



## Female Genital Mutilation and Repressive Boundaries: Representations in Mabel Ekwierhoma's "The Cut Across"

IMOH SUNDAY OBOT, OBASUYI YETUNDE OMOLARA  
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria

**Abstract.** Representation is one of the creative tools used in play text to interrogate or reinforce consciousness or awareness of certain nagging socio-cultural practices in society. In recent times, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a disturbing cultural practice in Nigeria, has received scant attention despite mounting global pressure to curb the devastating practice. Scant involvement of playwrights in the fight against FGM reduces the collective efforts towards the ill-disposed cultural practice in various parts of Nigeria. This paper examined Mabel Ekwierhoma's "The Cut Across" (2022) to reveal issues surrounding the practice of FGM with attention to its repressive effects and possible reasons for sustaining the tradition. The paper deployed textual analysis and Theatre for Development (TFD) as a conceptual frame of reference. The study arrived at the fact that FGM is practised in many communities because of ignorance, fear of speaking out or being banished from the community. Also, the custodians of many communities believe that FGM eliminates infidelity. However, the revealed complications, infections, barrenness, depression, sexual rigidity and death as consequences of FGM practices. The text also emphasised exposure and education as instruments that can help women fight injustices and injurious traditions. It was recommended that Theatre for Development should be considered as a viable platform for raising issues of social change, especially for rigid traditional practices such as FGM in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Local Birth Attendants, Local Circumcisers, Theatre for Development, Ill-disposed cultural practice, Repressive trends, Drama therapy

### 1. Introduction

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is an ancient traditional practice recently come under intense criticism because of numerous negative effects on female children and women generally. Because of its negative tendencies, it has been abolished in different countries. In Nigeria, FGM is prohibited under the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 (VAPP). Nigeria joined the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which advocates for the Rights of Women in Africa against FGM. Additionally, formal and informal programmes have been introduced at different times and levels to educate, enlighten, and create awareness about the dangers of continuing the depressive tradition. Despite these measures, numerous communities still practice it in Nigeria, perhaps because it takes time to eliminate harmful old traditions.

FGM, a raging menace, has necessitated scholarly interventions in recent times, leading to several plays dedicated to uncovering and addressing a plethora of issues. Notable among them are Juliana Okoh's "Edwede", Mabel Ekwierhoma's "The Cut Across", and Ayakoroma's "A Scar for Life", to mention but a few. This paper examined Mabel Ekwierhoma's "The Cut Across" (2022) by analysing the plot of the play to reveal issues surrounding the practice of FGM with attention on its repressive effects and possible reasons for sustaining the tradition. The paper deployed textual analysis and Theatre for Development (TFD) as a conceptual frame of reference.

### 2. Conceptual Clarification

Female genital mutilation is a global concern that requires concerted efforts towards eradication. In many instances, FGM is explained rather than defined

because it means different things to people in different contexts. However, the World Health Organisation (2023) defines it as the partial or entire removal of the external female genital organs. This removal is harmful to the female gender and carries several cultural reasons. One of such is to keep women committed and dedicated to their husbands to eradicate infidelity, which is seen as taboo in some communities in Nigeria. Omigbodun (2020) explains that among some ethnic groups in Nigeria, women have their labia minora, labia majora, and clitoris surgically removed, and their vulvae are closed except for a little opening that allows them to urinate and menstruate. UNICEF (2022) added that about 200 million women have undergone FGM across 30 countries, including Nigeria. Furthermore, in some communities in Nigeria, FGM is practised on girls at an infant age uphill puberty (UNICEF, 2022). According to Esther & Itunu (2019), it is performed within eight days after delivery, just like male circumcision. Carrying out FGM at the infant stage is to stop the excruciating pains and bleeding that often result in health complications. In similar circumstances, FGM is done shortly before marriage or shortly before a woman gives birth to a first child (Omigbodun, 2020).

