

Cultural Practices, Bodily Autonomy, and Girls' Unfreedom in Annor Nimako's *Mutilated*

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural rationales used to legitimise female genital mutilation and the critique of their drawbacks in Annor Nimako's *Mutilated* (2001). As a complex system of values, culture incorporates practices that have become increasingly contested in contemporary human rights and gender discourses, such as female genital mutilation. Given the dynamic nature of culture and its profound influence on social development, some cultural practices must be subjected to continuous critical evaluation to determine their impact on individual dignity and collective well-being. Thus, drawing on Feminist Literary Criticism and New Historicism, this article intends to show the relevance and value of the female genital mutilation to contemporary African societies. It also aims to claim the abolition of the studied practice once its obnoxiousness as well as its infringement on both the freedom and the holistic development of the targeted social group is corroborated.

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Introduction

Contemporary African societies are torn between the preservation of cultural traditions and the protection of fundamental human rights. This tension is visible in literary outputs. In fact, while some cultural traditions are often regarded as repositories of communal identity and historical continuity, other practices including female genital mutilation (FGM), have increasingly attracted critical attention because of their implications for women's bodily autonomy, dignity, and freedom. The persistence of such practices raises important questions about the extent to which culture can legitimately regulate the female body under the guise of tradition. African literary text has emerged as a crucial space wherein these tensions are interrogated.

Indeed, as an old-age tradition (Nimako 209), FGM and early marriage are the burning issues the novel under study revolves around. As a matter of fact, FGM is a cultural practice among many harmful others that is detrimental to girls' well-being, freedom, and psychological development. Instead of treating culture as a sacred and an unquestionable institution, many contemporary African writers expose its contradictions, revealing how patriarchal customs may simultaneously sustain communal cohesion and institutionalize gender-based oppression. In this context, Annor Nimako's *Mutilated* narrates a compelling literary exploration of the ideological mechanisms through which female bodies are disciplined, tamed, and controlled in the name of cultural legitimation.

Previous critical works on FGM have predominantly focused on the issue of female circumcision from the perspectives of cultural meaning, on its implications for cultural identity, and on the anthropological debates surrounding cultural interpretation. Indeed, in his article entitled "What about 'Female Genital Mutilation'? And Why Understanding Culture Matters in First Place," R. A. Shweder denounces the oversimplification that characterizes the anti-female sex excision. He also emphasizes the importance of considering how culture and perception matter in the debate on FGM, and invites to a 'hard second look' on the issue. What is worth noting is that Shweder complicates universalist discourse rather than merely denouncing anti-FGM activism. The scholar's work is particularly valuable because it provides the cultural rationale that characters and communities may invoke to legitimise FGM. In contrast, the novel under study foregrounds the lived consequences of those cultural rationales especially the restriction of girls' agency, bodily

autonomy, and freedom. Reading Shweder's work, it can be argued that this article explains why the practice persists within a cultural framework, while our article shows how this situation can produce suffering, coercion, and gendered unfreedom. This dialogue allows us to analyse not only the practice itself but also the conflict between cultural continuity and individual rights, making Shweder's essay a useful contextual source rather than a definitive moral framework.

In "Female Genital Mutilation and Identity Change in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Annor Nimako's *Mutilated*," Alama Ouattara examines how FGM influences female identity formation and transformation in African literary texts and beyond in the African society. Through a comparative analysis of Ngũgĩ's *The River Between* and Nimako's *Mutilated*, the study proves that FGM operates as a cultural practice deeply connected to notions of tradition, social belonging and identity. Ouattara's article also reveals how fiction portrays the tensions between cultural continuity and individual transformation. However, its comparative approach does not fully explore the specific mechanisms through which patriarchal structures restrict girls' freedom, and deny them control over their own bodies.

Beyond cultural interpretation, Fuambai Sia Ahmadu's article entitled "Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision" introduces an insider perspective into the debate on FGM. Ahmadu castigates external representations of excision as merely oppressive. She argues that initiation practices can work as significant markers of cultural identity, social recognition, and female belonging. Her work complicates grand narratives by emphasizing women's agency and the possibility that some women may perceive these rituals as meaningful rather than oppressive. Nevertheless, Ahmadu's emphasis on cultural ownership and identity leaves open questions concerning the position of young girls who undergo the practice without consent and whose body is shaped as per social expectations.

