

Chasing the Cut; Traversing the Issue of of Female Genital Mutilation in *Desert Flower*, by Waris Dirie

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Abstract: Female genital mutilation (FGM) is known globally as a violation of human rights of girls and women. It states the atrocious practice of injuring a woman's genital areas in the name of tradition and religion. The paper entitled, Chasing the Cut; Traversing the issue of of Female Genital Mutilation in *Desert Flower*, by Waris Dirie, attempts to study the practice of female genital mutilation as projected in the movie *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* that was released in 2009 as well as the book *Desert Flower* that was published in the year 1998. The paper looks into the issue of female genital mutilation and its after effects.

Key words: Trauma, Female Genital Mutilation, Gender, Harmful Practices, Violence.

Introduction

Cinema by far has emerged as the fluid representation of a nation and its culture. Nothing in the modern era has transcended boundaries as cinema. The reason movies often remain a crowd favourite is due to the representations that it embodies. Often, the very concept of a culture is perceived by a person from a different culture through the medium of movies. Thus, it can be justified as the medium of representations. Over the years, cinemas of various regions have helped us to form a kaleidoscopic view of that particular region. Every movie stands as a virtual representative of a fraction of people and their traditions. Films are today used as a powerful tool against social evils concerning the far outreach and impact a movie has.

When you cut off a woman's genitals, when you sew them together, when you open them to have sexual relations, when you sew them up again when the husband is absent, open the genitals...everything is clear. You control no matter what object, no matter what possession or property". (*Warrior* 288)

Female Genital Mutilation involves all the practices that cause external injuries to the female genital organs in the name of religion, culture and tradition. It is an ancient ceremony that violates essential aspects of women's and children rights. Recent survey by the United Nations Children's Fund shows that, almost 130 million girls and women worldwide have undergone some or the other form of (FGM/C).

Methodology

The term 'female circumcision' has been used for this procedure, comparing it with male circumcision. However, with the awake of awareness and with no known health benefits, the expression 'female genital mutilation' is much preferred. This paper will use Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) even though both terms carry out the same procedure. The history of FGM is not precisely traced, but the practice is thought to exist before the arrival of religions like Christianity and Islam. Even though there are no proper indications as to when or where the ritual of FGM originated, it is believed to have its roots from Mesopotamia. Egyptians believed that every human was a bisexual person like their Gods. While the female soul of a man was at his prepuce, the male soul of the female was at her clitoris. Thus, circumcision was performed for the improvement of male and females.

FGM has a bad impact on a girl's physical as well as mental well-being. Sometimes these effects last lifelong. The practice is painful and is carried out without anesthesia and often without the consent of small children. Unsterilized blades, knives, broken glass, sharp tones, scissors and in some regions sharp and long finger nails are used for cutting. There are no medical influences made for the practice and depending on the nature of the procedure, FGM is said to hinder some basic functions of the body, resulting in pain, trauma and infection.

The paper deals with the representation of FGM in *Desert Flower* and how a cut determines and controls a woman is also looked and explored in the paper. Body is repeatedly the location of suppression and discloses differences in gender relations. Body is significant to FGM as it is a means by which ethical and societal norms specific of a culture displays itself up. FGM and the bodies that it comprises have turned into frontlines for negotiations over power, control, sex and culture, where moral worldviews come into conflict. As Foucault says, "power is excised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile

relations” (Foucault 1998, 94). Human body frequently turns into the surface for engravings and biopolitics behind it gives emphases on how circumcised women are objects of power conflicts.

Results and Discussion

Though films and documentaries connected to female genital mutilation (FGM) try to sustain the truths surrounding the issue, there are undisputable cords of subjective explanations associated with them. Therefore, these films and documentaries emerge as the reel depiction of realities. *Desert Flower*, a 2009 German production is the most relevant film on the topic of FGM. The film is based on Waris Dirie’s 1998 autobiographical work with the same name which she wrote along with Cathleen Miller.

The movie consigns the practice of FGM and gives a deep insight into infibulation, which is classified as one of the most ruthless forms of genital mutilations. The movie is about Waris Dirie portrayed by Liya Kebede, who was cut at the age of five in a desert, over a rock. The film oscillates amongst her experiences as a young girl and what occurred to her in London, where she survived on the avenues and was helped by a teenager named Marilyn played by Sally Hawkins. Through Marilyn she lands up as a job in a restaurant mopping floors. After being discovered by fashion photographer Terry Donaldson played by Timothy Spall she rises into modelling. Dirie goes on to speak about FGM that she had to undergo and eventually became the UN spokeswoman against genital mutilation.

The film swings amid earlier days and present day, focusing on Dirie’s life and her hardships. The last part of the movie is the most painful one as it shows the FGM that Dirie was subjected to. In the case of Dirie she was cut under the shade of a tree without any anaesthesia. Delirious pain cuts through Dirie and even though the scenes are only implied, the screams are enough to create a scar in the viewer’s mind.

In her work *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* 1998, Dirie describes about the ‘tradition’ that she was subject to in chapter four that is titled *Becoming A Woman*. She describes as follows;

My father was growing concerned, because Aman was reaching marriageable age, but no marriage could take place unless she had been properly “fixed”. The prevailing wisdom in Somalia is that there are bad things between a girl’s legs, part of our bodies that we’re born with, yet are unclean. These things need to be removed- the clitoris, labia minora and most of the labia majora are cut off, then the wound is stitched shut, leaving only a scar where our genitals had been. (37)

The gypsy woman was an important member of their society not just because of her specialization but also due to the fact that she earned a lot of money. Paying for circumcision was one of the greatest expenses that a household had to bear but it was considered an investment, since without it, daughters could not enter the marriage market. Later Dirie describes her as Killer Woman because of all the little girls that died at her hands due to the complications of genital mutilation. After her sister Aman was cut it was Dire’s turn to be ‘clean’ too. Dire was cut under the shade of a tree, positioned under a flat rock. She remembers how her mother placed a root of an old tree between her teeth. Dire was cut with an old broken razor blade and her skin was punched with thorns from an acacia tree and was sewed up with white thread. She herself describes the ordeal as, “My legs were completely numb, but the pain between them was so intense that I wished I would die” (42). Her legs were tied together with strips of cloth binding her from ankles to hips. And she saw pieces of her sex drenched in blood drying in the sun. She was then taken into a special little hut that was prepared for her to rest and recuperate. After the gypsy sewed me up, the only opening left for urine and menstrual blood was a miniscule hole the diameter of a matchstick. In the following days her genitals became infected and she ran a high fever and she often faded in and out of consciousness. For a month her legs were tied together and she was warned to restrict her movements.

Later Dire comes understand that her sister Halemo died during circumcision. After the old gypsy woman cut her, she ‘bled’ to death. Waris also mentions about one of her cousins who was circumcised at the age of six. After she was placed in the hut for recuperating, her genitals began to swell and the stench was unbearable and one morning the girl was found dead by her mother in the hut. Dire mentions that frequently the results of circumcision were death for many. The ‘missing girls’ as how she addresses them were never spoken about. They died probably of related effects like; bleeding, shock, infection or tetanus. Considering the conditions in which it was done she finds it’s a miracle that she survived. Having her menstruation was one of the biggest problems that Waris had to encounter. Blood unlike urine accumulated in the body and it came out one drop at a time, resulting in her having periods for more than ten days.

Table 1: Examining Type 3 Cutting that was Performed on Waris Dirie

| | ANALYSIS OF INFIBULATION | Waris Diries |
|----|---|---------------------|
| 1 | AGE WHEN CUT | 5 Years |
| 2 | WAS THE CIRCUMCISER A WOMAN? | Woman |
| 3 | WERE WOMEN PRESENT DURING THE PROCEDURE? | Yes |
| 4 | WERE MEN PRESENT DURING THE PROCEDURE? | No |
| 5 | DID THE CUT TAKE PLACE IN A HOMELY SURROUNDING? | No |
| 6 | WAS A STERILIZED TOOL USED? | No |
| 7 | EXCESSIVE BLEEDING? | Yes |
| 8 | TOOL USED | Thorn |
| 9 | BANDAGED? | Yes |
| 10 | RECUPERATE SURGERY | Yes |

The above Table 1, gives answers to 10 questions. Through these questions we get a comprehensive understanding of the cut that Waris Dirie was subjected to.

Socio Cultural Contexts

Waris Dire, who has now become a trumpet for voices of oppressed women talks openly on the issue of FGM as she felt that no other girl should have the plight as hers. Pointless to say, the creation of films is determined by influences of storytelling and are thus, difficult to be objectively oriented. While, a comparison between a book and a motion picture are impossible, it can be said that through both the mediums, the creator has achieved what they wanted- to create awareness on the practice of FGM among audiences. An interview with Laura Ziv of magazine *Marie Claire* titled *The Tragedy Of Female Circumcision* was the turning point in her life of activism when she decided to speak on female circumcision. The interview had a great response worldwide and many organisations as well as thousands of people wrote out to Dire supporting her. Standing at an influential position, Dire's voice echoed millions of women who had/have to go through the ritual. Even though she describes that it worried her to speak against her culture she was ready to lose her dignity for what she endures. Her goal with the help of her foundation as she describes is "to help the women of Africa" (224).

After much thought, I realized I needed to talk about my circumcision for two reasons. First of all, it's something that bothers me deeply. Besides the health problems that I still struggle with, I will never know the pleasures of sex that have been denied me. ... Not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of girls are living with it and dying from it. It's too late to change my own circumstances, the damage has already been done; but maybe I can help save somebody else. (214,215)

Not that she become a supermodel, but that she chose to speak out against the treatment of women in her country and consequently all over the world is what keeps apart Dire. Being in a power position she realized the influences that she could make and started to work for the cause. Knowing influential position, she has championed for an action that has influenced even more people. Waris Dirie and her Desert Flower Foundation Team decided to work collected with young European and African journalists to start a secret research in African communities all over Europe. The Desert Flower Foundation team investigated for two years on FGM in African communities in many European capitals and the report included 4000 pages of hard facts which Waris Dirie decided to publish as a book titled *Desert Children*. The publication of the book and the outcomes of the study had significances. All of a sudden, FGM was not an African problem alone but it occurred right next door in Europe. The European Union took FGM in Europe for the first time in history on their schedule and invited Waris Dirie and the Desert Flower Foundation team to present their study during the council of ministers on February 6th 2006.

Conclusions

FGM acts as a bio political tool that styles a new populace of women who carries female sexuality into the conventional cultural discourse. Men have a fondness to circumcised women as their wives for the virginity that it ensures. Therefore, a woman has to carry with her the scars of subjugation on her body as well as in her mind. Desert Flower, as the work and as the movie, with little limitations, carry the same message of female genital mutilation and why it is important to stop the practice. Like Dirie comments, lack of basic education and strict adherence to tradition are reasons that cause FGM to thrive in most African countries. Grassroot level of campaign must be taken to eradicate such practices. It should be understood that however tiny, preventing a cut makes a difference.

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