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Review by J. J. J. J.

# GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA

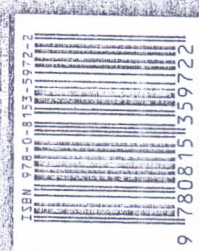
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## 4 Female circumcision

### Inexpressiveness and loss in Julie Okoh's *Edewede*

*Oludolapo Ojedian*

#### Introduction

Delphy observes that both patriarchal constructions and feminist reconstructions view the reproductive role of women as largely dictating their social role (2010: 44). This shows that the role of women within the society is largely pronounced as soon as she has a child, which invariably creates a sacred bond for the woman in question. That is, motherhood creates a gendered and stereotyped experience for women and a social construct that makes women and men totally different. Also, such a gendered position forms the basis of inequality, marginalization, subordination, and exploitation that women have to go through to secure their marriage and place at home. Walker's (1983) definition of womanism is:

The black folk expression of mothers to female children, you acting womanish, i.e., like a woman usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one (A womanist is also) a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture and women's strength committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

(pp. xi-xii)

Through the four parts of Walker's womanism, the selected writers here recognize the domestic duties that women are limited to, such as childbearing and motherhood, keeping the home clean and beautiful, and maintaining a polite and accommodating attitude, which is significant to their exploration of the feminine domain. But each of them deals with these issues in different ways. In Walker's (1983) collection of essays, she blends two senses of motherhood as being symbolical and spiritual, seeing that each woman is capable of bringing another into the world which she assumes as a commitment all women should embrace. Walker's assumption will hardly be popularized because there are women who do not cherish what motherhood

entails. Rather, some women view motherhood as life enslavement and another form of oppression in the patriarchal society.

#### *Okoh's perspective on female circumcision*

Female issues such as women's lifestyles, masculinity, motherhood, gender, poverty, and connections between the women's body, sexuality, and representation are explored in Okoh's works. As many women writers' works expose female exploitation through physical, sexual, and economic rape, Julie Okoh's (2000) *Edewede* reveals female circumcision as a form of sociocultural silence and an exploration of motherhood and loss. Reading through the play, one notices that Okoh explores metaphorical violence through physical violence against female bodies that sometimes leads to death. As she notices that female circumcision reduces female autonomy in society, she presents the title female character, Edewede, who is portrayed as a determined and an audible woman who refuses to allow a younger generation of women to be denied their autonomy or to die through female circumcision. Edewede's rebellion against the practice, which must be performed as a means of upholding their culture, denotes a breaking of the transmission chain between three generations of women in the society. Okoh presents three generations of women in the play, and she uses Edewede to serve as a link between the other two: the older and the newer generations.

Edewede disregards what her society perceives as the importance of female circumcision, which they believe helps to preserve female purity (by avoiding promiscuity), male social honor, and female dignity. The play shows how the custom of female circumcision bonds these women in a companionship that helps them live through the experience. When Edewede is faced with choosing either to allow her only surviving daughter to go through the same crude process of female circumcision or to disallow her (and break away from the tradition she feels inhibits women's autonomy in her culture), she is seen as a deviant from the culture.

The playwright exposes the exploitation of women's bodies in some parts of West Africa, which still allows the opprobrious practice that Okoh believes is culturally imposed on women against their wishes by customs and religion. Okoh (2000) observes that all the time wasted in nursing willfully inflicted injuries could be used instead in helping these women attain the basic means of subsistence and, thereby, contribute to the economy of the community. This is observed by Ezeigbo, (1996) who says that

In most communities where female circumcision is practised, the aim is primarily to ensure virginity before marriage and chastity throughout married life. The excision of the clitoris would ensure that a woman derives no pleasure from sex. It would also reduce her capacity to achieve orgasm.

(35)

Communities that practice female circumcision do not publicize the adverse complications, leaving people unaware of the dangers involved, and thus they continue in their ignorance. *Edewede* discusses this barbaric practice that is imposed on innocent girls, its implications, and a general belief about it in some West African countries like Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. To countries that practice female circumcision, it is assumed to have a cultural and religious basis, which advocates of cultural relativism have supported.

