

“When Something is Wrong we Write it”. The portrayal of FGM in children’s literature.

In 1997 my teenage self engaged strongly with one of my school set texts: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Eager to read more of Walker’s work, a trawl of my local bookshop in rural Wales produced Walker’s controversial *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) in which the character Tashi from the earlier novel returns to her Olinka tribe in order to undergo the rite of circumcision or, as it is commonly known now, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). I had never heard of FGMⁱ; in the period pre-widespread internet access and living in a non-multicultural community, such issues were not discussed. But by the 2010s an increasingly multicultural society brought FGM to public attention: in 2012, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution calling for all member states to ban FGM; in 2014 British Prime Minister David Cameron raised the profile of anti-FGM campaigns in a speech at The Girls Summit; in 2015 Barack Obama told a Kenyan audience that there was no place for “genital mutilation” in a “civilized” society. Now, a cursory internet search/exploration finds numerous links to anti-FGM campaigns and to facts and figures from NHS to the WHO. BBC Radio 4 commissioned an afternoon play on the topic, *Cuttin’ it*, in 2016 and Radio 4’s Woman’s Hour has frequently offered a platform for anti-FGM campaigners. Women’s experiences of FGM feature strongly on the biography shelves of bookshops, for example in Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel* (2008) or Hibo Wardere’s *Cut: One Woman’s Fight against FGM in Britain Today* (2016). The issue finds its way in to fiction such as Lucinda E Clarke’s *Amie Cut for Life* (2017), and into mainstream texts on women’s sexuality, for example anti-FGM campaigner/ victim Nimko Ali’s *Rude* (June 2019). Statistics suggest that 137,000 women in the UK alone are thought to have been affected by FGM and these figures, in combination with its recent prominence in politics and media have broken the silence surrounding FGM and generated an ambitious campaign to eradicate its practice globally by 2030.ⁱⁱ

While this is a worthy ambition, it is rife with difficulties unconnected to FGM itself; the spectre of colonialism haunts the issue. There is no easy *fix* where one culture seeks to change the practices of another, and colonialist language and actions inflect anti-FGM campaigns and literature. Lotte Hughes describes the alternative rites of passage being offered by largely Christian groups and NGOs in Kenya, in which girls celebrate their passage into womanhood without undergoing circumcision. But, as she observes, the ritual is laden with Christian “rhetoric and the language of ‘progress’” (280). Hughes suggests that the current attention given to FGM is a “contemporary globalized moral panic” in which the West imposes its own values upon African women’s bodies (276). This “moral panic” is, however, articulated in literature and media aimed at adults: given that FGM is a practice that primarily affects girls under the age of 16, it might be expected that the bookshelves of schools and libraries would hold appropriate texts on the topic, just as they do on drugs or domestic abuse, abortion and pregnancy. Yet an extensive search of children’s/YA literature produced only three fictional texts concerned with FGM. The topic, it seems, is one that juvenile literature (and the adults who write it) prefer to ignore.

Indeed, it is understandable why authors and publishers might veer away from such a sensitive subject. Karen Coats discusses the potential pitfalls awaiting the writer who takes on controversial issues in children’s literature, using the example of Hispanic author Gary Soto. He declared that he had given up writing children’s literature on the basis it “was too dangerous” after the protests consequent upon the publication of his book, which offended

