

**Female Genital Mutilation in Somalia: The Memories and Mimesis of Pains in Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel: My Life***

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**Abstract**

Female Genital Mutilation — also known as female circumcision – is a highly controversial practice that has aroused a cacophony of voices and research across disciplines. This paper privileges Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s memoir, *Infidel: My Life* to underscore the implications of FGM on the bodies of victims. A discursive engagement of an existential issue that affects the lives of millions of African women and girls daily marks the significance of the study. More specifically, the study holds both socio-cultural and religious significance based on its intent to show that the often-mouthed socio-cultural, religious and superstitious justifications for FGM are no longer tenable in today’s globalised world. A content analysis method is adopted to isolate the nuanced experiences of circumcised/mutilated women in the text. These experiences of FGM victims are analysed within the theoretical framework of Third World feminism; which is a theory that flags FGM as patriarchy’s agenda to police women and their bodies. The traumatic accounts of pains and sufferings shared by circumcised/mutilated women in Ali’s memoir are crucial to the formation of condensed feelings of empathy and rage that are capable of causing effective attitudinal change concerning the controversial practice. This paper finds and recommends that the most persuasive campaigners against FGM remain the survivors whose stories deserve to be at the forefront of the anti-FGM campaign(s).

**Keywords:** Culture, Female Genital Mutilation, Memoir, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel: My Life*

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## 1. Introduction

Global campaign on the socio-cultural and religious practices hitherto known as Female Circumcision (FC) but now classified as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has crystallised and reached a critical point. The practice is as controversial as it is polarising, and the disagreements on the appropriate terminology confirm the contentious nature of the practice. Therefore, it is essential to state that to free itself from entanglements associated with the politics of terminologies, concerning all surgical operations by which a part or all of the female genitalia is removed based on socio-cultural and religious demands, this paper prefers to maintain a middle ground approach on the terminologies debate. Following the controversy on what terminology best explains the practice, this paper supports the employment of the dual term ‘female circumcision/female genital mutilation’ (FC/FGM).

With the benefit of hindsight, this paper acknowledges that the term ‘female circumcision’ is close to ‘male circumcision’ in a way that vitiates the original intent as well as the effect of the practice on the female body/sexuality. Though the use of ‘female circumcision’ is less intrusive and offensive, it appears simplistic of the vicious, brutal nature and effects of some of these practices – especially the two more severe types, infibulation and farooni – on the sex[uality] and well-being of millions of girls and women. On the other hand, it is imperative to clearly state that the term ‘female genital mutilation’ recognises the harm caused by the practice. Therefore, in consideration of legitimate concerns about terminologies, this paper agrees with Rahman and Toubia (2000) and UNICEF (2013) that ‘female circumcision’ (FC) and ‘female genital mutilation’ (FGM) be used together. FC/FGM not only links the old to the new, but it also represents in terms of signification, an honest attempt to admit the validity of both terminologies; and also serves to prevent the foreclosure of critical debates on the practice on the grounds of inappropriate terminology.

This study is significant because it engages an existential issue that affects the lives of millions of African women and girls daily. More specifically, the study holds both socio-cultural and religious significance based on its aim to show that the often-mouthed socio-cultural, religious and superstitious justifications for FGM are no longer tenable in today’s globalised world. Invariably, the study’s two main objectives are: to show that the pains, trauma and complications associated with FGM support the agency and urgency of the push for its abolition; the utilitarian

capacity of literature in the anti-FGM campaign is accentuated by the harrowing accounts of victims in Ali's memoir, *Infidel*. Therefore, the study seeks to answer the following questions: Does FGM come with physical pains, trauma and nuanced health complications for victims? Do the first-hand accounts of FGM victims in Ali's *Infidel* give credence to the usefulness of literature within the framework of the anti-FGM campaign?

## **2. Literature Review**

Without equivocation, FC/FGM debate/campaign has engendered multidisciplinary perspectives and an enriched body of works on the sociocultural practice and the implications for circumcised/mutilated bodies. Specifically, many of the studies on FC/FGM concentrate on anthropological/sociological, public health and law/human rights perspectives. Toubia (1988, 1994) and Mandara (2000) focus on FC/FGM from the public health perspective. On the other hand, Kenyatta (1966), Hosken (1982), Lightfoot-Klein (1989), Walker and Parmar (1993), and Table (1993, 2007) interrogate the socio-cultural issues underpinning the practice from an anthropological dimension. From the prism of law/legislation, FC/FGM has also received the academic attention of Rahman and Toubia (2000) and Leye and Deblonde (2004), following the beaming of global searchlight on the practice and its eventual framing as a human/women's right issue.

