



A STUDY ON THE HARDSHIP OF SOMALI NOMAD WOMEN AS DEPICTED IN WARIS DIRIE'S *DESERT FLOWER*

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Abstract

Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower* is an autobiographical novel which not only focuses on her journey from being a nomad woman to a famous model, but there are many other aspects of women suffering in the Somali desert. The novel depicts the difficulties of nomads in Somali desert; everyone works equally for their survival. Despite working equally with the men, the Somali nomad women are subjugated at various levels. Without taking their sentiments, pain, and suffering into consideration, they are imposed with different decisions. The women go through extreme physical pain in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) but they hardly express it openly. It is through *Desert Flower*, Waris Dirie has been able to speak freely about the extreme pain she suffered as a result of mutilation. Her novel shows how a large number of girls die every year because of FGM and still, it is practiced among the people in Somalia. In her novel, she shows how Somali nomad women suffer in the name of culture and tradition; how they are deprived of their authority to choose their life partner and how they have to tolerate their pain silently. Since this is an autobiographical novel, the details given are assumed to be true and real.

Index terms: the suffering of women, Female Genital Mutilation, cultural tradition, subjugation of women

1. Introduction

Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower* has brought into light many issues which are not openly discussed in a society like Somalia desert, to which she belongs. The hardship of women is seen in every society and one can easily relate to this. But, this novel has shown a different kind of suffering where women: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is something that one can never realize without going through it or listening to it from the person who undergoes it. Waris Dirie has openly stated her condition when she was mutilated. Considering FGM either as a social norm or a religious practice, people from Somalia practice it believing that it will ensure a proper marriage, chastity, beauty, or family honor. The practice has become such a powerful social norm that even after knowing the harmful effects, the families allow their daughters to get mutilated. If the families dare to stop this practice they would run out of any good suitors for their daughters.

1.1 Methodology

The methodology adopted in this paper is purely textual analysis of the selected text focusing on the aspect of "hardship" of Somali nomad women from the feminist perspective. This paper will be focusing on different issues related to suffering of Somali nomad women as depicted in the selected text, *Desert Flower*.

2. Discussion

In Somalia, women are born and brought up in such a society where they are subjugated at different levels; to make them perfect for a good suitor they are circumcised without letting them know the fact.

"...there are bad things between 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 been. But the actual details of the ritual cutting are left a mystery-it's never explained to the girls" (Dirie, 2011, p.37).

The way of thinking depends on the society one lives in. Women are compelled to consider their bodies and bodily activities negatively as a result of being embedded in a hostile patriarchal society. Due to lack of education and the restriction to discuss it openly, they are not aware of the reason of being circumcised and its consequences. From a very tender age, girls are told FGM is something very special. Because of the extra care and treatment given to the girls before the FGM is done, they consider it to be very exciting and they eagerly wait for it.

"...female circumcision has been performed on younger and younger girls, partially due to pressure from the girls themselves, since they eagerly await their "special time" as a child in the West might await her birthday party, Santa Claus' s arrival on Christmas Eve" (Dirie, 2011, p.38).

Due to FGM, women suffer from extreme pain not even realizing the reason behind it. They consider that there is no solution to this agony because it happens with each girl like a normal thing. To stop the pain Dirie visited many doctors. Most of them provided her with birth-control tablets as a pain killer. It is Dr. Macrae to whom she disclosed the fact of circumcision and gets rid of her pain. Dirie's visit to Dr. Macrae brings many facts to light. The doctor reveals:

“...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 Sudan, Egypt, Somalia. Some of them are pregnant and they’re terrified because trying to give birth while they’re sewn up is dangerous. There can be a lot of complications-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”(Dirie, 2011, p.148).

Through the process of FGM, girls are made self-conscious about their womanhood. But, this deadly FGM brings deaths to many families; every year many girls die due to FGM. Dirie’s elder sister Halemo dies because of this circumcision. Dirie has given a detailed description of her suffering after mutilation. For a good many days, she was not able to sit, sleep or eat properly because of terrible pain. Though the scar got healed yet it had its after-effects. Majority of the girls in rural areas of Somalia perform FGM without any form of anesthesia or analgesia using non-sterile instruments like razor, blade, scissors or broken glass. The consequent effect of FGM is severe fever, severe pain, and difficulty in passing urine, severe bleeding and infections. Apart from these problems there are also long-term consequences such as prolonged labor, obstruction, episiotomies and perineal tears, postpartum hemorrhage, maternal and fetal death.

A study investigating 28,393 women attending 28 obstetric centers in several African countries conclude that women with FGM/C are significantly more likely than intact women to have adverse obstetric outcomes such as a caesarean section, postpartum haemorrhage, extended maternal hospital stay, infant resuscitation, stillbirth, or early neonatal death and low birth weight. FGM is estimated to lead to an extra one to two perinatal deaths per 100 deliveries (Muteshi et al, 2016).

The autobiography has shown how the nomad women irrespective of age, despite suffering excessive pain, works equally with the men. Among the nomads in Somalia, people increase the number of children and wives to ease the workload. The women make portable huts woven with grass, milk the animals, graze them and take care of the children and the household chores. Not only in Somalia, but all over the world, women are often told that the home is the domain of women. They are solely responsible for household chores irrespective of whether they work outside or inside. They are responsible for feeding the family either by purchasing food, preparing it, or compromising their food during the period of food crisis (Choudhary and Parthasarthy, 2007). The children are trained to do their duties from a very tender age. Dirie was six years old when she was given the responsibility to take herds of about sixty or seventy sheep and goats into the desert to graze. Every day her first work was to milk the animals and take them for grazing. Her childhood was lost among all these responsibilities. One day, when Dirie was nine years old her father gave the chore of watering the camels. During that time because of political turmoil, the armies camped at different places of Somalia and sometimes they tend to trouble the women. Despite knowing it, Dirie was courageous enough to travel alone with the camels and return home safely. Though women are given an equal place in the field of physical labor, their choices and sentiments are never taken into consideration. They are sealed so that they can never have any sexual relations without getting married and also they are not even allowed to marry a man of their choice.

