Faculty of Arts, 2006.

259) Similar thought is expressed in the novel's ending, when Tashi's friends watch her execution, bearing the sign: »Resistance is the secret of joy!«

On the other hand, Gloria Naylor does not offer a direct opinion of the future of FGM, but, similarly to El Saadawi, only expresses this through questioning the reasons for circumcision. She does this first by describing an ancient, isolated culture, which makes its rituals *a priori* questionable. The other way of questioning circumcision, which we have not yet mentioned, is Mariam's miraculous pregnancy. The circumcised girl is pregnant, for which she was banished from her tribe, and yet insists she had not been touched by a man. When she is examined by Eve during bathing, this turns out to be true. This gives us two possible interpretations; firstly, the author's criticism of FGM, since the operation is supposed to guarantee the girl's virginity and thus raise her value, but has caused the opposite in Mariam's case. Not only was she not protected by the operation from (forced or willing) intercourse, but the operation failed to fulfil its purpose of preventing her humiliation and social outcaste.

The second, a little more mystical interpretation is that Mariam is in fact a virgin, despite her pregnancy. Arguments in favour of this interpretation are her obviously closed vulva, which Eve has examined (»...it's not unusual along the shores of the Blue Nile for virgins to give birth. But I've bathed this girl and seen her body; no man has even tried.«), her »*No man has ever touched me.*«-chant (connected to the fact that, according to her mother, she is incapable of lying) and her retarded state (mentally challenged people are usually used as God's vessels, since these people are never mean and are seen as morally pure). Finally, the possibility of rape is overthrown in the next quotation by Eve: "So you see, if it had been rape, the whole village would have heard her screams. Even on the wedding night, the *ensaslay*, with a willing bride and a cautious husband, the village will hear the screaming. Sometimes it will take months, and many trips to that hut of blood, before the wound he slowly makes allows him to penetrate her without pain. And sometimes she's not fully opened until her first child.« (Naylor, 152)

The meaning behind this interpretation would again be more connected to the over-all idea of female victimization, of course connected to the rejection of FGM, where Mariam, the innocent and pure female-child becomes the sacrificial lamb God chooses to criticize the Africans' behaviour and the way they treat their women. Therefore, both interpretations show that even though Gloria Naylor withholds to comment on the future of FGM, her narration is not without criticism for the practice.

## THE IN-GROUP DISTINCTIONS

The more extensive analysis of a larger number of African and African American novels agrees with the mentioned differences, but at the same time reveals discrepancies in the intensity of the (dis)approval of FGM, as well as the (in)ability to present the complexity of the issue within each individual group. These distinctions must be studied in line with several factors, such as the autobiographical nature of some works, the aesthetic value and purpose of the novels, (un)familiarity with the African culture, the (lack of) knowledge of FGM, and the already mentioned contact of African writers with the western culture as well as, in some cases, with anti-FGM activism.

Thus, in the case of the African autobiographical writers Waris Dirie, Fauziya Kasindja and Mende Nazer, it is necessary to take into account the actual circumstances surrounding their stories as well as the time when the novels were written.

For example, during the time of writing her novel,<sup>15</sup> Waris Dirie was a US ambassador for anti-FGM affairs, and so, it must be assumed, is under great influence from the Western activists' mentality. This is reflected in her occasional use of western FGM-related terminology and her choice of reasons for FGM, which are common with western FGM abolitionists. On the other hand, her strong critique of FGM notwithstanding, she fails to accuse her parents for her circumcision and is even unable to talk to them about it. An additional important element in her story is the fact that Waris was circumcised at the age of five, but decided to leave Africa years later, after being »threatened« by a marriage to an older man she did not love. In the following quotation, Dirie herself stresses that it was her father (who wanted to marry her off) and not her mother (who circumcised her) she ran away from (her mother even helped her escape):

This horrible journey began when I ran away from my father. I lived in a nomadic tribe in Somali desert, and when I was thirteen years old, my father announced I was to be married to an older man. Since I knew I had to react fast (...) I told my mother I would run away. (Dirie, 14)

All these factors influence Dirie's ambivalent attitude towards circumcision and the consequent inconsistencies in her criticism of this practice.

