CULTURAL COLLISION: A STUDY OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF FAUZIA KASSINDJA’S *DO THEY HEAR YOU WHEN YOU CRY*  

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Female Genital Mutilation, a well-shrouded cultural and gender-based practice, is common among Arabs, Africans and the Diaspora, and has been represented in many literary works. This paper takes its cue from the dire need to rethink culture and some theoretical/intellectual assumptions in Cultural Studies when the topic of the “Global South” is bought up. It makes a case for “going South” in Cultural Studies. FGM is at a crucial moment in its history. It is a cultural practice of long-standing importance which presents to the global North countries a need for education and clarification of ethical dilemmas. The push for eradication of FGM comes from within individual cultures and should be supported by international efforts. However, most groups that practice FGM see it as a necessary, obligatory ritual that lies close to the heart of cultural identity and autonomy. So the women who want to protect themselves or their loved ones from the dreadful clutches of this horrendous cultural practice should be welcomed with open arms in the Global North countries from which refugee is expected by these women. So, this paper will give an understanding that approaches to end FGM need to consider cultural background since people belonging to other cultures can deal with it insensitively without realizing the gravity of the issue.

*Do They Hear You When You Cry?* Published in January, 1999 tells the dramatic story of a woman fighting to free herself from the injustices of her culture. Fauzia Kassindja is born in 1977, in Kpalime, Togo. It is Fauzia Kassindja’s first-person account of her questioning of “how things worked.” Kassindja tells her story with the help of Layli Miller Bashir, a law student who befriended her and helped negotiate her case. Bashir works as a lawyer and is the Director of the Tahirih Justice Centre, a US-based organisation with the aim of protecting women from human rights abuses through the provision of legal aid and public policy advocacy. This book educates one about the obstacles some women have to face in other parts of the world. It is an absorbing expose of the appalling immigration policies and practices in the United States. It is a novel about sisterhood depicting how a woman can help another woman putting all the barriers of culture, race and religion aside and keeping only humanly concerns a priority. The book is an eye-opener on many accounts. First, it illustrates the unique circumstances of women who seek asylum in the US and the cultural constraints that make it difficult for women like Kassindja to talk to INS strangers about FGM (or multiple rapes and forced impregnation – common experiences among thousands of Bosnian women.) In addition, it underscores statistics that show how opening US doors to female refugees fleeing FGM would not open the floodgates to the “dreaded hordes” of immigrants many Americans fear… Unlike Fauziya, most of the females who undergo FGM are under 14, illiterate, and devastatingly poor. They simply don’t have the means to leave, nor would they necessarily want to leave family for the unknown. The book also reveals the impersonal – and often inhuman – treatment asylum seekers experience in the US. *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* is certain to make readers think long and hard about the workings of our refugee system, our economic system, and whether or not we should pull up the drawbridge before those who flee to the US from injustice (Rysavy).

The novel began after Ms. Kassindja had spent nearly 16 months in prison and felt that she could no longer bear the often deplorable conditions of her incarceration and the indignity of being locked up with criminals. She decided that she must submit to the will of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and return to Togo, which would in all likelihood mean that she would have to submit in having her exterior genitals removed, something known in her culture as kakia-female circumcision and to the world at large as female genital mutilation (FGM). Karen Horney in her book *Self Analysis* has mentioned that a person “despite his best intentions to be co-operative, becomes unproductive as soon as his efforts meet some resistance” (6).
Having set the stage, Kassindja then flashed back to her childhood, which was idyllic. She is born in 1977, in Kpalime, Togo. She is the youngest daughter of a wealthy, prominent family. She now lives in Alexandria, Virginia. She belonged to a wealthy, prominent family where she enjoyed a sheltered childhood. Her libertarian father shielded her from the tribal practice of polygamy and genital mutilation. But when her father died in 1993, her life changed drastically. Her mother, originally from Benin, was banished from the Tchamba-Coossuntu tribe, and control over Kassindja passed to her father’s family. In 1994, two years before Kassindja was to be a graduate, her illiterate aunt ended Kassindja’s education and arranged marriage to a thirty nine year old man with three wives. Although Kassindja refused to sign the marriage certificate she was declared wed and confined to a storage room to await the arrival of a circumciser who would subject her to FGM. But she managed to escape before the circumciser arrived with the help of her mother and sister. She went to Ghana, then to Germany, then to U.S., where she had a cousin who lives in Washington D.C.