The concept of marriage is different among the nomads of Somalia. Marriage is considered to be a bond between two persons and two families, but for these nomads, marriage is a “deal” or a “business”, where the woman is always at a loss. As Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, “Marriage is always been presented in radically different ways for men and for women. The two sexes are necessary for each other, but this necessity has never fostered reciprocity; women have never constituted a caste establishing exchanges and contracts on an equal footing with men” (Beauvoir, 2011, p.502-503). A deal or a business can never be fruitful when the other party is always at loss. Since the party in loss is always women, they are supposed to remain silent and follow the deal. A man can have multiple wives, but a woman cannot marry a man of her choice. When Dirie’s mother finds it difficult to finish the works alone, her father brings a new wife of tender age to help him out in his work. Dirie herself was about to be a part of such “deals”; her father has chosen a suitor of sixty years for her as he is ready to give five camels as a bride price. For him what matters is the price, not Dirie’s happiness. When Dirie opposes his proposal, he replies,

“That’s the best kind darling! He’s too old to run around, chasing after other women, bringing home other wives. He’s not going to leave you—he’ll look after you. And besides...do you know how much he’s paying for you? FIVE camels! He’s giving me FIVE camels. I’m so proud of you”(Dirie, 2011, p.54).

Even after starving for many days and nights, Dirie had never decided to leave home and get rid of all her family troubles. But her father’s decision of getting her married to an old man breaks her down and compels her to leave her home and family. Being a victim of such a —deal, her mother also could understand her daughter’s feelings and supports her to run away from home. “Go—go before he wakes up...You are going to be all right- don’t you worry about that. You just be very careful. Careful!...And Waris...please, one thing. Don’t forget me”(Dirie, 2011, p.57).

It was not easy for Dirie to come out from all such restrictions and make an identity as a famous model. Being a nomad woman she has seen and experienced the oppressive life in Somalia and her experiences have made her strong to deal with any kind of situation. In the desert, she never had any past or future, what mattered was the present. In Somalia, the nomads lived the way their ancestors had been living for thousands of years. They do not waste time talking about the past or planning for the future. Their only work is to take care of the animals and the daily household chores. She never knew the world outside the desert; she did not know the value of time, not even her age. The babies born in their desert hardly survive therefore no importance was given to the tracking of birthdays. After she gets exposed to the world outside her desert she enjoys her newfound freedom. Her only goal was to “never to be sent back home”.

“There was no point in turning back now, however; it would simply mean I had gone through all the hardships of the past few months for nothing. If I went back home, a month wouldn’t pass before my father started dragging around every lame, decrepit fool in the desert who owned a camel, trying to marry me off”(Dirie, 2011, p.75).

She never went in search of modeling it is her destiny that gave her the scope to make an identity of her own. While working at McDonald's and learning the ways of life in London, she got her first proposal to be a

model. Her second proposal comes from —Pirelli calendar. This was the start of her journey to be a famous model. Waris Dirie, a girl who hardly knew how to speak and write in English was given the golden opportunity to try her luck. She did not even have a valid passport to travel for which she was about to be fired, but being a brave lady she arranges a fake passport in the name of Marilyn Monroe and flies to Morocco for her first movie “The Living Daylights”. She had to arrange two fake marriages to get a valid passport. Though the first one was a fraud, her second fake marriage with Nigel gave her a valid passport. Both these marriages brought lots of troubles. But the idea of never returning to Somalia and the zeal of securing her career as a model kept her motivated and stay strong to deal with all these problems. She becomes a successful model with different titles “A nomad from Somalia becoming a Revlon model”; “the first black model to be featured in ads for Oil of Olay” and so on. Though she made name and fame across countries, her identity of being a nomad made her write this novel. Dirie wanted to make people know what is happening in the desert of Somalia therefore she decided to sit for an interview with the writer of the fashion magazine, *Marie Claire*. She knew that people might criticize her for openly discussing their ancient social and cultural traditions but she decides to talk about it for the things like circumcision bothers her deeply and makes her feel incomplete. When her interview “The Tragedy of Female Circumcision” came out, she got support from many different nations which allowed her to become a Special Ambassador and fight for the abolition of female circumcision. As her name suggests, Waris Dirie is a person with extraordinary courage: “Waris means desert flower. The desert flower blooms in a barren environment where few living things can survive” (Dirie,2011, p. 35). In a place like the Somali desert where girls hardly survive or the one who survives hardly gets the chance to go out of the desert, Dirie is courageous enough to denounce her family, her cultural norm and speak against the illegal social and cultural traditions.

3. Conclusion

This paper aims at exploring the difficulties and hardships faced by nomad women in Somalia while primarily focusing on issues like FGM, marriage contracts, and how a simple nomad girl manages to break her ties with her family and so-called cultural norm and raises her voice for the rights of women. Women in the Somali desert as shown in the *Desert Flower* are living in hellish conditions; they are just helping hands to their family without any life or freedom of their own. The women are suffering more or less in every part of the world therefore, necessary steps should be taken by them to fight for their rights and break all those practices which are baseless. Like Waris Dirie, there might be thousands of girls or women suffering in the desert of Somalia or in any other place without any option, but to suffer and accept their fate.

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