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# ANALYSIS OF FEMALE GENITAL CIRCUMCISION IN MABEL EVWIERHOMA'S *THE CUT ACROSS*

**By**

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## Abstract

Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) refers to the total or partial removal of external genitals in women and girls. According to the World Health Organization (2016), approximately 91.5 million girls and women in Africa, age ten and above, have undergone FGC. The concern surrounding the high prevalence of FGC in Nigeria has been at the forefront of literary discourse. Contemporary Nigerian playwrights and dramatists, in particular, engage with this thematic concern. The Cut Across written by Mabel Evwierhoma and published in 2022, exemplifies this exploration. The thrust of this paper is to examine the implications of Female Genital Circumcision on femalecharacters within the context of this drama. Drawing on the realism theory advanced by Henrik Ibsen, the paper concludes that, due to the psychological and physical consequences of FGC, The Cut Across advocates for a modern approach specifically, mentorship to prevent promiscuity among girls and women.

**Keywords**: Female Genital Circumcision, Character, The Cut Across, Mabel Evwierhoma

## Introduction

The commonly used term for female genital surgeries is 'Female Circumcision'. However, many writers have rejected the term 'Female Circumcision' and insist on the use of the term 'Female Genital Mutilation'. This study shall use the term Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) to prevent the foreclosure of discussion.FGC has long been a common phenomenon in Africa. It refers toany procedure involving complete or partial

removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons (World Health Organisation, 2016). Nigeria accounts for about one-quarter of the estimated 115.130 million women circumcised globally. As such, Nigeria ranks third in the global burden of FGC (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2016).

The categories of Female Genital Circumcision includes; Infibulation, Excision, Introcision and Clitoridectomy. According to The World Health Organisation (WHO) Infibulation involves the removal of part or all of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minora and majora) and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening. Introcision deals with the pricking, piercing or incision of the clitoris and/ or labia; stretching of the clitoris and /or surrounding tissues and scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice. Clitoridectomy is the removal of the prepuce, with or without removal of entire clitoris. Excision entails the removal of the clitoris with partial or total removal of the labia minora. The most common type of FGC worldwide is the excision of the clitoris and the labia minora, accounting for up to 80% of all cases. The most extreme form is infibulation, which constitutes about 15% of all procedures.

Particularly in Nigeria, Female Genital Circumcision is a sensitive issue because it has both cultural and gender based connotations. Novelist, poets, dramatists, playwrights have expressedtheir concerns about FGC through their literary works. One of the major reasons for addressing FGC within the literary sphere is to bring about a better alternative that can strengthen the way of life of a people. And that is what Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across* sets out to achieve. Specifically, it aims to raise awareness, educate, enlighten, orient and inspire social change. However, there is paucity of literature on the analysis of Female Genital Circumcision in thisdramatic text. Therefore, this paper hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge in this area by examining the implications of Female Genital Circumcision on female characters in the aforementioned text.

**Playwrights and the Nigerian Society**

The art of playwriting over the years has involved the creative documentation of issues, events and activities of men and women within a given society. Itreflects ideologies and gender dynamics whileoffering solutions that ensure harmony and peace within the society (Anyagu, 2011). Playwrights are products of society and their works emerge either as a reaction or affirmations in response to trends in the immediate environment. Ebo further poses that playwrights worldwide use their works to expose the inherent ills in their societies (2009). This aligns with Utoh's perspective: Contemporary Nigerian playwrights continue to illuminate the social trauma of their society. Prevailing social problems receive expository attention in their work (2002).

The quest for a better society is an uncompromisable part of playwright's responsibility, which is expected to be the end result of his creative endeavour (Abubakar, 2017). Playwrights serve as the conscience of society, responsible for making potential remedies for social andpolitical problems. By writing works that confrontskey issues, playwrights actively contribute to bringing about the desired changes in society. Through dialogues and actions, their works reflect the conflicts and contradictions within society, serving as a tool to help people discover themselves, their problems and strive to overcome obstacles on the part to freedom and prosperity.

The aforementioned argument is further justified by citing examples ofliterary texts by several playwrights in Nigeria. For instance, in the drama text*In One Legend, Many Seasons* by Femi Osofisan, he portrays how the elite collaborate with the military to exploit the land, ultimately harming the poor. The play raises questions about justice and accountability. Another text by same playwright entitled *Once Upon Four Robbers*, questions the morality ofexecuting four robbers who stole peanuts, while corrupt judges misuse their positions to steal billions from the impoverished masses. Osofisan's commitment to educating and empowering the downtrodden is evident in both literary texts.

