

## Literature as Cultural Apparatus of Human Rights: A Study of Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower*

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### ABSTRACT

Rituals play prominent role in all cultures. Certain rituals are so anti-women in nature and too much harmful that they even risk the lives of people who perform it. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is one such ritual and has always been a very sensitive issue for feminists, writers and activists all over the world.

How far literature or academics has openly discussed about the issue of Female Genital Mutilation is a big question. For, even today a lot of people in and outside the academic platform consider the issue as a taboo to be discussed. This paper is an attempt to see how discourse about FGM by Western feminists and the critique of it by postcolonial critics should be looked at in a context where victims themselves have started narrating their experiences through their writing leading to the cultural apparatus of Human Rights. *Desert Flower*, the autobiography of a famous Somalian model Waris Dirie is analysed as a cultural apparatus of Human Rights in the context of FGM.

**Keywords :** Rituals, Female Genital Mutilation, Cultural Apparatus, Human Rights

Rituals are part and parcel of any culture. They play a significant role in all cultures. Rituals are a series of activities that depict the tradition and culture of a specific community. By engaging in a ritual people try to communicate that they have something in common with the rest of their community. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines Ritual as “the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree”. Many people believe that rituals signify or express the sacred. Sometimes rituals are a kind of exhibition of the patriarchy bound roles that men and women have to play in a society. Certain rituals are so anti-women in nature and too much harmful that they even risk the lives of people who perform it. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is one such ritual and has always been a very sensitive issue for feminists, writers and activists all over the world.

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consider the issue as a taboo to be discussed. Of course a few writers and critics across the globe have indeed discussed the issue of FGM through their writings. Writers like Alice Walker (*Possessing the Secret of Joy*), Ayan Hirsi Ali (*Infidel*), Rita Williams-Garcia (*No Laughter Here*) etc are a few among them. Narratives by victims are indeed very less in number in this particular area. This paper is an attempt to see how discourse about FGM by Western feminists and the critique of it by postcolonial critics should be looked at in a context where victims themselves have started narrating their experiences through their writing leading to the cultural apparatus of Human Rights. *Desert Flower*, the autobiography of a famous Somalian model Waris Dirie is analysed as a cultural apparatus of Human Rights in the context of FGM.

The World Health Organization defines Female Genital Mutilation as any procedure that involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for cultural or non-cultural reason. FGM involves removal of parts of the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora (WHO, 2016). Clitoris is regarded as one of the extremely sensitive organs and it plays a crucial role in sexual sensation. The removal of clitoris results in impairment of normal female sexual response. There are different types of FGM ranging from removal of the hood of the clitoris to the extreme infibulation.

The origin of FGM is unknown. It predates the rise of Christianity and Islam. Historians are of the opinion that some Egyptian mummies show characteristics of FGM. Historians such as Herodotus opine that it was practiced by the Phoenicians, the Hittites and the Ethiopians in the fifth century B.C. It is also reported that circumcision rites were practiced in tropical zones of Africa, in the Philippines, by certain tribes in the Upper Amazon, by women of the Arunta tribe in Australia, and by certain early Romans and Arabs. The fact is no religion promotes or condones FGM. But many people in the FGM practicing countries believe it to be a religious requirement. FGM is often perceived as connected to Islam since many of the practising countries follow Islam but the fact is majority of the muslims do not follow this ritual; while interestingly, there are non-Islamic groups who follow this ritual including some Christians, Ethiopian Jews, and followers of certain traditional African religions. Therefore FGM can be categorized as more of a cultural practice than a religious one.

Certain traditional cultures treat FGM as an inevitable part of their ritualistic beliefs. For them a woman is considered unworthy of marriage if she does not undergo FGM. There is no specific age to perform this ritual. Usually it is done on girls before their marriage. The World Health Organization estimates that 100 million women or more in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have undergone FGM. The consequences of FGM are not only limited to physical lack of a particular genital organ but also lead to severe psychological problems like anxiety, depression, lack of confidence etc.

Female Genital Mutilation is a practice still existent in many of the cultures across the globe. The practice can be found in African countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Uganda, Zambia etc. Certain ethnic groups in Asian countries also practice FGM. In Middle East the practice is found in Oman, UAE, the state of

Palestine and Israel. And in many western countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom and various European countries, FGM is practiced among diaspora populations from areas where the practice is common.

