



## Exploring Memory and Trauma in *Desert Flower*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a terrifying description of the physical and psychological effects of FGM or Female Genital Mutilation. This practice is represented through the autobiographical story of Dirie, a Somali woman who was subjected to FGM as a child. By placing FGM in the larger context of patriarchal customs and social norms, Dirie's story highlights how the practice feeds cycles of oppression and violence against women. The study analyses the enduring trauma linked with FGM which includes its impact on bodily autonomy, sexual health, and mental well-being. By using trauma theory the paper highlights how Dirie's journey from victim to survivor and global activist represents collective resistance to FGM. It also emphasizes on human rights violation, advocating for global efforts to support survivors.

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**Keywords:** Female Genital Mutilation, patriarchal customs, oppression, violence, trauma, survivor, collective resistance.

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### INTRODUCTION

For decades, millions of girls and women across the globe have been forced into traditional practices and rituals resulting in a motley of serious human rights violation. The practices are multidimensional like the foot binding practice in China once considered as a status symbol, early marriage prevalent in parts of Asia and Africa, Female genital mutilation (FGM) in parts of Africa, the Middle- East, Asia, Australia and now widespread in Europe. FGM is a coming of age ceremony for the ethnic groups in different parts of the world. It is an age-old tradition that marks the beginning of womanhood. The practice of FGM has led women and especially young girls to be genitally altered for non- therapeutic reasons and according to the definition by WHO, any treatment that involves the partial or complete removal of a woman's external genitalia or any other harm done to her genital organs for whatever reason is referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM). The form of female genital mutilation varies across different groups and societies. Among the four forms of FGM as described by WHO, type III known as "infibulation" is dominantly practiced in Somalia. In order to understand the existence of this practice it is necessary to consider socio- cultural factors prevalent in these communities. According to the various reasons been put forth by WHO it is believed that by circumcising the female genital organs their acceptability in the society will be maintained because an uncircumcised woman is usually rejected by the community. FGM is practiced nearly universally and without debate in some communities. FGM is frequently seen as an essential component of a girl's upbringing and a means of preparing her for marriage and adulthood. The girls are led to believe that FGM is associated with cultural ideals of femininity and modesty, which include the notion that girls are clean and beautiful after removal of body parts that are not considered clean, feminine. Female Genital Mutilation has harmful effects on the physical and psychological health of girls and women. The practice results in acute health complications such as excessive bleeding, pain, infection, the fear of anyone touching and along with it comes the terrible feeling to remain silent about it. Affected girls also experience morbid conditions. It is hard to ignore the suffering of body and self, inflicted under the guise of signifying it as an ecstatic celebration of womanhood, this practice still exists as a prominent activity which believes that cutting a girl will make her more „pure“ and promotes virginity and fidelity. Concretized cultures and phallogocentric power colonize and manipulate the female body- the two significant reasons why FGM basically thrives. The age at which the circumcised women experience FGM ranges between 5 and 14 years. Post mutilation the woman suffers from emotional and psychological damage. Many of the women describe feelings of intense fear, helplessness, horror, and severe pain and suffer from intrusive re-experiences of their circumcision. FGM was carried out without warning and without any prior justification. It is the unexpected occurrence that wounds the psyche of the survivor and results in trauma. Trauma affects people widely and deeply in innumerable forms of sexual, racial, ethnic violence. It results due to the atrocities inflicted upon body and mind that remain unclaimed. However, these atrocities deny to be buried until it is spoken. "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (Herman 1). In the past, trauma event was associated with unspeakability and as something that remains unexpressed. Trauma study is now being reconsidered in terms of its speakability. Female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that aims to control female bodies of their desire The biopic *Desert Flower* (2009) film captures the journey of a Somali- born girl Waris Dirie, a survivor of female genital mutilation. From being a nomad she turns into a supermodel and an activist against FGM, providing an inspiration for other women across borders. According to the customs of the community she is infibulated when she is three years old and at the age of thirteen her marriage is arranged to a sixty-years old in exchange of a huge bride price. It is now when she flees from Somalia to her relatives in Mogadishu after which she is sent to London. After being discovered by a famous photographer she goes on to become a supermodel there. Dirie is constantly haunted of her childhood memories of the circumcision through flashbacks. The film can be understood to a large extent as a factual representation since it is based on the life and memory of a person who has been through it and felt the pain. The present paper attempts to acknowledge the issues of FGM through Dirie's case and present how Waris endures the trauma that she had experienced in her childhood. Moreover, it also shows that trauma does not always end in

