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Female Genital Mutilation and the Restriction of Women's Sexual Autonomy: A Perspective from Ayan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*

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Abstract

This study explores the effect of dehumanizing deeds of female genital mutilation, and discriminatory and orthodox sexual perception toward women boosted by religion and perpetuated particularly by woman in Ali's autobiography, Infidel. It also reveals how patriarchal society frowns on a woman's plea for sexual liberation as a real freedom. In Infidel, a mediocre Somali girl transforms herself into a freedom fighter realizes her true essence and also becomes a member of the parliament of the Netherlands. Ali's memoir clearly illustrates the subordination of females in Muslim society and how their bodily autonomy is confined by religious norms. The poignant story of female genital mutilation, the issue of their virginity, decency in the way they dress, restriction in the movement and the situation of their insecurity and vulnerability in broad daylight are some of the most prominent issues she has highlighted throughout her writing. These are the impeding factors that curb women's freedom. The book explicitly presents the unshakeable faith of Ali in herself and her self-determination and daring personality. This book chronicles her inner evolution from a girl hailing from the most marginalized part of the world, Somalia, to the world's eminent advocate against Muslim fundamentalism. This study has adopted a qualitative research method of textual analysis with the theoretical lens of feminism and relies primarily on the concepts from the book to establish an argument by the secondary source of information gathered from journals, books and reports.

Key Words: Feminism, genital mutilation, patriarchal, subordination, virginity

Introduction

Society often undermines and misinterprets female immense sexual strength. Sexuality is considered as a source of male power and female subordination to male. (Khanna & Price, 1994). Women are believed to remain passive and accept what falls on them while having intercourse. They are socialized in such a way that to be sexually expressive is

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shameful and often taboo which further silences them on the matter of sexual pleasure. Society often fails to acknowledge the agentic sexual power a woman inherits. In the name of decency, morality and religious belief, her sexuality is usually controlled. Skafta & Silberschmidt (2014) assert that although female sexual gratification is always in the pivotal position, ideals of female virginity and fear of infidelity prevent the expressions of women's sexuality and sexual agency. The gender identity is constructed in such a way that labels females as a weak and subordinated creature. They are usually portrayed as a procreation machine and an obedient follower of her husband. In most of society, women rarely hold the power to make decisions that critically affect their life and wellness such as the matter of marriage, number of children they want to have and the type of relationship they enjoy, partner selection etc.

Female sexuality is controlled in various ways. One of the most barbaric and terrifying methods followed is female genital mutilation which is the main focus of the study. This study has particularly highlighted the issue from Somalia as it was raised by Ayan Hirsi Ali in her autobiographical memoir *Infidel* published in 2008 by Simon and Schuster. In Somalia, over 90 per cent or more of girls and women have been subjected to female genital mutilation. Despite the practice having devastating health implications for women and girls - including pain, bleeding, permanent disability and even death - discussion over how to end the harmful tradition, remains taboo (UN News, 2022). Although the feminist movement has attained its momentum, the issue of intersectionality within women is yet to be addressed. The unendurable pain that girl experiences while having their organ circumcised is heart-wrenching. The part of the female body that lets them with the erotic feeling and support for the arousal is cut. *Infidel* vividly presented this practice:

Little girls are made pure by having their genital cut out at around the age of 5. After the child's clitoris and labia are carved out, scraped off, or in more compassionate areas, merely cut or pricked, the whole area is often sewn up, so that a thick band of tissue forms a chastity belt made of the girl's own scarred flesh. A small hole is carefully situated to permit a thin flow of pee. Only great force can tear the scar tissue wider, for sex. (31)

This inhumane cult is justified in the name of religion. The custom of *barri* in the Muslim world where females should be completely submissive to males whatever so, Hijab, the practice of veiling all body parts by a female assuming a male may feel seductive etc. are some of the other conventions that significantly curtail women's bodily autonomy.

Review of Literature

The brutal practice of female genital mutilation is always at the centre of scholarly concern. This merciless act of traumatizing women by having their seductive parts

carved off is one of the severe issues to be discussed and researched so that the heinous crime can be made history. Olumide (2023) in his study of *Infidel* states that the distressing accounts of pains and sufferings experienced by circumcised/mutilated women in Ali's memoir are crucial to the formation of condensed feelings of empathy and rage that may enable the attitudinal change concerning the controversial practice (Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2023). The strict control over women's bodies and sexuality may have a detrimental effect on the well-being of women themselves and their families. Research has proved the importance of women's freedom in the decision-making of reproductive issues as the most important aspect of their lives. Their findings revealed that women's autonomy is strongly associated with their control to exercise reproductive rights which must be considered an important sociocultural determinant of higher status (Biswas et al., 2017). If women are given freedom concerning their bodies, they tend to make rational decisions for a better life.