A similar situation presents itself in the story of Fauziya Kasindja, who fled her native Togo and sought asylum in America. Although Fauziya repeatedly states that the reason for her escape was to avoid circumcision (these passages are numerous),<sup>16</sup> she is also threatened to be married to an older man with three wives, where she would probably live in service to their whims, of which she is aware. Therefore, the situation is more complex, as seen in her own words when thinking of returning to Togo: »I'd have to return to my so-called husband. Then I'd be cut and maybe I'd die. And if I didn't? If I lived? No, that would be worse. Real death would be better than the living death my life would become if I survived. I'd rather die.« (Kasindja, 521)

The fact that she is less open about other reasons for her escape can be understood as a result of her prison experience, where she learnt that FGM was the only reason that would get her asylum. Another fact in favour of this argument is the already Western terminology with which Fauziya talks about all this, proving she has grown to view this ritual in a Western manner (a definite result of the many hours of discussing FGM with her lawyers and reading American debates on FGM). We need also consider that Fauziya's family did not support circumcision and that after her father's death, Fauziya, under the care of her uncle, was to be the first circumcised woman in her family. Same as with Waris Dirie, Fauziya was assisted in her escape by her mother and sister, and so did not really escape from her own, but rather a foreign cultural practice. This point is also commented on by Njambi Wairimu Ngaruiya, claiming the western conclusions, drawn from Kasindja's story, to be unjust; i.e. when in one of the talk-shows following

<sup>15</sup> *Desert Flower* is Dirie's first novel in a trilogy, followed by *Desert Dawn and Desert Children*.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kasindja 1998, pp. 592-593, 650-651.

her release from prison Fauziya admitted that some girls/women in Togo did not see FGM the way she did, but adhered to it: "Instead of portraying Kasinga as a woman resisting circumcision because she (like many Africans) came from a family that perhaps taught her to disapprove of such practices, ...the media was fixated on what it saw as an example of coercion and oppression in African cultures and societies generally." (Njambi, 289)

The opposite is true in the case of Mende Nazer, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a young girl. Her idealised portrayals of her life in her native tribe are understandable, and at the same time important for the analysis of her descriptions of her tribal ritual of circumcision. The writer's kidnapping had a definite effect on the nostalgia with which she looks back on her childhood days; it is clear that she could not bring herself to question her parents or any of their actions, and this influences the suaveness of her criticism of her circumcision.

Thus we can see that an author's contact with western culture and its values is an important factor in the analysis of the writer's attitude towards circumcision, regardless of whether the writer has accepted the western views<sup>17</sup> or is, on the contrary, using her writing to try and fight western criticism and its partial view of FGM.

Therefore, a key factor to the writing of Nawal El Saadawi is her activism and feminism, as the writer is one of the strongest opponents of the African American way of treating the topic of FGM. This is closely connected to her indirect method of describing the process, cause and consequences of FGM, as well as her omission of direct criticism of this custom.

Similarly, Flora Nwapa's portrayal of female circumcision as a part of everyday life in an African tribal community is influenced by the writer's wish to fight the general assimilation of West-African writers, thus insisting on describing ancient traditions and customs of her people.<sup>18</sup>

Differences in describing FGM also appear among African American writers, where the most important factor is the level of the writer's (in)direct knowledge of African culture and tradition. This is often also closely connected with the aesthetic value of the literary work, since novels of less literary quality tend to place more importance on the dramatic effect of the story, than on representing both sides of the issue, thus neglecting the problematic nature of this custom. Therefore, if we compare Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* to Tracy Price-Thompson's *A Woman's Worth*, we find that, while Naylor's novel takes a negative stance in describing FGM, it still shows some understanding of the polemics and controversy surrounding this issue. This can not be said of Price-Thompson's work, which is primarily focused on shocking the reader, thus presenting only one, that is the critical side of the argument.