Instructively, recent literature on FC/FGM practice captures the nuances that underpin ongoing debates on the issue based on emerging realities. In their research, Titilayo, Palamuleni, Olaoye-Oyesola, and Owoeye (2018) posit that religion is a key factor in the sustenance of FC/FGM in practicing societies. According to the study on religious perception and the attitudes of men towards the campaign for the discontinuation of the practice in Nigeria, the odds against discontinuation are significantly lower "among those whose religious belief requires" FC/FGM (Titilayo, Palamuleni, Olaoye-Oyesola, and Owoeye, 2018, p. 20). The study finds that 89% of men whose religion does not support the practice subscribe to discontinuation, while its conclusion aligns with this paper's position that religion is a crucial factor in the general attitude of men and women alike to FC/FGM. In a similar vein, a study conducted in the Iraqi Kurdistan region by Abdulah, Sedo, and Dawson (2019) identifies religion, low education and locality (whether rural or urban) as factors responsible for the prevalence of FC/FGM practices. The study finds that mothers who support the practice have low or no education and represent 34.4% of respondents.

In addition, 46.3% of the girls surveyed are circumcised, which indicates a high prevalence of FC/FGM in rural Iraq. In recognition of the public health challenge posed by the practice to Iraqi women and girls, the study recommends that access to education and awareness needs to be created to increase knowledge about the harmful effect of FC/FGM among practising people.

The work of Williams-Breault (2018) not only represents an attempt to privilege FC/FGM as human rights issue following the plethora of national and international legations in that regard, but the study also appropriates the critical roles that education and women empowerment play in the agenda for eradicating the socio-cultural and religious practice. The study indicts FC/FGM as a violation of international conventions conceived to protect women and girls from oppression, harmful practices and violence. Therefore, it concludes that education together with empowerment offers the best panacea to the menace of FC/FGM in the world. Furthermore, Bukuluki (2021) identifies FC/FGM practices as the manifestations of strong social conventions and norms in practicing communities; a position that aligns with Ali's *Infidel's* denouncement of the practice as one that marks dissenting women/girls as social misfits. Underscoring the human rights and public health dimensions of the debates on such traditional practices, Bukuluki (2021) avers that "(...) female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is rooted in social motivations that do not have health benefits, and it constitutes a violation of human rights for girls and women" (p. 209).

Most of the previous studies on FC/FGM concentrate on a discursive engagement of the practices from anthropological, sociological, public health and human rights perspectives, which indicate the diverse nature of discourses on the issue. Buttressing this position, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000) posit most appropriately that: "(...) the body of literature on female "circumcision" is quite scattered and disparate, falling into diverse fields such as anthropology, demography, epidemiology, history, public health policy, law, social work, psychology, women's studies, and political science" (p. 1). However, within that body of extant literature on FC/FGM, not much attention has been paid to studies that engage the practice(s) from a literary exploration (literature as a discipline) standpoint. In addition, the specificity of memoir (the memories of circumcised women) deserves scholarly attention within the corpus. This paper fills that gap by beaming searchlight on Ali's memoir, *Infidel*, which documents the pains and trauma of FC/FGM on circumcised bodies. More so, the capacity of literature to transcend multidisciplinary boundaries has been acknowledged by, those who submit that:

Literature extends outside itself to forms of human experience beyond disciplinary boundaries, making it evident that the rigid separation of disciplines by myopic specializations can in the long run lead only to counter-productive and paralyzing isolation. Literature, as the hub of the wheel of knowledge, provides the logical locus for the integration of knowledge. Omobowale (qtd. in Owonibi, 2011, p. 59)

Literary works on FC/FGM date back to late 1930. Many of these texts, particularly Huxley's *Red Stranger* (1939), Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* (1970) and *Sardines* (1982), El Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and *The Circling Song* (1989), and Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993) are fictional texts. The texts mentioned above treat the subject and victims of FC/FGM from perspectives which oscillate between condemnation and ambivalence to the outright indictment. However, the sensational story and memoir of a Togolese woman, Fauziya Kassindja, who gained asylum in the US on claims that she escaped the shackles of forced marriage and circumcision in her homeland, helped to galvanise interest in such stories. As a result, other circumcised/mutilated women summoned the courage to give voices to their pains, traumas and experiences in written accounts, on the back of Kassindja's memoir, *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* (1998). Other FC/FGM-inspired memoirs include but are not limited to Dirie's *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* (2001), Korn's *Born in the Big Rains* (2004), Ali's *Infidel: My Life* (2009). Therefore, this paper not only adds to the diversity of voices on FC/FGM, but it also anchors a literary investigation of the practice in the specificity of memoir.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

For this paper, feminism is the preferred theoretical framework because it is an ideology/theory that has evolved over the years as a potent weapon in women's battle for equality in a world socially programmed to make them inferior to men. In agreement with Asante and Mazama's (2005) assertion that "gender is necessarily a factor to be raised in any critical, political, economic, behavioral, or cultural discussion" (p. xxxi), this paper's choice of feminism rests in its intention to understand and question the place of women in a patriarchal world order, where they (women) are socio-culturally programmed for abuse, and to playing second fiddle within power relationships. To be more specific, this paper's leaning towards feminism is anchored in the latter's

interest in women's oppression in terms of power relations, gender roles, gender politics and sexuality.

However, this paper is mindful of the complexities surrounding feminism as a gender theory that has mutated over the years. Since the rejection of the universalisation of women's experiences which was the case before feminism mutated, women outside western hegemony began to question "... some of the organizing premises of Western feminist thought" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 111), which do not accommodate women outside western culture and experiences. Therefore, the mutation of feminism became inevitable as alternative feminisms were offered and have become available in various formidable strands. Hence, the feminist strand of choice for this paper is Third World feminism because FC/FGM practices are essentially buried deep in the culture and traditions of so-called Third World countries. More so, Mohanty (1991) and Narayan (1997) postulate that Third World feminism recognises how culture and traditions are instrumental in the oppression of women within national boundaries; while also questioning Third World socio-cultural values such as FC/FGM, the Indian practice of Sati, Chinese foot binding, and Arabo-Islamic purdah as signifiers of age long discrimination against women based on their sexuality.

Furthermore, this paper employs a content analysis procedure for the discursive engagement of the text. Ali's *Infidel: My Life* is purposively selected for this study because of its hermeneutic privileging of the pains, trauma and complications of FC/FGM in the lives of circumcised/mutilated women. Based on a qualitative research method, Ali's text is subjected to descriptive and detailed analyses to signpost the pains and trauma inflicted by FC/FGM on women, as well as the contributions and usefulness of literature to the campaign for eradicating the practice worldwide.

#### **4. Memoir as an Important Trope of FC/FGM Pains**

'Truth is stranger than fiction' is a famous statement that reflects the importance of memoirs and other non-fictional works as far as literature is concerned. Memoir refers to a collection of stories of life-shaping events that happened in a memoirist's life. As a piece of literary work, the memoir is classified as "a collection of personal memories of an individual's life as recollected by that person. It is a collection of moments, experiences and events surrounding the private and public life of the writer" (Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2016, p. 146). Therefore, the contents of a memoir are expected to be as accurately factual as possible since they represent the recollection of events as the writer remembers them. In essence, a memoir is a well-crafted story about an

eventful and exceptionally pivotal period of the author's life. Invariably, Ali's *Infidel* falls into this important categorisation as it both appropriates and emblematises the difficulties that are associated with being born into FC/FGM practising societies. However, the stories retold in memoirs must not only be compelling but are also expected to carry the ambience of being readable and relatable, two attributes which exist against the memoir's character of allowing an expression of self on one's terms.

For a memoir to be impactful and be capable of birthing a campaign or compelling attitudinal change, one of the most distinct strengths must find expression in its inherent capacity to strike a connection or relationship of meaning with the reading public. Lending credence to this assertion, Balzer (2011) avers that "memoirs are powerful and full of feeling, and they stick with you unlike books from other genres" (p. 3). Therefore, it matters at this juncture to state that the ability of memoir to stick with a reader makes Ali's work crucial to this paper's attempt to identify FC/FGM as a brutal sociocultural and religious assault on women's sexuality in Somalia and elsewhere. Ali deserves commendation for committing her memories of the sociocultural practice to writing because what becomes clear is the fact that it takes an incredible amount of courage and bravery to write memoirs because they can bring back the pain and suffering that memoirists have endured in their journeys through life. Thus, Ali's memoir puts in focus the power of personal memories of pain being suffered and carried by victims of FC/FGM not to mention the critical role these condensed memories can play generally, to engender a change in attitude, which can lead to the abolishment of the practice. Primarily, this paper aims to accentuate the usefulness of literature (memoir) in implicating FC/FGM practices as vestiges of religious orthodoxy and an embodiment of ritualised ignorance.

### **5 . Ali's *Infidel*: Haunting Memories of FC/FGM Pain**

*Infidel* is a fascinating memoir, a crucible of personal experiences, written to document the pain, misery and, alterations in the life of the author, especially during her growing-up years. Lurking within the beautifully straightforward narrative is Ali's desire to use her memoir to push for the liberation of women's personhood and sexuality from the "mind-forged manacles" (*Infidel*, 2009, p. xii) of ignorance, traditions and religion, which FC/FGM represents amongst her people. Ali deserves commendation for finding a place within the varied issues raised in her memoir to

give prominence to how, amongst her people, Somalis, FC/FGM is representative of male supremacist ideas, which sanction female misery and pain.

