

The Cut that Scars: Exploring Female Genital Mutilation in Somalia with Reference to Select Texts

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Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is termed as a horrendous practice that causes harm to the female genital organs. Tracing its roots before the arrival of Abrahamic religions, the ritual that was originally a part of Africa has crossed boundaries and is practiced around the globe. With more than 3 million girls cut every year, United Nations has declared FGM as a ritual that needs to be curbed. Somalia is one country where the incidence of genital mutilation and its aftermath is very high. Most women in Somalia undergo the ritual of cut to purify themselves. This paper looks into “type three cutting” (infibulation) in Somalia with the help of three works written by Somali authors-Hibo Wardere, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Waris Dirie.

Keywords: Female Genital Mutilation, Tradition, Somali Writers, Violence.

Introduction

Among the many gender violations, Female Genital Mutilation is a bodily violence that has existed from the pharaonic times to date. According to the United Nations, (UN) Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) also known as Female Circumcision (FC) involves all the practices that cause external injuries to the female genital organs in the name of religion, culture and tradition. It is an ancient ceremony that violates essential aspects of women’s and children rights. As Alice Walker wrote in *Warrior Marks*, “Clearly, female genital mutilation is a painful, complex, and difficult issue, which involves questions of cultural and national identities, sexuality, human rights, and the rights of women and girls to live safe and healthy lives.”¹

In most cases, FGM is done from around three years to fourteen years. For better understanding the World Health Organisation has classified FGM into four divisions; type 1, type 2, type 3 and type 4.

Type 1, known as ‘cliterodectomy’ is the mildest form of the four and involves partial or total removal of the clitoral hood or the clitoris.

Type 2 called as ‘excision’ is the partial or total

removal of the labia minora, with or without removal of the clitoris and labia majora.

Type 3 also called as ‘infibulation’ is the most painful and horrific type of FGM. It involves the removal of the external genitalia as well as the sealing of the wound. Infibulation is also the most complicated type of cutting as only a miniscule opening is left to allow the flow of urine and menstrual blood. Scars are formed due to infibulations and for a scar to form; the legs of the victims are tied together for around two to six weeks.

Type 4 involves all harmful procedures to the female genitals for non- medical practices. These include; perforating, piercing, slitting, scraping and cauterization.

With a long evolved history, genital mutilation has emerged as a social norm that is quite challenging to be stopped suddenly. Even today, many countries especially the African Nations continue to practice this horrendous tradition. Though efforts to eliminate the practice have been happening for decades, the number of women and children subjected to this remain at large.

The attempt of this paper is to look into type three of genital mutilation also called as infibulation that occurs in Somalia with the help of works written by Somali

female writers Hibo Wardere, Waris Dirie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Methodology

Even after multiple attempts to ban Female genital mutilation in Somalia, the country still has one of the highest incidences of women having been cut. According to Thomson Reuters Foundation's research article; *Somalia: The Law and FGM*, there is still no law that punishes the practices of FGM. "The Constitution of Somalia (2012) state at Article 15 that: Circumcision of girls is a cruel and degrading customary practice, and is tantamount to torture. The circumcision of girls is prohibited. Article 29(2) further provides, 'Every child has the right to be protected from mistreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation'. Lack of education and tradition oriented thinking remains the main reason for the practice continuing among the Somalis.

Egyptian writer and women's activist Nawal El Saasawi in her work *The Hidden Face of Eve* wrote, 'The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice...Behind circumcision lies the belief, by removing parts of girl's external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized'.

Somali writer, Hibo Wardere in her work *Cut: One woman's fight against FGM in Britain today*, describes the torture she has been through. The cutting transforms Wardere into a new person and her relationship with her mother deteriorates. Like most in her tribe, she was cut in the presence of her mother and two other women. She quotes the ordeal as follows: "Then, with those long pincer nails, she dug between my legs and grasped my clitoris, my kintir...she lifted up that dirty razor, the one that still had the dried brown residue of other's blood clinging to it, like filthy reminders of her previous work, and she cut straight through my flesh". With no proper laws to curb the ritual, the story of Wardere remains the same for almost all Somali girls.

Waris Dirie is a Somali model and activist who endured the 'becoming a woman ceremony' at the age of five. As she belonged to a family of shepherds, unlike Wardere, she was cut by a gypsy woman under the shade of a tree on a flat rock with an old broken razor and was tied from hip to toes for the wounds to heal. In *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad*, Dirie write,

When the ties that bound me were removed from my legs, I was able to look at myself for the first time. I discovered a patch of skin completely smooth except for a scar down the middle like a zipper. And that zipper was definitely closed. My genitals were sealed up like a brick wall that no man would be able to penetrate until my wedding night, when my husband would either cut me open with a knife or force his way in .

Marriage was seen as the main reason for most girls being subjected to circumcision. A virgin woman always fetched higher price in the marriage market. Dirie's father agreed her marriage to a man in his 60's for five camels. To a family that herded sheep's, five camels were indeed a hefty prize.