As with African authors, an important factor of African American writing is the writers' participation in the activist polemics surrounding FGM, since there is a danger of engaged literature, i.e. literary works that place literary value second to

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<sup>17</sup> Such is the case of the writer Jacyee Aniagolu-Johnson and her novel *Mikela. Memoirs of a Masaai Woman*.

<sup>18</sup> This characteristic of Nwapa's writing was criticised by Dawthorne, who claims that, in the very case of Efurū, the writer's insistence on describing unimportant everyday events and tribal customs, negatively affects the quality of the story. (Dawthorne, 1975)

the primary goal, i.e. the argumentation of the writer's viewpoint. Such an example can be seen in Alice Walker's *The Secret of Joy*, where the author's general criticism of FGM is evident, which brought Walker a lot of negative African criticism.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, her work *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*,<sup>20</sup> describes her and the co-author Pratibha Parmar's visit to an African village, presenting FGM through direct descriptions and interviews. Their purpose, though, is not to depict this practice and its reasons from the point of view of the tribal culture, but rather to present the villagers' ignorance of the dangers of circumcision, and the details of the process itself.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the novels has shown a definite distinction between the African and African American writers' perception and consequently description of female genital mutilation. The reasons for this are several and differ from author to author. Nevertheless, the essential difference seems to lie in the African writers' commitment and loyalty to their culture, their tradition and its ancient customs, as opposed to the African American writers' necessary distance and western (mis)understanding of this practice. This dictates a regard for the complexity of this issue and thus an ambivalent approach of (the majority of) African writers, 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 the women's social role.

It is interesting to observe that, compared to the African American fairly unified one-dimensional view of FGM, the African 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 shows their attempt at describing the complexity of this issue, and at the same time their dilemma at trying to justify a traditional African custom, while being aware of its dangers.

At the same time we can see discrepancies between various writers within each individual group, which comes out in the level of criticism and their manner of describing FGM. Again, it is interesting to note the differences within the African group, especially in the context of their joint opposition of African American way of writing about this practice. The reasons for these differences have to be looked for in the writers' personal experience with circumcision, the purpose and intention of their novels, as

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<sup>19</sup> Olakunle comments on the novel as "an uncompromising attack on both the practice and the tendency-rooted sometimes in weak relativism, at other times in plain sexist culturalism - to justify the oppression of women by resorting to the alibi of 'tradition'." (Olakunle: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3612/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3612/is_200110/ai_n8955377)) His criticism is shared by Lovarie King, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sable Dawit, Salem Mekuria and others.

<sup>20</sup> This novel was followed by a documentary with the same title.



well as the level of assimilation in the western culture, i.e. their acceptance of western values and notions.

Therefore, the neutral description of Nawal El Saadawi's novel goes in line with her advocating the objective depiction of foreign cultural practices, while the early edition of Flora Nwapa's novel<sup>21</sup> testifies of her urge to introduce to the West the yet unknown and interesting African culture, along with its yet unfamiliar and unattacked traditional custom of circumcision, thus described simply and without the need to defend. The defining reason of Mende Nazer's gentle tone in describing FGM can be found in the fact that her circumcision was performed by her parents, for whom the writer feels great love and respect, while Fauziya Kasindja's critical view of FGM is (among other) a consequence of her family's rejection of the custom.

The differences within the African American group are less distinctive, since the rare attempts to present the issue from the point of view of the African culture, usually do not achieve their purpose.

We have shown that analysing the differences between African and African American writers' way of describing FGM is complex, since it involves specific circumstances surrounding the time of writing the novels', the knowledge of a foreign culture and the African writers' personal contact with circumcision. We have also observed the division among African writers between defending their culture and following the newly-gained perspective of the western world. This ambivalent attitude towards circumcision enables African writers to treat this controversial issue in its full complexity, and is at the same time the greatest distinction that sets them apart from the partial approach to female genital mutilation of most African American writers.

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<sup>21</sup> The novel was first published in 1966.

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