The history of anti- FGM activism has a recent origin beginning with Fran Hosken and her newsletters in *Women's International Network News* in 1976. Hosken has dozens of essays and articles and her four editions of the work *The Hosken Report* to her credit which talks about anti- FGM. *The Hosken Report* is a significant contribution in the field of anti-FGM activism. It was Fran Hosken who replaced the term 'Female Circumcision' with 'Female Genital Mutilation'. The use of the term 'mutilation' emphasizes the gravity of the act and reinforces that the practice is a violation of women's basic human rights. According to Lisa Wade, Fran Hosken and her contemporary writers who wrote against FGM were driven by the ideas of "global sisterhood", the concept that women all over the world are united by patriarchy. Their aim was to eradicate the practice of FGM. Fran Hosken and her contemporary writers treated the practice of FGM as an example of extreme form of violence against women through barbaric forms of patriarchy in 'Africa'. Writers like T. Levin (*Unspeakable Atrocities*), Hanny Lightfoot-Klein (*Prisoners of Ritual*) etc are a few among them. The literature of that period collectively defined FGM as a disfiguring cutting procedure that happens to women in Africa. Terms like "horror", "brutal", "cruel", "torture" etc were used to describe Female Genital Mutilation. The words of earlier writers who wrote on FGM explain clearly their view of Africa and the culture.

In response to these arguments certain scholars and writers wrote about practices like FGM as unfamiliar to the people outside this culture and they also supported people who practice them for some rational reasons which the outsiders do not understand. It is a fact that the cultural interpretation of Female Genital Mutilation is different from the western viewpoint. Atleast a few people in practicing countries believe that these kinds of attempts to abolish practices like FGM are viewed as imperialistic strategies counteracting local culture and women. Especially in the 1990s with the arrival of Postcolonial critics many scholars turned their attention from anti-FGM to discourse on anti-FGM and they argued that the discourse on anti FGM as being imperialistic and racist strategies of the West. Postcolonial critics treated African men and women as objects not as subjects in their own rights. As Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi writes:

...anti-FGM discourse carries colonialist legacies. Building upon "colonial feminism," in which colonial powers used images of "oppressive traditions" like female circumcision, veiling, and Sati as a means of justifying and maintaining colonial rule, contemporary feminists and anti-FGM discourse generally perpetuate this legacy, pointing to the Western need to intervene to protect women from the cruelty of their cultural traditions(112).

The anti-FGM discourse by western writers is looked upon by Postcolonial writers as culturally imperialistic narratives. It is worth noticing here what Kanneh feels about the whole discourse of Western anti- FGM:

‘Female circumcision’ has become almost a dangerous trope in Western feminisms for the muting and mutilation of women—physically, sexually and psychologically—and for these women’s need for Western feminism. Circumcision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, become one visible marker of outrageous primitivism, sexism, and the Third World woman (347).

The earliest discourses on FGM by Fran Hosken and her contemporaries failed to give due respect to the African culture and tradition by highlighting the ‘barbaric’ nature of the African culture. They succeeded in drawing the attention of the world to Africa but ultimately they ended up in creating Africa as the ‘other’. Whereas Postcolonial critics and writers who blamed the earlier discourses failed to address the issue of Female genital mutilation which is a reality. But the fact that FGM is a gendered oppression and denial of Human Rights cannot be relegated by depoliticizing it in terms of strategies of imperialism and cultural relativism.

It is at this juncture the relevance of Victim Narratives arises. When victims narrate their stories they are trying to articulate the discourses of victimhood, oppression and suffering and thus they provide a cultural apparatus of Human Rights. A cultural apparatus is essential to the political and legal dimensions of Human Rights. As Pramod.K.Nayar rightly observes “These ‘scenes’ (images and narratives) are sites where victims put forward themselves, their bodies, lives and deaths as testimony to the absence of Human Rights for many people across the world...When victims present themselves, their *stories*, the campaign for HR is launched and gathers momentum (1).

