Mutilated Bodies: A Study of Female Genital Mutilation

Khushi Khandelwal

Independent Researcher
Former PG Student,
Department of English
Central University of Rajasthan

Abstract: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a widespread practice involving cutting, removing, or injuring female genitalia. The practice is performed in some parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and is a violation of women’s rights. This paper examines FGM's causes, effects, and prevalence and analyzes the social and cultural perspectives contributing to its continuation concerning Waris Dirie’s Desert Flower. The paper concludes that FGM should be eradicated, and more efforts should be made to raise awareness about its harmful effects and the benefits of ending the practice.

Keywords: Female Genital Mutilation, Patriarchy, Rituals

1. Introduction

Waris Dirie was born in 1965 and is a Somali model, author, actress, and human rights activist in the fight against FGM. From 1997 to 2003, Waris was a UN special ambassador against female genital mutilation. In 2002 she founded her own organization in Vienna, the Desert Flower Foundation. She has authored Desert Flower (1998), Desert Dawn (2002), Desert Children (2005), Letter to My Mother (2007), Saving Safa (2013), and My Africa - The Journey (2017). Her novel Desert Flower has also been adapted into a movie by BBC.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), FGM refers to all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (WHO, 2020). WHO classifies FGM into four types, depending on the nature and extent of the procedure. In Type 1, also known as clitoridectomy, the clitoral hood, and sometimes part or all of the clitoris are removed. In Type 2 or excision, the clitoris and labia minora are partially or entirely removed, with or without removal of the labia majora. In Type 3 or infibulation, the vaginal opening is narrowed or sealed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora and/or majora, with or without removal of the clitoris. In this type, the vaginal opening is stitched almost wholly. Just a small opening is left to let the menstrual blood and urine pass. This type 3 was done to Waris. “There are bad things between a 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 labia majora are cut off, then the wound is stitched shut, leaving only a scar where our genitals have been. But the actual details of the ritual cutting are left a mystery - it’s never explained to the girls”. (Dirie 37) Type 4 refers to all other procedures involving injury, pricking, piercing, cutting, scraping, or removal of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a cultural practice that reduces women to mere capital for reproduction. The practice is believed to be a rite of passage that marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood. The practice is performed in some parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and is a violation of women’s rights. FGM is also referred to as female circumcision and is carried out for various reasons, including cultural, religious, or social beliefs. However, the practice is dangerous and can lead to many health complications, including mental and physical harm. FGM remains a global concern, with an estimated 200 million girls and women affected worldwide.

2. Reasons and Enforcement of the Practice

Every human society has its rituals, which consequently shape the identity of this section. This barbaric ritual is deeply rooted in gender inequality, and patriarchal societies are highly responsible for the same. Women’s bodies have always been the sites to showcase masculine ‘powers’. Men simply promote and demand FGM since they want to ensure their ownership of female sexuality. Besides, it is a way to police and regulate girls’ virginity. Women are perceived as mere bodies, bereft of any individual identities. In addition to this, by using religion as a tool to create fear, it is claimed that FGM is necessary for spiritual cleanliness. For over four thousand years, African cultures have mutilated their women. Many believe the Koran demands this, as the practice is nearly universal in Muslim countries. There is also a hygiene and aesthetics perspective to this custom. It is believed that the girl who has not undergone this process will have ugly looks and smell bad. To gain social acceptance, this ritual becomes a gateway for females. FGM
is a family’s honor and izzat. Another idea behind this patriarchal custom is that the clitoris threatens the penis. So it has to be removed in order to exercise power over women.

Females (mothers), being the bearers of patriarchal baggage, play an active role while exercising this patriarchal enterprise due to the fear of ostracization of their daughters. FGM is usually initiated and carried out by women. The mothers comply by circumcising their daughters because they fear that the daughter might remain unmarried.

Now the question comes of how this ritual is enforced in society. What happens if a girl does not undergo this ritual? If a girl does not undergo FGM, she is refused by the men as she is perceived to be ineligible for marriage. The practice is done using fear of punishment that would be perpetrated by God or supernatural forces if any girl escapes it. Poems and folksongs celebrate FGM, and the girls who are not cut are criticized for the same. Cultural change becomes necessary in such a context. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer in her seminal work *We All Should Be Feminist*, writes, “Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we must make it our culture.” (Adichie 20)

3. Medical Issues and Real Experience

In rural areas of Somalia, FGM is performed without any medical aid. For circumcision, non-sterile instruments like razors, blades, scissors, broken glass, sharp stones, and, in some regions, teeth are used. The consequent effects of FGM can be multiple, ranging from high fever, difficulty in passing urine, excessive bleeding, urinary infections, damage to the urethra to HIV. Moreover, this fatal ritual can lead to sterility, cysts formation, the pooling of menstrual blood in the abdomen, depression, postpartum hemorrhage, and maternal and fetal death. Waris underwent this at the tender age of six; about her experience, she writes:

“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 minuscule hole the diameter of a matchstick. This brilliant strategy ensured that I could never have sex until I was married, and my husband would be guaranteed he was getting a virgin. 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 could not take any more.” (Dirie 50)

She was left in a special hut for a few weeks, with her legs tightly tied so that the internal and external injuries could heal. During this period, when Waris was living alone in the hut, her genitals became infected, she had a high fever and could not urinate. All this could have led to her death as well.

4. Conclusion

FGM is a deeply ingrained cultural practice that is perpetuated by various factors, including gender inequality, social norms, and cultural beliefs. It is a violation of human rights, and the woman is affected physically and psychologically. Without any reasonable logic, this ritual has been carried on and on over the ages because of mere ignorance and superstition. It has taken forward the legacy of pain, cruelty, torture, and horror, which needs to be uprooted now. There comes the need to bring change in society.

Bibliography