In short, what makes our article different from these works is that it transforms the discussion of FGM from a question of cultural identity and anthropological interpretation into a feminist and a new historicist literary investigation of bodily autonomy, girls' unfreedom, and resistance against the ideological structures that regulate female bodies. This paper argues that Annor Nimako's *Mutilated* demonstrates that while FGM is sustained by cultural legitimation that perpetuates women's unfreedom, counter-history

eventually emerges as the foundation for cultural reconfiguration, the restoration of their body autonomy, and human dignity. Thus, through its critique of oppressive traditions, the novel advocates a dynamic reconfiguration of culture grounded in human rights, justice and individual agency.

Moreover, the peculiarity of the study lies in its interest in girls' circumcision in Africa under the analytical lens of Feminist Literary Criticism backed up by New Historicism as a complementary theoretical tool. While Feminist Literary Criticism provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining *Mutilated* because the novel foregrounds the intersection of gender, culture, and power, New Historicism explains culture and tradition, which legitimate the cultural practices oppressing girls and women. Together, these approaches illuminate how *Mutilated* represents the female body as both a cultural battlefield and a site of resistance against oppressive traditions.

Thus, 'Feminism' began to be used widely in Europe as a synonym for women's emancipation only in the 1880s (Offen quoted by Humm 1). Karen Offen defines Feminism in these terms:

Feminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman. (151)

It follows from this definition that feminist criticism is about the freedom and liberation of female gender from men's hegemony and ideology. Dealing with African feminist, Filomina Chioma Steady writes that African feminist discourse takes care to delineate those concerns that are peculiar to the African situation (28). This African situation which is nothing other than African social reality represented by FGM and early marriage in actual life constitutes the main material the novel is built with, hence the scope of new historicism, the complementary theoretical tool used for the analysis.

The term 'new historicism' was coined by the American critic whose book is usually regarded as its beginning (Barry 172). For Peter Barry, it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same period (Barry 172). This means that New Historicism takes account of the referential life the fiction world belongs to. In fact, according

to this theory, while the historical events affect the literary works of a given society, the written works in that society also shape its history and collective mind by interpretation so that literary texts can also lead the history and upcoming works (Greenblatt 2). The upshot of all these definitions is that the story of *Mutilated* is deeply rooted in a society whose treatment of girls is displayed. Thus, by analysing this topic, our concern is the transformation of society as a whole (Horkheimer 219) so that a ‘society without injustice’ (Horkheimer 221) can emerge with less exploitation or oppression. In this work, Feminism and New Historicism allow us to examine the novel in relation to patriarchal ideology, culture, historical and cultural force surrounding FGM.

This article examines the extent to which female genital mutilation (FGM) curtails the freedom of girls and adversely affects their physical and psychological well-being. Its primary objective is to interrogate this cultural practice in order to expose its harmful consequences and advocate for the emancipation of girls and women. To this end, the study addresses the following questions: How does *Mutilated* represent the cultural legitimization of FGM? How does the novel dramatize the relationship between bodily control and girls’ unfreedom? How do female characters negotiate complicity, suffering, resistance, and cultural transformation?

The novel reveals that the persistence of FGM is sustained by patriarchal discourses that confine girls and women to positions of subservience by restricting their bodily autonomy and social agency. The central argument of this paper is that patriarchal ideology oppresses girls and women through harmful cultural practices while simultaneously generating forms of resistance that challenge existing power structures and advocate social change. To achieve this objective, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first examines the cultural legitimization of FGM and its representation as a mechanism of unfreedom. The second analyzes the denunciation of the practice through women’s resistance, tracing their movement from subordination to counter-history and highlighting the need for cultural reconfiguration.

1- Female Genital Mutilation, Cultural Legitimation, and the Representation of Unfreedom

Prior to anything, it is worth putting that female circumcision is an integral

part of cultural practice which is more prevalent in Africa than in other places in the world. But, what does culture mean? What is its implication in the constrained condition of the affected girls and women? British Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* gives a noteworthy definition of culture, when he writes thus: "Culture, or civilization, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1). Simply put, culture and civilisation are a single concept, which is about human's way of life. However, if this sociocultural life is of paramount importance in the imaginary inhabitants' life of Annor Nimako's *Mutilated* as regards food habits, tradition, education and social events, it all the same carries a hidden significance.