Ali identifies Somalia, her homeland, as a predominantly Muslim third-world country that is overwhelmed by social stratification, religious bigotry, bitter clan rivalries, warfare and repression. These existential conditions in Somalia are superimposed on an ancient foundation of man-made tyrannies of traditional beliefs, superstition, and religious orthodoxy. She avers that FC/FGM's most virulent type, infibulation – the preference of most Somalis – is necessitated by societal agenda to own and control women's sexuality, in a bid to reaffirm the supremacy of men as enshrined in religious codes and expectations. Although Hosken (1982) and Talle (2007) posit that FC/FGM practices predate Islam, the religion has appropriated the practice because it represents Islam's interest in controlling women and feminine sexuality. Ali establishes the nexus between Islam and FC/FGM in her memoir, positing that:

Female genital mutilation predates Islam ... in Somalia, where virtually every girl is excised, the practice is always justified in the name of Islam. Uncircumcised girls will be possessed by devils, fall into vice and perdition, and become whores. Imams never discourage the practice: it keeps girls pure. (p. 31)

Although “it is worth noting that orthodox Islam does not prescribe female circumcision” (Talle, 2007, p. 104), the exploration of the obvious relationship between Islam and FC/FGM in *Infidel* privileges its vital contribution to the “debates about the relationship between religious or customary ‘cultures’ and practices identified as harmful to the health, dignity and/or sexual well-being of women” (Bennett, 2011, p. 93).

In Somalia, Ali confirms that FC/FGM procedure is carried out on teenagers between the age of five and thirteen. She also confirms that an uncircumcised girl is the subject of terrible abuse, taunts and jeers, especially from her mates and society in general, for being the carrier of an impure body. Among the Somalis, “little girls are made “pure” by having their genitals cut out” (p. 31). Ali describes the harassment and humiliation of an uncircumcised girl in her elementary school:



(...) the kids didn't even want to be seen with this girl. They spat on her and pinched her; they rubbed sand in her eyes, and once they caught her and tried to bury her in the sand behind the school. The ... teacher didn't help. Once in a while, he called her *damnin*, *dunce*, and *kintirleey*, too. (p. 30)

Somali society has a name for women/girls with intact genitalia; they are dismissed and othered derogatorily as "*kintirleey*" which means "she is with the clitoris" (p. 30).

Ali avers that in Somalia, the need to amputate the clitoris is buried deep inside a superstitious belief system and the sado-masochism of religion: "I gathered that this hideous *kintir*, my clitoris, would one day grow so long that it would swing sideways between my legs" (p. 32). Unfortunately, this is the situation in most practising societies, where the justification for the practice is not only built on religious belief, but also on the foundation of ritualised ignorance forged in timelessness and mythology. For instance, among the Yoruba (my ethnic group) of Nigeria, a popular superstition serves as the impetus for FC/FGM practice. This particular superstition, which was narrated to me by my mother, rests on the belief that if the clitoris is not removed, it would most certainly lead to the death of a baby, who ultimately dies when the clitoris touches its head as it emerges from the birth canal. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

Thus, the myth created around the potential risks of an intact clitoris by FC/FGM practising societies, together with a disregard for the relevance of the clitoris as the site of sexual desire and enjoyment for women, only serves to emphasise the open craving of patriarchal and religious societies to deny women the agency for sexual expression and the ownership of self. Ali's memoir clearly shows that the desire to clip the clitoris relies on a misogynistic power structure, especially one that views the feminine organ of pleasure with trepidation. Writing on the perceived threat of the clitoris to patriarchy, Boddy (2007) posits that:

(...) the clitoris is the female analogue of the penis, hence both sexes are endowed with qualities the penis represents. Yet far from unseating the binary archetype, they seem to sustain it by implicitly valorizing the male, subsuming the female, and advancing a model of gender that stakes presocial anatomy as its (cultural) ground. Still it is understandable that for those committed to this view, removal of the clitoris entails an irreparable diminution of feminine value – the ultimate violation of natural female "essence". (p. 59)

The clitoris - quite a sensitive part of the woman's sexual anatomy - is generally acknowledged as an erogenous zone and the primary source of sexual pleasure for women. Showing its centrality to female sexuality, Carroll (2013) describes the clitoris as "an erectile organ of the female located under the prepuce; an organ of sexual pleasure" (p. 111). The description establishes the clitoris's similarity to the male organ in erectile signification and also accentuates why patriarchy wants it amputated.

In a patriarchal world of heightened masculinity and gendered inequalities, the clitoris, being an imitation of the penis, rivals the male genitalia and is thereby marked for elimination. The amputation of the clitoris using FC/FGM practices seeks to obliterate "a girl's 'hard parts' and make a woman forever soft and feminine" (Johnson, 2000, p. 218). Additionally, by undermining the clitoris, a patriarchal world ensures that the privileged sex retains the power of sexual superiority, together with the right to enjoy and express sexual pleasure. On the other hand, practising societies being traditional and religious, expect women to be submissive and to remain coy or silent on how they feel about sex and during sexual intercourse, even within the boundaries of legitimate relationships. Therefore, it becomes evident that FC/FGM is an extension of time-forged gendered inequalities, from which women have suffered untold hardship over many centuries under the rule of privileged patriarchy. It is then safe to argue that the socio-cultural cum religious practice is unambiguously a representative of male supremacist ideology to own women's bodies and to maintain the upper hand in sexual power relations as alleged by feminists.

