

# Reflections of an African Woman

by Juliana Makuchi Nfab-Abbenyi

*Cet article établit la corrélation entre les diverses expériences de l'auteure en tant que femme africaine, femme noire et étudiante du tiers monde. L'auteure parle de la complexité des problèmes reliés à la race et à la couleur de peau qu'elle confronte à tous les jours.*

*Person of colour. Woman of colour.* I used these expressions for the first time some months after I came to Canada for graduate studies. I learned that it was necessary and sometimes strategic to say woman or person of colour. "What/who is a person of colour?" I asked. "You are a woman of colour," my friends replied. *Colour. Colour.* I looked at them. They had colour, they were "white," not as white as a sheet of paper, but they were white, some with little shades of redness that "white" people have in abundance in Africa. So, when they turned around and said to me, "You are a woman of colour, you know, a black woman," I was taken aback and still today, five years later, when a white person tells me, "You are a woman of colour," I look at them and wonder whether they have no colour. The two things that I am most certain about are that I am a woman and that I am black.

Surely, I have read and learned the histories, the strategies, the racism embedded in a label such as person-of-colour, and I still cannot figure out why a child born of a white parent and a black parent can never be white, always coloured. One of my friends once said to me, "If your blood has been 'white' for generations, when and if it

mingles with just one drop of 'black' blood, you automatically become a person of colour, you are coloured." Blackness brings an identifiable colouring to whiteness.

Where I come from, one identifies two races (although we really do not *identify*, we just know there are two). There is us, the Cameroonians, the Africans, then there are the others, the westerners, those white people who colonized us, the Europeans, or simply, "whiteman," as we call them in *Pidgin English*. Then I came to North America where people are referred to as niggers, persons-of-colour, Hispanics, Orientals, Native peoples. You cannot believe the number of people I look at through African eyes. I say to myself, "They are white, they look white," but North America tells me they are coloured, Hispanic, etc. Living in a society that persistently categorizes people because of their race and the colour of their skin, I sometimes find myself playing mental games, trying to guess whether the person I am looking at is black or white. That is something I never did back home, it would never have occurred to me.

The first and only time I have been called a nigger straight to my face was by one grey-haired old white woman. I had just gotten off the bus and was about to cross the street when this person raised both fists as if to push or hit me. I stopped and looked up and she was cursing, first in a language I did not understand. I kept looking straight at her; then she swore in English; "Go back to where you came from, you animals, you monkeys..." and she kept on mumbling. I had been living here just a few months and I wondered what I had done that so infuriated this woman. "She might be nuts," I thought, but then I still had many lessons to learn about racism. I have encountered racism in a number of ways as an African, but mostly, as a black woman. "What's the difference?" you might ask. As you will see, these are clear distinctions that people make.

As it happens every once in a while, I meet someone at the bus stop or in the metro. If we do strike up a conversation, they will ask me with one raised eyebrow which of the islands I am from. "I am not from the Islands," I would reply. "Then you must be from Guyana." "I am from Africa." Immediately when I say that word, "Africa," there is an obvious display of interest. I am examined as though I were some strange, exotic specimen that has found its way out of the jungle. Often I am told that Africans are not like these other black people in America or those from the Islands and the reasons sometimes vary, but one reason remains constant. I am seen as that pure African, that "pure" black person whose blood has remained untainted, uncontaminated. Some people are surprised when I am offended by



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this. They remind me that I ought to be proud to be an "original" black person; that there is less racism toward Africans because of who they are, the way they *look* and how they comport themselves. But what if my African-ness were not stated beforehand? Then evidently, I would just be a black person and that is the bottom line. Nevertheless, the obvious question that follows the revelation of what I am is what brought me to Canada. I respond that I am studying at McGill. "Ooh, what?" "I am doing my Ph.D. in Comparative Literature." And then the responses will inevitably be something like: "Oh!" or "Really?" or "Ooh, good for you," or "Interesting." What is revealing is how

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that "Oh" is said, the facial expressions that go with it and the sudden silence into which my interlocutor slips.