This concealed significance can be what Edward T. Hall terms as hidden culture in *Beyond Culture* (Hall 57). In fact, if culture is food, dance, and language that are perceived in daily behaviours and attitudes, it also encapsulates beliefs that represent its hidden side to repeat Hall. As such, culture takes an iceberg-like model (Hall), which is made of a visible and an invisible part (Hall). The visible manifestations of culture are just the tip of the iceberg which consists of socio-cultural events such as dance, dietary practices, marriage, and FGM in the novel.

However, the hidden part of the imaginary culture is related to the serious damage caused to the girl's holistic development. If the visible is the palpable and tangible mutilation of the female genitalia, the invisible side stands for the psychological damage and pain, the unfree state of girls/women in society. As a matter of fact, most of the women characters comply with genital mutilation because of the patriarchal discourse that promotes its historical value and scope. The text reads: "female circumcision had been practised among their people for ages. It was their heritage" (Nimako 22). Here the unveiled part of the iceberg in regard to female circumcision is the unfreedom, the ongoing and traumatic scar borne by the mutilated girls/women over their life time. Yet, this silent pain is detrimental to them. In *Female genital mutilation: An overview*, medical literature suggests this definition:

The most common types of female genital cutting rituals involve amputation of part or all of the clitoris and the labia minora resulting in irreparable physical damage and increased risk of health complications (the

anatomy of the external female genitalia and the effects of female genital mutilation on health). It is because of the severity and irreversibility of the damage inflicted on the girl's body that the procedure has been termed "female genital mutilation," often abbreviated to FGM (3). Annor Nimako's *Mutilated* provides with a similar definition as follows:

female circumcision and female genital mutilation is the removal of parts of or all the organs of the external genitalia of a female. These organs consist of the clitoris, the labia minora and the labia majora. The tissues removed are normally healthy ones and cannot be replaced. Because this practice involves the definitive and irremediable removal of a healthy organ, it must be regarded as mutilation. (31)

From these clear-cut definitions, it can be understood that FGM is a surgical operation performed on girls' and women's bodies, notably on their genitals, thereby revealing their unfree state. The word 'practice' mentioned in the definition by Nimako is about cultural practice. This physical ailment experienced by the female sex amounts to the legitimization of violence girls and women are subjected to. The norm as established by patriarchy consolidates women's domination by men. In this vein, it is obvious that the main reason is the social conditioning of women to accept FGM within social definitions of womanhood and identity, then consolidating cultural legitimization. Tom R. Tyler contends that Legitimation refers to the characteristic of being legitimized by being placed within a framework through which something is viewed as right and proper (76). Put in other words, it refers to the fact of making patriarchal power lawful, justified, accepted and acceptable. As such, FGM becomes a legitimate rite by attaching itself to social values and norms as defined by patriarchy, which refers to the role of men as the chief responsible for the welfare and decision of the whole community. In Kate Millet's parlance: "Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children" "classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property" (Millet 67). This amounts to arguing that male gender is the absolute authority while the female one is subordinate and inferior wherever in the family, and society in general.

Indeed, a heritage whose contents remain unexplained and hidden, strengthens the female gender's great dependence on tradition, regardless of its obnoxious effects as testified to by excision. This social discourse

corroborates the force of tradition upon many characters, as it can be noted: “It is the custom of our people” (Nimako 49). As such, to get acceptance and recognition from men and fellow women, girls and women must show subordination, docility, and submission. In this respect, girls and women struggle to confirm their girlhood and womanhood through the ritual of mutilation admitted by the society. This argument is further substantiated by Sarah’s mother’s threatening words when Sarah expresses some reluctance to get involved in the matter of FGM:

You have shamed me all these years; you have shamed your family and friends; you have shamed the community and that will send me to my grave (...) If you don’t submit yourself to be circumcised during this two-week period that you are going to be here, when you die, your dead body will be brought to this village before it is buried. That will shame your body. (Nimako 86)

