

The Exploration of Women's Suffering Under Patriarchy in the Work of Waris Dirie's *Desert Dawn*

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▪ p-ISSN: 2663-3299

▪ e-ISSN: 2663-3841

▪ L-ISSN: 2663-3299

Abstract: *The history of the sufferings of a woman is tricky, turbulent but therapeutic as well. Women through the ages has suffered either at the hand of religion or culture. Male dominancy has reduced woman mostly into a second-class denizens of the world. One-half of the human race is still living amidst cruel practices. Is she really so helpless or impotent? In the character of Waris Dirie, we see she is not. Yes, she does become one when she doesn't have an understanding of her strength. She is exploited in the name of patriarchy. She falls prey to certain prejudicial practices ordained by culture or tradition or providence. This research is meant to highlight the travails of Waris Dirie and dispel the impression of a woman being 'an incomplete being' as promoted in a male-identified society. It is time, in the words of Mary Wolston Craft, that a degree of reason, virtue and knowledge should replace outdated cultural practices against women. (Wollstonecraft, 1796)*

Key Words: Race, Religion, Woman, Father, Waris Dirie, Patriarchy, Culture, World

Introduction

The history of oppression against women is as old as the woman herself. The Athenians used to keep a wife in complete seclusion under strict prohibitions required by the law. So much so that she was watched over by a special vanguard. There are instances of her remaining all her life a minor, under the control of her guardian, who might be her father or her husband. Moreover, in primitive societies, prostitution of hospitality was in vogue. According to the custom of the time, a woman would yield herself to the guest visitor. Another tradition which was popularly practised was among Babylonians, where a woman was bound to yield herself at least once in a lifetime to a passerby for

money, and the same money was later contributed to the wealth of the temple.

In the days of yore, the Jews had much the same customs as the Arabs. There were times when polygamous patriarchs put away their wives at will. It was a common practice and was not once disapproved by the people of the time. Similarly, in societies where the custom of blood price was common, only a nominal sum was demanded if the victim happened to be of the female sex. Her value compared to man was like the slaves compared with a free man (Beauvoir, 1956).

World history is replete with resilient characters. They have always served as beacons for humanity looking for direction amidst the turbulent sea of life.

These men and women folks have, during their lifetimes, resisted evil in different forms and manifestations and have defended what generally is considered to be right. For this to do, strength of character and conviction of belief is required. Character strengths, when applied, prevent not only unwanted life outcomes but are important for their own sake as markers and indeed causes of healthy life-long development ____ (Peterson, 2011). History bears testimony to the fact that great souls have, of course, worked against the firmly entrenched beliefs, cultures and traditions when they defy human rights.

Stereotypes, an unfortunate chapter in human history, has contributed to the intellectual decadence of the developing and underdeveloped world. Stereotype refers to obsessive fixation with particular ideas. It is difficult to resist a stuck-in-the-mud approach let alone challenge it. That is why vicious cultural environments, like the one mentioned, brazenly continue to promote gender stereotypes (Watch, 2017). To rebel against cultural stereotypes, surmount the odds and then, on the contrary, ascend to glory is next to impossible. 'Odds', as are summed up by Rosa Park in a beautiful quote "*There is just so much hurt, disappointment, and oppression one can take*". *The line between reason and madness grows thinner*" (Theoharis, 2015). 'Odds' vary from society to society. For example, in Pashtunwali, a male is not allowed to be in association with women, for there are chances that he may lose his manhood and would be reduced to the status of a eunuch with time.

Adhering to the 'good' in one's culture while, at the same time, challenging the 'bad' and securing an iconic status for oneself in an all-around hostile environment is, therefore, humanly daring. The list of such men and women is long, but few names are a must mention, like that of Moses, Jesus and the seal of the prophets, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). On the other hand, among women

in history, names like Rabia Bin Basri, Malala of Maiwand and Joan of Arc stand out.

Objectives of study

1. To bring to fore the novel *Desert Dawn* and share the travails of Waris Dirie with the readers.
2. To highlight the negative impacts of patriarchy in African culture.
3. To help inspire girls of third world countries not to yield but keep struggling.
4. To show the negatives in an apparently acceptable culture.
5. Sensitize society to the evils of patriarchy.

Methodology

The method adopted for this research was qualitative in nature. Different sources consulted for this research included Monique Wittig's *Theory of Disintegration of Culturally Constituted Bodies*, *The History of Sexuality* by Michael Foucault and Simone-de-Beauvoir's book *'The Second Sex'* and an article, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*. A chapter in Simon-de-Beauvoir's book entitled as, *'Patriarchal Times and Classical Antiquity'* was my prime source of information and inspiration. This chapter on the history of patriarchy has encompassed different cultures and civilization throughout the history of man. What particularly proved to be a turning point in the study of this book was the concept of *'Womb and Tomb'* given by Simon-de-Beauvoir. While reading the novel *'Desert Dawn, I, from the time, learnt about the culture of FGM in Africa and was shocked to know. My curiosity drove me to know more about Waris Dirie, and as a result, I decided to highlight the miseries she underwent and how bravely she fought despite a strict patriarchic set up. The culture of patriarchy has, from time to time, derived strength from religion especially*

monotheistic religion like Christianity. St. Thomas once said, “*a woman only an occasional and incomplete being, a kind of imperfect man. Man is above woman as Christ is above man*”. He believed that man was the image but not a woman and went on that if God is the beginning and end of every creature then man is the beginning and end of a woman. Made Patriarch believe that she is made from him and for him. Such statements have rendered the 'weaker sex' further weaker and have contributed more to the miseries of women across the globe, particularly in Third World Countries. Patriarchy in some cultures is so ingrained that many take it for granted, consider it something normal and would never think of speaking against it. It is patriarchy that constructs gender. How the story in the case of Waris Dirie is constructed and later enacted by a patriarch, but she decides to take a stand and resist patriarchy with the help of her mother. She refused to become a 'woman' in the patriarchal sense under cultural compulsions. The medium through which womanhood is constructed is the body, a passive medium, a white paper through which cultural meanings are inscribed. The body in patriarchy is a powerful medium and how this Waris Dirie refused to be an accessible medium for her patriarch father.

Significance of Study

What should this research aim at? Firstly, to highlight the negative impact of patriarchy on our society. Secondly, to motivate the same age group not to give up in the 'do or die' situation. Thirdly, to showcase how culture molds behavior patterns and how difficult it is, especially for a female, to break the glass ceiling.

This research article encompasses the cultural aspects that have played a formative role in the life of iconic Waris Dirie.. Religious beliefs and their influence on superstitious societies and how it shapes the

general tribal thinking and thus formulate cultures are not within the ambit of this research article. Dummy democracies which promote retrogressive culture through sugar coating could be an interesting topic for future research. Presently, the study, no doubt, is reflective of 'contextualized Patriarchy', but at some places, readers find some interesting 'conceptual stretching.

Discussion

The Culture of Patriarchy

The word 'culture' has come from the Latin word, *cultura*, which means to 'cultivate'. Culture, generally speaking, refers to a set of traditions and customs that people have created and developed later over time. People usually have an attachment with it, and that is why they give it greater significance. Every culture encompasses manners, dress, language, religion, morality and even law. Tylor, an evolutionary theorist, believed in the possibility of arranging all human societies in a hierarchical order by comparing their different yet core institutions. His definition of culture remains the one most widely cited by anthropologists everywhere, which according to him, is a complex whole that encompasses many things like knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and even law, along with other capabilities that human beings acquired with the passage of time. (Eller, 2014). In this complex whole, it is almost impossible for an individual, especially a female, to challenge the established system and run the risk of her life. In patriarchal society gender inequality is as common as it is uncommon in the developed world. Generally speaking, culture is synonymous with improvement both of mind and manner; therefore, apparently, the word 'suffering' does not go well with the word, 'culture', but we shouldn't forget that cultural patterns vary from country to country and what is considered sinful in one culture may be totally acceptable, even

praised, in another and that is best known as cultural relativism. (Academic American Encyclopedia) Infibulation is a never heard of term in English culture, but the culture where Waris Dirie grew up it is a normal practice, known to everybody and accepted by all without question.

Patriarchy has come from the German language, which originally means 'the father chief of a tribe (contributors, 2019). In this sense, now used more especially of the 'patriarch' of the Old Testament, i.e Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with their forefathers and twelve sons of Jacob. ([Britannica, 2017](#)) A more inevitable and natural result of patriarchy is the oppression and suppression of women in several forms and manifestations. An overview of history, for example, tells us that women, during different times and eras have been excluded from major institutions such as a church, state, universities, and other male-centred professions. In very rare circumstances, even if they've been given a chance to serve, it has generally been at very subordinate, second-class levels. Marilyn French goes so far as to argue that historically women's oppression has amounted to a form of slavery. It is apathy at its worst when you don't have the right expression to define a state in which an individual does not have rights over her own bodies, the matter pertaining to her own sexuality, her decision when to marry and whom to marry or marry at all, to reproduce or to get divorced, in a particular area where they may not have received education or have experience, practice a trade or profession, or move about as they deem fit in the world? Women in most cases, work all their lives laboriously but without receiving any payment for their labor. ([Johson, 2004](#)). It is as if what they eat and drink is enough reward and that they instead should be grateful to men for them. In a highly patriarchal society, women are thought to have been made from supernumerary bone.¹ Some scholars think that the idea of

'supernumerary bone' has come from religion.

1. Supernumerary is said of a person or thing that is in excess to the normal number esp. (extra person). Someone or something that is not part of the regular body but associated with it in either due to need or emergency; something that is employed in addition to the regular company. Simply, an actor appears on stage but is not speaking or saying anything.

On the Run from Patriarchy

The resilient character under discussion who fought against all odds is of Waris Dirie. She was born in Africa. She lived the life of nomads. She shared all common traits with other girls of her village. She loved animals, especially goats and camels. She loved her pastoral lifestyle, style-tending the herd, milking them and watching out for predators. Like other Africans, her family was always on the move, constantly travelling, never staying at one place for more than a week. Her family lived by seasons and sun not on artificial time. Knowledge in her community was passed by word of mouth. There was no written script in Africa until 1973 ([Dirie, 2002](#)). The only two forces that reigned supreme in this benighted environment were culture and religion. Culture according to Lindholm in such an environment becomes objective reality. Especially if the set up stereotyped or outdated. In such cliches arrangement, a collective entity that usually evolves during the time and last for as long as ages sometimes, with roles specified for each member, having a set of identities and morals that member must follow in order to keep strengthening the group as a whole. The first and foremost task that this complex system has is that of survival task. To accomplish this task is not easy because it must cope with certain constraints and pressures that could

be ecological, political, economic, structural, and technical. (Lindholm, 2007).

Psychology says that children rebel purely out of non-conformity and non-compliance (Pickhardt, 2019). To decide to run away from home is not an easy decision. Dirie ran away from home at the tender age of 13. Why she had to take this decision because she was not ready to comply with the power of patriarchy. Women are an important pillar of African society; they contribute much by doing most of the work and never shying away from any responsibility. Yet women are powerless to make decisions. They have no say, sometimes not even in whom they will marry. 'I knew I was helpless before my father', says Waris Dirie. In order to escape an arranged marriage with a 60 years old man at the behest of her father. She was to be the fourth wife of that old man. Dirie's story of escape is heart-rending. Both *Desert Dawn* and *Desert Flower* are autobiographical novels and have detailed descriptions of her travail under patriarchy. How she landed in London and started working as a maid, especially the way she started her career. London became her launching pad. she embarked on her successful career as a fashion model (Kirkus, 2018). When one day, she returned home after having undergone a drastic change in her personality. She writes, "my family treated me like a stupid, ignorant child, and it was hopeless for me to protest. My mother insisted, 'No you have to change' (Dirie, 2002, p.183)". This is the power of culture and patriarchy. Patriarchy shaping elements are its male-centric approach to everything. The society under patriarchy is male-dominated, male-identified and male-centred in character. But it is just the tip of the iceberg. At its core, patriarchy is a set of symbols and ideas that constitutes a culture embodied by everything from conversation to literature (Johnson, 2004).

The culture of patriarchy has always played a dominant role in shaping human

action and thinking. Patriarchy never allows a woman to play the lead role. She is treated like a chattel in tribal society, always at the beck and call of man. She even thinks the way she is told to think. Independent thinking is unthinkable in patriarchy. The underlying argument in favour of extreme patriarchy has come from Simon De Beauvoir in his famous work, *The Second Sex*; 'women, very simple, she is nothing but a womb or an ovary. The word 'female' with its six alphabet is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man, the adjective 'female' has the sound of insult' (Beauvoir, 1956). Of all, the most dangerous idea of how to ensure complete control is the Juridical Notion of Power, which according to Monique Wittig, is the regulation of political life in a purely negative way, i.e., limitation, prohibition, regulation, control and even protection. In Africa, patriarchy is so well entrenched that even women sing-song in favor of it. In one of the famous African songs, as quoted in *Desert Dawn*, a woman has been compared with goats and camels. If a camel needs a tether so does a woman need a husband.