Review research done by Mulongo and his friends describes the evidence that psychological consequences are very common among women experiencing female genital mutilation. The discomforts they encountered arose due to the socio-cultural context of her belief system, marital relationship, and support networks. The researchers also realized the lack of extensive research on the issue and suggested the initiation of more research projects on such a critical issue (Mulongo et al., 2014). The psychological repercussions of the cut are unreparable. Its destructive impact on the mentality of women is beyond imagination. So, such an issue should not be left unaddressed. So, the researcher should appropriately dig out the social stigma existing in society.

A study titled "The Production of Sexual Mutilation among Muslim Women in Cairo" by Maria Frederika Malmström contends that women in Cairo basically from low-income status find that having a circumcised body means being complete, making one look pretty and the requirement to be a Muslim. They believe that mutilation of sexual organs safeguards young women from having intercourse before marriage and supports to establish of healthy relations with their husbands (Malmström, 2013). She further argues that a woman is completely regulated even in the way she dresses and is instructed about when she has to dress openly and when she should veil her body parts. This practice is instilled from early childhood through concern with the protection of the "hymen" (since social virginity is essential) and through female circumcision. A woman is socialized to be shy in sexual expression with her husband and it is widely believed that the husband should commence lovemaking and women should be passive recipients.

Most of the studies primarily concentrate on the conspicuous effect of female genital mutilation. They mainly focus general understanding of this practice. The issue of female genital mutilation about the restriction of their sexual autonomy through the literary genre is not abundant. In this regard, an in-depth analysis of the autobiography

by the person who is a survivor of female circumcision and the bitter experience of her relationship and marriage life sheds light on the issue of the stereotypical concept of the female body and sexuality. Sexuality is a less talked about issue even in literature. So, this study tries to fill this gap by divulging the concern of female genital mutilation and their sexual autonomy.

Statement of Problem and Research Questions

The movement of women around the globe to establish their rights and for the creation of a just society has enabled them to secure their position to a greater extent. Nonetheless, the universal notion of feminism and the way of perceiving women's problems have drawn attention, especially from the women of the third world. The problems faced by women in the third world are still complicated and very stubborn to challenge. Plan International (nd) states that even today more than 200 million women and girls are the survivors of female genital mutilation. The matter of sexuality among women is supposed to be insulting and filthy which males enjoy freely talking about. Women are socialized in such a way that they deserve no right to talk about their sexual experience and they are completely swayed or regulated by their husbands will. The group of men enjoy unrestricted talk about masturbation, orgasm, lovemaking etc. When it goes to the domain of the female, it is felt indecent and sinful. Females are not even free to choose their partner. This notion of female sexuality and bodily freedom is even more curtailed in Muslim society. So, the social, cultural and religious belief of curving women's bodily freedom needs to be well disclosed and addressed. Thus, this study explores these issues by answering these research questions:

What is the perception of people in Somalia towards sexuality and women's bodily freedom?

How does *Infidel* reflect the experience of a woman who has undergone circumcision?

What are the consequences of restricting women's sexuality and their bodily autonomy for the well-being of women and society as a whole?

Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to highlight the critical issue of female genital mutilation which is mostly prevalent in the Muslim community and to explore the circumstances that restrict women's sexual freedom as portrayed in Ayan Hirsi's book *Infidel*.

Methodology

Ali's memoir is subjected to thorough analyses from the feminist perspective to point out the traumatic effect of female genital mutilation and other instances of how women's body and sexuality is taken into control by males as well as the contributions

and usefulness of literature the campaign for eradicating the practice worldwide. This has become a crucial social issue. In this regard, this paper has applied the qualitative approach to research because this research analyzes ‘‘the subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices’’(Flick, 2021, p. 542). To explore these issues. this paper has adopted a content analysis technique for the discursive engagement of the text. Ali’s *Infidel* is purposively selected for this study because of its effort to highlight the dehumanizing issue of female genital mutilation and their submissiveness to the patriarchal culture. Purposive sampling has been applied to select the related concepts from the texts because according to Stephen M Croucher and Daniel Cronn-Mills(2015), this sampling focuses on the specific concepts by excluding the non-essential concepts (95). The text has become the primary source of concepts and the related criticism and book review have been considered as the source of secondary concepts. Ali, as being lionhearted and the most wanted Muslim fundamentalist, fearlessly portrayed this practice giving a reminiscent of her own experience and that of her friends.