silence and is not left unrepresented because in her case she is able to demonstrate her „self“ and raise her voice against FGM. The current existing debates on FGM are also highlighted. It was after the mid 1990s when trauma studies gathered reasonable attention especially with the publication of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* in 1996 by Cathy Caruth. She presented trauma as an unspeakable experience and irreversible damage done to the survivor. Sometimes due to the the impact of trauma it becomes incomprehensible. Cathy Caruth gives a Freudian insight: “What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6). The victim undergoes helplessness and loss of control, feeling trapped physically and psychologically. This type of event evokes negative emotions like fear, anxiety, embarrassment, or physical discomfort. Though, the trauma is not a part of conscious memory, it still resides like an intruder. According to Freud and Breur “it is not so much the traumatic event itself as the memory of trauma that acts like an “agent provocateur” in realizing the symptom” (Luckhurst 499). Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* defines post traumatic disorder as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). The psychological complications of FGM maybe submerged deeply in the child’s subconscious mind, and they may trigger the onset of behavioral disturbances. In the longer term women may suffer feelings of incompleteness, anxiety, depression, chronicity, frigidity, marital conflicts conversion reaction or even psychosis. The wound voices out its story trying to establish a reality or truth which is unavailable to the masses. Due to the narrow presentation of trauma by Freud and the Yale school, pluralistic model developed the trauma theory in wider cultural arenas. Because the current remembrance process is impacted by historical and cultural circumstances that affect narrative recall and generate knowledge of the past, it shifts the attention to the external, cultural variables that influence the meaning of a traumatic experience. The act of returning to the past image or flashbacks prove to be significant in analyzing and uncovering the forgotten wound. Judith Herman describes a survivor’s traumatic condition as “a conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). However, as Stampfl describes the “commonsensical idea that the unspeakable may be merely a phase in the process of traumatization, not its predetermined endpoint”. The pluralistic model focuses on the fact that trauma is representable. The revisionists, who diverge from the classical model either altogether denounce Freud and Lacan or consider certain Freudian and Lacanian theories. The revisionists engage in wider function of trauma and the values attached to it. By considering the plurality of meanings related to trauma proves helpful for both the individual and society. Waris evokes her memory of the event of female circumcision mainly through two people- her friend Marilyn and the journalist who interviews her. Even after undergoing child abuse Dirie deals with it successfully by dismissing any feelings of despair. This is probably due to the fact that her cultural values “create veils of illusion, attempts to mask or reinterpret behaviors that induce trauma” (Vickroy 131). She had the impression of this practice being a universal one and believed that it is a part of every woman’s life until she meets Marilyn in London who later becomes her friend and supports her. The women are misled and made to believe in the necessity of the tradition. “She is coerced and brainwashed into thinking that it will make her a woman in the eyes of her community, her peers, her mother and her future husband” (Wardere146). Marilyn becomes emotionally overwhelmed and starts to cry when Dirie shows her the scars of circumcision. A kind of “traumatic counterference” (Herman 140) takes place because Marilyn being unaware of this practice shows her rage after hearing the story. Probably Marilyn being a woman herself might have suffered to a lesser degree in the past. Although Waris survives the assault, she is incomplete and feels wounded. The process is so dangerous that many girls die due to excessive bleeding, shock and infection. The unsterilized instruments are usually used for the procedure without any anaesthesia endangers girl’s health increasing the risk of infections. While in London, Dirie experiences immense pain due to which she visits a doctor. Being aware of the FGM and its dangers he advises her to get it operated. During this time an African male doctor while translating for Dirie criticizes her and questions her decision to change the norms of culture on her part. He tries to impose a code of silence on her and shows how her culture will never fully accept the actions. Subsequently Dirie leaves the hospital without scheduling an appointment. Even though she is fortunate to get the scar operated, the wound that has traumatized her evokes the fear of going through it once again. “Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event” (Herman 37). Apart from experiencing bodily pain she feels the consequences of her traumatic childhood experience during her entire life. However, with the support of Marilyn with whom Dirie has formed a relationship of trust she chooses to go through the operation. Marilyn’s empathetic attitude also assists in the re- creation of her psychological faculties since the first principle according to Herman for recovery is “based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creations of new connections” (133). After her operation, Dirie feels different and empowered. She is reborn as a complete woman. She starts to think back on the atrocities that she had faced during her childhood. Her life in London also proves to be cumbersome and is not free of struggles. Until she meets Marilyn, Dirie performs all household chores at her relative’s place with whom she was sent. To abandon the practice and prevent it from happening in the future she decides to proclaim aloud and sever the barrier of denial of the horrible events. The reporter sent to interview Waris Dirie asks her about the day that changed her life. Before becoming a supermodel Waris was a Somalian nomad who fled from her home to avoid the marriage with a lot older man in exchange of a bride price. After struggling in London for many years and while cleaning the floors she is discovered by photographer Terence Donovan and goes on to become a supermodel. To the reporter’s surprise Waris narrates her history as a victim of female genital mutilation. Waris reconstructs her traumatic memory of childhood and “She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. . . so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (Herman 175). She explains how after being circumcised she is inflicted by “double wound” on both body and mind:

the wound of the mind- the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, . .

. . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 4)

The day that changed her life presents a harrowing experience when she was forced to submit to the cleaning ritual and became a victim of circumcision at the age of five. A gypsy woman performed the circumcision on her with a broken razor blade on a solid rock. Then the gypsy woman sews her up with the thorns which infected her wound. She gives an acutely distressing account- “Only scarring remains where the genitals once were” (“Dirie” 01: 51: 14- 17). Through narration Waris shows her ability to remember and place the event which helps cure her. Though Dirie describes her happy moments with her mother she is also troubled by the fact that she was willingly involved in the unlawful practice to infibulate her daughter. However, Dirie is sympathetic towards her mother because she knows that her mother is a victim of oppressive powers that support it. Her mother’s

selflessness makes her assist Dirie in running away from the clutches of traditional powers. Memories of her poor mother revisit when she familiarizes with the hotel owner in whom she tries to find her mother. Having grown up, her agony of the loss makes her visit the same place where she became the victim and was scarred - "I went back to the rocks once everything was gone" ("Dirie" 01:50:10- 13). After Waris' marriage is fixed with a sixty-year old man she senses the danger and flees to her relatives in Mogadishu, "When abused children note signs of danger, they attempt to protect themselves either by avoiding or by placating the abuser. Runaway attempts are common. . ." (Herman 98). Waris seeks to grapple with the horror of that memory by making it public and recollecting her painful past. After years of silence and becoming a supermodel Waris Dirie breaks the taboo and rebels against the silencing of the mother and girl child. She feels empowered and undertakes the challenge to abolish FGM.

In order to save other girls from going through the same experience, Dirie decides to campaign against FGM and speak about it in the United Nations. However, the process of raising her voice is not easy since the fear of negative reaction from Somalis bothers her. She battles with embarrassment before sharing her experience. Finally, through her narration and speech at United Nations she fixes the experience of "delayed recall". She speaks of her family and her two sisters one of whom bled to death and the other who died during childbirth. Regarding the practice the worrying fact that Dirie highlights is the ritual that believes that an uncircumcised woman is "unclean". She encapsulates her unspoken voice in a powerful statement and admits "Whatever happens on the least of us has the effect on all of us" ("Dirie" 01: 59: 43- 48) which is sufficient to understand the intensity of such a harrowing practice that leaves a deep scar. For the sake of being pure and clean "When I was a child I said I do not want to be a woman. Why when it is so painful, so unhappy?" ("Dirie" 01: 59: 57- 02: 00: 10). Her remembrance of past and her confession can be compared to clinical psychotherapy or talk therapy like the survivors of childhood sexual abuse go through. The re-telling of her extraordinary life story for world-wide consumption emphasizes the expressive aspects of severe circumstances. "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are pre requisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of the individual" (Herman 1). Since Dirie confesses her own story, she can be said to be healing from her own trauma of childhood. Cultural values prevent Dirie to get her scar operated on the very first day of her visit to the hospital and African male's unacceptability is an indication that her step is unwelcomed. She however preserves hope "The environment of social relations and cultural values can be a source of trauma or a force that silences victims of out of denial and guilt" (Vickroy 131). Dirie's experiences are assimilated through flashbacks:

Because traumatic events are unbearable in their horror and intensity, they often exist as memories that are not immediately recognizable as truth. Such experiences are best understood not only through straightforward acquisition of facts but through a process of discovering where and why conscious understanding and memory fail. Waris Dirie in her book *Desert Children* describes about her campaign against female genital mutilation in Europe and the difficulties the immigrant women go through in western countries. It contains the interviews of women who have endured FGM. Encouraged by Dirie's initiation to fight against it they speak the unspeakable in their own words by telling the devastating physical and psychological effects of it. Some of the interviewees were very young when they went through genital mutilation and it has now turned out to be a nightmare for them. Kadi who was circumcised when she was four years old shares her experience:

When it came to my turn it was done on a trip back to Mali with my mother, in a bush, far away from my father's village. I remember they hurt me a lot. But I only had vague memories and wasn't sure what had been done until I saw pictures of another case and I read the text. Then I understood. It shocked me. (Dirie 20)

Since the topic is considered a taboo Kadia could not go talk to anybody about it. What is more astonishing is the fact that most often it is carried out in unsterile surroundings with the girl forcibly restrained and cut with rudimentary instruments. Waris was fortunate to overcome her fear but there are women who are on their own and in dire need of support. There is a new challenge that Waris senses which immigrant circumcised women in Europe go through. They have to "live in two separate worlds: the African world of their parents and the European world they were born into and in which they grew up" (Dirie 22). According to an article published in 2018 by the European Institute for Gender Equality a strong legal framework is important for the prevention of female genital mutilation. "Awareness campaigns are the other crucial element to end female genital mutilation. Although the government takes the possible steps, affected women still live in the midst of a dominant discourse. Waris herself recalls the day when her books were exhibited in Austria. It came as a shock to her after witnessing the poster that was put up at one of the stalls where donations for her Somalia project were being collected. It bore a photo of a circumcision taking place with big letters on it: *Come and meet circumcision victim*. She says "As victims of FGM we are not shown such sensitivity. People point at us, calling the societies we come from barbaric and backward, but at the same time they seem unaware just how barbarically we are treated here in Europe" (Dirie 26). Being marginalized, there is little space for understanding these communities of women as critical communities with agency. In order to build up equitable social relations among women across borders and cultural contexts there is a need to discard essentialist binaries like First World/ Third World constructs. A crucial understanding of women's socio-political situation can prove to be a key factor in treating the issue of circumcision. In her article "Under Western Eyes", Mohanty argues that western feminists construct a monolithic identity of African women in the discourses surrounding female genital mutilation. According to her the representation of "third world woman" is constituted as a "coherent group, (thus) sexual difference becomes conterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it, and people who do not" (Mohanty 73). To get rid of the practice it is necessary that the women should be educated who in turn can carry the message to other women.

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## CONCLUSION

In order to give voice to the voiceless Waris acts as an agent to admonish the institutions which carry the operation of FGM. There is "the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of „normalcy" and to testify to the people the truth of their experience" (Tal 120). The desire to give meaning to her survival provides the strength to work against the enactment of the same in the future. Dirie's constant reminder of the event of what she has experienced as a child can be seen as the repetitive nature of trauma. She never clearly indicates that the practice has proven traumatizing for her. She tries to recover from the fractured sense of self by reconstructing her experience of trauma and tries to give a universal theory of moral order. Trauma theory provides a wide perception of intrusive memories that the human mind suffers from the traumatizing effects. Desert Flower is an appropriate example of how can the telling of event act as a cure and means of empowerment for the individual.

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