From a feminist perspective, this passage can be read as the consolidation and legitimization of the patriarchal authority, which is exercised through cultural expectations and the social regulation of the female body. The repetition of the term “shamed” is particularly significant, as it transforms the lady’s refusal to undergo circumcision from an assertion of bodily autonomy into a perceived violation of family and communal honour. By insisting that she has “shamed” her family, friends, and community, Sarah’s mother shifts the focus from the girl’s physical and emotional well-being to the preservation of a collective social reputation. Obviously, it is not the mother’s voice the reader can hear or read; instead, it is that of the culture. Thus, this rhetoric illustrates how patriarchal societies can appropriate girl’s and women’s bodies as sites upon which communal values, honour, and cultural identity are inscribed. In this respect, Filomina Chioma Steady is right when she pens that “Culture is a collective pattern of living conveying the norms and values handed down from generation to generation in any society” (54). The speaking mother is then playing this role of cultural transmission. She wishes her daughter kept safe their culture despite its corroborated harmful side effects.

Like the old woman who complies with FGM in *Mutilated*, in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* and Fatou Keita’s *Rebelle*, many women also sound unable to voice their anxiety in the name of cultural conformity. FGM is the cause of many deaths, as illustrated through Muthoni’s death in *The River Between* (Ngũgĩ 53). In *Rebelle*, the traditional excisionist’s name is ‘*Dimikèla*.’

Literally, ‘*Dimikèla*’ means he/she who is responsible for others’ wound, pain and hurt. Despite the horrible side of the phenomenon of FGM, a great number of women seem to abide by it in the name of cultural preservation and legitimation.

Like some female characters in these novels, the same misfortune befalls the female child-character of Barbara Aseke in *Mutilated* (Nimako 5) who died following circumcision. This speaking female character fails to see girls’ and women’s oppression. Therefore, FGM hampers girl’s freedom. This practice amounts to the state of unfreedom female children are faced with in the patriarchal system. From the term ‘unfreedom,’ let us consider the phrase ‘to be unfree,’ as being a prisoner (Dahl and Nexö 12), and in chains. Christian Dahl and Tue Andersen Nexö contend that: “the prisoner is thought of as a physical entity, blocked in his or her movement by other physical things” (12). The physical entity blocked, is the whole female gender whose right to freedom is denied in *Mutilated*, and beyond in the historical society Africa is. The following passage substantiates the extreme violence girls and women undergo:

A piece of cloth had been spread on the hard ground. On it lay a four-month-old baby girl held down firmly by two men, and two boys aged about twelve. Each of the four held firmly an arm or a thigh of the infant. In the background were mothers sitting on a bench. They had brought their babies to be circumcised. (...) They are traditional practices that are intolerable; they are traditional practices to which no one should be indifferent. (...) The figure of an innocent baby held down firmly like a sheep to be slaughtered struck horror in many hearts. (Nimako 35)

The presence of the mothers with their babies to have them mutilated accounts for cultural legitimation. But, beyond that, one is allowed to note the motto of New Historicism which, in Michael Warner’s terms reads: “The text is historical, and history is textual” (Warner 5). This historicity of text is nothing other than the presence of cultural life in the fictional world. So, as a sample, this excerpt enables the potential reader of the text to discover the history and culture of the extratextual world. The passage is also a telltale sign of the girls’ unfreedom in the imaginary society. This tough description of the performance of the female circumcision recalls the ordeal of late unfortunate Barbara. It follows, then, that through the little girl’s body, women’s body in

general is subjected to gendered violence. This physical pain that leads to moral ailment or death at worst, is in store for any female person in the patriarchal language. What is more important is the age of the female baby that is still too young to go through such hardships. Put it in another way, women seems ready for the social status that positions them in the place of corporeal pain.