When Kassindja’s plane landed in America she followed other passengers towards a woman officer sitting behind it. She got a bit relaxed as she thought it would be much easier for her to narrate her story to a woman officer rather than a male and she pleaded for the grant of political asylum to her by telling her the reality of her passport as she didn’t want an illegal entry into the country. The officer pulled out a form and filled in the necessary details and asked her to wait. The officer didn’t ask her to narrate her story but to wait in a room. Kassindja was taken for finger prints and pictures. The reaction of officers over there was very cold which perplexed Kassindja. After all the formalities lady officer came to her and wanted her to narrate her story explaining the reason for asking for an asylum. Kassindja told her that her father had died on January16, 1993 and how after her father’s death her aunt evicted her mother, pulled her out of the school and forced her to marry an old man who already had three wives. She further explained how her oldest sister helped her to escape to Germany where she met Charlie and bought the passport from him for $600. She explained that she wanted to be allowed in a country where she had relatives and could speak the language. She wanted to live with her uncle and educate herself so that she could have a new life for herself. For all the above mentioned reasons she wanted political asylum. But Kassindja didn’t tell the officer anything about FGM (kakia). She was a woman and could have sympathized but her cold attitude stopped her from doing so as she thought she was a white American woman who would probably have not heard anything about FGM and it would be impossible for Kassindja to explain everything to her. Kassindja had a doubt that officer might think that she was lying and making up the stories. In addition to this, “…it was such a horrible, personal, intimate thing. I couldn’t bring myself to speak of it. It was too shameful.” (172) Kassindja thought that her story was enough for a person to sympathize with her and grant her an asylum. She looked naively at the officer expecting her to sympathize and welcome Kassindja to her country with open arms but her dream was soon shattered to pieces with officer’s apathetic reaction, “that’s it.” Then she handed the sheet of paper to Kassindja to have a glance at the paper and sign it. While having a look at the paper she noticed that there was not much written on the paper just her name, date, place of birth, citizenship that she had bought passport from Charlie and had come to United States her aunt wants her to marry someone she doesn’t like. Everything written on the paper was true but it was written quite unemotionally but she thought that might be it`s their way of doing official work and was still optimistic about getting an asylum.

