

Unmuting Maimed Voices: Desert Flower

Ms. Pooja Halyal
Assistant Professor,
Department of Studies in English,
Rani Channamma University,
Belagavi -591156,
Karnataka State.
Email Id: skpoojabgm@yahoo.co.in
Mob: 9964505798

Abstract

This paper is about an autobiography of Waris Dirie, a Somali woman titled *Desert Flower*. Although this text is classified as autobiographical writing, it possesses quite different textuality, structure, terrain, and mode of expression. *Desert Flower* basically reads like the story of 'rags to riches' as it is an account of the various hardships experienced by Waris right from her childhood in her small village in Somalia till her success of becoming an international supermodel and human rights ambassador for the United Nations. The telling of her personal story also mirrors the life, culture, values, rituals, customs and beliefs of the African tribe, of which she is a part, but chooses to escape from its clutches to live her life differently. In fact, the book from being her personal life story turns out to document the horrific practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), of which Waris herself is also a victim. In the unraveling of how the circumcision leaves her mutilated all through her life inhibiting her from experiencing simple pleasures of life, she unveils to the world the horrendous traditional practice which is in practice even today in certain tribes, even in 21st century when we talk about 'my body my choice' in the era of post-feminisms. Her narrative emerges primarily as a lament for her people's traditional blind faith in the FGM. Waris' own personal history becomes a framework to relate the passing of the tribal life and her experience of westernization which awakens on her a keen awareness of the unnecessary pain and trauma inflicted on the women community of her tribe. Hence this paper tries to trace the process of unmuting the maimed voices and what it entails as unraveled in the aboriginal autobiography.

Key Words: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), circumcision, post-feminism

Introduction

“I wanted the people who promote this torture to hear what it feels like from at least one woman, because all the females in my country are silenced.” (P.215)

The above statement of Waris Dirie brings in perspective all the silenced women of African Countries, who are maimed for life, unable to lead a healthy life and enjoy the pleasures of living. Waris through the unveiling of her deepest hurt due to a traditional practice followed in her tribe, is not just telling her own story, but is representing the heinous crime committed by Patriarchy on women of twenty eight African countries. It is the strength of her voice and the commitment to unhesitatingly bring to light the most inhuman practice of FGM and the agonizing repercussions of it for the women all through their lives which makes *Desert Flower*, ‘an autobiography with a difference’. It solidly falls in line with those books written with a definite social cause intending strongly to alleviate societal injustices. It reads like a feminist treatise interrogating the misogyny of Patriarchy embedded in the practice successfully making FGM a Human Rights issue, from being merely perceived as yet another customary practice with religious sanctions that is better left to be negotiated within the community.

Among the many restrictive practices in the world on women like on widows, child marriage, sati, prevention of access to education and other resources, owning property, economic enslavement, forced prostitution, dowry, rape, acid attacks, women trafficking, female feticide and infanticide, glass ceilings, sexual harassment at work place, molestation in public spaces, and several gender discriminative practices, FGM comes as the most heinous of tortures inflicted on women. The UNICEF reveals that “the exact number of girls and women worldwide who have undergone FGM remains unknown; at least 200 million girls and women have been cut in 30 countries with representative data on prevalence. However, the majority of girls and women in most countries with available data think FGM should end and there has been an overall decline in the prevalence of the practice over the last three decades, but not all countries have made progress and the pace of decline has been uneven. Our Country India too which boasts of an equitable Constitution is not exempt from this heinous practice. Female genital mutilation (FGM) in India is known as khatna or khafz prevalently practiced in the Muslim Bohra community and does not have any laws banning it. The United Nations has declared female genital mutilation a human rights violation, and yet, the act is not banned in India and many other countries, which speaks of the lack of initiative to rectify the crime against women.

However when the reasons for FGM are explored, it is obvious that the underlying intention is almost the same as in other social evils pertaining to women that of a male obsession of keeping the female body and soul under its control and establishing its ownership on the women. Along with the animals, land and other properties, women too are considered as possessions, which should remain un-tampered, pristinely pure, completely domesticated willfully surrendering their wish and will to the dictates and fancies of the masters who own them. The root cause of FGM as it stands revealed in the autobiography is the importance attached to the virginity of women, inscribing the demand of complete sexual loyalty of the woman towards the man who marries her. As Waris discloses the traumatic experience of circumcision she underwent at the age of five, still a child oblivious of its body parts with no notions of sexuality, only to be eligible to get married, the intent of the whole practice becomes clear. The FGM is to seal up the vagina for any accidental interventions by strangers before the woman is married, thereby assuring that the husband gets an untainted possession to be only his and to further handicap her from gaining any kind of sexual pleasure even in marriage, so that she would never be able to assess sexual pleasures due to her nor have any desires to any other sexual alliances out of wedlock all through her life. This selfish desire of ascertaining women's chastity and marital fidelity comes at the cost of the women's lives, most of the times, with women dying due to infections, bleeding, gangrene or any other diseases because of the total unhygienic butchering of their most sensitive private parts without any scientific procedures or equipments by some gypsy women. Those who survive, however die every day with the permanent discomfort of attending the nature's call, agonizing during monthly cycles which get prolonged, painfully getting ripped open by their husbands and facing near death delivering their babies. The turmoil and anxiety of her painful existence after FGM, has been very sensitively narrated by Waris all through the book interspersing it with her struggle to survive and live her dreams. For instance, she narrates about the traumatic experience of her circumcision that scarred her not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically too. She unhesitatingly lays bare the entire procedure of FGM:

"I Peered between my legs and saw the gypsy woman getting ready..... she fished out a broken razor blade..... I saw dried blood on the jagged edge of the blade. She spat on it and wiped it against her dress.The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals, being cut away....The killer woman had piled next to her a stack of thorns from an acacia tree. She used these to puncture holes in my skin, then poked a strong

white thread through the holes to sew me up. The pain between my legs was so intense that I wished I would die.” (P. 13-14)

After this gruesome torture of getting her genitals slaughtered in a most crude way, there is a period of utmost pain which the woman is made to suffer alone in a make shift shack under a tree marooned in the desert with no medicine whatsoever till the wound is healed, and many a time the victims bleed to death, with their body rotting with infection producing foul smell. Waris narrates-

“I was lying on the ground close to the rock. My legs were tied together with strips of cloth binding me from my ankles to my hips so that I couldn’t move..... I turned my head toward the rock; it was drenched with blood as if an animal had been slaughtered there. Pieces of my meat, my sex, lay on top, drying undisturbed in the sun.”(P. 43)

Then Waris lays bare the most horrendous experience-

“I thought the agony was over until I had to pee.... The first drop came out and stung as if my skin were being eaten by acid. After the gypsy sewed me up, the only opening left for urine and menstrual blood was a miniscule hole the diameter of a matchstick.....As the urine collected in my bloody wound and slowly trickled down my legs onto the sand- one drop at a time-I began to sob. Even when the killer woman was cutting me to pieces I had never cried, but now it burned so badly I couldn’t take any more” (P. 44)

After enduring fever, infection, isolation for weeks Waris listlessly wonders:

“Why? What was it all for? At that age I didn’t understand anything about sex. All I knew was that I had been *butchered with my mother’s permission*, and I couldn’t understand why.” (P. 44. italics mine)

The above confusion in an innocent mind only reiterates how African tribal women have been enslaved by this tradition, that mothers, the life-givers and protectors of their children, only put their very lives to risk, without voicing any protest or questioning the need for it. The ignorance of their rights to lead a free life entitled to enjoy all the pleasures that living can offer, which is nurtured by the tough and restrictive poverty stricken life that these women are subjected to is often the culprit. Again it is not just the women; the men too are obsessed with the chastity of the girls. In an instance that Waris narrates we see how Waris’ father chases the man who attempts to molest another daughter Fauziya and fights with him stabbing him and in turn gets stabbed, and survives the wounds after prolonged illness. Waris subtly highlights the deep sentiments of African men attached to their women’s purity-

“My father always joked with us girls, “You are my queens, my treasures, and I keep you under lock and key. And I’ve got the key.” (P.49)

Brought up in such environment pollen with vicious practice, gender bias and superstition, it is nothing but the daring and strong will power of Waris that capacitates her to shape her life differently in the larger world, when she finds that her father had decided to trade her with a sixty year old man for five camels. The exposure to the life outside Africa makes her realize the injustice done to her and womankind of Africa through FGM. Her awakening of being wronged is very sensitively revealed by Waris, when she opens up her injury to her white friend Marilyn,

“Tears poured down her cheeks as she turned away..... She asks, “Waris, do you feel *anything?*”(P. 146-147)

At this Waris realizes that not all the women in the world have undergone FGM and it is injustice meted out only to a community of women. She confirms it enquiring Marilyn-

“So this hasn’t happened to you, to you and your mother?” (p. 147)

To which Marilyn says-

“It’s horrible, Waris. I can’t believe there are people in the world who would do this to a little girl...I feel sad. Sad and angry. I’m crying in a way because I can’t believe there are people in the world who would do this to a little girl.” (p.147)

It is only then that Waris decides to get a surgery done, so that if not any other feeling at least she could enjoy going to the bathroom, and not endure the torture every time, day after day. However, it’s only after the operation, did she realize the enormity of the problem when Dr. Macrae tells her-

“You know, you’re not alone. Let me tell you, I have women come in here with this same problem all the time. A lot of women from the Sudan, Egypt, Somalia. Some of them are pregnant and they’re terrified because trying to give birth while they are sewn up is dangerous.the baby can suffocate trying to exit the tight opening, or the mother can bleed to death. So, without the permission of their husbands or their family they come to me, and I do my bit. I do my best.” (p. 148)

After having found some solace from her miserable condition, Waris goes on to become a successful supermodel, overcoming all the hurdles on the way with her instincts for survival nurtured very early in her Somalian childhood. However, she does not stop at her comfortable existence but is constantly thinking about the helpless condition of women back at home who live in pathetic conditions, accepting the cruelty they are subjected to mutely in the name of bearing the burden of womanhood. She writes-

“Because of a ritual of ignorance, most of the women on the continent of Africa live their lives in pain. Who is going to help the woman in the desert-like my mother-with no money and power? Somebody must speak out for the little girl with no voice. And since I began as a nomad just like them, I felt it was my destiny to help them.” (p. 213)

Waris then gives an interview to Laura Ziv about her entire traumatic experience of circumcision and the health hazards thereafter, which got printed in the famed magazine *Marie Claire*, under the title “The Tragedy of Female Circumcision.” The horrified readers of the European world were horrified and swamped the magazine with letters of support. With a new confidence Waris then started to publicize the issue and went on to do a segment titled “A Healing Journey,” which was aired in 1997. The United Nations took cognizance of the issue and invited Waris to join as a Special Ambassador of the UN to fight FGM. Thus Waris became the first to set in motion the rectification of injustice meted out to African women since four thousand years. Like Taslima Nasrin, Arundathi Roy, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Malala Yousafzai and many strong women, Waris has not hesitated to risk her life in stating the truth, She confesses towards the end of her autobiography thus-

“Many of my friends have expressed concern that a religious fanatic will try to kill me when I go to Africa. After all I’ll be speaking out against a crime many fundamentalists consider a holy practice.” (P.220)

However Waris with immense faith in God confesses that it was a sheer miracle of God that she survived from the mouth of a hungry lion in Somalia going on to kiss success; achieve fame and honour in her life. Hence God had a mission set for her and she will definitely fulfill it.

Thus *Desert Flower* is an autobiography unraveling the interior of not just the landscape of Somalia but the mindscape of a Somali woman drawing forth the bitter truth about the inhuman ritual of female circumcision, that was relentlessly being practiced in almost twenty eight countries of Africa. The narrative reads like a fictitious story of a woman in a dreamland achieving the most desirable things after magically overcoming all the obstacles thrown in the way. But, a closer reading would only unravel the strength of Waris’ personality, her daring, survival tactics, sheer determination, will power, risk taking, eagerness to learn and improve, honesty, positivity, friendliness and capacity to struggle against odds, work hard in all circumstances, all of which and her immense faith in God lead her to achieve almost a dream success. The text is definitely a loud call to stop this violence

against half the population sensitizing in clear terms the mankind, the cruelty unleashed on the women and the suffering and captivity of their bodies and minds enforced.

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