Barbara is believed to have her humerus and clavicle fractured during her circumcision as disclosed by the character of Dr Blankson's inner thought (Nimako 5). However, it is not only the female inhabitants of the novel that are unfree, but all the women of the historical African societies where FGM is at the core of this cultural practice. Some of the words and phrases notably in: 'four-month-old baby girl held down firmly by two men, and two boys aged about twelve,' 'the fractured humerus or clavicle' paired with this sentence 'The figure of an innocent baby held down firmly like a sheep to be slaughtered struck horror in many hearts' in the aforementioned passages are enough to unmask the obnoxious and dark side of this cultural practice. In one word, it can be maintained that it is a practice that denies girls and women the right to freedom.

Indeed, the baby girl here is no longer treated as a human, but an animal whose freedom is questioned. Indisputably, the female gender is under the yoke of oppression and domination, thereby confirming that girls are in bondage to the culture that advocates patriarchal ideology, which validates their unfreedom. If freedom is the absence of oppression and domination, then we can grasp the meaning of unfreedom through Philip Pettit's words. Pettit views freedom as non-domination. He claims that: "The condition of the slave is to live at the beck and call of a master," and to be "in a position where fear and deference will be the normal order of the day" (Pettit 32-64). Even the most fortunate slave, even the slave with the most permissive master, will live a life in unfreedom because he or she is "depending on [someone else's] grace and favor" (Pettit 33). It is crystal clear that freedom is the opposite of servitude and slavery. Therefore, the socio-cultural condition of the girls in *Mutilated* exemplifies the metaphor of the slave as theorized by Pettit. Every girl is expected to conform to this status in order to affirm her socio-cultural belonging and identity, despite the fact that the practice is detrimental to her physical health and psychological well-being.

Although the novel is polemical in tone, its style is largely realistic and

melodramatic, appealing to the reader's emotions and eliciting sympathy for the victims of this oppressive practice. As our past begins to change (Latour 11), it can be argued that the novel raises a serious controversy as regards the different views and tensions about the preservation and the abrogation of such a practice. Psychologically, FGM is often a very traumatic experience for some of the victims. Traditional circumcisers typically use crude implements with questionable levels of sterility such as razor blades, knives, scissors and sometimes glass fragments (Nimako 40). The writer's depiction of the scene explains his vow to give girls and women the lost dignity. From this situation, it follows, as noted by Shane O'Neill that "A distinctive feature of any critical theory of society is that it aims not only to explain or to interpret key aspects of the social world but also to engage in a project of emancipation" (127). Thus, the horrendous portrayal of this practice leaves no room for Nimako for keeping quiet. He hyperbolically shows the scene so as to lead to women's revolt and protest.

2- From Patriarchal Subordination to Counter-History: Women's Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Culture

African feminism is a theory which combines racial, sexual, class and cultural dimension of oppression to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as human rather than as sexual beings (Steady 4). The African feminism this study is concerned with, is not related to race issue. Instead, it is about cultural view of the African female gender. Thus, from Filomina Chioma Steady's standpoint, women should be responsible for their bodies and any undertaking they consider as being right for them. Indeed, patriarchal ideology that determines girls' and women's social fate via cultural practices such as FGM, needs questioning, because nobody should decide on what to do with the other's body.

In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper understand autonomy as involving three distinct but causally interdependent dimensions or axes: self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization. Self-determination involves having the freedom and opportunities to make and enact choices of practical import to one's life, that is, choices about what to value, who to be, and what to do. The self-determination axis identifies external, structural conditions for individual autonomy, specifically freedom conditions and opportunity conditions.

Freedom conditions identify the kind of social and political constraints that interfere with the exercise of self-determination and the kind of political and personal liberties that enable it. Opportunity conditions specify the kinds of opportunities that need to be available to agents in their social environments for them to have choices about what to value, who to be, and what to do (17). What is noteworthy in this long extract about autonomy is one's ability to decide and be accountable for one's life. The three crucial dimensions that are self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization turn out to be the essence of human, for, they are important parts freedom is based on. This means that men and cultural tenets should not define what to do with girls' body. Yet, in Annor Nimako's *Mutilated*, girls, the future women are denied the autonomy of their body and flesh. The body being girls' and women's own and inherent property, culture and tradition should not intervene in their use of it, let alone cut part of it. Thus, autonomy is at the heart of human's rights in general, and girls' in particular, insofar as it ensures control over decisions related to health, independence, dignity, sexual pleasure, and reproduction.