The manner FGM is carried out in the local communities constitutes a major concern. Omigbodun (2020) explains that unsterilized sharp objects such as scissors, pieces of glass, old razor blades, and other objects are often used. The use of unsterilized sharp objects leaves room for infection and disease. He further noted that persons who carry out such illegal surgical operations are untrained and bereft of expertise. Such operators include: local birth attendants, circumcisers and herbalists (UNFPA, 2021),

Due to the dangers of this barbaric tradition, a multi-disciplinary approach has been used to address the practice of FGM. This has been done through the formation of legislative frameworks banning the practice, research, medical treatment of complications, sensitisation, mass mobilisation, and community action. However, these approaches yield few results in certain areas of the country for certain reasons. Firstly, FGM is rooted in traditions and religious beliefs, which makes it difficult to eradicate. Some communities strongly that it is responsible for eradicating infidelity (Amusan & Asekun Olarinmoye, 2008; Odo, Dibia, Nwagu, Umoke & Umoke, 2020). Secondly, since local circumcisers do not have alternative sources of income, they resist any attempts to discontinue the practice (UNFPA, 2021, p. 20). Thirdly, in many communities, mothers and aunts are the custodians of FGM (UNFPA, 2016). In such

communities, for a girl-child, married woman, or young mother to be recognised and integrated into the community, they must accept the tradition (Wogu, Amonyeze, Folorunsho & Aloh, 2019).

### **3. Conceptualising Theatre for Development (TFD)**

Theatre, drama and society have always been inseparable (Abah, 2005). Playwrights and dramatists are members of society. They depict the realities of their societies. Therefore, theatre and drama mirror society. Moreover, theatre and drama engage the attention of people through a dramatic presentation of problems (Umenyilorah, 2014; Obot, 2019). Succinctly, theatre and drama enable the audience to see their problems in fresh and critical ways. Obuh (1993) explains that theatre is often used to create awareness about a menace. Again, this is possible because theatre is potent in presenting issues clearly and gaining acceptance from people with some ease, unlike other art forms (Obuh, 1993).

The above assertions form a strong impression about theatre as a social change and development agent. Importantly, the use of drama and theatre to bring about social change and to instigate well-being is known as Theatre for Development. Specifically, theatre and drama were deployed in the 90s, during the Mass Mobilisation for Economic Recovery and Social Justice (MAMSER). Theatre midwived the success of the programme by creating awareness, raising consciousness, and leading to behaviour change through edutainment.

### **4. Dramatic Representation: A Theatrical Device**

Several devices enable drama or theatre to convey messages to the audience, but dramatic representation is pivotal here. Gallagher (2024) explains that dramatic representation is used by playwrights to provoke audience imagination, which helps them have a clearer picture of the situation under review. Dramatic representation implies mental images or pictures painted in the minds of the audience during performance or dramatic readings about an issue, person or thing. In this case, the dramatic representation is about FGM. Aesthetically, representation is a strong visualisation tool used in communicating images, or pictures, such as ideas, concepts, experience or action to be taken. A dramatic performance unfolds the imagination, which, in turn, stirs a critical reflection strong enough to cause a change of attitude (Obot, 2021). This quality creates a platform for TFD to express dramatic experience, especially participation. As Greene (2001) explains,

participation is crucial when there is a need for social or behavioural change in a society. This is even more essential when a dramatic text is carefully crafted and interpreted to give a contemporary meaning to an issue (Obot & Obasuyi, 2021).

### 5. “The Cut Across”: Plot Structure

Mabel Ekwierhoma’s *The Cut Across* is one of the creative masterpieces devoted to the issues of female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM). The drama is set in a rural community in the South-South region of Nigeria, revolving around the main character, Emu, a returnee from Europe, who personally took up the challenge of confronting this barbaric tradition and saving the women and girls of the community from the cruel blades of circumcision. The fight to stop the tradition met with stiff resistance from its proponents and the custodians of the culture. Emu’s mother faced threats for harbouring a child with such courage and disregard for the culture and traditions of her land. Despite the threats and disdain, Emu continued her campaign against FGM, and her plight was answered as the tradition was declared abolished.

Several issues surrounding FGM were revealed in the text, including the nature of the practice, reasons for its persistence, dangers to women who are cut or at risk of being cut, and the struggle for abolition. It is essential to note that the play highlighted a significant level of ignorance among women and girls who advocated for the continuation of female circumcision in the community. This was clearly shown in the play when Emu complained thus:

Emu: I am all alone and tired of this struggle against  
My kith and kin. Or is it their struggles against me?  
Why should acts like culture be undertaken  
when the repercussions help one?  
...apart from feeling amputated, I do not see any reason  
why friends and family do not want to envision  
tomorrow.  
...the world has left this community behind.