Not surprisingly, feminists believe that anti-women practices, such as FC/FGM, represent the reaction of an insecure patriarchal structure and the hegemony of sexual pleasure to feminine sexuality – which the clitoris represents. The underlying assumption is that men alone prefer to enjoy and express feelings of sexual pleasure. Women, by socio-religious conditioning, are expected to suppress any urge, which can result in the expression of the same feelings in traditional societies. Feminists have argued strongly that until the advent of their movement/ideology, society expected women to "cater to male sexuality with barely a nod to women's desires" (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 114). Thus, the socio-cultural and religious need to suppress the sexuality of women gives urgency to FC/FGM, which removes the offending clitoris, an action tantamount to 'clitoris envy' and the equivalent of Freudian derision of feminism as 'penis envy'.

Underscoring how these societies prepare women for a life of servitude to men, Ali illustrates how Somali girls are deliberately groomed and cultured to neglect self in deference to the approval of others: "In my childhood, the self was neglected. You pretended to be obedient, good, and pious for the approval of others" (p. 251). Therefore, patriarchal justification for FC/FGM cannot be excised from the main body, buried deep in a sexual power relationship that casts the woman as the weaker partner. In that case, the "removal of the clitoris entails an irreparable diminution of feminine value" (Boddy, 2007, p. 59), in a way that such removal forecloses the presence of feminine challenge to male supremacy. Ali's *Infidel* suggests that because the hyper-masculinity of African patriarchy undervalues the female person, it contrives FC/FGM as a medium of policing African women's bodies, often burying it under the existing religious and traditional belief system.

In *Infidel*, Ali reiterates that the need for a woman to remain a virgin until her wedding night remains an impetus for FC/FGM in Somalia and, by extension, in practising societies. To enforce total compliance with the societal code of behaviour on chastity, patriarchy contrives superstition and myths around female sexuality. On this ground, disincentives to any challenge to patriarchy's dictates on women's acceptable behaviour are couched in supernatural terms. The reason for this societal demand on women is not far-fetched as overtly patriarchal "African (...) societies supported sexual norms that minimised misconduct and capriciousness. Depicting sexuality in supernatural terms thus prevents deviance and excesses, unites the collective and reinforces the need for socially acceptable conducts" (Izugbara, 2011, p. 537). These societies are known to indoctrinate their female members, starting from a tender age, to shun deviance and rebelliousness and, to accept practices like FC/FGM, despite the pain and complications associated with them.

In Somalia and most practising societies, FC/FGM is projected as an honourable act, a rite of passage that solidifies families and maintains a societal sense of order and cohesion. Ali intones that society ties the virginity of girls to the honour of their families. Therefore, "(...) if a girl's virginity is despoiled, she not only obliterates her honor, she also damages the honor of her father, uncles, brothers and male cousins. There is nothing worse than to be the agent of such catastrophe" (p. 6). Interestingly, the custodians of family honour are essentially the male members of a girl's

family. However, an understanding of honour that privileges men as its sole custodians underscores how misogyny and male supremacist ideology are deployed to service enlightened self-interests.

The honour of Ali's family is at stake following the blunt refusal of her father – a US-trained anthropologist who prides himself as a modern man – to have any of his two daughters circumcised. Ali's father's position clearly shows that, all over societies where FC/FGM exists as a norm, there are pockets of resistance inspired either by exposure to western education as exemplified by Ali's father or through the agency of proselytisation (Joshua in Ngugi's *The River Between* and Catherine in Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* readily come to mind). With a personal conviction built on the foundation of western education, Ali's father, Abeh, vitiates FC/FGM as a backward cultural practice of which his daughters would not be allowed to partake: "My father was a modern man and considered the practice barbaric. He had always insisted that his daughters be left uncut. In this he was quite extra-ordinarily forward-thinking" (p. 31). However, whether in rural or urban areas, those who live in traditional Third World societies always have their paths dogged by the influence of culture. Trapped in a timeless partition described as 'tradition', these peoples are often "separated from contemporary experiences, collectively identified as 'modernity'" (Bennett, 2011, p. 92). It is then instructive that Ali's grandma, as a custodian of ancient customs, repudiates her son-in-law's claim to modernity which is Ali's father's valid ground for denouncing FC/FGM. Therefore, when the opportunity presents itself – Ali's father is in jail as a political prisoner, and her mother travels on a trade mission – it dawns on Ali that: "Grandma would ensure that the old traditions would be respected in the old ways" (p. 31).

Ali's grandma's scant regard for her son-in-law's denouncement of FC/FGM represents the triumph of tradition over modernity, which is often the reality in practising societies, where even educated and sophisticated persons come under intense pressure to conform to a social norm. Ali's grandma's support for FC/FGM serves as an acknowledgement of what the alternative holds for Ali and her sister in a society that attaches purity and marriageability to the practice. The old woman defends herself against the accusation of cultural misconduct and betrayal of trust, following the circumcision of her granddaughters without the permission of any of their parents. Confirming her 'good' intention and the clarity of her purpose, the old woman resorts: "Imagine

your daughters ten years from now – who would marry them with long *kontirs* dangling halfway down their legs?” (p. 34). Ali's grandma's position also exposes the dilemma being faced by parents in practising societies, especially the reluctant ones, who face the challenge of whether to accept or turn their backs on a practice that offers their children the benefits of societal acceptability and, ultimately, marriage.

