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Nussbaum Article

Ethics – Dr. Feder-Marcus

One of the many cultural problems in the world is the clash between the rights and wrongs of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It is also one of the most ignored cultural procedures, in which puts the female’s health in danger. Many Protestants have tried to terminate the cultural procedure, especially feminists and people of high political power, yet FGM is one of the cultural values that won’t cease. In her article, Martha Nussbaum argues the rights and wrongs of Female Genital Mutilation based on the universal value moral code. Although her main focus is to establish whether it is right or wrong to judge other cultural practices by using your own personal moral beliefs based on your own cultural understanding.

Nussbaum’s argument is very persuasive from the start. She opens up her argument by relating to the story of a nineteen year old girl named Fauziya from Togo, West Africa, whom fled her home to avoid the FGM procedure. Although this practice is done on girls from ages of seven to fifteen, Fauziya’s luck ran out when her father, whom was against the practice, died. Using Fauziya’s story Nussbaum opens her article with a sensitive side giving the reading the opposing view of the matter and the understanding of why it is wrong.

Nussbaum stresses that the only way to judge other cultures is by evaluating them using the universal value moral code and not by using the standards of one’s own culture. Nussbaum uses a non-ethnocentric way of evaluating other cultures. Although Nussbaum is clearly against the FGM practice, she is very non-bias. She states that “feminist argument should not be condescending to women in developing countries who have their own views of what is good.” In other words, what might seem wrong to some people can very well be right to others. Nussbaum uses four theses which were developed and influenced by ethical relativist to make her argument.

The first thesis states that “it is morally wrong to criticize the practices of another culture unless one is prepared to be similarly critical of comparable practices when they occur in one’s own culture.” In other words, if one is going to be a negative critic of a particular culture and the way that culture carries out its rituals, one must be prepared to criticize their own culture if there is ever a similar practice. Nussbaum agrees with this thesis; in her article she stresses that Americans are a prime example because they are the first to criticize a culture without examining their own cultural shortcomings. Nussbaum points out that American feminist have shown a great deal of criticism towards American problems such as the ideal female body issue and dieting instead of focusing on problems that are much more serious such as Female Genital Mutilation. Nussbaum states that we are in a state of moral narcissism, where we focus on our own failures instead of focusing on the calls for help from others of different countries and cultures.

The second thesis states that “it is morally wrong to criticize the practices of another culture unless one’s own culture has eradicated all evils a comparable kind.” Nussbaum surely disagreed with this thesis because she believes that it is unethical to ignore another person’s cries for help due to distance. As an example she uses the Second World War, where she states that it would have been unethical for the American’s to ignore the Jews cries for help because of the Great Depression of the 1930’s and 1940’s. Nussbaum tries to explain that what hurts one person can easily hurt another, regardless of how far apart they may be. As stated by Nahid Toubia, regardless of what the problem is “it represents a human tragedy and must not be set to set Africans against non-Africans, one religious group against another, or even women against men.”

The thirst thesis states that “Female Genital Mutilation is morally on a par with practices of dieting and body shaping in American culture.” Nussbaum explains that this thesis is also wrong for many reasons. The first reason is because FGM is a procedure done by force, whereas dieting and undergoing any procedure to meet the standards of beauty is done by choice. The second reason is because FGM is irreversible, whereas dieting is far from irreversible meaning a diet can be stopped anytime. Third, FMG is a procedure done in unsanitary and dangerous conditions. Four, FGM is linked to many health problems such as infections and even death, whereas dieting is linked to reversible problems such as anorexia and bulimia. There are many more reasons why Female Genital Mutilation is incomparable to body shaping in American culture, such as irreversible loss of the capability for a type of sexual function. Also FGM compared as a form of male domination.

The fourth thesis states that “Female genital mutilation involves the loss of capacity that may not be especially central to the lives in question, and one to which westerners attach disproportionate significance.” In other words, westerners dedicate to their desires and wants instead of focusing on things of much more importance. This was a statement by philosopher Yael Tamir, whom argues that sexual pleasures undermine other values of human functions. Nussbaum doesn’t agree nor disagree with Tamir’s statement because she can see both sides of the argument; she states that there is a big difference between celibacy and Female Genital Mutilation.

The Arab Springs is a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East. I believe that this movement does support Nussbaum’s position because the people of these countries are fighting to change their own cultural norms within the government. These people are fighting for their freedom and equality. By evaluating their own cultural norms amongst each other, whether they are from the same country or not. This supports the first thesis which states that one must be prepared to criticize their culture before negatively criticizing another culture. As I have concluded before, Nussbaum has a very non-ethnocentric, non-bias, and ethical way of criticizing other cultures. I can say that I agree with Nussbaum’s way of critically analyzing what is wrong and what is right. It is said that there are three sides to every story, “his, hers, and the truth.” I believe that the best way to criticize or make a judgment of another person’s life and culture one must evaluate their own first.