the Hispanic population when his fictional family moved from Pilsen to Des Plaines (qtd Coats 17). Coats asks “who is allowed to tell what stories, and who should have the final say over whether the books are offensive or not?”(17). She observes that those who write outside of their own culture are often accused of cultural appropriation, and concludes that such a response may well result in “silencing storytellers” and thus “eliminating diversity from diverse literature”(17-8). Rita Williams-Garcia, the African American author of *No Laughter Here* (2004) a fictional book on FGM aimed at 9-12 year olds, stated that she wanted to write a sequel but was discouraged by how difficult it had been to persuade libraries and bookshops to stock her book because of its subject matter.ⁱⁱⁱ *NHL* is now out of print, available only secondhand or on Kindle, evidence of the reluctance of the children’s literature market to address difficult topics. Emma Craigie’s relatively recent YA novel on FGM, *What was Never Said* (2015) has fared rather better. It has been positively reviewed in the UK press, for example *The Guardian*, and is now nestled safely amongst the YA novels. Craigie, a white British author, is vulnerable to objections from postcolonial critics who believe that “only the oppressed and silenced groups should write their own discourse” (Nikolajeva 15). Although Craigie had worked closely with the anti-FGM charity Integrate Bristol and had spoken to girls affected by FGM, her story about a Somali teenager, Zahra, who relocated to Bristol, and her subsequent escape from FGM, is a compelling read, but it has undertones of colonial discourse.

For the postcolonial critic, such texts need to be closely considered; it is not desirable or indeed acceptable simply to label one culture uncivilized or barbaric from the perspective of a powerful other, and both *NLH* and *WWNS* at times teeter on the edge of doing precisely that. Yet there is surely a real need to discuss FGM in children’s literature. To simply turn a blind eye to a practice that happens to 200 million girls/women worldwide is to undervalue the child reader . As Edward Ardizzone convincingly argued, “[...] books for children are in a sense an introduction to the life that lies ahead of them. If no hint of the hard world comes into these books, then I am not sure that we are playing fair.” (293) In relation to FGM, the world of children’s literature is clearly not “playing fair”, for a girl can undergo FGM, but she cannot read about it. Focusing on Williams-Garcia’s *NLH* and Craigie’s *WWNS*, this paper questions to what extent these texts “play fair” in their representation of FGM. It considers the use of voice, writing, and sisterhood in promoting awareness of FGM, and the tactics used to speak of it while simultaneously sheltering the reader from graphic descriptions. Further, it explores the way in which they reveal, well intentioned as they undoubtedly are, very Western constructions of African traditions.

Set in America, *NLH* opens with Akilah awaiting a letter from her best friend, Victoria, who has gone to Nigeria for her coming-of-age celebration. The arbitrary nature of ritual is highlighted from the opening of the narrative as Akilah imagines that if the phone only rings twice before being answered then surely a letter will arrive (1). The letter is never delivered but the Victoria who eventually returns is unrecognizable; she no longer laughs, does not want to talk and even her handwriting is now “really tiny” (46). Throughout the narrative, Akilah, an African American girl whose parents affectionately nickname “girl warrior”, tries to work out what has happened to her friend while coming to terms with her own changing body and subsequent menstruation. Both Victoria and Akilah are modern city girls, taken by their mothers to spend their summer vacations with their extended families.

While Victoria's relatives are Nigerian, and Akilah's African American, in different ways both sets seem less civilized than their urban cousins. Akilah's Aunt Cassandra's rural family home is dominated by women, as five sisters still live locally: only Akilah's mother and the sole brother, Uncle Jason, have moved away. On their arrival in Silver Spring, Akilah and her parents interrupt the whipping of her cousin, Pearlina. When Akilah's mother, a social worker now living six hours away from her older sisters and implicitly more culturally sophisticated, "spoke out against the whippings" (*NLH* 23), Aunt Cassandra responds by suggesting that Akilah's mother will need to "crack the whip on [Akilah's] little tail" (*NLH* 24). The extended family laugh and share their own stories of whippings which seem to be considered a naturalized rite of passage. Never having undergone a whipping, Akilah is regarded as an inexperienced onlooker and excluded from the family narrative. There is an implicit link here between Akilah's experience in Maryland, where she has not undergone her family's rite of passage and factual accounts of girls who have not undergone FGM and are therefore not considered a part of the adult community. FGM, as Hughes points out, often represents "a graduation [...] to a higher stratum of collective social being or personhood" (275). To become part of the family involves sacrifice and physical harm both in American and Nigeria, and while both Akilah and Victoria's mothers attempt to alleviate any suffering for their daughters (Victoria has an anaesthetic before undergoing FGM, much to the dismay of her female relatives), the text suggests that discarding such rituals is a difficult and slow process.