*Infidel* joins the rank of other literary works which have indicted FC/FGM as a painful and dangerous procedure that violates the rights of women to the sexuality and dignity of a person. Like other works of the same category, *Infidel* portrays the intense pain suffered by victims as well as the grim realities and grave complications associated with FC/FGM practices. Ali describes her circumcision at the age of five:

(...) an itinerant traditional circumciser from the blacksmith clan, picked up a pair of scissors. With the other hand, he caught hold of the place between my legs and started tweaking it, like Grandma milking a goat ... Then the scissors 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 ... When the sewing was finished, the man cut the thread off with his teeth. (p. 32)

Ali's recollection and description of her circumcision are detailed enough to point to the crudity and cruelty of FC/FGM. Ali's vivid accounts of her circumcision procedure elicit feelings of empathy for her and rage towards a cultural practice that inflicts indescribable pain on a five-year-old child to guarantee chastity and the purity of her body.

Ali equally employs the circumcision experience of her younger sister, Haweya – who is circumcised with her at age four – to illustrate how FC/FGM operations are sometimes marked by accidents, which can cause additional lifelong pain, trauma, and physical scars: “I do remember Haweya's bloodcurdling howls (...) Haweya must have struggled more than (...) I did, or perhaps the women were exhausted after fighting us, and slipped because the man made some bad cuts on Haweya's thighs. She carried the scars of them her whole life” (pp. 32-33). It is imperative to situate Haweya's accident within the paradigm of what is 'normal'; that is, the human body's reaction to pain, especially when the reacting body is that of a four-year-old. Haweya's resistance

is not only the normal bodily reaction to pain; it also represents her stoic protest against a cultural practice which inflicts excruciating pain on an individual to satisfy societal norms and expectations. Notwithstanding the reality that practising societies use FC/FGM to gauge and celebrate a person's display of courage and bodily control, the expressions of pain that manifest in muffled groans and ear-piercing shrieks during the procedure and in tears of pain during urination later, show the limit of human resistance to pain.

*Infidel* also joins the body of literary works that have explored the complications associated with FC/FGM practices. Ali's memoir identifies difficult urination and the possibility of post-circumcision bladder damage due to the retention of urine: "(...) my bladder was bursting, but it hurt too much to pee ... when I urinated the flash of pain was as sharp as when I had been (sic) cut" (p. 33). The author implicates FC/FGM for its capacity to cause adverse health complications in the bodies of circumcised/mutilated women. One of such complications is bladder damage because a freshly circumcised woman/girl would usually hold urine in the bladder longer than it is necessary, fearful of the excruciating pain which usually results from the contact of urine with a fresh wound. Furthermore, Ali identifies bed wetting as another implication for FC/FGM victims. "We all started wetting our beds after the circumcision" (p. 34), she writes. Mandara (2000) reports difficulty with urination and how "30.3 percent" (p. 102) of examined circumcised women suffer from vesicovaginal fistulae (VVF) – an abnormal condition in which there is a connection between the bladder and vagina, leading to uncontrolled leakage of urine. The bedwetting episode of Ali and Haweya, which starts after they are circumcised/mutilated, establishes a correlation with the prevalence of VVF incidents among circumcised women, as reported by Mandara (2000).

Since FC/FGM purportedly safeguards virginity, curbs sexual desire and panders to religious sentiments on purity, sex and sexuality talks are considered taboo and disallowed in practising societies to perpetuate a state of silence and ignorance: "Somalis almost never talk about sexuality directly. The subject is shameful and dirty" (*Infidel*, p. 112). Thus, a Somali woman's sexuality belongs to her family, which claims the right to own that body by sewing up the woman's genitalia to guarantee her virginity and prevent her from dishonouring the family. In this sense, no one tells a Somali woman who the owners of her body are because she just knows:

In our household, the whole subject of what was between your legs was taboo ... I was a Somali woman, and therefore my sexuality belonged to the owner of my family: my father or my uncles. It was obvious that I absolutely had to be a virgin at marriage because to do otherwise would damage the honor of my father and his whole clan – uncles, brothers, male cousins – forever and irretrievably. The place between my legs was sewn up to prevent it. It would be broken only by my husband. (p. 72)

Patriarchy, while freeing itself from the demands of imposed chastity, places that burden between the legs of women. To perpetuate the myth of superiority, patriarchy disregards the pain and complications that FC/FGM imposes on women's sexuality and health.