However, societal forces such as patriarchal norms and cultural attitudes, often deny girls this control. Egregious examples are FGM and early marriage, which commodify and objectify girls' bodies, thereby testifying to infringement of girls' fundamental human rights, hence their reaction from silence to voice. As a matter of fact, being born a female child appears to be difficult in this imaginary African community despite the wind of modernity. Physical ailment and unfreedom are in store for girls, the future women. Either the female child is prevented from attending school or she is forced to marry earlier, then corroborating her unfreedom and oppression. Facing such a troublesome sociocultural reality, women rise up and demand greater freedom, hence their resort to counterhistory (Gallagher and Greenblatt). The struggle of these women, mainly the characters of Dr Yvonne Alhassan, Sarah, and other unnamed downtrodden girls and women then tallies with the concept of "counterhistory" developed by scholars of New Historicism (Gallagher and Greenblatt) in *Practicing New Historicism*.

In their collective book, they pen that "counter-history denotes an approach that actively disputes dominant historical narratives. It suggests a spectrum of resistance against conventional history, emphasizing marginalized voices and alternate possibilities" (Gallagher and Greenblatt). We are then allowed to read that counterhistory gives prominence to the inherently

contested nature of historical and cultural knowledge. By describing counterhistory as an approach that “actively disputes dominant historical narratives,” these scholars draw attention to the fact that established histories often privilege the experiences and perspectives of dominant groups while marginalising alternative voices. Counterhistory therefore seeks to recover those voiceless and silenced people, and to demonstrate that what is presented as historical truth may represent a single version of facts. The expression “a spectrum of resistance” also involves the subversion of official patriarchal ideology, or what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie names the single story (2009). As consequence, the marginalised question the established cultural assumptions, and advocate alternative interpretations of historical and cultural events. Within the cultural context represented in the novel, counter-history opens history to multiple new vistas and possibilities that are likely to contribute to cultural reconfiguration.

Therefore, by amplifying the peripheral female voices, Nimako’s *Mutilated* challenges dominant cultural narratives surrounding female circumcision. Dr Yvonne Alhassan, the female doctor character’s standpoint is enough to show that women are fed up with the cultural practice that encages and imprisons them. Clearly, her medical authority and her direct address to the chief, call for a collective organisation that resists customary and patriarchal power to produce a counter-history. The text reads:

Yvonne looked the chief straight in the face and said, Naa, we want you and your people to stop giving away your daughters in marriage when they are very young. We want you to stop mutilating your baby girls. We’re forming a strong team, together with other organizations, to fight the harmful traditional practices. You and your elders should set good example for your people to follow. The girls and women have been suffering for too long. (Nimako 264)

What can be gleaned from this message, is the female speaker’s strong desire for cultural and social reconfiguration wherein girls and women matter likewise. The chief, as the representative and guardian of culture, tradition and custom is strongly challenged, and asked to leave aside the harmful part of tradition that hinders girls and women from living a full life. Her imperative sentences ‘Stop practicing early marriage’ and ‘stop mutilating girls,’ resonate with her commitment to bodily autonomy, and sociocultural reconfiguration, because women as well as men deserve respect and consideration. The gist of

this account is the liberation and freedom of women, which should perforce be the fruit of their own struggle. As defined, counterhistory can include the feminist perspective, which seeks to help the neglected and oppressed subjects retrieve the denied voice. It then reveals the limitations of the established historical order.

In this line of thought, Karen Offen's contention is of note, when she pens that: "Feminism makes claims for a rebalancing between women and men of the social, economic, and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity, but with respect for their differences" (151-152). This assertion which is like a call for revolt, and a feminist manifesto appears to incite women to reject subordination. In this way, they will eventually refuse to get cut and relegated to the second area. We would say that in the story of *Mutilated*, daughters, wives, mothers, and women are fed up with the right of fathers, husbands, men over them. Consequently, the absolute authority of patriarchy is called into question, paving the way for a new social order characterized by cultural reconfiguration. This change consolidates the vision of New Historicism. As Robert Diyanni posits: "An important feature of new historicist criticism is its concern with examining the power relations of rulers and subjects (1587). In other words, patriarchal ideology that aims at subjugating female gender needs dismantling for the rise of a fair and just fictional society, and by extension a well-ordered extratextual world.