Ola Rotimi's*Hopes of the Living Dead* demonstrates that the demands of the masses cannot bestifled by physical disability. Despite beinglepers, they unite and revolt against authority, demanding a better rehabilitation center. Also, Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* exposes the excesses and cruelty of some African Heads of Government. He boldly reveals the identities of real-life corrupt leaders who serve as models for the characters in his play. Kole Omotosho's *Shadows in the Horizon*, each character symbolizes their socio-economic status. The contrast between the wealthy businessman with fine cars and houses and the struggling professor with an unfinished house and a dilapidated Volkswagen car highlights the impact of political arrangements on society. This clearly shows, in visual terms, how the new political arrangement has relegated the brains of the society and has built up businessmen who have amassed wealth through inflation of contracts. Furthermore, issues such as non-payment of teachers' salaries, non-availability of bank loans to farmers and the careless life style of the so called Government representatives are addressed in Ben Tomoloju's *Jankariwo.* AhmedYerima comments on the lingering problems of oil exploration in the Niger Delta in *Hard ground*.

Chimah Utoh focuses on the pandemic nature of HIV/AIDS in *The Cauldron of Death*. The rippling effect of this scourge engulfs the family of Ikem as it passes from father to other members of the family through careless sexual indiscretion. Equally, Irene Salami's *Sweet Revenge* captures the experiences of women who are victims of desertion by their husbands, leaving them with the responsibility of caring for the children. Similarly, Stella Oyedepo grapples with the theme of child abuse and exploitation in *Alice Oh!* Alice.This issue has assumed alarming proportions within the present dispensation, so much that government had to set up an agency to combat it. *On His Demise* by same playwright is a plaintive cry about the plight of women within the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu. It exposes the sociological arrangement that places women at a serious disadvantage vis-a-vis their relationship with their in-laws in the event of the death of their spouse. Another significant example of play text worth citing is Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across*. This particular literary text comments on Female Genital Circumcision in contemporary Nigerian society. Aforementioned drama texts are a few examples that shed light on concrete social issues in the country.

**Theoretical Perspective**

This study is anchored on Henrik Ibsen's strand of realism. Realism aims to provide an accurate representation of everyday life without idealization. It operates through a system of conventions that produce a portrayal of the real world beyond the text, achieved by processes of selection, exclusion, description and addressing the reader (Falode, 2009). This theory focuses on characters and events that appear ordinary, emphasizing truthful treatment of common, everyday life. It seeks a one-to-one relationship between representation and the subject (Stegemann, 2015).

Some features of Henrik Ibsen's realism include: interpretation of the actualities of any aspect of life; emphasis on people trapped in social situations; causality built into the text; focus on characters'internal lives, motives and reactions of others; emphasis on morality (usually intrinsic and relativistic between people and society); protagonist rising up against the odds to assert themselves against an injustice; characters in control of their own destiny and superior to their circumstances; dialogue reflecting everyday speech, not heightened for effect (Miller,2021). Ibsen's strands of realism is suitable for this study because it emphasises meticulous attention to detail in dialogue, characterization and setting. Specifically, this study examines how Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut* Across addresses the sensitive issue of Female Genital Circumcision by subjecting the characters' dialogue to critical scrutiny.

**Synopsisof*The Cut Across***

Mabel Evwierhoma's*The Cut Across* is a dramatic text set in a rural Urhobo community in the creeks of the Niger Delta Region. Itcentersaroundfemale characters who experienced Female Genital Circumcision at a younger age within the community. Fortunately, one of the victims received a scholarship to study in Europe. Upon exposure to Western education and marriage, she suddenly realizes that Female Genital Circumcision is harmful and detrimental to women and girls in the community. In an effort to protect younger girls and women, she returns to her community to educate families, friends, elders and paramount chiefs about the repercussions of FGC. She also recommends mentorship as a superior alternative that can help girls and women remain faithful.