The strength of custom and practice, of ritual, is evident in Akilah's account of her mother who gave her daughter an African naming ceremony; buried Akilah's umbilical cord in the backyard and "loves a ritual" (*NLH* 59). Tellingly, however, in what critics might well term a 'civilising mission', once Akilah and her mother learn of Victoria's FGM, they move away from their own reliance on traditions and customs. The text ultimately strongly suggests that such rites of passage are outdated; Akilah's mother has already insisted that her daughter will not be whipped, despite the criticism of her elder sisters, and when Akilah begins to menstruate she says: "Mother surprised me. She hadn't called my aunts to tell them the news... There were no green tea libations to Mother Moon and no mumbo-jumbo speeches about my journey into womanhood." (*NLH* 121) The language Akilah uses here is not neutral: "mumbo-jumbo" and "Mother Moon" are clearly disparaging phrases and, earlier in the narrative, when seeking information on cultural attitudes to menstruation, she points out that "the deeper I searched the kookier it got" (*NLH* 59). The terminology of tradition and ritual rather than medicine and science is clearly established in the text to be backward and ill-informed as opposed to modern, enlightened and thus, *better* ways. In her discovery of the practice of FGM, Akilah then, not only sheds light on rituals that "maim, disfigure, destroy" but the horror is heightened when she discovers it's not "just in Africa, but here too" (*NLH* 93). Homi Bhabha argues that the colonial subject "is almost the same [as the colonizer] but not quite" (86) and in its references to the cultural rituals practiced by Akilah and her mother the text perfectly illustrates this theory; both Akilah and Victoria's families engage with rituals, yet one is far more physically and psychologically damaging than the other. However, that Akilah and her mother abandon their rituals in the name of progress while Victoria's family clearly intend to continue theirs, simply emphasizes the cultural gap between the two families and cultures. While *NLH* is well intentioned in its focus on FGM, it cannot escape from speaking *for* and so silencing the 'other' within its own Western framework.

The Western Gaze

Campaigns to eradicate FGM are largely located in the Western world and tend to homogenize all varieties of the practice, bundling together different cultures and traditions and labelling them as 'other' to Western society in a way that resonates with outdated colonial ideologies. Referring to Fauziya Kasinga's well-documented plea for asylum in the United States, based on her need to escape FGM, Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi argues that "Media representations of Kasinga's story perpetuated troubling colonialist assumptions in the dichotomy of an enlightened West as refuge from the 'backward' and 'barbaric' traditions of Africa" (283); she suggests that the anti-FGM campaign is "a civilizing mission if ever there was one" (284).

In many ways, children's literature is also a "civilizing mission", where the subject of the process is the child. As Peter Hollindale observes, "to write books for children and to write about them is a political act" (11). The children's texts about FGM discussed here are part of that civilizing mission: their aim is to raise awareness of the brutality of FGM and they are dedicated to girls who have experienced that brutality. But as John Stephens argues, "child readers need to be equipped to recognize and interrogate the ideology of fictional texts. In particular they need to be made aware of narrative point of view, since this serves to construct subject positions and inscribe ideological assumptions"(56). While the texts are clearly keen to give a voice to those who have been silenced, as Perry Nodelman in his pioneering essay on the adult colonization of children's literature observes, "In the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it. As long as we keep on speaking for it, we won't get to hear what it has to say for itself – and indeed, that may be exactly why we are speaking in the first place" (30). The intention of these texts to raise awareness of FGM is both brave and important but there is a tension, an opposition, between those good intentions and their ideologically inflected assumption that FGM is barbaric, brutal and part of a world that has not yet achieved civilization.