Even on the wedding night, avowed as one of the most memorable nights in a person's life, many circumcised/mutilated women only manage to live through the horrors of that night as sex becomes an ordeal for them. For an infibulated newlywed, on the night that is known in Somalia as 'Night of Defloration', sex is excruciating and brutal because tradition expects the groom to either cut the woman open with a knife, take her to the hospital for a deinfibulation operation, or prove his masculinity by pushing through the scar tissue between her legs with his penis. In Ali's memoir, three different experiences of first-time sex (night of defloration) exist to buttress this surreal ordeal: that of Haweya's friend, Sahra; Ali's friend, Jawahir; and Ali's own experience. Recounting her ordeal, Sahra:

(...) told Haweya what it was like when Abdallah had first tried to penetrate her after they were married: pushing his way into her, trying to tear open the scar between her legs, how much it had hurt. She said Abdallah had wanted to cut her open with a knife, because she was sewn up so tight that he couldn't push his penis inside. She described him holding the knife in his hand while she screamed and begged him not to. (pp. 90-91)

When Abdallah could no longer stand the intense screams and tears of the pain of his wife, "he agreed to take her to the hospital to be cut" (p. 91). Thus, Abdallah's decision to discontinue coitus in preference for Sahra's deinfibulation in a hospital saves both of them from a horrendous ordeal fraught with the dangers of physical and psychological injuries.

Jawahir's first sexual experience is more complicated than Sahra's. Unlike Abdallah, who decides to excuse himself from the encumbrance of cultural expectation and pseudo-masculinity, Jawahir's husband prefers to tow the line of tradition. In Jawahir's case, Ali, her husband: "(...) didn't cut her with a knife, just with his penis. It took a long time, and it hurt" (p. 113). At the end of the couple's first sexual intercourse, Jawahir suffers genital injuries that require her to: "apply Dettol to the parts that were bleeding" (p. 113). The author succeeds in casting FC/FGM as a practice that ensures the domination and brutalisation of women through sex; despite sex being one of the most intense and alluring experiences of humans.

The triad experiences of FC/FGM-related coitus pain shared by Ali continue with the details of her own 'Night of Defloration' experience, which is not remarkably different from that of her friends. Providing a vivid description of that horrible night with her husband, Mahmud, she writes: "He gasped and shoved and sweated with the efforts of forcing open my scar. It was painful and took so long. I gritted my teeth and endured the pain until I became numbed" (p. 143). In unflattering terms, which show how ugly sex often turns out for infibulated women like her, Ali describes the aftermath of sex with her husband: "My scar hurt so much that I could barely stand up" (p. 143).

Sadly, the narratives of the sexual encounters of infibulated women, exemplify a deliberate attempt to situate how FC/FGM damage the sexual life of millions of African women. Thus, it is easy to conclude that due to unpleasant sexual experiences, some circumcised/mutilated women may develop psychological problems, including frigidity – an aversion to sex – which in turn can lead to marital problems arising from an inability to conceive. The position above is supported by the studies of Lightfoot-Klein (1989) and Toubia (1994), which report on circumcised/mutilated women's tendency to show anxiety over whether their lack of sexual satisfaction would prevent them from getting pregnant, thereby putting a strain on their marriage due to childbearing expectations in practising societies. Ali's descriptions of painful sex in her memoir reinforce Boddy's (2007) argument that the matter of "female sexuality is ... a medical and moral issue" (p. 51). In that light, FC/FGM practices should not be tolerated, owing to the incalculable damage they do to the sex[uality] of women.



*Infidel* also attests to the fact that FC/FGM-related fatalities are often recorded. These fatalities are products of the crude manner and conditions under which the operations happen. An average reader cannot miss the implication of Ali's circumciser using bare teeth to "cut the thread off" (p. 32) the bleeding wound between her legs during her circumcision. Ali's memoir also shows that FC/FGM procedures are done without anaesthesia and sanitisers, thereby causing horrific pain, bleeding and, sometimes, death from infected wounds: "Many girls die during or after their excision, from infection. Other complications cause enormous, more or less lifelong pain" (p. 31). Without equivocation, the memoirist rejects FC/FGM because: "The entire procedure was torture for all" (p. 33) women who ever experienced it. The portrayal of the intense pain, suffering, and complications that circumcised/mutilated women endure in the immediacy of FC/FGM operation and much later send a strong signal from the author that this ancient ritual to the gods of virginity and chastity have no place in today's world.

Furthermore, it is imperative to state that Ali's *Infidel* succeeds in bringing to the fore the existence of another form of FC/FGM, which was thought to have been abandoned or had gone into extinction. Known among the Somalis as *Faroooni*, this form is more severe than infibulation, already documented as the most invasive by scholars (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2000; WHO, 1995). *Faroooni* is so extreme that it can be easily said that victims have had their entire genitalia scraped away. Ali encounters a distressed victim of *faroooni* while working in The Netherlands as an interpreter for a Dutch doctor, who could not understand his patient's unwillingness to undress for a scheduled medical examination of her genitalia. Ali recounts the feelings of shock and horror they have when confronted with the sight of *faroooni* circumcision:

(...) when she climbed onto the table and he looked between her legs, he snapped back with shock, and swore. Then he angrily ripped his gloves off, because no steel tool was getting inside that. This girl had no genitals at all, just a completely smooth panel of scar tissue between her legs. This was the *faroooni*, the excision so extreme that the woman's whole genitals are scraped off and mend into a hard band of dark skin. I had never seen one [...] but I knew what it was. The doctor, though, thought the girl had been burned. The whole medical team seemed shocked. (p. 213)

The extremity of farooni can shock every right-thinking person, forcing one to question why such extreme brutality is necessary to guarantee that a girl remains a virgin and chaste as legislated by misogynistic expectations.