More importantly, Sarah emerges as a dynamic character, a transformed insider, and an agent of reform whose trajectory aligns with Yvonne's perspective in the narrative. By turning her former mistake into a catalyst for change, she contributes to the cause of women's emancipation. Indeed, Sarah's acceptance to get herself circumcised accounts for her emancipation, and women's resistance more broadly. Her blind adherence to traditional belief has eventually contributed to the resolution of the plight raised in the society of the novel. Thus, far from viewing her as a ridicule and stupid character, Sarah's combat which consists in freeing her fellow sisters from the bondage of tradition is of paramount importance. We are allowed to read how hell-bent she is on freeing women from subjugation in this line: "Sarah urged them to encourage many more to join the crusade to free all girls and women from the cruel practice" (Nimako 334). Consequently, Sarah achieves the function of a transforming agent, thereby concurring with

Yvonne with regard to the liberation of the female gender from cultural domination. In the name of sorority, these women are really committed to decolonising the mind of their people, mainly girls' and women's.

It is worth noting in passing that Sarah's first blunder originates from her quest for identity and belonging. From Sarah, she becomes Salamatu after her circumcision and marriage with Alhaji Nuhu after the breakdown of her first marriage with Dr Blankson. Alhaji Nuhu is her second husband who is an adamant defender of the traditional belief that champions FGM. Drawing on patriarchal discourse, this man opines that having sex with mutilated women gives more pleasure. As such, Sarah, makes herself a victim of the practice to get social recognition. "Please understand. I did it (genital circumcision) to identify with my people. I did it so that I'll be accepted by my people" (Nimako 156), she tells Dr Blankson, her former husband. Beyond Sarah's search for identity, the reader is then allowed to know how stupid and mentally enslaved she is.

Fortunately, from the status of victim of such a mental bondage, Sarah becomes a leader, a torchbearer who uses her bitter experience to preach words of the liberation of girls and women, not only in the fictitious society, but also in the extratextual world, actual Ghana and Africa represent. The persistence of the negative must be deconstructed for a new cultural form to emerge. Change shall come when women will be aware of the social injustice they are made victim of. The words of Yvonne and Sarah are now in contradiction with the principles of their tradition and history.

This is normal, as change has to take place, because every literary work is a product of its time (Diyanni 1586). Indeed, the novel was first released in 2001, which is a year of the twenty-first century, a period of possible mental change, important social mutations, and the rise of counter-history. Accordingly, women's view of FGM, early marriages, and other burning issues about them must be rejected. It is high time the African people abandon such a lore that keeps the female gender in subordinate position. The contradiction between oppressors and oppressed, between free social class and the unfree one needs breaking for the birth of a free society.

In the framework of this study, we would rather say that the abolition of this traditional belief which consists in dominating girls' and women's bodies will lead to its eradication root and branch. So the binary opposition between modernity and tradition, men and women, freedom and unfreedom

absolutely leads to tension, which is likely to give girls and women the dreamt freedom. In this respect, Sarah, as a victim of tradition becomes an advocate of counter-history and by extension anti-FGM. This passage illuminates her critical stand when she tells her mother in a heated conversation that: “This practice is harmful. It causes unnecessary death and suffering. We suffer quietly while our husbands enjoy themselves. I wouldn’t have known this if I hadn’t suffered it myself” (Nimako 299). The narrative then gives prominence to the marginalised and subordinate women’s voice through the character of Sarah. This female character uses the voice of the subalterns to reflect their invisible hard experiences and the complexities of their cultural practice.