Female Genital Mutilation and the Restriction of Women’s Sexual Autonomy in *Infidel*

Infidel is an engrossing autobiographical depiction of extra extraordinary figure whose unswerving fight for freedom is exceptional and worthy of global recognition. Her relentless fight against gender discrimination in the Muslim world and male authoritativeness over the female body and sexuality is highly commendable. Throughout her intrepid voyage from a fundamentalist Muslim world to the world of reason, the issue of female sexuality to the unjustifiable and dehumanizing act of female genital mutilation is presented. Christopher Hitchens (2008) opines, ‘‘A strong feature of this book is the clear-eyed approach that it takes to matter of sex. Ayaan believes that sexual repression is at the root of all the related problems’’ (p.xiv). Ayaan pictured the Somalin society as ignorant, having blind faith in religion and highly patriarchal. The narration of atrocities and pain she suffers along with her sibling is hard to believe for the readers of this monstrous deed. Ali recounted her experience of this practice as:

Then the scissor went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable, and I howled. Then came the sewing: the long, blunt needle clumsily pushed into my bleeding outer labia, my loud and anguished protests, Grandma’s words of comfort and encouragement. (p.32)

Removing the seductive part of the female body is associated with purity and a girl without having their part removed is often viewed with disdain and hate. Ali in her memoir describes the poor fate of a girl with a clitoris who was harassed and bullied

by her friend at school calling her, “*Kinterleey*, she with the clitoris” (p.30). Her friend treated her in a barbaric way, “spat on her pinched her; rubbed sand in her eyes, and once they caught her and tried to bury her in the sand behind school” (p.30). Ali identifies Somalia as a predominantly Muslim third-world country overwhelmed by social stratification, religious bigotry, bitter clan rivalries, warfare and repression. Somali society is heavily characterized as having an ancient foundation of man-made tyrannies of traditional beliefs, superstition, and religious orthodoxy (Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2023). This situation consolidates how the females are confined in a cesspool.

The concern of feminism is to describe both a position in politics and as a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of interpretation from the point of view of cultural practices. This means that roles assigned to a ‘daughter’ or ‘mother’ are social rather than natural because the woman is trained in such a way that fits the social pattern. Ali is forcefully pressurized to suit in the tutelage of sexuality constructed by society. The above-quoted passage reflects how pathetically she underwent the processes of genital mutilation. This confirms the norms of feminist theory as described by Nayar (2010) when he shows the correlation between feminist theory and literature:

Feminist theory is the philosophical and analytical approach that employs this political position to read cultural practices like art or literature. Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational–sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused. (p. 83)

This notion of objectification of the female body for only sexual satisfaction has been depicted in *infidel* when Ali (2008) says:

It was not rape. I wanted to have sex with Mahmud -just not this way. He gasped and shoved and sweetened with the effort of forcing open my scar. It was painful took so long. I gritted my teeth and endured the pain until I became numb. Afterward Mahmud fell heavily asleep. (p 143).

This description of her nuptial night with her husband graphically reflects how her sexuality is treated for the satisfaction of her husband. She is a sex object and a procreating machine as Nayar has described the aspects of feminist theory. This theory reflects the situation of female oppression as Ali has narrated in her memoir.

Ali’s description of her mother’s subordination to the male figure of her family demonstrates her submissiveness to patriarchal value. As Nayar (2010) claims women are regarded as second-grade human beings, and cultural structures provide ideology that makes a woman subordinated. The concept of *baarri* is culturally constructed in Muslim society. However, feminist theory unpacks these ideologies as a form of dominance. Toril Moi (1987) suggests that feminist criticism is a unique kind of discourse that exposes political issues along with a kind of revolt against male

chauvinism. Ali's description of *baarri* in the following lines brings out these ideations of feminism on the surface:

Women had no right to divorce under Muslim law. If you divorced, you would be used goods -no longer a virgin. She would get the reputation that she was not *baarri*: completely submissive to males.... a woman who is *.baarri* is like a pious slave. She honours her husband's family and feeds them without question or complaint. . . . If her husband is cruel, if he rapes her and then taunts her about it, if he decides to take another wife, or beats her, she lowers her gaze and hides her tears. And she works hard, and faultlessly. She is a devoted, welcoming, well-trained work animal. This is *baari*. (p.12)

The concept of *baarri* in the Muslim world is all governed by customs that satisfy men in the name of Allah (Pakri & Anandan, 2015). *Infidel*, a memoir narrated by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, embodies the brutality of such neurotic generational tradition in Somalia and Arab Saudi. Ali recounts the drastic changes that characterized in life. Growing up in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya, Ali was a devout believer of Islam who soon realized the evolution of her beliefs, which in the end led to her intellectual awakening and activism in the Netherlands against gender inequality. In her memoir, Ali describes the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Quran (Holy Book). The Hadith (Sayings of Muhammad) and Syariah law as factors contributing to unequal and unjust treatment of women in Islamic society also confine women's sexuality. She graphically describes a society that tyrannizes and brutalizes women to protect them from being stigmatized as immoral and impure. Ali's awakening to a society that sacralizes violence led to her battle against sexual exploitation and oppression of women to ensure that women are sexually liberated from patriarchy (Pakri & Anandan, 2015). This is why, she is so expressive and rebellious about the mutilation of sexual organs.

