

Confronting Female Genital Mutilation in Waris Dirie's Autobiography *Desert Flower*

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Abstract—This paper primarily discusses the contentious issue of recent times, i.e., Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Waris Dirie's autobiography *Desert Flower* published in 1997. FGM is a gender based violence that affects the physical, psychological, and sexual health of women. It is constructed as a means of policing the women bodies by men in order to assure that they are clean and pure but women are made to believe that it is carried out for their own benefits. The convinced women then consider it as their duty to continue the ritual throughout their family lineage. Young girls are lured into accepting it by the belief that they will enter the respectful gates of womanhood by adopting it and it will make their parents, family, and the whole clan proud of them. Women need to be liberated from the shackles of such inhuman practice. They need to be educated about it. For this purpose, mid wives and doctors play a momentous role. Waris, in her autobiography has revealed how proper education and right behaviour of doctors can bring women like her out of the sufferings of FGM and lead a healthy and normal life. She does not stop at this. She decides to be the voice of the voiceless and bring about mass awareness against the whole process of FGM. She gave several interviews regarding this issue, published books and made a film based on this novel. As a result of her continuous efforts to eradicate this ritual, she became a Human Rights ambassador for the U.N. She has also established the *Desert Flower Foundation* to advance women's rights in Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's world has welcomed women into every field but quite contrary to it are prevailing problems of domestic violence, sexual abuse of women, female foeticide, and rituals like Female Genital Mutilation. Female Genital Mutilation is a motley of serious human rights violation like gender violence, sexual liberty, and child abuse. Austrian- American feminist Frank Hosken published *The Hosken Report: The Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Female* (1979) which brought the issue to a wider audience. It was the first report to estimate the numbers of women cut around the world. Hosken called FGM a "training ground for male violence, and accused women who facilitated it of participating in the destruction of their own kind."

Female genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision or female genital cutting, is defined by the World Health Organization as "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons". It violates the

right to non-discrimination, health and bodily integrity and the victims, invariably, are the young disempowered girls with no voice of their own. Moreover, the practice is performed by the elders of the family so the girls are either scared of losing their parents or confused about their loyalties. They are made to believe that FGM is something universal so they are not supposed to complain against it rather they have to face it stoically and bravely to make their families proud of them.

The World Health Organization has classified FGM into four types:

1. Clitoridectomy (Type I):- It is the partial or total removal of the clitoris and, in very rare cases, only the prepuce which is the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris.
2. Excision (Type II):- It is the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora. The labia are "the lips" that surround the vagina.
3. Infibulation (Type III):- It is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner or outer labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.
4. Other (Type IV):- It includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.

According to estimates by the WHO 150 million women are affected by FGM world-wide. In Europe, the number of mutilated women or girls and women threatened by FGM amounts up to 500,000. Over 125 million women and girls have experienced FGM in Africa, Yemen and Iraqi Kurdistan; half of them live in Egypt and Ethiopia. Over eight million women and girls have been infibulated, a practice most common in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. In Asia, the countries where Female Genital Mutilation is practiced includes Malaysia, Indonesia, southern parts of the Arab Peninsula along the Persian Gulf, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, South Yemen and among some sects in Pakistan and Russia. However, in India Female Genital Mutilation is widely prevalent among a Muslim sect called

The Daudi Bohras, which is an Ismailia Shia sect, numbering half a million and concentrated in the Western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. A highly organized sect, they have a spiritual head known as Dai, Maulana or Sydena. Bohris practice Type I FGM i.e., Clitoridectomy.

The reasons given by families for having FGM performed include:

- a) Psychosexual reasons: It involves the reduction or elimination of the sensitive tissue of the outer genitalia, particularly the clitoris, in order to attenuate sexual desire in the female, to maintain chastity and virginity before marriage and fidelity during marriage, and increase male sexual pleasure;
- b) Sociological reasons: It includes identification with the cultural heritage, initiation of girls into womanhood, social integration and the maintenance of social cohesion;
- c) Hygiene and aesthetic reasons: The external female genitalia are considered dirty and unsightly and are to be removed to promote hygiene and provide aesthetic appeal;
- d) Myths: Enhancement of fertility and promotion of child survival;
- e) Religious reasons: Some Muslim communities, however, practice FGM in the belief that it is demanded by the Islamic faith. The practice, however, predates Islam.