Darja Marinšek argues that while African writer authors writing on FGM have also been influenced by Western ideologies, they still offer a very different depiction of the practice than their African American counterparts. Marinšek compares descriptions of the act of circumcision and observes that the African writers use metaphors to describe the cutting process: "to have a bath", or "to remove the bud". Often too, these accounts emphasize the good food and nursing that the women/girls receive afterwards, as well as their increased status in society. Significantly, the African-authored narratives avoid terms such as mutilation, clitoris or vagina (132-9). By contrast, African-American writers take a more negative view. For example, Alice Walker in *PS J* criticizes the "ignorant African holding on to tradition at any cost" (135) and uses "shocking terminology" with reference to the cutting process itself and has a "self-righteous tone" (136). Marinšek concludes that the African writers are ambivalent about FGM because they are immersed in and influenced by their culture and traditions, whereas the African American writers are condemnatory because they have "distance and (mis)understanding of this practice" (144) and are equally immersed in their own culture and influenced by its traditions. Ideology is inescapable.

Marinsek and Njambi both argue that Western-authored FGM narratives are inherently othering. Njambi states that her paper is not pro-FGM, but is instead a plea to raise awareness of the “arrogance and presumptuousness of the part of those (no doubt, well-meaning) social change agents who do not see [...] the imperialism residing in their views” (300). A brief examination of *WWNS* which moves from present time Bristol, UK, to flashbacks of protagonist, Zahra’s early childhood in Somalia illustrates these concerns:

I love the sound of the language of Somali [...] It bubbles like spring water on the tongue, but then there’s a pause and the sound is flung to the back of the throat. It growls [...] It is a language which moves across the mouth as its people move across the world. A whole-mouthed language of a brave people.

I love the sound of English. It is easy, light fluid. Tip of the tongue. Hand up, busy and keen. It can rise into the nose, straight through to the brain. It is good for thinking in. It is the language of promise and future [...] but you cannot howl in it. It will never go that low. (25)

Somali is constructed as animalistic (growl, flung), physical, passionate, violent and painful, while English, in marked contrast, is the language of “promise”, education, civilisation and tellingly the “future”. English, the text suggests, cannot go as low as the deep howl of Somali. As Edward Said observes, in the West the “Orient [is constructed as] irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different,’ while the European is ‘rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’”(40). If, as Said argues, the European constructs a particular version of the Orient in order to teach, rule and dominate it (3), then children’s books which raise awareness of FGM in the West are always already heavily implicated in this ideology. But either prior to or on publication of *WWNS* in 2015, there is no apparent awareness of this. In her *Guardian* review of *WWNS*, June Eric-Odoré states that Craigie produces “captivating images for the reader of life in Somalia during the war and of the people and their characters”. More surprising still is that to illustrate her point, Eric-Odoré cites Craigie’s representation of the FGM cutter in the narrative: she has “black clothes”, “narrow face” and “yellow-whites [to] her eyes”(11). The cutter’s companion has a “thin hand” which “grabbed” and “squeezed” Zahra’s arm “tightly” and is described as having a “marble eye” and a “croaky” voice (*WWNS* 13). Later, Zahra recognizes the cutter by her “low rough cough” (*WWNS* 188). The cutters are constructed as witchlike old crones, the barbaric upholders of a bygone tradition which has no place in the civilized world.

No matter how well intentioned Craigie may be, the colonial discourse is overt, and the postcolonial reading must, as Roderick McGillis states, “intervene in the way cultures construct persons”(xxviii). In the descriptions of the cutters and their language as backward, violent and barbaric, the colonizer emphasizes “a more advanced state of civilization” (xxii). The culmination of this colonial discourse is the redemption of Zahra’s mother’s by the close of the narrative. Once the influential Auntie Noor and the cutters are safely delivered into the hands of the British justice system, Zahra’s mother takes her daughters in her arms, “sobs” and, importantly, tells the story of her own circumcision, declaring ““I remember the pain”” (197). The reader heaves a sigh of relief, the girls have escaped, the perpetrators have been caught, the talking has begun, and the dominant culture has been successful not only in ‘saving’ the girls but in educating and assimilating the mother and her old ways of thinking into the mainstream Eurocentric dialogue.