Feminist theories highlight the societal perception of women and argue that female bodily freedom and sexuality have been considered impotent, and not a subject of discussion as it is relative to males and protected by males as stated by Nayar (2010). Women's freedom is confiscated in the Muslim community of Somalia where Ali was raised, girls were not allowed to move out of the home. In a jealous tone, she flashed her memory back and stated that her brother was free to roam around while that privilege was never given to her and her sister. Boys were always in charge of their families while girls were limited within the surveillance of their parents, especially their father or brother. Ali writes:

My mother hated having to go out without a man, hatted being hissed at by man on the street. To be a woman, out on her own is bad enough. When my mother went shopping without a male driver or spouse to act as guardian, grocers would not attend to her. No women went out in the street. They couldn't, their husband

locked their front door when they left their houses, having to walk on her own is humiliating and low grading. (p.48)

Ali's confident representation of the concept of sexuality and women's lack of control over their bodies is one of the significant issues to be unveiled. Her first experience of menstruation was not appealing, not welcoming and not a matter of celebration instead she met a violent screaming from her mother stating her a "filthy prostitute" (p.72). She even cursed her to get cancer which was disheartening. Unaware of herself about her bodily transformation, nobody was there to talk about the issue of sexuality and reproduction, failing to get to know about her own body. Ali narrates:

In our household the whole subject of what was between your leg was taboo. I know what I needed to know about sex. My sexuality belongs to my family, my father or my uncles. I had to be virgin at marriage. To do otherwise damage the honor of my father and his whole clan-uncles, brothers, male cousins. The place between out was sewn up to prevent it and to be broken by husband. (p.72)

As per the report of UNFPA, "My Body is My Own", almost half of the women are refused their bodily autonomy (UNFPA, 2021). It is a sheer infringement of basic human rights. Women's freedom over their bodies is well pronounced by the feminist movement, the notion of "My Body My Right" is at the centre of feminist concern. Nonetheless, women are not granted that level of freedom over their bodies they are aspiring for. In her autobiography, *Infidel*, Ali recalled the incident when she had an infatuation with Abshir, a friend of his brother Mahad. When she disclosed the issue among family members, it was frowned upon and she got a very humiliating response:

All the people were scandalized by my announcement of love. It was shocking, un-Islamic to fall in love. You were supposed to hide such things and wait until a boy's family asked your father, and then you were supposed to cry. (p.127)

(Cixous et al., 1976). In their literary writing, *The Laugh of Medusa* accentuated how women are socialized to suppress their feelings and emotions which has the ultimate link to her physical and mental wellbeing. From the early stage of their life, they are inhibited from exploring their body in the name of decency and morality. They said, "We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty" (885). Over time, women failed to recognize their bodies because of this patriarchal conception of women's body and sexuality.

Women are prescribed to be shy and suppress their feelings. If they appeal sexually, it is believed to be insulting and shameful. Ali states "Kissing Abshir and spending time with him is considered sinful" (p. 129). Later, she happened to meet another man Mahmud through her relative Aunt Khadija who proposed her to marry him. She was infatuated and wanted to have intercourse with Mahmud. She presumed that the relationship between them would be exciting and the nuptial night would be filled with the thrilling experience of being obsessed with each other. But things did not go as she

had expected. Her feelings and emotions were not well acknowledged by a Muslim guy who was raised in a patriarchal setting. She was completely overwhelmed by his masculine force, and could not dare to express her love fully. She shared her experience of the nuptial night as:

Then I lay down on the bed, fully clothed: I didn't know what else to do. I wanted everything to be wildly erotic, within the role of Marilyn Monroe or Lady Chatterley, but I didn't even know how to undress. When Mahmud came back into the room he said, "take off your clothes off, of course". I did awkwardly, woodenly. Nothing was happening as I had dreamed. I made an attempt at foreplay, like I'd read about in books, Mahmud looked at me quizzically." "Hey, have you done this before?" he asked me. I mumbled no, and let him get on with it. If I had lied and told Mahmud I had sexual experience, then perhaps we would have had foreplay; but then of course, he would probably have divorced me. Because I admitted to being a virgin, there was no pleasure at all. (p. 142)