Ali's portrayals of FC/FGM in her work can shock the reader into action against these practices, which she also succeeds in casting as a kind of gender-based violence. While appropriating her personal experience and those of other circumcised/mutilated women, Ali proceeds to privilege FC/FGM "as a kind of trauma" (*Infidel*, p. 231) from which victims hardly ever recover. With clarity and courage, Ali makes a personal declaration in *Infidel* against all forms of FC/FGM procedure, calling the practice cruelty against women. She writes: "The excision of women is cruel on many levels. It is physically cruel and painful; it sets girls up for a lifetime of suffering" (p. 140). The exploration of FC/FGM in Ali's work serves as an impetus for ongoing efforts that strongly dismiss the practice over its inherent capacity to negatively alter the lives, sexuality and wellness of millions of African women/girls based on traditional and religious dogmas contrived by patriarchy.

## **6. Ali's Metamorphosis: From a Mutilated and Wounded Child to Committed Activist**

*Infidel* chronicles the metamorphosis of a wounded child into a committed activist. Ali deserves commendation for sharing the gory details of her own experience in her memoir to undermine the planks of culture and religion on which FC/FGM leans in practising societies. Ali's memoir also validates earlier fictional works, such as Ngugi's *The River Between* and Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* that accentuate certain life-threatening issues associated with FC/FGM practices. Being a product of a society, which is both traditional and religious, and born into a world in the firm grip of men who demand the complete surrender of women to codes of suppression, Ali's work must be recognised as an act of deviance and protest literature. However, the defiance and rebellion of the memoirist have come with their price. According to Levin (2009), Ali succeeds in giving accounts of her own transformation as well as many FC/FGM victims: "from blithe, frolicking children into subdued, saddened spirits, whose earlier robust rebelliousness has been quelled" (p. 3). She also narrates how FC/FGM significantly alters the life of her sister, Haweya, the most energetic and rebellious of three siblings: "Haweya was never the

same afterwards (...) She had horrible nightmares, and during the day began stomping off to be alone. My once cheerful, playful little sister changed” (p. 33). Subdued and dazed by the brutality of her circumcision, Haweya is forever lost in the wall of protection that she constructs in her mind as a shield from the pain and trauma of patriarchal-mandated violence.

Therefore, this paper praises the audacity of courage represented by Ali's documentation of FC/FGM experiences in her memoir, *Infidel*. Born and raised in a society structured to culturise and nativise girls/women into the silence of acceptance of patriarchy and its oppressive tendencies, the exposure of FC/FGM pains by Ali is not only an act of defiance but that of profound bravery too. Interestingly, there is a Somali proverb that goes thus: “When you're born as a woman, you must live as a woman” (p. 49). The foregoing anachronistic proverb derives both its origin and strength from the misogynistic belief that a woman is born into playing second fiddle. Hence, Ali's raised voice against FC/FGM in Somalia – a society where the voices of women are muffled under cultural and religious manipulations – signals that the author has taken seriously the challenge: “(...) to expose *women's* ordeals despite patriarchal-mandated silence.” (Asaah, 2009, p. 85, not in original)

## 7. Conclusion

Recent times have witnessed a trend in which renewed interest and much premium are being placed on the agency and specificity of FC/FGM-inspired memoirs. Ali's *Infidel* appropriates the memoir genre to show self-consciousness, personal experiences of pain, trauma, misery, an awareness of human realities and bodily integrity to deconstruct the burden that FC/FGM places on women. The memories of pains documented in the text validate appeals for its abolishment as the personal accounts of Ali and the stories of other women reinforce the urgency to put a stop to FC/FGM practices worldwide. The paper finds that the hermeneutics of *Infidel* signpost the capacity of literature to implicate FC/FGM and other practices contrived by patriarchy to dominate women. Ali seems to have heeded the battle call of feminists for women to rise to the occasion and destroy every vestige of patriarchy wherever and in whichever forms they exist. Without any doubt, Ali employs the memoir genre for an unambiguous, authorial excoriation of FC/FGM practices in her homeland, Somalia and everywhere. But aside from the explicit condemnation of these practices, which *Infidel* privileges, the personal accounts of FC/FGM in the text strike a connection or relationship of meaning with the reading public than earlier fictional texts. Therefore, this paper finds and recommends that in the push to eradicate FC/FGM practices worldwide, the voices of victims must be recognized, accentuated and deployed for maximum impact because the most persuasive campaigners against these practices remain the survivors themselves.

### About the Author

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