

Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experiential Texts and Human Contexts

Chantal Zabus

324 pages, 2007, \$65.00 USD (hardcover)

Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

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Professor of Comparative and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Paris 13 and author of *The African Palimpsest* (1991) and *Tempests after Shakespeare* (2002), Chantal Zabus has produced a well-researched, well-written, and scholarly but accessible monograph which combines in one important volume much of her intellectual—albeit controversial—focus for the past eight years. From her “shock value” opening in which she declares “What lies between a woman’s thighs has always haunted the male psyche” (1) to her open conclusion that suggests two areas for further study, Zabus offers a comprehensive and rigorous study that weaves together history, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, religion, human rights discourse and activism, cultural studies, autobiography, fiction, and above all, the female body, specifically in African contexts.

Zabus’s introduction provides helpful signposts to the remainder of this dense study. She immediately acknowledges that early Western gazing at what was viewed as a non-Western void (the partial or complete removal of a woman’s genitalia) was “unabashedly voyeuristic” (1). She then suggests a contemporary resurrection of this discourse in transformed form whereby as of the 1970s, that gaze was transposed into Western moral scrutiny, excision became female genital mutilation (and subsequently female genital cutting), and women’s rites or rituals began to be seen as conflicting with human rights. Zabus’s focus, however, is not only on these debates around cultural relativism, international human rights violations, racism, Western imperialism, and patriarchal dominance of women, but also—and most notably—on what she calls the privileged place of literature. In first-person accounts, referred to here as “experiential texts,” women’s voices are finally heard, and the female body becomes a site of contest and liminality. Zabus’s study incorporates consideration of literary and historical texts written in English, French, and Arabic over four decades (from the 1960s to 2006), and over a broad geographical area of Africa (including the Maghreb and Sudan), and the Middle East. Zabus suggests that these texts show “how women have broken away from male discourses . . . and have disentangled themselves from culture, religion, and patriarchy to voice their *experience* of excision in the autobiographical mode” (4).

Speaking of the African woman's body as "textually under siege" (7), Zabus is concerned with women's relational self-writing and with confessional experiential texts coming from a lived body that has experienced excision. This represents a concern for the individual "I" as well as the feminist, communal "we" of all women. She explains her use of "excision" to refer to three of the four identified types of ritual operations (excluding infibulation) and gives reasons for her avoidance of the term "cutting" as it is associated with self-harm and self-inflicted violence rather than the violence against the female body which for Zabus is in question in excision. She ends her introduction with a sub-section, "Fearful Symmetry," in which she broaches the subject both of the following section of her book and also her forthcoming study on male circumcision, stating explicitly that the most radical and severe form of excision, infibulation, establishes a clear dissymmetry between male and female practices. She does note, however, that women's first-person narratives are unmatched by the far fewer male autobiographical accounts of the loss of the foreskin.

Between Rites and Rights is composed of three parts: "The Cult of Culture"; "Speaking from Memory: Religion and Remembrance"; and "From Sealing to Opening Up: Sex, Exile, and Empowerment," with a conclusion, "Between Rights and Future Rites." In Part One, excision is studied as a social practice that supports both sex segregation and gender inequality. This first part of the study treats "sexual pre-texts," "Kenyan reactance: Kenyatta, Huxley, wa Thiong'o," and "Kenyan women's texts: Njau, Likimani, and Waciuma." Here Zabus explores the practice of excision as an initiation rite into adulthood and into society and as a cult of culture that these women's autobiographies challenge and resist.

If Part One reads texts as representing the body as neither object nor subject, but open to cultural inscription, the texts examined in Part Two are presented as seeing the body as a surface on which violence can be enacted. This is the suffering body that is violated, tortured, mutilated, amputated, and thus traumatized. It is the female body remembered in autobiographical narratives, whereby that memory is culturally inscribed within myth and therefore within religion. In this section, Zabus discusses mostly texts from Egypt. In "Passing and Other Circumspections," she treats Nwapa, El Saadawi, and Rifaat. In "On Spurious Geneses," she focuses entirely on works by El Saadawi, and in "Spoken Autobiographical Acts," Atiya's *Khul-Khaal* is examined.

Perhaps the most interesting section of Zabus's study is found in the third part, with an analysis of literary texts published as of the early 1990s, a study of the excised body as transformed into the spectacle of high fashion, and an examination of some of the more recent literature of exile regarding excision. Chapters include: "The Sealed Condition: From the Beginnings to Freud and Herzl"; "Silence, Exile, and the Spectacle of the Fashioned Body: Aman, Barry, Dirie"; "The Whole Woman and the Law: Keita, Ahmadu, Kassindja, Dirie, Khady, Abdi, Korn"; and a chapter

devoted to the “Exciser,” whose own voice has yet to be represented in literature in an autobiographical, experiential text.

Zabus’s conclusion reiterates that literature has contributed greatly to the larger debate around excision, since it often reflects upon patriarchal cultures’ “uneasy negotiations between custom and globalization” (266). Pressures from the West to excise a rite from certain cultures are clearly invasive, but at the same time, such practices influenced early European anthropology and psychoanalysis, shaped Western theories of female sexuality, and informed even modern Western medical discourse. Her discussion of contemporary and predominantly Western urban “neo-tribal” and “modern primitive” rituals of body modification is particularly timely and important: the “(pending) eradication of excision needs to be assessed against the momentous return to ritual in the West, its new ambigenderal sexualities and gender blending, and its new positioning in late imperial culture *between rites and future rights*” (273). As already mentioned, her forthcoming area of study will concern experiential texts about male circumcision. In this second study, the physical body will continue to serve as her focus since it reproduces “the anxieties of the social body while showing that one can read the truths of culture not only in male flesh, as is customarily done, but, most tellingly, in female flesh” (266).

Supplemented by helpful notes, and an excellent bibliography and index, Chantal Zabus’s study is interesting, important, and intriguing, while controversial in its “strong hints” at male circumcision and female excision symmetry. This reviewer considers her book essential reading for anyone interested in issues such as Western colonization and imperialism, global cultures, patriarchy, female genital cutting (my terminology), women’s literary texts, gender rights, and ultimately human rights.