The above lines clearly illustrate how women's sexual pleasure is undermined in a society where sexuality is viewed completely through masculine parameters. Ali had a similar sexual experience of passivity, just serving to pleasure her husband. Without letting chance to explore her body, her husband engaged in violent penetration which gave nothing to her. She simply fulfilled her duty as a sexual slave to her husband subjugating all her inner feelings. A prominent feminist philosopher Lucie Irigaray (1985) writes:

woman's erogenous zones never amount to anything but a clitoris-sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe the penis in intercourse: a non-sex or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing. . . about woman and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say. . . . Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. It leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus, she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (pp. 23-25)

Female sexuality and sexual pleasure are usually overlooked and are often avoided in most of society. To talk about the sexual pleasure of female and their gratification is often forbidden. Even highly educated women and girls hesitate to talk about their bodies and sexual experiences. As mentioned by Khau(2012) female sexuality is a highly armed domain within many societies with women and girls being violated daily about performing their gendered and sexual identities. Moreover, female sexuality is constructed as not needing pleasure where they are forced to construct their sexual identities around sexual restraint and passivity and active engagement is considered

bad. Khau (2012) says, “women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure is also testament to the perceived abnormality and immorality . . . The policing and control of female sexuality within hetero-patriarchal contexts remains one of the major drivers of violence against women” (pp 11-12). The awful experience of Ali along with her friends during their nuptial night gives a vivid picture of how women's sexuality is policed. Ryan's friend Sahra's experience of sex was even more terrible:

Sahra told how awful it was to be married. Her husband was repulsive. He tried to penetrate her first when they got married, pushing his way into her, trying to tear upon the scar between her legs, he wanted to cut it with a knife, she screamed and was taken to the hospital to the next day. Without showing a bloody bed sheet, marriage was viewed as suspicious and virginity was questioned. (p. 91)

The story of Jawahir, another friend of Ali, is no less horrible. She also had painful sexual intercourse where she had no place for arousal. Neither did she enjoy fully having orgasm. Jahahir lay down in full dress. Her husband injected her and ejaculated, no matter whether she enjoyed it or not. It was violent sex where the female feeling was completely discarded. It is usually believed in the Muslim community that good women are forbidden to feel desire. Marriage is supposed to be for the protection and security not for formalizing and continuing the sex life. Sexuality is for males and they can enjoy the way they want. There is no restriction for them. Ali highlights the discriminatory perception of sex for male and female in the following lines when she says, “Women to be sexually available to their at all times. . . Your wives are your tillage, go in unto your tillage in what manner so ever you will” (p. 178). Women should not ignore the sexual desires of their husbands even if they are not feeling comfortable. However, the sexual instinct of women is not valued at all. Women are considered to be completely driven by men's desire. They are like sex toys only regulated to suppress their desires and accept what the patriarchal society wants back from them.

Conclusion

Women have substantially progressed in achieving fundamental social, political and economic rights. Nonetheless, the issue of sexual malpractices such as genital mutilation and controlling sexual autonomy is far from achieved. Not only in Muslim society, women in most of the world are hesitant to talk openly about their bodies and sexuality. They can not express their sexual desire as freely as that of men. Aayan Hirsi Ali in the book *Infidel* has audaciously portrayed the bitter reality of the society where she was brought up. This book has profoundly succeeded in unravelling the issue of female sexuality and the inhuman practice of female genital mutilation through the lived experience of Ali herself and some of her friends. The emotional empathy aroused by the book while reading the atrocities of genital mutilation and coercive sexual control by male to female is hard to describe in words. Through recounting her memory, Ali

has bravely fought against this injustice. Ali is well aware of the power of literature to create vibrations that transcend beyond any geographical boundaries. After reading a book, all women try to know their bodies. Therefore, this paper finds and recommends that in an attempt to uproot the practice of circumcising female genitalia and controlling their sexual autonomy, the voices and experiences of the victims should be thoroughly understood and recognized as they are the valid and authentic campaigners against these practices who can effectively persuade the people to joint hand and eliminate such practice. In the context of Nepal, female sexuality is not suppressed through the practice of cutting as done in some parts of Africa. However, they are not as free as males to express their desires, and there are a lot of stereotypical beliefs regarding women's sexuality and fidelity. Society often links women's sexuality with character and morality. The message delivered by *Infidel* is not only limited to the fate of Somali women, rather it is also a voice of women residing all over the world who are subjected to fill the template created by society and breaching of which would be a questionable issue for their character and morality. These issues open the arena for further research.

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