



A Study on Female Genital Mutilation in select Novels of *Alice Walker* and *Waris Dirie* through Trauma Theory

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ABSTRACT:

Female Genital Mutilation is a harmful practice in Africa and several countries, which is practiced on women at a young age. The concept behind this practice is to protect the girl child in the community before marriage. This activity is highly traumatic for children, because of the post-traumatic stress disorder; the children are turned into victims of mental Trauma. This paper presents the solution to Trauma recovery for the victims. The practice is done at a young age without the concern of children, so the child is afflicted with physical hardship. This paper incorporates Judith Herman's healing theory to facilitate a trauma recovery solution. Applying this theory, a survivor's traumatic experience will undergo healing through a five-stage framework. This paper will be beneficial for the victims, who are undergoing a mental block due to the practice of Female Genital Mutilation.

Keywords: Female Genital Mutilation, Trauma healing, Cultural practices, Female circumcision, post-traumatic stress disorder.

Introduction:

Trauma studies have become a focal point in contemporary literary analysis, because the globe is confronting numerous challenges. Trauma can manifest in multiple ways within relational dynamics, nightmares, DNA, and global crises like ongoing wars. The present study is based on the practices of FGM, the trauma of the victims and healing. The selected literary works are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *Warrior Marks* and Waris Dirie's *Desert Children*, *Saving Safa*, and *Desert Flower*.

Research studies frequently focus on the trauma experienced by victims, often overlooking aspects of their healing process. For instance, the article by Salma M Abdalla and Sandro Galea discusses the adverse mental health of the individual affected; however, it does not constitute a healing "This review provides a comprehensive summary of the existing literature on the adverse mental health consequences of FGM/C" (Abdalla and Galea 10).

Furthermore, the study by Alice Behrendt and Steffen Moritz emphasizes the importance of post-traumatic stress disorder and the eradication of trauma through Female Genital Mutilation. Despite its findings, it doesn't deliver a healing solution. "The result of this study indicates that female genital mutilation is likely to cause various emotional disturbances, forging the way to psychiatric disorders, especially PTSD" (Behrendt and Moritz 1001). This study also provides a strong argument for the provision of culturally grounded knowledge that can contribute to the eradication of Female Genital Mutilation.

The systematic review of Christos Iavazzo, Thalia A. Sardi, Ioannis D. Gkegkes emphasizes the importance of eradicating the inhumane practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and the diseases caused by the practice but does not address the aspects of healing for survivors. "The findings of our review indicate that FGM confirm the variety of infections that can occur after the practice of this form of mutilation. Furthermore, the presence of complications, both medical and psychological, indicates that more efforts are required to eliminate this ancient practice" (Iavazzo et al.). While existing literature in trauma studies predominantly focuses on the trauma itself, this article aims to shift the discourse towards exploring the healing process. The primary focus of this paper is to analyze the representation of Female Genital Mutilation in the selected novels of Alice Walker and Waris Dirie, incorporating with trauma theory of Judith Herman's trauma theory, which explores five healing stages to examine the trauma and healing portrayed in narratives.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to literary analysis, exploring how Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is portrayed as a traumatic experience in the selected works. The research is situated within the framework of trauma theory, utilizing narrative analysis as the primary method of textual interpretation.

Theoretical framework:

Trauma theory underpins the analytic approach of this study. Judith Herman's trauma theory emphasizes the process of recovery for survivors, with the dimension of healing explored in depth in her works *Trauma and Recovery* and *Truth and Repair*. *Trauma and Recovery* outlines the three key stages of healing - safety and stabilization, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection and integration. *Truth and Repair* expands the recovery process by emphasizing the role of justice in healing. The primary source of the research is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *Warrior Marks*. Waris Dirie's novels are *Desert Flower*, *Desert Children*, and *Saving Safa*.

Discussion:

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a culturally embedded practice performed on girls at a young age within certain communities. The rationale often cited behind this practice is the belief that it protects the girl child by preserving her purity before marriage, preventing premarital sexual activity, and illicit relationships, and, in some cases safeguarding her from sexual violence. "Female Genital Mutilation is in many communities believed to reduce a woman's libidos and therefore believed to help her resist illicit sexual acts" (World Health Organization). The cultural significance of these practices is that religious leaders or midwives will implement the procedure for the rituals. The practices will be partial or removal of the private parts of the child, and thorns will stitch the wound. "The wound is served with crude instruments such as thorns" (Klein et al. 2). Due to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), children often experience significant psychological distress, manifesting in various trauma-related symptoms. Furthermore, the profound pain, emotional suffering, and sense of betrayal often inflicted by trusted family members compel children subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) to endure psychological trauma, including symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "Additionally positive associations between FGM and psychiatric sequelae that includes flashbacks, psychiatric disorders, anxiety disorders and PTSD were reported" (Klein et al. 4).