The play opens with a dialogue: a grandmother, Ebikere, tries to cajole her granddaughter, Oseme, to undergo the assumed rite of passage into adulthood, but Ebikere is opposed by her daughter-in-law, who does not support the idea. The play illustrates the rite of passage, described by Scullion (2000: 8) as a "turn or series of ceremonies or rituals of initiation." In *Edewede*, Okoh shows the older generation of women as the upholders of the rite of passage and tradition. She exposes Ebikere as the one who encourages female circumcision to continue:

EBIKERE: Circumcision is part of our culture. My mother was circumcised. So also were your grandmothers; great grandmothers; and great grandmothers. It is a rite that every woman in this land goes through ... your bravery in the camp of circumcision will be the pride of your family and lineage.

(3)

While these young girls do not have any idea of the painful experience they are about to go through, Ebikere believes that circumcision is an occasion that every young girl should anticipate anxiously. On the one hand, it is the barbaric, crude excision of the clitoris; but since on the other hand, it brings the society pride, its members have to undergo the process to honor their societal values without considering the girls' health. It is a moment of bravery and heroism that allows these females to show the dichotomies of the public/private sphere, but it underscores African patriarchal victimization of women. These views are also summarized in Kassindja's (1998) description of what female circumcision entails as told by those who have gone through the whole process:

I've heard that during the procedure, four women spread your legs wide apart and hold you down so you can't move. And then, the eldest woman takes a knife that is used to cut hair and scrapes your woman parts off. There are no painkillers, no anaesthesia. The knife isn't sterilised. Afterwards, the women wrap your hips to your knees and you have to stay in bed for forty days so the wound can close.

(13)

Although several descriptions have been made by different writers about how circumcision is done and its assumed benefits to the societies that

practice it, the practice of the Nigerian society that Okoh portrays is not explained in detail. Some of the reasons why communities practice female circumcision, apart from it being seen as a positive tradition, include for religious purposes, increased cleanliness, preservation of virginity, better marriage prospects, and enhancement of male sexual pleasure, among others. Okoh, however, exposes that the excision of the clitoris is deeply rooted in tradition and African mythology, which allows the older generation represented by Ebikere to hold firm to it as they believe that such practice helps to maintain social cohesiveness and harmony. This society views the clitoris as a "peanut" that causes confusion, impurity, and imperfection, which should be "carved out of its pod" during the initiation ceremony before young girls move from girlhood to womanhood.

It is also at this initiation camp that girls learn about the taboos of the land and their future roles as wives and mothers, which eventually makes them into copies of their mothers in the society. Edewede believes that the unchanging culture does not benefit anyone; rather, it claims innocent girls' lives, leaves some with psychological trauma, but inasmuch as the society sees nothing wrong with the practice, it will continue. This is revealed in her argument with Ebikere:

EDWEDE: What about those girls who do not return to the village and are never even mourned, after bleeding to death? Regarded as sacrifice, they are left behind for the vultures to feed on. Tell her also about those girls who do not live long enough to see the days of their marriage and motherhood because of the infection contacted during the operation. Go on, tell her about all of them.

(6-7)

#### *Female circumcision and its challenges*

As mentioned earlier, the dangers of the process, such as anxiety, severe depression, and psychosomatic illnesses, are not publicized. Edewede tries to use these as evidence against the acceptance of this practice by other women. Edewede's zeal to effect change in the course of such tradition, which does not benefit the private sphere but instead glorifies the public sphere, makes Ebikere see her as a woman with vile words, a woman ill-brought up, a woman who does not know her womanly role in her marital home, a woman without cultural heritage, and a woman without any sense of humility. Ebikere sees that Edewede's action goes in line with the masculine power of asserting one's position of dominance and maintaining an audience in the presence of inhibiting powers. This portrays the societal perception of any woman who dares to be heard, powerful, and resilient against some cultural practices that make her valueless.