Studying as an African at McGill is not without its own hurdles. For one, you rarely see people who look like you. You are often the only black person in your class. Because you are African, some people view you as intrinsically incapable of competing at McGill. But they forgot, or are ignorant of, our histories of colonization—histories that resulted in me reading Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters, Molière, Hugo, Voltaire, giving me more knowledge of European cultures than some Europeans have. We had to emulate and reflect the Empire, not vice versa. Not surprisingly, some University students would say to me, "Cameroon, where's that?"

I had this naive view about the highest institutions of learning that compelled me to hope that racism would not show its ugly face in such an environment; after all, are these people not supposed to be the most educated, cultured, the most sought after? I have learned a hard lesson: racism has nothing to do with being educated and *everything with being educated*. The first term at McGill, I got an A on a term paper in Psychoanalysis. One of my classmates who received a B asked for my paper and read it. Then this person called me and spoke of their utter surprise at how intelligent I was, and proceeded to use a string of adjectives that ranged from being "shocked" to being "stunned."

Racism can be encountered *c/overtly* just about anywhere on campus. It was in the fall term of 1988. I had forgotten my student card in the library. I realized this only when I got home, so I called the "lost and found" desk. I gave the gentleman my name and asked if he had my card. He said he had five cards in front of him and kept repeating other names to me as I tried to enunciate mine.

"I have a Samuel...a Samantha..."

"No, my name is Sam-Abbenyi, Juliana Sam-Abbenyi<sup>1</sup>..."

"Juliana...eh, yes, I have Samuel, Samantha..." "No not Samantha, Sam-Abbenyi, (spell) A B B E N Y I."

"No, Samantha..."

"Okay, is this Samantha black or white?"

"Ooooooh, *she's* white."

"I'm black."

"..."

"Juliana, ah, Sam-Abbenyi, that's you?"

"That's me. Can I come and pick it up?"

Fifty minutes later he handed me my card and smiled. I, too, smiled. *Blackness* can be visible or invisible depending on the eye and perspective of the beholder.

Being an African woman, i.e. from the Continent, also exposes me to a specific kind of racism. I am either viewed as an exotic specimen or as a victim of all sorts of patriarchal oppression, especially of clitoridectomy and/or polygamy. I was sitting in the Union Building cafeteria one cold winter morning of 1989 with one of my friends and some of her friends. I had just come out of a feminist theory course that (thankfully) included black American women's writing. For the past two weeks, we had been discussing Angela Davis and bell hooks. That week we had started Alice Walker. I told my friend how excited I was that we had black feminists in this course and how delighted I was about reading Walker. The moment I mentioned Alice Walker's name the discussion became animated, engaging.

"Isn't that the author of *The Color Purple*?"

"Yes, it is."

"You know, I've seen the movie. (Dreamy look in her eyes). A beautiful movie."

"I have seen the movie and read the book! Really beautiful, I must say."

"You're telling me," another chimed in.

"What do you think Juliana," my friend asked me?

"What?" I said.

"I mean..., about the book, Alice Walker...Goddess woman...wow!"

"..."

I had nothing to say and my friend looked at me quizzically. For some reason or the other, I did not seem to be catching-on to their enthusiastic mood, so one woman turned around to me and inquired:

"Tell me, Juliana, how many wives is your husband going to have?" She had this knowing, amused look in her eyes. I looked around and everyone, except me, seemed secretly amused.

Was I missing something, I wondered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know, we hear that you African women don't mind being married to, and sharing, the same husband. Well...? Even in Alice Walker's work, you read about all those women who are married to one man and just sit there and do his bidding. Those men are just like children and the women have to work for them, feed them, and take good care of them. So, Juliana, how many women will your husband marry?"

I had not realized that Alice Walker was such an authority on African women.

