

response to that question, although I continue to seek answers through conversations with some polygamously married women. Just as monogamy is not the ideal form of male-female relationships (witness the divorce rate in North America), reducing women's oppression within polygamy to sexuality is not the answer either. Western women, I mean all western women, including all those crusading and well-meaning feminists, need to be educated about African women and this education must go beyond sexual mutilation.

You might be shocked to learn this, but my awareness of clitoridectomy and/or infibulation was only sparked and intensified when I came to Canada. In Cameroon, I knew that boys were circumcised. I had only occasionally heard of women being "circumcised" in some countries. What this means is that the vast majority of African women are not sexually mutilated. I am not in any way minimizing the horrendous nature or repercussions of this practice. The point is that there are many/other equally important burning issues around basic needs that the vast majority of African women also have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. These issues include illiteracy, teenage pregnancies, lack of sufficient health facilities, infant mortality, the struggles to feed and raise many children (both their own and those of the extended family), complex traditions and cultural practices that must be juggled and subverted on a daily basis. I am therefore uncomfortable with the fact that when some people see me, an African woman, they think I have no clitoris and that I have a capacity to tolerate co-wives. My oppression is naturalized and legitimized in those terms.

Along the same vein, I am weary of pervasive academic racism that persistently seeks to legitimize certain kinds of histories and cultures. For instance, I will, as a literary scholar, use the example of literature to illustrate my point. For African literature to be taught here in universities, it has to be coated, like a pill, with terms such as "minority..." as opposed to majority discourses, to authenticate its presence. Africa is a whole continent, but in order for its literatures to be taught here (if that happens at all), it has to be smuggled in under something called, "Third World" or "Post-colonial" literature. Other literatures have histories, they can stand on their own (English literature comprises so many periods: Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, Modern, Contemporary, Postmodern... it has a history); African literature is simply "Third World" or "Post-Colonial." Categorizing African literature under this thing called "Post-colonial" literature negates what our literatures are all about (by emphasizing the neo-colonial). This categorization also completely denies and robs us of the oral literatures and traditions that have been anterior to colonialism, that have survived colonialism, and still continue to shape and ground our literatures, histories, and philosophies of life. As long as certain groups of people continue to promote discourses which blatantly maintain dichotomies and hierarchies grounded in racism, the whole literatures of a continent will continue to be treated as

"minority" literature. This also makes it easier for these cultures and histories to be co-opted and/or exploited as experimental raw material.

I have learned from my experiences in North America to deal with racism as it happens. I have learned not to be angered by every contact with prejudice, but I do get angry and I do use my anger when it can serve a constructive purpose. I have likened the struggle with racism to a race, like the ones I see on TV, on a ski slope. Replace the time-to-beat and medals to be won at the winning line with your life. Dealing with racism therefore depends on negotiating those curves and obstacles in such a way that you do not fall off the slope, breaking a leg or your neck, and hurting someone else in the process of your fall. The target always has to be that prize waiting at the end of the course. Once one is *conscious* of that, one would negotiate those obstacles painfully, carefully, slowly.

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## NADIA HABIB

### She Slices, Trying to Reconstruct a Memory

Her neighbour is suspicious of her music, sniffs at her spices in the hall. She, an alchemist, sits at the kitchen table trying to reconstruct a memory blade sharp.

No sun warms her back, no fragrance of lemon trees or jasmine. She slices watermelon, no sugar rises to the surface. She's learned the contours of graveled snow.

She unfurls some coriander, lays it on the cutting board, chops it sharp-edged, and sits with her nose to its juices. Her neighbour tip toes by with pine-scented air freshener.