The remembrance of the victims of circumcision in that same society, like her sister and elder daughter, makes Edewede determined to change the situation and also influences other women of her generation. Edewede's

elder sister's death created in her the fear of female circumcision, but her elder daughter, Ize, who also dies of an infection contracted after the operation, has made her more determined. Her loss is encouraged by Erial, who sees the women's lack of voice as a central problem: it hinders them from expressing themselves and contributes to the underlying inferiority complex. This is a means of undervaluing femininity, which makes these females "cripples," incapable of making their own decisions about their bodies. Additionally, they have not been given alternative tools to protect themselves against any form of social pressures. Therefore, the older generation of women only finds their means of survival based on the pride of their "self and social" honor.

Edewede's reply to Erial's question of whether she is really crippled baffles Erial, who is influenced by the retrogressive tradition that makes women powerless. This practice can be changed if, and only if, they are willing, determined, and ready to change it for their own good.

EDWEDE: What do you expect? We live in a land where men are born to dish out commands and women to carry them out and suffer in silence.

ERIAL: You are a human being, capable of doing many things men can do, if only you'd try. But you wouldn't try because your mind is weak, weakened by fear. That is why you lack confidence in yourself.

(22)

In Okoh's writing, female characters are represented as liberating forces, which acknowledges the importance of their sexuality and autonomy. Erial's call for Edewede to change her situation and that of other women in her society, or else the death of innocent girls will continue, is a step toward their gender autonomy. She summons the courage to use her voice, to dismiss her fear and resignation, and to see herself as a superior being, instead of crying and lamenting over issues that can be changed only if she is determined. She raises Edewede's consciousness at that time to use her anger and the grief over the death of her daughter to reverse the order of things if she does not want her only remaining daughter to go through the female circumcision process. Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) recognize that consciousness-raising is taken from the idea of "speaking pains to recall pains" (84). Echols sees consciousness-raising as a way for women to regularly gather in small groups so they can recount their own lives and how they 'became' women. Pilcher and Whelehan argue that such consciousness-raising groups of women are expected:

...to look askance at their own lives and realise the extent to which they share experiences with other women of various backgrounds and ages; that their problems are not unique and individual, but rather all too common and produced by wider social relations and institutions.

(17)

Consciousness-raising groups help women to relocate themselves within society, hence they are seen as another element of female discourse that strengthens the female bond. Although these consciousness-raising groups have advantages and disadvantages, writers such as Brownmiller (2000) have identified problems associated with it. Okoh's call for action is similar to Walker's (1992) in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, where she purports to document female circumcision in Africa. Readers of different genders, ages, and viewpoints are educated about the destructive effects of female circumcision and at the end of the novel are ready to stop the act from infringing on female autonomy. Okoh and Walker's writings on female circumcision are different in their analysis: Okoh, as an African woman living in Africa, presents a way forward by encouraging women to take actions that will stop the act, while Walker sees the stocked characterizations of her African female characters from her Western view.

Although readers cannot separate Walker's view of the female gender from their representation of social and racial stereotypes, they can see Walker's calls for autonomy, through the conscious efforts of knowing, as better than what is considered good for the females in any patriarchal society. Okoh explores consciousness as a means of creating female autonomy and avoiding further loss in different ways that are not always relatable. She employs Edewede and other women of her age group to create an unbroken bond among them as a way of rising against their agonizing indigenous culture, which makes women weaklings, property, objects of sexual gratification, and leads them to unavoidable death, after being enlightened by Mama Nurse. This effort of Mama Nurse, Eriala, and Edewede to educate these other women on the complications of the female circumcision practice makes them determined to eradicate the practice and the cultural beliefs behind it. At the end of the meeting, these women disapprove of female circumcision, as well as society's justification that it promotes female purity and cleanliness and prevents women's promiscuity. They now see it as a health hazard, a form of psychological torture and physical mutilation that make them powerless and voiceless.

### Conclusion

Although Okoh explores motherhood as a means through which women are recognized and esteemed, she also uses the patriarchal structure in her plays to transform her timid, shy, immature female characters who represent the female gender into fully grown, mentally developed, and sexually intelligent women who are confident enough to question the authority of men. Okoh's *Edewede* is a motivated woman with a sense of sisterhood who desires to help other women who suffer loss in silence. She calls them into action by viewing female circumcision as a form of slavery imposed on women, to dominate them in the society that sees no value in femaleness except for their domesticity, obedience, and ignorance, even if they die in the process.

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