Representing FGM: Child vs Adult Readers

One of the key differences between biographical narratives concerned with FGM and aimed at the adult reader and stories on the topic intended for children is that the first-person child protagonist in the latter is never actually subjected to FGM. In *NLH* it is Akilah's friend Victoria who suffers; in *WWNS* Zahra has hazy memories of her sister Rahma's circumcision and subsequent death and she discusses FGM with her cousin, Yasmin, who underwent the operation in Somalia. Zahra, however, and her younger sister Samsam, escape FGM and learn about it only through the anecdotes of others. In factual adult memoirs, accounts of FGM are graphic and shocking while in children's literature they are softened for their readers, yet both adult and child narratives draw on the language of horror noted by Njambi and Marinsek. In her autobiography, Hibo Wardere, in a chapter entitled "butchery" recounts her clitoris being pulled by the cutter who used a "dirty razor" with "the dried brown residue of others' blood clinging to it" to "cut straight through my flesh" (32-5). The plain language makes more horrific the brutal, unhygienic and barbaric act. While in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's account the cutter is a man (although women hold her down), the language is similar; the cutting is described as being "like butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat" (32). Just as meat on a butcher's slab is prepared for consumption, so these girls are prepared for their sexual consumption by men.

By contrast to the graphic horror in the adult narratives, in the fictional Yasmin's account of FGM in *WWNS* the detail is absent: she is "pushed on to the bed" where "women grabbed hold of her legs" and told to bite on a cloth. She recounts how "I wasn't expecting the pain. I hadn't seen a knife or anything. There was just suddenly this screeching pain. The next thing I remember is that you were lying beside me on the bed" (138). Here there is no filthy knife, no detail of the physical act or extent of circumcision; it is sanitized and censored. *NLH* also maintains a silence around the act of FGM, and Victoria's mother inspects the doctor's knife and insists that hers is a "modern" family and that Victoria will be anaesthetized (69). Some idea of the pain caused by the operation is revealed, if only in metaphor, when Victoria declares that, post-op, urination felt like "standing in a pot of fire." The act of FGM itself is finally described, but again in childish language: "Akilah, they took my raisin and sewed my skin together to hide what they did" (72). Victoria's description is empathetic but also vague, avoiding clinical or physiological detail and employing a euphemism for the clitoris. The psychological effect of the operation is apparent in Victoria's loss of voice: she is unable openly to articulate what has been done to her and can tell her story only in a whisper.

That Victoria says that her skin has been sewn together to "hide what they did" not only enacts the way the narrative hides what has been done, but also implies recognition of the illegality of the act and the taboo surrounding it. As Akilah, and implicitly the reader, are left without any clear information about what exactly has happened, Akilah searches the internet for articles on "cruelty to girls in Africa" (92), a narrative ploy that enables the child reader to carry out their own research should they wish. Akilah's research triggers her mother's move away from ritual and tradition: she catches sight of the computer screen "with large white letters flashing 'Two Million Girls Mutilated Each Year'" (93). Akilah's mother, liberal as she seems with her backyard chats about puberty, until this point is guilty of

maintaining the taboo on speaking openly of FGM. Although Akilah had earlier overheard her mother say, in the context of her role as social worker, that she couldn't believe anyone could "do *that* to their own daughter" Akilah had been quickly sent to her room to prevent her hearing any detail. The text implies that had Akilah's mother discussed FGM openly with her daughter then Victoria's FGM may have been prevented. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that in order to eradicate it the story of FGM needs to be shared, not just within the communities that practice it, but also throughout society.