Waris Dirie is a Somalian fashion model, author, and women’s rights activist known for her efforts to eliminate Female Genital Mutilation. She has authored a few books like *Desert Flower*, *Desert Dawn*, and *Desert Children* etc. She experienced the most extreme form of FGM called infibulation. Dirie’s procedure of FGM was performed under unhygienic conditions without anesthesia, and she was forced to endure excruciating pain and both short- and long-term complications. Being a victim she recounted her experience with FGM, as well as her dramatic transformation from nomad to fashion model, in her autobiography *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* (1998). She has founded the Desert Dawn Foundation (2001) to raise funds for Somalian clinics and schools as well as the Waris Dirie Foundation (2002) to advocate for the abolition of FGM. Her life is also chronicled in *Desert Flower*, a 2009 film adaptation of her book.

Waris Dirie’s autobiography *Desert Flower* is all about her experience as a desert nomad and her journey from nomadic life to a super model from Somalia. Dirie was one of 12 children born into a large nomadic family. Like many of the desert children her life was also spent for taking care of cattle, goats etc. But she enjoyed the freedom that she received to be part of Nature: “Our greatest pleasure, though, was pure joy at being a child in the wilderness, the freedom to be part of nature and experience its sights, sounds, and smells.”(17). At a very young age of five Dirie had to undergo FGM in its highest form called infibulation. When writers like Dirie narrates their tale of suffering as evidence of denial of Human Rights, the crusade for

Human Rights is initiated and gathers impetus. Dirie explains: “The prevailing wisdom in Somalia is that there are bad things between a girl’s legs, parts 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). A woman who has not undergone this ritual is considered unfit for marriage. Since marriage being the only hope for women in their land there is no escape from this practice too.

Listening to subjectively articulated stories like Dirie’s lead to the construction of a cultural apparatus. Response to these cultural testimonials will have an impact on the larger culture of Human Rights. It is heartbreaking for any human being when she narrates her experience: “The first drop came out and stung as if my skin were being eaten by acid. After the gypsy sewed up, the only opening left for urine and menstrual blood was a minuscule hole the diameter of a matchstick.”(43) The impact of FGM is enormous as the women had to experience a very traumatic experience. Actually the woman is mutilated physically, psychologically and sexually. As Jessica A Platt rightly observes:

Immediate health consequences may include shock, gangrene, and accidental damage to the urethra. More long-term effects involved with female circumcision include scarring, urinary tract infection, and infertility. Complications with childbirth are almost unavoidable for infibulated women. To give birth, the scar, caused by infibulation, must be reopened, resulting in increased blood loss and extreme pain. (8).

Moreover the psychological stress of the procedure may trigger behavioural disturbances in the victims, closely linked to loss of trust and confidence in caregivers. In long term, women may suffer feelings of anxiety and depression. As Hanny Lightfoot Klein observes:

Frequently seen psychological complications include severe, recurrent anxiety, depression and a generalized phobic state. These tend to manifest themselves at various stress points in a woman's life, such as the period preceding circumcision, at menarche, before and for some time after marriage, and with the birth of each child. A severely depressed self-image, lack of confidence, feelings of sexual inadequacy and worthlessness, repressed rage and anorgasmia have also been observed.

At about the age of 13, she ran away from her home to avoid an arranged marriage with a much older man. Women are commodities in African marriage market she says: “Virgins are a hot commodity in the African marriage market, one of the largest unspoken reasons for the practice of female circumcision. My father could expect a high price for beautiful virgin daughters but had little hope of unloading one who had been soiled by having sex with another man”(50). Dirie leaves her home and takes a long journey that took her to Mogadishu and, from there, eventually to London to serve as a maid in the home of an uncle who was beginning his term as an ambassador. When his tenure ended, Dirie decided to stay in London illegally. She was illiterate, but she found a job in Mac Donalds and she took classes to learn to read and write English.

In 1983, at the age of 18, she reached the hands of a renowned photographer Terence Donovan. The photos he took launched her career. In 1987 she graced the cover of Pirelli Calendar and appeared in the James Bond film *The Living Daylights*. She went on to appear on the runways of Paris, Milan, and New York; in advertising campaigns for top beauty brands, including Revlon and Chanel; and in leading fashion magazines such as Elle, Glamour, and Vogue. When guys proposed she rejected them because they may find her circumcised and hence different. She says “The other problem that prevented me from having a relationship with a man came up when I realized I was different from other women, particularly Englishwomen” (141).