"What makes you think that all Africans are polygamously married?" I asked. "By the way, to answer your question, one."

My friend looked at me doubtfully and said I was not being fair. It is only when African men come to Canada, she insisted, that they are forced to marry monogamously. First of all, because this practice is illegal in Canada and secondly, because the white women that they marry cannot take that "crap."

Then, I *was* amused! Mistaking my chuckle as testa-

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ment to a change of mood and judging that I was now ready to enter the discussion, our conversation took a swing right back at me.

"By the way, Juliana, I was meaning to ask you... This is rather difficult, (she looked pained), but I will ask it anyway. How does it feel ... I mean, this thing about clitoridectomies in Africa?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I have never had one. To tell you the truth, my real exposure and awareness to 'female circumcision' has been kindled only since my arrival here in North America."

"Nooooo!"

"Yes."

"You must be kidding."

"Seriously, I'm not."

"You expect me, you expect us to believe that?"

This exchange took place roughly six months after I got here. At that point I could not understand why they could not believe me. Why was it so hard to believe me? In retrospect, and in view of other conversations with Canadian women, identities of African women seem to be intrinsically linked with subservience, male domination, polygamous marriage (always presented in negative terms), and sexual mutilation. My friends could not believe me because of the negative colonial and post-colonial images and (re)presentations of African women that have been reinforced by the media and the feminist movement. Have you seen any Hollywood movies *about* Africa? Apart from a few Masai dancing in all their splendour, coupled with lions and giraffes, Africans and African women, especially, are virtually absent. They ought to be. After all, those movies are anything but about Africa or Africans. Like the love affair between Hollywood and the jungle, (Western) feminism has also carefully selected and capitalized on the one issue that hits someone like a bolt—

female circumcision—and has used this (unforgivable) practice on some women as the blanket marker of African women's identity and oppression. This leaves little doubt as to the narrow and often uni-dimensional perception that some Canadian women would have of African women. There is a blatant and unfair tendency to posit a unified (African) female subject. But, then, I cannot put the blame on Hollywood and feminism alone.

The bitter truth is that most western women seem to be comfortable with and are more liable to believe and retain those stereotypical images of "other" (the African woman). This facilitates their description and appropriation of that "other" while at the same time maintaining a distancing between themselves and that "other," consequently reconstructing pre-conceived hierarchies along the way. So long as the "other" is kept squarely in the position of victim, it somehow lessens the western woman's own victimization. It puts the oppression of western women on a plane all its own, such that they can look down and say, "Boy, we are fighting inequality, but these African women still have a long, long, way to go."

That is why a white woman can look me straight in the eye and without any qualms or after-thought say that we African women can take the "crap" (i.e. getting married polygamously) while they, white women, cannot. It is the negative and sometimes racist politics inherent in such declarations that I find distressing. Western women too often reduce the issue of polygamy and female circumcision to the body and sexual pleasure. There exists a certain feminist discourse of gratification that makes "us" feel sorry for those women while being thankful that we are not in their shoes. This happens without asking the numerous, complex questions as to why women are active participants in their own oppression. It is wrong and very limiting for women here, white or black, feminist or non-feminist, to reduce the issue of female circumcision to a problem of sexual pleasure. After all, there are many women walking around here with their clitoris intact, and for whom their sexuality or the erotic component of their lives is as problematical. By restricting this issue to the "body," without taking into consideration the gender relations, the discursive ideologies, and practices that define it, most women condemn women who have had a clitoridectomy to their predicament. Very little is done to explore other avenues that could be constructive and useful to these women and the societies in which they live—avenues that might enable them to heal from the trauma and fundamentally challenge and change certain ways of thinking for future generations.

If I were to tell my friend that I can never be married polygamously, but that I do support some women who sincerely find fulfillment and empowerment in such marriages, she would not want to believe me. Women here often find such a statement amusing or downright naive.

How would a woman find fulfillment in a relationship where she "shares" her man? I do not have a definite

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.