In a struggle against tradition and culture, the journey is always tedious and lonely, but at the end of the day, the whole community benefits from a favourable outcome. From the text, Emu was not the only voice shouting against female circumcision. Others lent their voices, but with fear of the repercussions from the community leaders and elders.

From the play, one can easily decipher that the leaders and elders of the community supported the female actor unanimously. Based on this premise, any attempt

to paint the act in a bad light was to be strongly rejected and crushed to the ground. It was a no-go area because nothing was to change. As far as they were concerned, FGM was sacrosanct and unchangeable in the community. This was clearly illustrated in Act One, Scene 3, when Oni Emu told Emu, “There is no point setting the community on fire. Let us not keep people awake with the rat’s odour” (p. 13). Succinctly, Oni Emu was out rightly saying that to bring up the matter of female genital mutilation was as good as setting the community on fire. She created a picture of the crude practice as “rat’s odour”

The Eurocentric import of the text is worthy of note. The central character in the play (Emu) is a returnee from a country across the Atlantic in Europe, after spending several years. From this representation, it could be observed or argued that such an exposure gave her the impetus to pursue the campaign against the long-standing tradition against women and young girls.

Apart from the Emu, no character pioneered the revolt against the practice. There was general apathy towards querying the act, even women in the community found the practice harmful and awkward. The implication of the above picturisation is quite consequential to the general discourse on external motivations, especially for women’s liberation in Africa and Nigeria. The illustration here is that, as far as matters of genital mutilation are concerned, local voices are ignored or downplayed. The right weight, respect and audience may not be given to someone from the local community. Thus, to a large extent, the reason presented for attention and escalation was because the crusader, though with some external influence or colouration, was also a victim of the practice in the community.

Also, Emu’s exposure to Western civilisation helped to build her confidence and tactical approach in the fight against female circumcision in the community. The majority of women and girls in the community were uneducated and unexposed, and these contributed to the acceptance of the practice. It was as if no woman was able to see the dangers embedded in the practice. Commentaries from two female characters can be used to explain the above statement:

ANUCHE: Our forefathers did not listen to our Foremothers who cried about the devastation that cutting caused. Some of those who died from cutting were called evil children, witches, sorceress, amidst other negative cognomen... (p. 46)

In the same vein, Miyeri added:

How about those who survived the blade?  
Many are proud wives and mothers today  
There is dignity in that cutting because it  
Removes the triggers of promiscuity (p. 47).

The above statements show that some female characters attach dignity to women who have been cut. They also agree that female circumcision can reduce sexual libido and, by so doing, address the nagging issue of promiscuity and infidelity. It was also made clear that women who died after cutting may have been plagued by evil spirits or witchcraft. This is trying to erase the fact that female circumcision can lead to death. All of these could be placed under the factor of brainwashing and ignorance. After several years of seeing female curcumin in this way, the arrival of Emu, from the white man's lands, could only bring about friction. This is known as ideological war, which must be won for social change (Epskamp, 2006; Iorapuu, 2009).

Again, because of the fear and the threat of being banished from the community, many women who understood the dangers of the tradition kept mute and suffered in silence. Courage was required to start a campaign, and that came from Emu, who had exposure to Western education and lifestyle. Her doggedness and determination came from outside and not from within. Emu's doggedness and determination of Emu in the campaign against FGM can be credited to her exposure to Western civilisation and education. Something that girl-child education can achieve in the long run. If a girl-child is given quality education, has her rights respected, with an equal playing field in the community or larger society, negative socio-cultural practices or anti-women traditional practices will eventually disappear in the African communities.

Unfortunately, most precarious traditional practices continue unabated because people of such communities are ignorant of what is happening in other cultures and societies. Emu brought facts and knowledge about female circumcision to her female friend and the entire community through her campaign. It therefore means that the availability of knowledge leads to a change in attitude. What several communities are experiencing presently is a fallout of knowledge availability. Custodians of customs and traditions consciously or unconsciously fight new knowledge instead of accepting it. When members of the society or community cannot interrogate traditional practices, they indirectly encourage tyranny, which cannot help a people grow and develop. Harmful practices are sustained by ignorance, ego and domineering tendencies.