Voice

Both texts strongly advocate the power of voice and story in the discussion about and prevention of FGM. The very titles *NLH* and *WWNS* alert readers to the absence of voice and its consequences. *NLH* begins with a breakdown of communication as Akilah awaits a letter that never arrives. Akilah too suffers from loss of voice after she learns of Victoria's FGM and is unable to answer questions or talk in class (75). In *WWNS*, when Yasmin relates her own experience of FGM she pauses and "falls silent" (138) before finding the courage to start again. Voice and writing are central to feminist discourse. Helene Cixous argues that "Language is a translation. It speaks through the body" (2) yet as these girls' bodies have been mutilated and their physical sexuality excised so their voices have been silenced. The solution offered by the texts, in accordance with feminist discourse, is to remember to speak, to spread the word and write against the taboo: "By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her... censor the body and you will censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous and Clement, 93). The narratives of both *WWNS* and *NLH* conclude with the written word as the girls and their friends/sisters retell their stories. *WWNS* concludes with Zahra's realisation that she needs to tell the story of her sister Rahma; that FGM "has to stop" (200). However, even here a postcolonial critic may take issue: Zahra begins to write this story in the "Indian cloth Sketchbook" (200) gifted to her by her helper, Lettice: it is a white western woman who enables the Somali girl to tell her tale. Similarly, Craigie is herself creating a narrative from those taken from the girls she meets through Integrate Bristol. Nonetheless, *NLH* seems to escape this postcolonial problem as it concludes with the unmediated voices of Victoria and Akilah, planning the letter to the girls of the world that they will post online. Both novels suggest the power of storytelling in the battle against FGM and in the fight to reclaim women's power over their own bodies.

Conclusion

There is a question posed by both these narratives: who is writing the story? For within the positive feminist discourse is a less acceptable postcolonial thread. Discussing Suzanne Fisher Staples' novels, which recount the lives of Muslim families, Claire Bradford suggests that their readers 'are positioned as members of a superior society from which they observe barbarity' (47) and perhaps the same can be said for *NLH* and *WWNS*. Bradford asserts that such children's literature "lumps together... societies under the name of Islam," focusing on the oppression of women, and featuring protagonists who are "exceptional Muslim girls whose aspirations and values are readily aligned with those of their implied Western readers"(45). Zahra, in *WWNS* is such a character, as is her older cousin, Yasmin, who has undergone FGM Yasmin is represented to be a Westernized student, living independently, refusing to wear traditional dress, negotiating a relationship with a boyfriend and of course saving her younger cousins from undergoing FGM. *WWNS* fulfils the need for children's

literature to have a happy ending: Zahra's mother turns against FGM; the girls are rescued with the help of the police; and of course Yasmin, although she requires the assistance of her University professor. Finally the text seems to enact Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the way in which the voices of the oppressed vanish in the discussion of Western theorists. The heroines in the children's texts discussed here are those who embrace Western life, leaving their traditions behind. While these works are ground-breaking in that they have broken the silence in children's literature around FGM, their authors can only write from their own (Western) ideological perspective. Children's literature needs to represent the world of their readers back to them in recognizable ways, to touch on reality and on sensitive subjects. We need to be less squeamish about what we allow our children to read and yet we also need to critique our own western voices, to be minded that our own language is laden with cultural bias.

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ⁱ According to Unicef figures (collected by WHO) over 80% of women in Mali, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Guinea have been affected. 130 million women worldwide have endured FGM with 130,000 of those living in the UK. It is a practice often conducted as a celebration of 'coming of age' at the onset of puberty anytime between 10 and 13, but it also often affects children from 0-10.

ⁱⁱ There are many websites documenting this including: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/when-america-spoke-on-fgm-our-time-had-come-we-can-banish-it-by-2030-a3656101.html>
<https://www.amrefusa.org/usa/en/newsroom/fgm-vision-2030/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this see <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2013/aug/22/amnesty-teen-takeover-rita-williams-garcia-fgm>