Another Somali activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali also has the same story line like Wardere and Dirie. In her work *Infidel: My Life*, we see a similar pattern. She was cut in the vicinity of her home along with her brother and sister with a pair of scissors. Ayaan describes how the torture was more severe to her younger sister Haweya who was four at the time of her cutting. As a result of her cries and struggle, Haweya had to be stitched twice and the author mentions that her little sister was not the same anymore. "Haweya was never the same afterward. She became ill with a fever for several weeks and lost a lot of weight. She had horrible nightmares, and during the day began stomping off to be alone. My once cheerful, playful little sister changed".

Results and Discussion

Traced to pharaonic rituals, FGM is often imbibed without knowing the real reason behind the procedure. As a result over the years this became a normative tradition and continues to do so. The concept of FGM in many cultures resonated with purity. As how her mother tells Wardere, "We are a family whose girls are known for our virginity. We are clean, and that means we can marry well, and you will stay pure until you get married to your husband". This was the notion of most mothers who had their daughters cut. The article *Somalia: The Law and FGM*, mentions that with the law of Somalia still in favour of FGM, countries sharing their borders with Somalia take their child to be cut in the country. "It is also suggested that many Somali women and girls from the Western diaspora (for example, in the USA, Australia, the UK and other European countries) are taken to Somalia for FGM because there is no risk of prosecution".

The issue takes a wider stage when it is understood that the cutting is not just limited to African countries. ⁴According to Wardere (189), in 2001 around 66,000 women between the age of fifteen to forty nine living in England and Wales were cut. Taking cues from African nations, genital mutilation started to spread even to educated communities. Mothers often took their daughters to cut in order to preserve virginity and stop masturbation.

In table 1 below, the type 3 cutting that had to be endured by all three writers have been analyzed. With unfavorable settings and unsterilized tools, it is often a miracle that they survived. Waris Dirie and Hibo Wardere

had recuperated surgery done on them to minimize the damage that was done on their bodies. Even though it had little to do with sexual pleasure, the surgery helped them to urinate better.

14 questions are looked upon in table 1.

✓ Denotes YES

✗ Denotes NO

Some questions have answers in words while for some questions the data was not available and hence, NO MENTION is given.

Table 1: Examining Type 3 cutting that was performed on Hibo Wardere, Waris Dirie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali

	Analysis of Infibulation	HIBO WARDERE	WARIS DIRIE	AYYAN HIRSI ALI
1	Age when cut	6	5	5
2	Were women present during the procedure?	✓	✓	✓
3	Was the circumciser a woman?	✓	✓	✗
4	Were men present during the procedure?	✗	✗	✗
5	Was a sterilized tool used?	✗	✗	✓
6	Did the cut take place in a homely surrounding?	✓	✗	✓
7	Did the victim run a fever?	✗	✓	✗
8	Excessive bleeding?	✓	✗	No Mention
9	Thorn or needle used	Thorn	Thorn	Needle
10	Bandaged?	✓	✓	✓
11	Time taken to unbind	10 Days	1 Month	2 Weeks
12	Married	✓	✓	✓
13	Sexual experience	Painful	No Mention	No Mention
14	Recuperate surgery	✓	✓	✓

Socio Cultural Contexts: Located on the eastern part of the African continent, Somalia has a population of 15.64 million of which 73 percent of Somalis live in poverty. Without a proper central government and occurrence of civil wars, the education system of the country has one of the lowest enrollment rates. So, it is often difficult for NGO’s or other organisations to communicate about the practice of FGM with the people. Women seldom talk about the practice and men choose to keep silent. As Dirie says, “The health problems I’ve coped with since my circumcision also plague millions of girls and women throughout the world. 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 no power?”⁵

Tradition is an important factor to most Somali tribes. They seldom part with the beliefs that they hold on to. According to the Egyptian customs, clitoris was a part that grew with age and so to curb its growth it needed to be cut. A cut woman was seen as pure and chaste while an uncut girl was seen as a slut in the society. ⁶Ayaan’s grandmother asks her daughter, “Imagine your daughters ten years from now- who would marry them with long kintirs dangling halfway down their legs?” This was the notion of most mothers and grandmothers; a notion that has been handed down from generations to generations.

Conclusion

With a hole as small as a match stick head left for urine and menstrual blood to pass out, infibulation leaves the victim with lifelong infections, hemorrhage and pains. Childbirth is the most torturous procedure that a woman with type 3 cutting has to go through. Even after several measures taken, FGM continues to be on a high incidence in Somalia. Primary level education should be a very important step towards tacking FGM. Even though it gets difficult to convince elderly women rooted in their tradition about the practice, medical camps organized by people from their same tribe can do wonders that an outside intervention. It's high time that men are informed and they take a stand too. As Saadwai mentions, ³parents see circumcision as a safeguard against the deviations a girl might take.

All through history, the feminine sex had to undergo harsh customs and cruel traditional practices that deprive them of their choices. Female genital mutilation is one such barbaric practice where a female is inhibited and subdued. Not just protests, but a strong mind that can break stereotyped barriers is utmost necessary to put an end to a practice like genital mutilation. Preventing a cut after all, can make a big difference.

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