*If a camel needs to be tied to its tether
So a husband needs you to run errands for him,
And the same husband needs to beat you for
the wrong you haven't committed. Simply it
means that a woman beaten by a man is
considered to be a normal act.* (Dirie, 1998, p.22)

Waris Dirie belonged to the family of nomads. One day too tired to keep her eyes open, a goat went missing. Sharing the travail on page 75 of *Desert Dawn* she writes: "my father counted every single animal in the evening before he put them in the corral and every morning before he let them out to graze. As soon as he started to count, I stood behind my mother. He slowly counted those animals up to 50. The higher the count, the closer I stood to my mother. I wish I could climb inside of her. He called my name, 'Waris come over here. I didn't move and he walked towards me. 'Did you hear me calling you?

I knew I was going to get killed anyway so I might as well take a chance-anything. I thought about running but where would I go. When my father was mad, he reminded me of an angry lion. He had no mercy-nothing stopped him. Lions are like kings or queens. They sit there in silence all day and when they are hungry, they kill gracefully, elegantly. They go directly for the muzzle or the throat, and death is almost instant" (Dirie, 1998, p.76)

The touchstone of gender inequality varies from society to society. Tracing back gender inequality takes to the patriarchal societies. Patriarchy and gender inequality go hand in hand. Patriarchy derives strength from gender inequality. Even those who are the victim of gender inequality hold patriarchy in high esteem because they have never experienced life out of a patriarchal system. Gender inequality is a form of inequality, that is distinctly different from other inequalities, be it in the economic or social or political sector. In some societies, gender inequality is imperceptible. In others, it is direct yet subtle and is the result of the patriarchal values that are fully operational in society. Such patriarchal values have origin in the already prevalent or pre-existing differences that people have accepted with time. The differences may either be in economic order between male and females but at the same time may be because of gendered social norms and perceptions. This gender inequality has resulted in eve-teasing and all other forms of atrocities against women (Ghosh, 2011).

Waris Dirie, while sharing her painful emotion and physical memories about infibulation on page 11-12 of *Desert Dawn* says, "as a child, I actually begged my mother to have circumcision done because I heard it would make me pure and clean" (Dirie, 2002). This association of sin with sex has a long history and what is known as the Repressive Hypothesis (Foucault, 1978). Waris Dirie writes in *Desert Dawn* on page 12

that when she was only as tall as a goat, her mother held her tight while an old woman, who of course, wanted a medical practitioner severed off her clitoris and the inner part of her vagina and sewed the wound closed in her own traditional way. The so-called lady doctor had left only a tiny matchstick-sized opening for urine and menstrual blood. At the time, I had no idea what was going on because we never, ever talk about it. All I was told was that it would protect my virginity. Detailed discussion on the topic was taboo. She wasn't the first in the family. She writes how her own sister had undergone the same procedure and how she had died from an unhealed wound.

She writes, '*Although no one in the family would tell me, I am certain she bled to death or died from infection*'. Female Genital Mutilation, also better known as FGM, is as common in Africa as circumcision in the rest of the world. A woman with an intact vagina is considered to be whore in the African culture. In the case of women, it is the mark of subjugation ordained by patriarchy. It is such a scar that a woman is supposed to carry all her life. Female Genital Mutilation involves all the nasty practices imaginable. It causes external injuries to the female genital organs. All inhuman things are done either in the name of religion or culture or tradition. It is an age-old custom that is a violation not only of the essential rights of women's but children rights as well because most of the girls made to undergo FGM are under eighteen. A recent survey by the United Nations Children's Fund shows that almost 130 million girls and women worldwide have undergone some or other form of FGM. (Oviya, 2021)

Father Versus Daughter

In the year 1995 when, after having settled in her new life, having all the perks and privileges, the only wish left to be fulfilled was to meet her parents, especially her mother. There came an interview proposal

from BBC on Waris Dirie's life which she accepted on the condition that they would somehow help her meet her parents in Somalia, to which they agreed. 1995 the BBC proposed making a documentary about my life as a supermodel. With their help, after the initial hiccups, she finally met her parents, but she discovered that even after quite a time there nothing had changed, especially the patriarchal mindset. Here is how she has shared her story in her book *Desert Dawn* on page 178.

She writes that she had been self-dependent right from the start. It was because of the place where she grew and trained. For example, she knew how to cut her hair as well as those of her other brothers and sisters. There were no barbers in town and Rashid complained that his hair was getting too long. But when I picked up the scissors, everyone said, 'Ah, no, no.

I asked, 'what do you mean?

They said, 'you can't do that.

No Waris, that's not the point,' my father said flatly and waved his finger in the air.