This was represented when Potokiri said: "That is impossible. Traditions which our forefathers handed over to us cannot be faulted. Don't they see how faithful our women are?" To corroborate this assertion, Ose Vuoke stated that: "Yes, modernity has a lot of predicaments. Compare them with the women from across the forest who follow men at the snap of their fingers" the last statement by Ose Vuoke was to agree that women who are not circumcised tend to harbour stronger libido, and can flirt with other men and which was not accepted within the culture of the people. Perhaps, there is sense in believing that sustaining the old, long tradition of their forebears could bring about sanity in the society. However, continuing in a tradition that was more or less a violation of human rights was not a tradition that was worth keeping.

So, many have argued that it is not as though such practices are set to damage any member of society. The knowledge available at that time made it possible for a solution to be sought, which often resulted in several practices, some harmful to both male and female members of such communities. Arguably, the emergence of new knowledge is the order of the new world, known as the digital age. The emergence of new knowledge and ideas continually leads to daring changes in the practice of traditions and cultures in African societies. Instead of embracing change, we often find resistance. The play illustrates this scenario when the elders of the community stood up against Emu's idea to do away with female circumcision despite realising the dangers therein. This double standard can be linked to ego, self-centeredness, and entitlement mentality.

Furthermore, the play projected the use of repressive tendencies such as fear and intimidation as weapons for subverting possible attempts or opposition to female circumcision in the community. For instance, Oni Emu persuaded Emu, her daughter, to back down on the planned campaign against female circumcision for fear of sanctions against her from the community leaders. She pleaded thus: "I do not want your uncles to send me away under the pretext of taboo and inherit what your father left for me and your siblings" (p. 14). She added: "They will accuse me of instigating you against tradition (p. 15). Imagine how many women in the community who would have challenged the barbaric tradition, but because they are likely to be ostracised, they remain silent. Fear and intimidation are factors that deter people from challenging traditions and cultures.

The play also showcased the disadvantages of female circumcision. The words of Emu re-echo succinctly:

The world is amazed that we continue an act that maims women for life. ...the disfigured, barren and sick women whose lives the cutters have reshaped are at stake...there are infections and diseases transmitted by the unsterilized blades and they are dismissed by our people as common ailments”

In addition, Emu succinctly stated:

The world is amazed that we continue an act that maims women for life. The statistics on the dead, whose demise was blamed on household enemies or witches, he disfigured, barren and sick women whose lives the cutters have reshaped are at stake.

From the foregoing, the world cannot imagine that female circumcision is in practice, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A whole load of implications abound for women who are cut. The implications include: barrenness, sickness, death, and infections, which are irredeemable.

## 6. Use of Literary/dramatic devices

The play was able to deploy imagery, metaphor, and flashback as literary devices to paint a vivid mental picture of the scenes. A good example was the flashback of Owesuo, who went through the cutter’s blade and developed complications during childbirth. The whole picture of Owesuo being pushed in a wheelbarrow for miles across the forest and rivers to a reputable hospital on the outskirts of the village. The surreal flashback in act three, scene five (p. 54), paints a gory image of the ordeal that women go through.

Arguably, Ewrierhoma used simple language to express the subject matter. This simplicity allows readers from various backgrounds to comprehend the issues surrounding female genital mutilation, which is a social concern. The essence of simple language was perhaps deliberate to allow for easy comprehension. More so, the play deployed a plethora of literary devices that helped to create effects, such as: making a specific mood or rhythm, expressing a comparison interestingly, adding sensory depth to the text, creating vivid imagery, emphasising something, building suspense and highlighting the importance of an idea.

## 7. Conclusion

The study arrived at the postulations that FGM is practised in many communities as a result of ignorance, fear and allegiance to culture. Instinctively, the custodians of many communities believe that FGM eliminates infidelity and sexual immorality, which strengthens the family as the unit of society. However, the review further revealed complications, infections,

barrenness, depression, sexual rigidity and death as consequences of FGM practices. Emphasis was placed on education and exposure to modern civilisation as triggers to accentuate women’s fight against injustices and injurious traditions in Nigeria. Thus, it has been recommended that Theatre for Development (TFD) should be considered as a viable platform for raising issues of social change, especially for addressing rigid traditional practices such as FGM in Nigeria.

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