She handed over the paper back after signing it and then came a male officer who by having a glance at the paper declared that it was no reason for allotting an asylum which shocked Kassindja. He asked her if she wanted to go to Germany, Britain or Togo but she replied in a dissenting way. To which he cantankerously explained her than she might have to go to a prison and wait for her hearing. Kassindja was adamant enough for the allotment of asylum and didn’t want to go back so another officer came for scrutinizing her and questioned her harshly and by then she had become confused and scared so wasn’t able to answer them properly and started fumbling. He asked her to draw a flag of her nation which she did but got confused to which side the star is supposed to be placed left or the right and the officer began to harass her psychologically by shouting at her. On the basis of this encounter he made a report explaining that she was lying as she had no knowledge of Togo including its geography, language and the colours of its national flag. He further wrote that she was elected to go before the Immigration Judge rather than return Frankfurt. Meanwhile, Kassindja sat alone in the waiting room for about half an hour and was getting numb by the idea of getting into a prison. After a while a heavy black woman dressed in a light blue shirt and black pants entered the room and asked her to remove all her clothes including her undergarments to which Kassindja hesitated but had to do it as she had no other way. When she was asked to remove the underpants she requested the officer not to do so as she was menstruating but she didn’t listen and she “took off my underpants and stood in front of her completely naked, soiled pad exposed, shamed beyond words.” (177) She was then told to squat and cough three times. Same process was repeated by turning backwards. She was then told to get dressed and handcuffs were tied like criminals. She was then migrated to Esmor’s detention center where she was again strip teased but this time her clothes were not given back to her she was made to sit in a cold stinking room all naked. She was waiting there for the officer to return back when a man’s head peeked inside the room asking about the food which humiliated Kassindja beyond words could explain. She sat down putting her hands around her chest as she was al naked and soiled with menstrual blood. After a long spell of time another female officer came with ill fitted and faded clothes and asked her to wear them and ask her to shower. After the shower she handed over her different clothes again ill fitted, faded and torn clothes. The underpants were used, soiled and loose. When Kassindja requested for a sanitary pad she didn’t respond and took her to her cell where she accompanied other women who helped her with getting her essentials like pads. Life in the Esmor was a living hell for her. They were not allowed to go outside or see the sky. They were locked in a freezing cold room with its blinding lights, a blasting T.V, crackly mattresses and non-edible food. She was sharing her cell with three other women all of them were nice to her especially Mary who told her that there was telephone from where she could call her family. She called her cousin Rahuf who with a lot of hurdles was able to hire a lawyer for her named Eric Bowman who was a good looking American African. They first chatted on phone and she explained everything but his sympathetic attitude encouraged her to talk to him even about kakia. “My face burned with shame and my voice faded to a whisper as I talked about kakia.” (225)
Bowman gave her a form to fill in which she wrote that the reason she was seeking asylum was that she was a young girl of eighteen years whose legal guardian, father had died and soon after his death she was sold in an arranged marriage to an old man who was already having three wives and want her to be circumcised. Eric Bowman later hired Bashir as his assistant to this case who was already working on the crimes committed against women like rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery, domestic violence and FGM. Bashir had already published papers on FGM and was keen to remove this inhuman practice from grass root level and wanted a law to be framed in this country as well. She wanted FGM to be granted as one of the reasons for immigration as it is life threatening. So she worked really hard for the case and also talked to Kassindja on phone.

All Bashir’s hard work culminated in a thick packet of exhibits, all organized into five categories: general information on FGM; INS response to FGM; United Nations response to FGM; U.S. Congress response to FGM; and medical community’s response to FGM. She included Dr. Toubia’s New England Journal of Medicine article, a copy of a thorough report on FGM called Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action also by Dr. Toubia, a copy of new INS guidelines on gender persecution, a copy of INS’s report on FGM, article reporting that the American Medical Association had come out in favour of legislation banning FGM. She also included the text of the bill that Congresswoman Pat Schroeder was still trying to get passed prohibiting FGM. She also kept talking her case to everybody she met so that she should not overlook or forget something. One person she consulted was a close friend, Denise Wolf who was the editor-in-chief of the Law Review, the most prestigious of the law school’s journals. He suggested “media coverage” of the case as media attention could arouse the public sympathy which could work in Kassindja’s favour. Bashir called the number Denise had given her and left a message on the woman’s answering machine, but when the woman didn’t call back, Bashir decided to call a couple of other local newspaper reporters but nobody returned those calls either. Her first attempt on dealing with media had failed.

When Bashir was working on her case Kassindja, unaware of all the efforts of Bashir, was spending her days in a smoking pod coughing up blood and had not got a hearing date yet. On April 19 petition was filed and on April 24 Kassindja was granted parole and was set free. Later she had a hearing on June 13, 1996 and won that also. She had spent sixteen months in prison. After becoming free she gave several interviews to several T.V. shows including CNN International and Nightline. She also talked to her family back at Togo.

Even after coming out of the prison Kassindja shared a very amicable relationship with all the lawyers who helped her in her case. She was still in contact with them. She called them as her second family. She was in contact with her inmates of prison as well. Her attitude for certain relationship depicts a coping strategy as pointed out by Karen Horney known as “moving towards people”. It is this strategy which helped her shun away the anxiety and lead a life despite all odds.

Intervention of media and publicity played a major role in Kassindja’s case. This depicts that awareness and education regarding FGM is very much necessary so that nobody should behave insensitively to already devastated souls.

References: