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Saving a Desert Flower/Saving Safa from Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Waris Dirie's (1965-) memoir, *Saving Safa: Rescuing a Little Girl from FGM* (2015), manifests a fluid and matter-of-fact account of her life especially her attempt to rescue a seven years old Djibouti girl, Safa Nour, from the horrific cultural violence/crime of female genital mutilation (FGM). Dirie gives voice to her and thousand others' unspeakable suffering of FGM. She spells out her tremendous rage like the Senegalese anti-FGM activist Khady Koita and Somali-born anti-FGM activist Hibo Wardere. At the age of five, infibulation, the most severe form of FGM, was performed on Dirie. At the age of thirteen, she escaped from her native place, Galkayo, Somalia and later turned a supermodel and a UN ambassador for the abolition of FGM. Her first personal account, *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* (1998) laid bare her heart touching story about her trauma and years of struggle to stand for the rights of little girls/women. The book was an international bestseller and adapted into a film of the same name in 2009. Safa was chosen to act as young Waris Dirie in the film. *Saving Safa* was a part of her campaign against FGM. In the book, Safa was frequently called "our little Desert Flower" and the first name of the author, Waris, also means desert flower. Flower is emblematic of blameless female genitals.

Throughout the book, Dirie identifies herself with Safa. "Safa was like a mirror in which I saw myself as a young child" (58). Such identification enables her and the readers to re-vision her own FGM with critical understanding of an interlocking system of women's oppression in the name of tradition in Africa and other parts of the globe. Dirie is psychically bonded to Safa speaking out of her repressed soul in an attempt to get creative release from agonizing history through Safa's rescue/release from FGM. Dirie as a survivor of FGM experiences terrifying epiphanies of oppression/repression in her life. She goes on compensating the pain of the girls/women who underwent FGM through her

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activism against the millennia-old horrific practice. Besides, she decides to rescue those who are yet to undergo such violence. That was why she founded Desert Flower Foundation in Vienna in 2002. As such, her activism/resistance takes a creative form as well as an operational form, thereby giving it a holistic approach to eradicate FGM.

The book begins with Safa's heart-rending letter written on January 15, 2013 from Balbala, Djibouti to Dirie (who was then in Brussels) with the help of Fardouza, Foundation's representative in Djibouti. The second page of the book displays an innocent yet an inexplicable photograph of Safa which greatly moves the readers with empathy. This empathy is gradually increased with Dirie's free-flowing style of narration/language, moving words, and her sheer grit and determination to save the girl. The girl attends a private French School in Djibouti with the help of the Foundation. Dirie's assistant, Joanna, gives the letter (Safa's earnest appeal to escape FGM) to Dirie in person. Safa lives in the slum area of Balbala, a suburb in Djibouti city. They live below the poverty level. On average, people in Balbala live on the equivalent of about thirty Euros a month. Thus, they are deprived of their basic human rights, such as food, cloth, home, medicine, education, etc. Add to this fact that girls and women are neglected and deprived of human rights particularly sexual freedom. People in Balbala practise "pharaonic circumcision" (infibulations). They mutilate the little girls to curb/disable their sexuality under the pretext of making them pure.

The Quran and the Bible do not approve the practice. Moreover, a law had been passed against FGM in Djibouti; but, it is rarely enforced. Dirie mentions the WHO's report that worldwide 150 million women are affected by FGM. Every year about three million girls become victims of genital mutilation. That means eight thousand girls are mutilated every day; many bleed to death. East Africa has the highest rates of death during childbirth. FGM has a huge factor in that. Apart from the issues of sexual disability and tradition, the book brings economic issue into light. That is, poverty and a girl's bride-price lead the families to cut their girls. Dirie reports that France and in other European countries, gynecologists carry out illegal FGM on girls/women for a huge fee. They are not concerned with the health issues of the mutilated girls. They are in need of money to make their lives comfortable though the gynecologists know that the survivors suffer from physical complications and psychological wounds throughout their lives. Dirie, Inab (a mutilated girl from Djibouti), Safa's mother as well as other women are no exception in this regard. Inab transgresses against

the gruesome practice and protects her two sisters from FGM. Dirie expresses her admiration for Inab who risks her life to save the sisters. She takes Safa, Idriss, and Inab with her in Paris and then in Vienna to save Safa from FGM and to educate them. Safa's parents are not convinced about the cruelty of FGM. They have spared their daughter for purely economic reasons.

In spite of the "contract" bearing Safa's educational expenses and her family's basic needs which Safa's parents, Fozia and Idriss, signed with Dirie's Foundation in the presence of a notary; they now want to mutilate Safa. This is because an obvious breach of the cultural practice would bring about a "threat of expulsion from the collectivity" (Levin 118). Though they guarantee to not mutilate Safa, Fozia in a video interview said that she would perform FGM on Safa. The rising tension in the mind of Dirie along with Fardouza, Joanna at this stage increases suddenly and it drives them to drop everything and to fly from faraway to Djibouti. After passing through several ordeals at the Djibouti airport, they finally find Safa. Being very worried, Dirie makes Dr. Acina check Safa whether her genitals are intact. As part of the contract, Safa is to be examined by a pediatrician six times a year to check that she remains intact. Here, worth noticing is just Dirie as well as her Foundation's commitment and great effort to protect Safa's bodily integrity and to ensure her education.

The book reveals the bitter truth of maternal perfidy and butchery. Women like Safa and Hawo's mothers are concerned in greater degree than men about the tradition which also resonates in Wardere (118). Dirie, during her desperate attempt to protect Safa from her cutter grandmother (Fatouma) and parents, recalls Safa's mutilation and piercing scream in the pivotal scene-the circumcision scene- in the film. Dirie calls it a "re-enactment of the torture" (40) which she undergoes in her memory again and again. She vividly recalls her cutter's cutting of her genitals without any anesthetic and her own cry until she could cry no more. Dirie's mother also relives her trauma of FGM and eventually realizes the violence which society imposes on only women as cultural defenders. She requests Dirie to protect her granddaughter, Hawo, from FGM. Dirie says with a traumatic flashback: "No: those weren't Safa's cries I was hearing - they were my own" (128). Dirie saves Safa from FGM and says: "Safa would become an example for countless other girls; she was going to be my successor and continue my work" (144). Thus, her mission to eradicate FGM extends from personal to global level. The significance of the book rests on its marked emphasis to promote women's education and solidarity and a global movement

to ban FGM.

The book suggests that guaranteeing financial support is the only way to motivate the parents not to have their daughters mutilated. It also suggests a compulsory education for the mothers so that they know about their rights and fatal consequences of FGM. Dirie strongly advocates “a sustainable and multi-level approach” (271) to wipe FGM out once and for all. In so doing, she gives emphasis on two important issues: education and economic independence of the girls/women. Her Foundation conceives/promotes education as a powerful weapon to combat FGM as it is written in the mission statement of the Foundation.

Works Cited

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