**Analysis of Charactersin*The Cut Across***

Characters play a crucial role in a story. They shape the action and engage the audience in the unfolding drama. **Playwrights** use characters to propel the plot, speak dialogue and perform actions. What characters say and how they say it provide insights into their complexities, flaws, personalities, desires and motivations. Additionally, characters' interactions with others can reveal their true nature. In *The Cut Across,* we encounter various characters such as: Emu (Returnee from Europe), Obuko who (Mother of Emu), Pa Emuotor (Uncle to Emu),Oye (Sister to Emu), Omafuvwe (friend to Emu), Oni Esiri (Wife of Pa Emuotor), Esiri (daughter of Pa Emuotor),Ose Vuokeand Potokri (Friends of Pa Emuotor), SisiInoku, Madam Diata, Paramount Chiefs of Omafuowho and a host of others.

The protagonists are central characters around whom the entire story revolves in this drama. Their decisionsdrive the plot. The conflict theyface is caused by other characters, who serve as the antagonists. Additionally, minor charactersplay a significant role in the story. The actions of these minor characters influence the decisions made by both protagonists and the antagonist. Hence, this section delves into the analysis of characters of two victims of Female Genital Circumcision. Emu (A returning from Europe) and Obukowho (Mother of Emu) as well as the antagonist, Pa Emuotor (Uncle to Emu), whois the head of the female genital cutter.

**Emu: Emu is a returnee from Europe and the daughter of Akpoveta. She is the only girl in the community to be awarded a foreign scholarship. Happily married and blessed with children in Europe. Despite living oversea for years, Emu still enjoys speaking the local dialect and indulging in delicacies such as Usi, Banga soup and Ukodo. After experiencing Female Genital Circumcision at a tender age, the character questioned the practice. She desires to know what her uncle (Pa Emuotor) did to her cut flesh and where it was buried.Also of interest to her isknowing what proves men's fidelity in the community. She returned to her community for a very brief visit in order to address the issue of FGC with her uncle who is the head of cutter.**

**Emu believes that there is a need for the cutters to refrain from cutting the genitals of the young maidens because it is a cruel, harmful and total violation of right. Her stand is that instead of FGC, the society can encourage proper socialization for males and females to help build morality. And maidens or young girls can remain chase until they marry with proper mentorship. She is also of the view that the journey into womanhood is one of acquiring skills to build family and society for development. Also of concern to her is to speak against the practice of forceful marriage. She believes that a girl should marry a man of her age and choice, as opposed to the forced marriage practice in the community. Some of her friends in the community believe that her struggle will bring about changes in the FGC practice which causes pains, tears and blood.**

**Obukowho: Obukowho is the mother of Emu and the late Akpoveta's wife. She is avictim of Female Genital Circumcision. She lost her husband to the cold hand of death and is grieving overthe sudden**

**disappearance of heronly son. Despite her bitter experiences, she still believes in maintaining a cordial and respectful relationship with the relatives of her deceased husband and the community at large. She discourages her children from engaging in actions that can lead to victimization or causes her to be inherited by her late husband's brothers. Her wish is for her only son to preserve the memory of her late husband. This is why she consistently turned down the advances of Emu's uncle. To Obukowho, questioning Female Genital Circumcision is an abomination, and she vehemently dissuade her daughter from engaging in it. However, other women chastiseher for allowing her daughter to question and speak against Female Genital Circumcision.**

**Pa Emuotor: Pa Emuotoris an elder and head of the cutter for female genitals in the community. Specifically, he is involved in performing the welcome rite, which includes breaking of a kola nut, offering prayers and a bottle of hard drink to the gods. To Pa Emuotor, the honour of a family lies with its wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. Furthermore, he believes that a woman's honour, dignity and reputation can be lost if not properly protected. He upholds the practice of Female Genital Circumcision and believes that it is the only way to keep girls and women faithful. Eventually, he accuses Emu ofspeaking against and criticizing FGC and he reported thisto the Council of Elders and Chiefs of the community.**

**Implications of Female Genital Circumcision on Characters in Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across***

**Consequence on Health of the Characters**

Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) involves complete or partial removal of female external genitalia. In most cases, the health of victims is negatively affected. Genital areas may develop scars and keloids, leading to discomfort and pain. Interferes with the menstrual cycle and causes**bleeding during that period**. Urinary problems may arise as a result of the altered female anatomy. Circumcised girls and women may find it difficult to conceive babies on time. FGC can also inflict post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Instances from **Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across* which indicate the consequences of FGC on health, are stated in the following excerpts.**

