

Malevolent Dogma and Frigidity: Collective Trauma in Warsan Shire's "Girls"

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Abstract – Warsan Shire, London's first Young Poet Laureate, wrote her poem "Girls" exclusively for the campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Britain initiated by Fahma Mohamed and led by The Guardian. FGM, a ritual rooted in gender inequality, attempts to mutilate female sexuality which is extremely traumatic for the victims and may lead to acute or chronic physical or medical complications. FGM is a ritual mostly found in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The poem portrays the pain and trauma a girl undergoes after mutilating her genitalia. FGM, a surviving practice from primitive tribalism, is even practiced in Europe and America by the refugees and immigrants. The psychological and emotional implications of this practice are to be considered which stays with the victims for the rest of their lives. The intense fear, helplessness, pain, horror, humiliation, and betrayal experienced by the girls undergoing FGM create in them multi-phase trauma. The patriarchal religious and cultural discourses inflict sexual frigidity upon the girls in their attempt to control female sexuality. Shire's lines transmit this trans-historical and intergenerational trauma not only to the victims but to the individuals and cultures unaccustomed to this human rights violation.

Keywords: FGM, Frigidity, Trauma, Tribalism, Islam, Africa

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The undertaking of writing poetry is moving from papers to electronic gadgets and the shift from the traditional space to a virtual space have given birth to lamentations over the shrinking place of poetry, and lack of scholarship and creative writing. Poets find new space for the publication of their creative efforts. Blogs, social networking sites and webzines host a number of creative endeavours from poetry to painting and photography. New age creators could meet, mentor, and publish their works, and their followers reblog or share, thereby increase their popularity. Warsan Shire, a 30 year old Somali-British woman, is the first Young Poet Laureate of London and a representative of this new generation of poets. She has written her poem "Girls" exclusively for *The Guardian* in 2014 as part of a campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) initiated by Fahma Mohamed, a Bristol schoolgirl then. FGM is found in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, a surviving tribal ritual which attempts to control female sexuality.

Alexis Okeowo in *The New Yorker* magazine comments on Shire and her poetry: "Shire grew up in London, where she has always felt like an outsider, and embodies the kind of shape-shifting, culture-juggling spirit lurking in most people who can't trace their ancestors to their country's founding fathers, or whose ancestors look nothing like those fathers. In that limbo, Shire conjures up a new language for belonging and displacement" (Okeowo).

The recurring themes in Shire's poems are war, gender discrimination, sex, and cultural assumptions. In an interview given to *africanwords.com*, Shire noted, Character driven poetry is important for me – it's being able to tell the stories of those people, especially refugees and immigrants, that otherwise wouldn't be told, or they'll be told really inaccurately. And I don't want to write victims, or martyrs, or vacuous stereotypes. In most of the poems I write, the character name is based on a real person. But I won't use their real names unless they want me to. And my family are really amazing – they'll tell me, 'I have a new story for you', and I'll get my Dictaphone and record it, so I can stay as true as possible to the story before I make it into a poem (Reid).

Before "Girls", Shire has written another poem addressing the issue of FGM titled "Things We had Lost in the Summer" which has been published as part of the anthology *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* in 2014. Shire shares the horrific experience of living in a community where women have undergone FGM – a whispered horror for all of them.

My mother uses her quiet voice on the phone:

Are they all okay? Are they healing well?

She doesn't want my father to overhear.

('Things We Had Lost in the Summer')

Her second poem on FGM, "Girls", has appeared as a video presentation for *The Guardian* as part of the media propaganda to end FGM. Since it is available in video format, I quote the poem for reference:

Sometimes it's tucked into itself,
sewn up like the lips of a prisoner.
After the procedure, the girls will learn how to walk again,
mermaids with new legs,
soft knees buckling under their sinless,
stainless bodies.
Daughter is synonymous with traitor, the father said.
If your mother survived it, you can survive it,
the father says. *cut, cut, cut*.
On a reality TV show about beauty,
one girl exposes another girl's secret.
And they huddle around her
in liberal concern for her pleasure
touching her arm,
asking,
Can you even feel anything down there?

The camera zooms into a Georgia O'Keeffe painting in the background.

Mother, did you even survive it?
The cutting, the carving,
levelling the ground.
Deforestation.
Warm blade against inner thigh.
Silencing the devil's tongue from in-between
your legs,
maybe you did. I'm asking you sincerely
mother, did you even truly survive it?

Two girls lay beside one another in bed

holding mirrors up to the mouths of their skirts,
comparing wounds.

I am one girl, you are the other.

Female genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision, is a ritual found in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. World Health Organization defines Female genital mutilation as a process comprises 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. Like circumcision of the penis, this brutal practice too is mostly carried out by traditional circumcisers which may turn into life-threatening risks include hemorrhage, shock secondary to blood loss or pain, local infection and failure to heal, septicemia, tetanus, trauma to adjacent structures, and urinary retention (WHO).

FGM is classified into 4 major types: First is clitoridectomy i.e. the partial or total removal of the clitoris. Second is excision, the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora with or without excision of the labia majora. Third is infibulation, the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora, sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoris. A small hole is left for the passage of urine and menstrual fluid; the vagina is opened for intercourse and opened further for childbirth. And the remaining includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes (WHO Fact Sheet 2017).

FGM is often associated with Islam, but it is not exclusively an Islamic ritual. Circumcision of the penis is not mentioned in the Qur'an but it is highlighted in the *Sunnah* (the Prophet Muhammad's recorded words and actions). It existed before the rise of Islam, and practiced differently in different ethnic groups (BBC). Senior Muslim religious authorities appear to agree that FGM is not required by Islam or is prohibited by it. FGM is praised in a few hadith (sayings attributed to Muhammad) as noble but not required and some groups follow this practice (Clarence-Smith 14-5). Religion and patriarchal norms attempt to control female sexuality and feign to purify body by mutilating clitoris thereby eliminating the chance of female masturbation. FGM is a violation of human rights and clearly a case of child abuse. According to a recent UNICEF report, FGM is practiced in 30 countries, and at least 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM (UNICEF).

Muslim reformer Shireen Qudosi argues female genital mutilation and the tribal psyche behind it psychically cuts women off from their intuitive selves:

A woman's ability to feel and express herself is an extension of her voice. When little girls are stripped of their ability to feel, and are later shamed for expressing (or wanting to express) themselves sexually, it's a form of mental abuse that silences the most primal form of communication: sex. It strips them of their ability to discover themselves before they have even reached the threshold of womanhood... Girls are violated at the earliest age, trained to be obedient and submissive. They're often conditioned through praise and rewarded for compliance... There is no protective matriarch, no archetype of the Wild Woman, who is free from the structures and constraints of indoctrinated communities. Most girls are cut before they ever part their legs, the tongue behind their lips snipped long before an older voice rooted between their legs is torn off (Qudosi).

The opening lines of the poem contain two phrases that introduce the trauma experienced by the girls who underwent FGM –“tucked into itself” and “sewn up like the lips of a prisoner”. They indicate the suffering and the pain after mutilating their genitalia. They feel uncomfortable between their legs and could not walk properly. They feel like mermaids metamorphosed into humans with new legs. They are learning to walk. Because of the extreme pain and discomfort, they go weak at the knees. Their now sinless and stainless bodies are trying to maintain posture.

The second stanza of the poem begins with a highly misogynistic statement from the father: “Daughter is synonymous with traitor”. The father believes that infidelity is an inherent nature in women and does not trust her daughter. So he instructs – “cut, cut, cut” – to tear apart his daughter's genitals to control her sexual impulses. In the next stanza, the setting changes to a TV reality show. In reality shows, some exciting matters are introduced to the audience by mixing it up with some melodramatic moments. The same is repeated in the third stanza where the audience is introduced to the shocking reality that one of the participants has gone through FGM. One girl exposes the other's secret. Other participants huddle around to console her. They ask whether she can feel anything down there; could she reach orgasm without clitoral stimulation? Then the camera zooms to a Georgia O'Keeffe painting in the background. O'Keeffe is best known for her paintings of enlarged flowers. Here the petals of the girl's flower are brutally plucked out. Other girls and audience sympathise with her sexual frigidity.

In the fourth stanza, the girl asks her mother some questions. Her mother too had gone through the traumatic phase, and the same fate has been inflicted upon her by her father. She asks her mother the questions asked to her by the reality show contestants. She asks how she felt when her clitoris was removed. Could she survive the extreme pain and trauma? She assumes she might have endured the pain since she

was submitting herself to the ritual. The girl expresses her doubt whether any woman could willingly undergo genital mutilation. Her mother might have gone through it without having the power to question patriarchal principles and is instilling the same to her daughter. The horrors of genital mutilation is expressed through the phrases, cutting, carving, levelling the ground, deforestation, and, warm blade against inner thigh.

The poem ends with an instance when two girls lay beside one another in bed and checking their wounds after mutilation. They hold mirrors up to the mouths of their skirts. They see their disfigured identity and the loss of their womanhood. The poet says she is one among the girls, and it is you the other.

FGM is a practice intended to maintain ideas like chastity and honour, and is supported by women. Not only the Semitic religions, but many other ethnic groups perceive sex as sinful and are afraid of the influence women have upon men to lead him to sexual activity. This fear is to be triumphed over for the existence and continuation of patriarchal authority. In Old Testament, it is Eve who fell into the trap that Satan set for them and tempted man to eat the forbidden fruit. Satan used the lips of woman to tempt man. The intention is that the tongue, in-between a woman's legs is to be mutilated to silence the devil. The poem portrays the violence inflicted upon female bodies by the male centred religious and cultural discourses and how they slash their freedom and identity.