Moreover, Sarah’s standpoint goes along with what is called the touch of the real, which allows to understand the intersection between narrative and lived experience (Gallagher and Greenblatt). This real is truly touched through the rejection of the patriarch’s power and supremacy by the oppressed in the studied novel. Thus, Sarah’s snide words that reinforce this touch of the real are in accordance with Sanjeev Kumar Vishwakarma’s account of feminism. In the Introductory section to the book, Vishwakarma writes thus:

Feminism, across the world, as a social phenomenon⁵⁵ is associated with subversion of longstanding patriarchal domination not only in the boundaries of family life but also outside (...) Feminism as a political movement fights for the rights of women in all human efforts to run this world: right to vote, right to education, right to profession and right to decision making. (Vishwakarma 13)

This means that women’s resistance to FGM in the family circle as well as outside it testifies to their dream of liberty, freedom and a new socio-cultural order. If the studied feminism is not about right to vote, it is obviously about women’s right to education, health, freedom to be, to do, and freedom to decide. Feminism then serves as a weapon that permits girls and women to voice their anxiety and claim for justice in the imaginary society of *Mutilated*. Here is the time of assessing this cultural practice promoted since ages and dawning a new start. Sarah’s acceptance to have herself circumcised is like an initiatory journey which allows her to confirm the dreadful side of their culture, hence her determination to bring FGM to an end. Therefore, her

⁵⁵ We correct the original version related to a mistake in “phenomena.” The “a,” indefinite article does not agree with “phenomena,” the plural form of “phenomenon.” So, we replace “phenomena” with “phenomenon” to correct the original sentence.

struggle is in line with Africana critical theory, which involves not only the critique of domination and discrimination, but also a deep commitment to human liberation and radical/revolutionary social transformation (Rabaka 16). This call is nothing other than that of casting off the yoke of patriarchal dominion, and give birth to a significant cultural reconfiguration and transformation. In this line of arguments, Ifi Amadiume's thought of women's struggle is of interest. She thus avers that

women are essential to the progress of their societies and Africa's future, it is important to understand the nature of discrimination and injustice against women in various countries of Africa. It is equally important that we acknowledge differences in women's conditions and concerns. I argue that African women can and do speak their conditions, needs, and rights, and have played an important role in the cause of social justice. (Amadiume 48)

Here lies the substance and richness of the commitment and resistance of the women in Nimako's novel. The counter-history as viewed in women's agency and language aims to invite the potential readers and Africans more broadly to take a careful second look at traditional practices that violate girls' and women's rights. Only under this condition, we are likely to establish justice through the reconfiguration of cultural tenet, whereby girls' and women's bodies are no longer construed as male property, but recognised as autonomous subjects entitled to equal treatment, dignity, and rights.

Conclusion

Based on both Feminist criticism and New Historicist perspective, the study has demonstrated that FGM is not exclusively an individual bodily experience but a cultural practice sustained by historically embedded sociocultural structures. Owing to the Feminist perspective, the analysis has revealed that patriarchal ideology contributes to the control, subordination and objectification of girls' bodies. The mutilated female body consequently becomes a site whereby gendered power relations get significance. The novel unveils how cultural legitimization can transform a violent practice into an apparently accepted social norm. Girls and women are deprived of bodily autonomy and placed in conditions of physical, psychological, and social unfreedom.

From a New Historicist view, the study shows that there is physical

violence within the cultural beliefs, and communal expectations in *Mutilated*. Accordingly, the narrative discloses that cultural practices cannot be understood independently of the social institutions and discourses that sustain them. However, Annor Nimako does not represent girls and women solely as passive victims of patriarchal domination. The novel also brings to the fore forms of female consciousness, resistance by challenging the legitimization of the oppressive tradition that denies them agency over their own bodies. Their resistance and resort to counter-history thus become an important means of dismantling the cultural mechanisms that normalise FGM and girls' subordination. The resistance also opens the possibility of redefining cultural identity without necessarily rejecting culture itself. So, culture can be reinterpreted and reconfigured in response to changing understandings of dignity, freedom, and human rights.

Accordingly, *Mutilated* participates in a broader literary interrogation of traditions that compromise girls' and women's bodily integrity. By bringing Feminist and New Historicist perspectives together, the study has shown how individual suffering is connected to collective cultural and historical structures. Annor Nimako's work calls for a cultural reconfiguration in which tradition, gender equality, and bodily autonomy can coexist. It can be argued that as a person who espouses feminism (Offen 122), though a man writer, Nimako has achieved his goal by denouncing and castigating this cultural practice through an exaggerated portrayal of its ill effects, because literature, as a reflection of society, is a mode of social expression with the help of words (Vishwakarma 13) that can lead to social and cultural dynamism.

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