FGM has ever remained a controversial practice, whose origins continue to be much debatable. Religious experts contend that FGM is a foreign practice which is not sanctioned in any of Islam's religious texts. The origins of the practice are unknown. Gerry Mackie, one of the renowned political theorists, has suggested that it began with the Meroite civilization in present-day Sudan. Citing the Australian pathologist Grafton Elliot Smith (1871–1937), who examined hundreds of mummies in the early 20th century, US historian Mary Knight writes that the genital area may resemble Type III i.e. infibulation, because during mummification the skin of the outer labia was pulled toward the anus to cover the pudendal cleft, possibly to prevent sexual violation. It was similarly not possible to determine whether Types I or II i.e. clitoridectomy and excision respectively, had been performed because soft tissues had been removed by the embalmers or had deteriorated. Another Greek physician, Aëtius of Amida (mid-5th to mid-6th century CE), offered more detail in one of the books of his *Sixteen Books on Medicine*, citing the physician Philomenes as his source. The procedure was performed in case the clitoris, or nymphê, grew too large or triggered sexual desire when rubbing against clothing. Gynecologists in 19th-century Europe and the United States removed the clitoris to treat insanity and masturbation. British doctor, Robert Thomas suggested clitoridectomy as a cure for nymphomania (hypersexuality) in 1813. One of the first reported clitoridectomies in the West was performed in 1822 in Berlin by Karl Ferdinand von Graefe (1787–1840), on a

teenage girl regarded as an "imbecile" who was masturbating. According to a paper written in the *Obstetrical & Gynecological Survey*, FGM was performed in the US in 1960s to treat hysteria, erotomania and lesbianism.

Female genital mutilation has detrimental effects on the physical and psychological health of the infants, girl-children and women. Depending on the degree of mutilation, FGM can have a number of implications like; Shock, Bleeding or Hemorrhage, Urinary retention from fear of pain, Infection caused by the use of unsterilized instruments in unhygienic environment which may lead to complications like pelvic inflammation, blood poisoning, tetanus, and even death. There is also high risk of HIV transmission through the use of one instrument for multiple operations, Damage to organs such as the anus, urethra and the bladder caused by inexperienced circumcisers, Repeated urinary infection because of the narrowing of urinary outlet which prevents the complete discharge of urine from the bladder, Extremely painful menstruation, Formation of scars and keloid on the vulva wound, growth of dermoid cysts which may result in abscesses, Vulval abscesses, Severe pain during intercourse which may consist of physical discomfort and psychological traumatization and complications during child birth.

Of all the aspects of FGM, the psychological or the emotional damage is a lesser known area. Nahid Toubia (1993), a Sudanese surgeon and Women's health rights activist specializing in FGM, cites three psychological cases: "anxiety state" originating from lack of sleep and hallucinations; "reaction depression" from delayed healing, and "psychotic excitement" from childlessness and divorce. Other problems include traumatic experience, sense of being betrayed by family members, elders, and joining peer groups by force through the FGM operation.

The present study takes its cue from the plight of African women as expressed in the autobiography of Waris Dirie named *Desert Flower*. Waris Dirie, born in 1965 is a Somali model, author, actress and social activist. From 1997 to 2003 she served as a UN Special Ambassador. Her autobiography *Desert Flower* depicts the journey of a girl from a child bride who was circumcised at the age of five to a woman of the year. *Desert Flower* is the international best-selling autobiography. It was published in 1997 and describes her life journey beginning from her birth in Somalia from where she fled at a tender age of thirteen as her father forced her to marry a sixty year old man to her finally becoming an international super model. She has remained five times best-selling author who mainly writes about FGM.

Desert Flower is a very well written book depicting not only the autobiography of a super model but also serving the purpose to inspire many girls around the globe to fight against FGM. This book teaches the girls that "...women are not animals in heat, and their loyalty has to be earned with trust and affection rather than barbaric rituals..." (225).