In most of these girls' life, they are unprepared for FGM and are taken by surprise and cannot resist what to come. The trauma suffered by the girls can be two-sided –being cut or seeing and hearing another family member endure the procedure. Even the reaction from the part of the family members or the community can be terrifying as they may tease the girls for not being brave to face the cutting. This dismissive reaction can also lead to another dimension of trauma. But the society considers the change of behaviour occurred to the girls experiencing trauma as positive since genital cutting tamed them to be calm and submissive. But this ritual profoundly ruptures the self-esteem, trust over adults, and the feeling of safety and warm familial relations. Children who have experienced trauma often have difficulty in identifying, expressing and managing emotions, and may have limited language for describing their feelings and as a result, they may experience significant depression, anxiety or anger (Vergoth).

Trauma victimization has deleterious effects on both physical and mental health. Cathy Caruth who pioneered a psychoanalytic post structural approach in trauma studies suggests that trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience

and language. This Lacanian approach crafts a concept of trauma as a recurring sense of absence that sunders knowledge of the extreme experience, thus preventing linguistic value other than a referential expression (Caruth 11). Poems which discuss elements of trauma apparently use traumatic figurative language, by using a metaphor, simile, or metonym. Usually the predominant themes in these poems are war, death and oppression. These traumatic incidents are directly and indirectly interwoven into the poem in such ways to highlight issues of pain, sadness and frustration. The disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (words replace images) is what figurative language expresses and explores. The literary construction, of memory relates to the negative moment in experience, modifies that part of our desire for knowledge (epistemophilia) which is driven by images (scopophilia). The figurative or poetic language, or perhaps symbolic process in general, is something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non) experience. The nature of the negative, that provokes symbolic language, and its surplus of signifiers cannot fully be determined (Hartman 540).

"Girls" portrays the pain, physical as well as psychological, experienced by the girls who underwent FGM. The poet abundantly uses figurative language to express the negative nature of the subject of the poem. The opening stanza expresses the depth of physical discomfort of the girls after FGM. When they try to walk, they feel extreme pain between their legs as their labia are tucked. The labia are compared to the lips of a prisoner sewn in order to silence them. The girls are compared to mermaids, who have got legs for the first time in their life, learning to walk. The irony of purifying the body by torturing and inflicting pain is expressed in the fifth line of the poem – their bodies are now sinless and stainless after FGM.

The fear towards female sexuality is clearly visible in the comment of the father: "*Daughter is synonymous with traitor*". The open expression of sexuality from the part of a woman is perceived as indecent and a defiance against male dominance. Patriarchy is always afraid of the loss of chastity of women and their choice in sex since it is an abomination before society. Since daughter is a potential traitor for the family and her sexuality may bring abomination, it is necessary to control her feelings and minimize promiscuity. So the father instructs to cut. The simple use of the word cut is a horrific expression evoking the inhuman intention. The symbolic representation of the painting by Georgia O'Keeffe indicates the loss of sexual organ. The vagina is compared to a flower and the petals of the flower are brutally plucked out.

The fourth stanza is abundant with expressions of horror and negativity. The brutality of the ritual is evident in phrases like cutting, carving, levelling the ground, deforestation, and warm blade against inner thigh. It is like cutting every plant, disturbing the natural state and turning it to a desert. *Silencing the devil's tongue from in-between your legs* is a reference

to the Bible since it is Eve who is tempted by the serpent and persuaded Adam to commit the original sin. Since woman is the reason behind the fall of man she must be punished and endure pain. Her tongue should speak no more, it should be mutilated. This thought process is evident in the expressions. In the last stanza, the girls hold a mirror against their genitals, getting a reflection of their pubic area, looking into themselves and their distorted identity.

Traumatic experience is like a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in the brain. Trauma is only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise. The experience can be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups and language and literature are media for the representation of trauma. Trauma as a timeless, repetitious, and infectious concept then becomes a trans-historical phenomenon, transferred to distant generations and individuals, as part of group memory or individual memory. (Balaev 151-2).

The words and figures of speech used by Shire represent the depth of individual trauma as a lived experience. It transcends the limits of individual experience when FGM as a ritual is being practised through generations and the mother and daughter in the poem are victims of this experience. The pain of FGM then becomes a trans-historical, intergenerational traumatic experience and the poem re-inscribes the trauma and shame experienced by contemporary individuals. As an individual with first hand experience of the cultural surroundings, Shire's lines transmit the trauma not only to the victims but to the individuals and cultures unaccustomed to this human rights violation; her last lines say so: "I am one girl, you are the other".

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