I said, 'I know how to cut hair. You trust me.

'well, what's the point then?

You can't have a woman cut a man's hair.

I said, papa, 'don't insult my intelligence. [\(Dirie, 2002, pp. 178-179\)](#)

The way woman's rights are crushed has led to worldwide awareness among female. However, this awareness is still quite low, especially among developing or underdeveloped nations. The persistent rise in cultural or religious justifications sought for women's inequality has made a woman a real victim in the eyes of the world. It is one of the important reasons why it is so significant for women's rights to be recognized at least as human rights. Many people, even today, are unable or unwilling to perceive what the problem is or how big the problem is. Even today many serious inequalities on the basis of gender are still regarded by many people as trivial, natural, or culturally normal. Some of the most

egregious and obvious violations of woman's basic rights are taking place at places which are generally better off and considered to be corridors of power. In many countries, even during peacetime, a woman's dignity is not safe. There are instances where it has been seen that the most dangerous environment has been her home, the place she lives in and trust the most. The trickiest situation arises while we try to analyze the public/private dichotomy regarding woman's rights. The right to privacy on the part of the male is a hurdle in the way of protecting the rights of women.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 16 is only about marriage and family. It specifies unambiguously: That family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society. That marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. That man and woman having attained complete age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. That they are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and have the right to its dissolution" (United Nations, 1948). Free will and full consent are terms too ideal to be found in the dictionary of a patriarch. Waris Dirie ran away from the forced marriage with a 60 years old man who already had three wives. It was her father who after having got assurance of four camels from the old man, had finalized the marriage. Had it not been for the mother to help her run away, she would have easily become his prey [_\(Okin, 1998\)](#)

Sex is a secret thing in African Culture [\(Dirie, Desert Dawn, 2002\)](#), Page No 47. While sharing her scariest moment about sex one night when I saw my mother lying on her sleeping mat on the other side of our round hut. My father was on top of her. She didn't say anything. I got up to see what was going on and went over to them. I reached out to get my mother's attention, and the next thing

I knew I was flying across the room. My father grabbed my leg and pitched me up in the air backwards. I was so stunned I didn't even cry out; it knocked the wind right out of me.

According to the UN, the population of females in the world is estimated at 3,904,727,342 or 3,905 million or 3.905 billion, representing 49.58% of the world population. How can this whopping number of people go unnoticed and suffer silently at the hand of patriarchy? Waris writes about her miserable conditions on Page 75 of *Desert Dawn*: "*I wanted my father to see me, to look at his daughter right in the face. People all over the world have looked at pictures of my face. Photographers and magazines have paid a lot of money to take photographs of me. I wondered if my father even knew what I looked like. When I was a girl, all of his attention was on the boys. Girls were supposed to bring tea and go away. I was never to speak to a man unless I was spoken to; I was barely allowed to stay nearby when the adults were talking. Now I had lived.*" (Dirie, 2002, p.103).

A classic example of strong patriarchy is on page twenty-four of *Desert Dawn* as portrayed by Waris Dirie, where she laments the bitter reality in some societies like the one in which she lived where a woman is not even counted a member of her husband's tribe. Strange enough that despite being a wife and mother, her brothers or relatives usually present her side when there arises a matter of dispute. She adds in her own words, "When my mother married my father, she did not become a member of Darood because of the marriage, her alliances remained with the Hawiye". Dirie in the preceding lines, has

shared the plight of her own mother in *Desert Dawn* (Dirie, 2002).

Conclusion

It can be safely assumed that not all woman is daring and lucky like Waris Dirie to break the cult of patriarchy and emerge as successful lady now working for the rights of other women. Woman in developing and underdeveloped countries are still as miserable as she was 50 years ago. This research has highlighted only a minutia of what is the case with women. The constraint put in place for a woman are so many that Simon-de-Beauvoir had to say about the word 'woman', she is not born a woman, but she becomes one Waris Dirie in her book, begins a chapter by the African Quotation, "To bear a woman is to bear a problem. This research hopefully will help minimize the hegemonic conceptual schemes against the woman by enlightening the benighted people in our society.

Recommendations

The research work is confined to the patriarchy and suffering of a woman in such an environment, whereas there does exist room for further enquiry, especially if the phallogocentric attitude of men towards women in a patriarchal society is highlighted. How gender is constructed with time in a patriarchal society and how humans accept it without question could also be a rich research area for the future. This research is based on the individual struggle against patriarchy but class struggle against patriarchy is an open field for further research.

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