Undergoing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) constitutes a traumatic experience that can lead to significant psychological complications. Freud's reference to the vagina dentata symbolizes mythic and psychoanalytic fears of female dominance. In some communities, such fears are echoed in the belief that the absence of circumcision could empower women, thereby reinforcing traditional anxieties surrounding unchecked female sexuality. "The old belief that if uncut, the vagina will swallow the penis is reminiscent of Freud's concept of the vagina dentata" (Diallo 85). Women have been subjected to Female Circumcision because of prevailing cultural fears "Although the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful" (Walker, *Color Purple* 170). Women and children do not willingly accept the rituals; rather, it is the coercive nature of cultural practices and the underlying reality of male dominance that compel them to undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). "At first she merely spoke about the strange compulsion she sometimes experienced of wanting to mutilate herself" (Walker, *Possessing* 49). These are some of the critical reflections on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as explored in Alice Walker's work.

The following reflections from Waris Dirie's works reveal her evolving thoughts on the practice of FGM, shaped by personal pain, cultural conflict, and a commitment to protecting future generations. The continuation of FGM is often perpetuated by those who carry out the practice without fully knowing or questioning the rationale behind it. To demonstrate, "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. But the actual details of the ritual cutting are left a mystery-it's never explained to the girls" (Dirie, *Desert Flower* 37-38). To preserve family honor and social status, fear of social exclusion, economic factors, lack of awareness, tradition, and customs they are practicing such harmful practices without knowing the consequences. "The procedure just gets carried out because that's the way it's always been done, no one thinks about the consequences"(Dirie, *Desert children* 2). The uncircumcised child is considered a curse for the family "Maman and papa also argue because of me and maman cries a lot, Safa is a disgrace, she is not circumcised! (Dirie *Saving saf* 6). Because of deeply rooted cultural traditions, social pressure, expectations around marriageability and sexual control, religious misinterpretations, lack of education, and economic dependence, many women are forced to undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). As a result, countless girls and women suffer long-lasting physical and psychological trauma. To support these victims, it is essential to provide access to medical care, psychological counseling, legal protection, education, and community-based advocacy aimed at ending the practice and empowering survivors.

To this end, Judith Herman's trauma recovery theory offers a structured and compassionate framework that can help survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) gradually overcome their trauma by guiding them through the stages of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with everyday life, which she discussed in *Trauma and Recovery*. In line with Judith Herman's trauma recovery theory, supporting FGM survivors requires a multi-stage approach, first ensuring their physical and emotional Safety through medical care and protection then facilitating Remembrance and Mourning through trauma-informed psychological counseling and ultimately promoting Reconnection by providing education, legal empowerment, and community-based advocacy to help survivors reclaim their lives and challenges the continuation of the practice. She also added on the Justice, where she discussed that the recovery process for trauma survivors does not end with safety, remembrance, and reconnection but Judith Herman emphasizes in *Truth and Repair* that survivors must also be given the space to seek and envision justice. True healing requires not only personal restoration but also societal acknowledgment, accountability, and the opportunity to repair the harm through survivor-centered justice. Likewise, the healing journeys of FGM victims depicted in novels can be understood through the lens of Judith Herman's trauma recovery theory, which provides a structured framework for recovery through the stages of safety, remembrance, and mourning and reconnection and envision justice with life and society.

FGM survivors such as Tashi, Dura, M'lissa, Waris Dirie, Aman, Khadiatu, Safa Nour, and numerous real-life individuals depicted in *Warrior Marks* exemplify the profound psychological and physical trauma caused by the practice. Their journeys toward healing can be meaningfully understood through Judith Herman's trauma recovery model, which emphasizes the stages of establishing safety, processing traumatic memories through remembrance and mourning, and ultimately achieving reconnection with the self and society. However, as Judith Herman further argues in *Truth and Repair*, true recovery also requires a pursuit of justice, where survivors are not only healed individually but are also acknowledged collectively through truth-telling, accountability, and social repair.

Conclusion:

As highlighted in the preceding discussion, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a deeply harmful practice that inflicts profound psychological and physical trauma on girls and women. Through the lens of literature and trauma theory, Judith Herman's model of recovery discussed the trauma healing of the victims and survivors. Survivors' journey, both fictional and real, underscore the necessity of a holistic healing process that includes not just personal recovery but also societal acknowledgment and justice. Many victims undergo this practice without fully understanding why it is being done to them, trapped in traditions that are rarely questioned. By shedding light on these experiences through academic discussion and personal testimony, this paper aims to raise awareness, challenge harmful cultural norms, and spark meaningful change within communities. In promoting healing and justice, we create the conditions for more voices like Waris Dirie's, to emerge voices that inspire resistance, resilience, and hope for a future free from such violence.

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