> **Akpona: Last week, Mama Ejiro's daughter bled and almost died under that cruel and filthy blade of theirs. I want the cutting of our genitals to stop. I wish girls were not born with that thing (pp.40-41).**
>
> **Emu: Are you all aware of the infections that the hospitals across the forest treat as a result of genital cutting? How soon do you forget Ediri, Aghogho and others who cannot bear children because of the mistake in cutting too much flesh from the genitals? Or the psychological pain thereafter? Esiri, face reality (p.42).**
>
> **Emu: Our fathers should think about our sisters abandoned by their husbands for being frigid because of cutting. They should remember the dead and the living dead from the cruel cut across bodies and lives with blades and cutters that dry up the well spring of women's lives (pp.58-59).**
>
> **Emu: Our father, need I remind you of Awesuo who we all know? After she was cut, and badly too, her complaints met deaf ears. What the cutter told her was that childbirth would put away all her problems. By the time her baby was to be born, it was tired and the Birth Attendant had no**

**experience with which to handle her case. We left to get more experienced help. On getting to the dispensary, the child was dead inside his mother(pp.60-61).**

**Emu: Have you seen Okpako, Awesuo's husband since then? He abandoned her. Her destiny was amputated by the cutters (p.62).**

**Based on the aforementioned dialogues, Female Genital Circumcision has the capacity to negatively impact human health. It can cause infections, bleeding, infertility and inflict psychological and physical pains. Families may be torn apart and women face the risk of abandonment by their husbands. FGC also results in characters losing their babies during childbirth. Some characters are on the verge of losing their love ones. The use of unsterilizedobjects such as blades and the lack of expertise amonglocal genital cutters cause further harm to the health of victims/characters.Consequently, some characters wish that the genitalia were not a part of the biological structure in female bodies.**

**Violationof Victim's Right**

The right to live free from discrimination, violence and to accesseducation, healthcare, economic opportunities, property ownership, voting and equal wages is fundamental to human existence. However, Female Genital Circumcision infringes upon female bodily autonomy. In most cases, girls undergo FGC without their consent, affecting their self-esteem and mental well-being. Furthermore, it intersects with other forms of violence against women, reflecting broader gender-based discriminations. These include denial of access to education, lack of proper healthcare, limited exposure to economic opportunities and more.

**Emu: Mama, let me see this to the end. I cannot back out now, I really feel cheated and need to connect with my missing part or my whole being. I do not feel complete (p.15).**

**Emu: My fathers, this is not about gutters. It is about the destinies of young women being stolen from them in this community in broad daylight (pp.34-35).**

**Potokri: Did you not tell us how you warned Akpoveta to let her be escorted to Onoriodo's compound for his son Omovigho? Your brother wanted his daughter to be educated. Now, see how things have turned at his demise (p.36).**

**Emu: Papa, the visit is only to recover through the knowledge that will free me and affirm who I am, I seek to know the location of just one part of my body that was cruelly cut off. Is that a crime (p.38).**

**Emu: I have not forgotten. But you need travel documents and a visa. You know your parents are preparing you for the Chief as wife number six! (p.39).**

**Uyota: The Chief has agents in all the neighbouring villages and don't be surprised that people are stationed everywhere to return Efe back to square one! I pity Efe. That man is too old and ugly. Did you see his crocodile skin? (p.40).**

> **Emu: Akpona, that man is as old as her grandfather. I hear he's partly deaf too. I can't believe what you girls think and talk about in this place. If you must marry, can't you get a man your age? (p.40).**
>
> **Ofuafo: Why would a girl's body part be cut while she's awake and still alive? (pp.41-42).**

**In the stated excerpts,** Female Genital Circumcision occurs alongside forced marriages. This denies women and girls the autonomy to choose their preferred suitors. Girls in the community are forced into marriage and are completely deprived of education. Deprived of living a healthy life. The freedom to make decisions and be independent is completely hampered through the actions of other characters. Unfortunately, the voices of the voiceless, calling for male cutters to refrain from the practiceare completely dismissed.