At one stage of her life she decides to undergo a surgery that can provide a relief to the extremities of infibulation. She meets Dr. Macrae for the surgery. As she was not so good at communicating with the doctor, the doctor has arranged a Somalian in the hospital to translate for her. It is worth noticing the attitude of the Somalian especially his concern for his culture when he got to know that Waris Dirie is there for the surgery:

Right away, I could see the Somali man wasn't happy. He pursed his lips and glared at the doctor. Between the fact that I did understand some English, and the Somali man's attitude, I sensed that something was not right. He said to me, “Well, if you really want it, they can open you up.” I just stared at him. “But do you know this is against your culture? Does your family know you're doing this?”(145).

Any way she undergoes the surgery and is able to enjoy the freedom of normal peeing. Of Course it is not like a normal woman. But better than her previous state: “Within two or three weeks I was back to normal. Well, not exactly normal, but more like a woman who hadn't been circumcised. Waris was a new woman. I could sit down on the toilet and pee— whoosh! There's no way to explain what a new freedom that was” (148).

Her modeling career was chronicled in the 1995 BBC documentary *A Nomad in New York*. Her celebrity status helped to catapult the topic into the public eye, and in 1997 she was appointed as the United Nations Population Fund's special ambassador for the eradication of FGM. At the turn of the century, Dirie retired from modeling to focus on activism. However, Dirie's love for African culture and tradition had been intense all through even in the midst of all hardships. She is always proud to be an African woman. The strength of the African woman is much more intense than the colonial writers that failed to address in their writings about African Women. Towards the end of the book *Desert Flower* Waris Dirie talks very emotionally about the culture of Africa and the very life as an African woman:

In my culture, a woman earns a badge of respect when she becomes a mother. She has brought another human being into this world, contributed to the gift of life. When Aleek was born, I, too, was a mama, a woman who had come of age. After going through the cycle of womanhood that began prematurely with my circumcision at age five, and came full circle with my baby's birth when I was about thirty, I had even more respect for my own mother. I understood what incredible strength the women in Somalia possess to bear the burden they carry simply because they're born female. (212)

The strength of African women that Waris Dirie portrays through her life narrative is incredible and appreciable. The earlier discourses on FGM to a large extent failed to acknowledge the power and inner strength that African women possess, thereby Waris Dirie's narration stands as a counter discourse against the existing discourse on FGM by both Colonial writers and postcolonial writers who critiqued the colonial discourses.

. Different cultures and civilizations have their own traditions, rites and practices. Certain rites and practices seem awkward and outrageous for people who are outside the practicing community. Of course certain cultural rites are not so innocent that need to be discussed especially such rituals that harm individuals. In the case of Female Genital Mutilation it extends upto the level of mutilating parts of genital organ of females in the name of rituals. It is necessary that we should respect and give due importance to all cultures and rituals. But at the same time if the rituals are a denial of human rights it need to be discussed debated and brought into the forefront for essential changes. When victims narrate their stories a cultural apparatus of Human Rights is the outcome and it ultimately contribute to the political and legal dimensions of Human Rights. Through reading such victims narratives one can identify with the 'other', or those denied their rights, equality, dignity and justice. Moreover, when the victims narrate their experience from a subjective point of view and the readers can reach certain conclusions without any bias or prejudice towards any particular culture or country, without the so called binary divisions of East/West. When victims begin to narrate the experiences, it is free from almost all politics and their writings are more authentic because they are the ones who have experienced it. So naturally the writings will be free from the accusation of objectification.

When Waris Dirie narrates her tale the amount of inspiration that she provides to the whole community of women who face the issue of FGM is enormous. It encourages millions of African women to fight against FGM and shows them the incredible strength hidden in African woman. The language of loss and grammar of suffering in these kind of victims narrative alert the civil society to the absence of Human Rights that triggers responsible responses. As a result public cultural realm of Human Rights is initiated which acts as a catalyst for legal and judicial changes.

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