FGM is a custom which basically emerged because of the insecurities of men and is done just to please them. According to Karen Horney, one of the Neo-Freudian psychoanalyst, men suffer from 'womb-envy'. It denotes the envy men feel towards women for their primary role that is to sustain and nurture a new life. Historian Robert S. McElvaine in *Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (2000), extended Horney's concept of 'womb-envy' and said that it is an important factor in the psychological insecurity suffered by many men. He coined the term Non-Menstrual Syndrome (NMS), denoting man's capable insecurity towards biological and reproductive traits of women. Hence, men who are envious of women's reproductive traits insist that "a real man" must be "not-a-woman", thus they may seek to socially dominate women by dictating what they may or may not do in life as psychological compensation for what men cannot do biologically. FGM is one amongst such rituals which is just performed for the unconscious gratification of men. Originally the custom was performed when the girl reached puberty, as according to Somalians, girl became fertile and capable of bearing her own children. But with the passage of time this ritual has been performed on younger and younger girls, partially because of the pressure from the girls themselves as they eagerly await their 'special time' to enter the gates of womanhood.

The writer of the novel underwent this process at a tender age of five. She is warned by her mother not to drink much water or any liquid product the night before the circumcision is performed. Next morning she is woken up early by her mother and taken towards a place which is a bit farther than the place they are staying. There the gypsy woman, named by Waris as 'killer woman', is waiting for her. That woman is named so because of the number of the little girls who died at her hands because of the excessive bleeding during the procedure, her sister, Halemo being one of the examples. That killer woman is considered as a very important person in the community not only because she has a specialized knowledge but also because she is minting huge amount of money from it. Paying for the procedure is one of the greatest expenses a household undergoes but is still considered as a good investment by the family since without it the daughters will not make into the marriage market. Women with their genitals intact are considered as unclean sluts whom no man would consider taking as a wife.

She is lying there just like a log of wood, oblivious to pain and numb with fear. Dreading the pain of urination she is holding it back resulting in the infection of the wound. She is fading in and out of consciousness and suffering from fever as well. More than the physical trauma there is the psychological one. As she is all alone in the hut and is listless and bored. At this moment she ponders the reason behind the ritual but is not able to think of any. As soon as this practice is performed its ill effects on the psychological well-being of a young girl are raising their heads.

One of the unspoken reasons for FGM is the fact that virgins are treated as a hot commodity in the African marriage market. Fathers expect huge bride price for their beautiful virgins but have little hope of unloading one who has been soiled by having sex with another man.

The physical and psychological trauma of Waris is horrendous. But more gruesome than this is the description of her monthly menstrual cycle. When she was in Mogadishu and bled for the first time, she felt a searing pain in her abdomen. For the purpose she consults Dr. Macrae who educates her about FGM and suggests a cut open surgery but Waris is not mentally prepared on the day of surgery because of the childhood memories of the circumcision. While living in Y Waris discusses the problem with Marilyn, one of her friends, who is not able to fathom it and questions about it. Finally one day she pulls her pants down and shows her which brings tears down her cheeks. Marilyn supports her and encourages her for the surgery for which she agrees. Both of them go to the doctor and get the surgery done. Dr Macrae tells her that she is not alone with this problem. There are women all over the world from Sudan, Egypt, and Somalia with the same condition. Some of them are even pregnant and are terrified because trying to give birth while they are sewn up is dangerous as the baby can suffocate trying to exit the tight opening or the mother can bleed to death. These women without the permission of their husbands or their family come to him for the required surgery.

Conclusion: Fortified cultures and patriarchal oppression are the main reasons behind FGM. Oppression stems from society's devaluation of women's strengths. Young girls are required to be educated against FGM. There is a need of developing self-awareness and the power to act amongst such girls so that they must be their own rescuer. The infusion of society with values based on cooperation is required. Doctors dealing with such patients are required to be thoughtful, non-critical and intensely knowledgeable of the profound consequences.

Experiences of the life trigger ideas in Waris's mind to raise her voice against FGM. It is only then that she realizes how inhuman it is and decides to fight against it. She started speaking against it as she wanted to give the voice to the voiceless. She gave several interviews regarding the issue, published books and made a film based on this novel. As a result of her continuous efforts to eradicate this ritual she became a Human Rights ambassador for the U.N. She has also established the Desert Flower Foundation to advance women's rights in Africa.

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