**Male Domination through Female Genital Circumcision**

Female Genital Circumcision is enforced through social norms, religious justifications and community pressure. This practiceprioritizes male authority and seek to regulate women's bodies. Elders, male family members and religious leaders often play a role in upholding the practice. The decision to perform FGC is typically made by community leaders or male family members. Further emphasising male authority over women's bodies. Female Genital Circumcision is shrouded in secrecy, reinforcing the notion that female sexuality is primarily for male ownership, control and pleasure. The following dialogues in **Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across*, are used to justify the claim that Female Genital Circumcision reinforces control over female bodies in both personal and social contexts.**

> **Potokri: So, what is the matter? You know that I need to be near my new wife so her eyes do not stray far from my hut (p.28).**
>
> **Pa Emuotor: Your mother is to blame. I promise you that she has to appear before the traditional council (pp. 35-36).**
>
> **Oni Emu: I beg you our father, let this matter be settled quietly before Emu leaves. She only came home on a brief visit to us her family and not a prolonged stay (pp.37-38).**
>
> **Pa Emuotor: You have only one choice. Obukowho join me as my wife or I shall report this matter to the elders and chiefs (p. 38).**
>
> **Anughe: 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, sorcerers, amidst other negative cognomen. Have you forgotten, Awesuo? (pp.46-47).**
>
> **Emu: And those elders, don't they hear of the victims and survivors of female genital cutting? How do I face them? The chiefs are an authority and they are resolute (p.49).**

From the foregoing, elders and paramount chiefs readily support and uphold the practice. Unfortunately, this contributes to a **high level of disregard forthe torments meted out to the victims and their complaints. More significantly, Female Genital Circumcision creates an avenue for the manipulation of girls and**

**women. Female characters are expected to be submissive and comply with the practice. Failure to comply immediately warrants threats, condemnation and prosecution of the women and girls by the council of eldersin the community.**

**Implications of Female Genital Circumcision on Culture**

Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) carries profound cultural implications for girls and women. It is deeply rooted in the traditions and culture of a people. FGC is believed to mark a girl's transition to womanhood and serves as a means of ensuring female faithfulness and modesty. Failure to undergo circumcision can lead to difficulty in finding a partner**, girls and** women may face exclusion, ridicule or even accusations of impurity. **Additionally, non- compliance with this practice within the community can result in several financial penalties for families. The following dialogues of characters in the text are used to reveal the cultural implications of Female Genital Circumcision.**

> **Oni Emu: Then, do not be the louse. 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 because I have no son around already, my farming on the family land beside the market is a challenge. Papa Esiri has his eyes on it. O God, let Akpor come back safe (p.14).**
>
> **Oni Emu: They will accuse me of instigating you against tradition, having resisted being inherited by your cousin's father. Emu, my daughter, is Paul complaining? (p.15).**
>
> **Potokri: Traditions which our forefathers handed over to us cannot be faulted. Don't they see how faithful our women are? (p.29)**
>
> **OseVuoke: …compare them with the women from across the forest who follow men at the snap of their fingers (p.29).**
>
> **Omafuvwe: …it is not wrong to cut a woman's genitals. Was her own not cut? Did she not reap the benefits? It was done before us, it is still being done and it shall continue to be done (p.44).**
>
> **Omafuvwe: A mother of seven girls. Go and guarantee your place in your husband's house. You should be the one campaigning for more cutting to prevent your multitude of girls from being sluts and treat the willfulness of girls that has shamed many families and may befall you (p.46).**
>
> **Omafuvwe: If cutting was not important, it would not have been handed down to us by our forefathers (p.46).**
>
> **Miyeri: There is dignity in that cutting because it removes the trigger of promiscuity and … (p.47).**
>
> **Madam Diata: That Akpoveta's daughter has forgotten that she is a woman. She should be fined. Remember that she will return to her**

**husband and children and leave us with rebellious offspring. Already two girls have refused to be cut (p. 56).**

**The bone of contention in the aforementioned excerpts is that Female Genital Circumcision prevents promiscuity and ensures female fidelity. Additionally, due to its status as a tradition, most characters strongly disagree with or oppose others who question or fault the practice. Despite the negative impacts, male characters show no concern for the distress of victims. Older victims, particularly mothers, attempt to discourage their wards from speaking out or engaging in actions that oppose the practice.**

## Conclusion

Mabel Evwierhoma's *The Cut Across* reflects the contending issues surrounding Female Genital Circumcision: the dilemma, plight and complaints of victims. By subjecting dialogues of characters to critical scrutiny, this article discusses the consequences of Female GenitalCircumcision on health, culture, right and gender. Categorically, it is established in this article that this practice inflicts several harms and imposes restrictions on women'sparticipation in decisions directly concerning their existence. This textintroduces mentorship as an alternative that can restore bodily autonomy and dignity for girls, serving as a mechanism for regulating the sexual affairs of women and girls.

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