To Teach or Not to Teach?

An analysis of depiction of trauma in Waris Dirie’s and Cathleen Miller’s ”Desert Flower” and trauma narratives as sensitive issues in the EFL classroom
Abstract

This essay examines Dirie’s and Miller’s Desert Flower and its depiction of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and the effect that this violation has had on the narrator. The analysis has been conducted through the critical lens of trauma studies with emphasis on how bearing witness of traumatic events can serve as healing and empowerment in the struggle to end FGM. As the multicultural classroom has grown extensively over the past years, the demand for an intercultural awareness is placed on the schools, where the pupils are to be given the chance to develop an understanding and acceptance of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This essay argues that, in spite of the dilemmas that often occur when teaching trauma as a sensitive and controversial issue, Desert Flower can in fact be used in the EFL classroom to engender intercultural awareness as well as offering the pupils a chance to develop self-actualization and social consciousness.

Keywords

Trauma, FGM, circumcision, literature, Desert Flower, autobiography, pedagogy, upper secondary school, EFL classroom
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1 Introduction

My mother named me after a miracle of nature: Waris means desert flower. The desert flower blooms in a barren environment where few living things can survive. Sometimes it doesn't rain in my country for over a year. But finally the water pours down, cleansing the dusty landscape, and then like a miracle the blooms appear. (Dirie and Miller 37)

As can be interpreted from this quotation, a desert flower is something that can live through the most difficult circumstances. It is a flower that, through the hardships that nature brings, still can blossom and thrive. This quotation can therefore be seen as a metaphor for Waris Dirie’s childhood and adult life until the age of around 33, which is portrayed in a book named after this astonishing flower. Desert Flower (2001) is an autobiography about a nomad girl living in Somalia. After having been circumcised at the age of five and sold into marriage at twelve for five camels in exchange, Dirie decides to flee from the desert. Eventually, after painful hardships, she ends up in London. Now she lives in an alien country with no knowledge of the world except from her nomad life back in Somalia. The story onwards lets the reader become immersed in her struggle to overcome her ghosts from the past, and how she eventually works with the World Health Organization (WHO) to help women around the world with the goal to extinguish Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

When reading the book one could interpret Dirie’s life as a Cinderella story, since she, at the end establishes a successful career against all odds. However, when applying a deeper approach to analysing the book, one could instead view the story from a different perspective, a darker perspective that sees Dirie’s life as something else than solely successful. The main focus of the book puts emphasis on the hardships that Dirie endures, where FGM is only one among many. As WHO alarmingly confirms, FGM is a practice that has affected more than 200 million women and girls alive today.
This procedure, which causes intentional injury to the genital organs of females, is concentrated to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and is mainly connected to maintaining traditions (“Female Genital Mutilation”). Dirie describes this as a ritual act of ignorance causing a life plagued by pain for many women, a ritual which has been mutilating women for over a thousand years (Dirie and Miller 225, 232).

Traumatic experiences as those above, may not be an issue commonly taught in schools due to their complexity laden with cultural implications. This, explained by Rachel N. Spears, could be the result of the fact that teachers often find trauma-related issues difficult to teach because of the fear of dealing with the unknown. Moreover, this resistance can also correlate to not knowing the pupils’ responses to such topics (53). However, living in an era where globalization has increased massively during the last years, and which has contributed to the increased numbers of multicultural pupils in Swedish schools, it is of great importance to broaden the knowledge about various cultures in order to facilitate intercultural understanding. According to Vitallis Chikoko and others, school is a good platform for teaching such topics. The authors argue that adolescents need to be able to expand their abilities of discussing and analysing sensitive issues in a way that is peaceful and respectful (6). Where else would this be possible if not in school, where a teacher can be present to actualize the manner of peacefulness and respect?

Accordingly, the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school does in fact acknowledge this issue as one of the fundamental values by pointing out the importance of understanding other people, and furthermore the ability to empathise with others (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Additionally, the syllabus for English stresses the aims “to develop knowledge of . . . the surrounding world” as well as the importance for pupils to “develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features . . .” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. “Syllabus’”). One medium for meeting aforesaid correlations is
through the reading of literature. In accordance with Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration*, literature is one approach for gaining knowledge and understanding of people (52). In *Empathy and the Novel*, by Suzanne Keen, the effect literature has on readers’ ability to empathise is further discussed. Keen states that empathy “can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (4). Moreover, Keen expounds readers’ feelings towards reading literature and informs her audience that some find it more likely to empathise with autobiographies rather than other types of literature (73). This corresponds with what the pupils might experience when reading *Desert Flower*, having in mind that the story is based on actual events. In addition, a reader does not have to have endured the same hardships as the narrator in the book in order to identify and to experience an empathetic response (Keen 70).

The aim of this Master’s Thesis is to conduct an analysis regarding the issues of FGM and its impact on the narrator in Waris Dirie’s and Cathleen Miller’s *Desert Flower*. These issues will be analysed through the critical lens of trauma studies touching upon postcolonialism. Then a pedagogical analysis will be conducted, where the usage of Dirie’s story in the EFL classroom is problematized when teaching trauma narratives as a sensitive and controversial issue, highlighting both possibilities and potential pitfalls.

An important aspect to have in mind is the fact that *Desert Flower* has been mediated through a ghostwriter, which can ultimately have had an influence on the story told in the autobiography. The question one can ask is therefore if this story can be seen as truly authentic, since the aspects of subjectivity must be taken into account. The truth claims of autobiographies are complicated in themselves, and a literary piece such as *Desert Flower* is always to some extent a fictional representation. However, as can be acknowledged in the authors’ note, the authors establish that the autobiography is in fact
a true story, and everything is presented as factual events based on Dirie’s memories. Although the story is a fictionalized version of Dirie’s memories, it could be impugned to argue that the story, albeit the lack of objectivism, could count for being authentic. This due to its basis on events from a person having been through the experiences told in the story.

The fact that this autobiography offers a rich story based on real events might motivate pupils to read this particular book since it may raise their interest that the author of the novel has been through the events that they are reading. Furthermore, this rich portrayal of the memories of real events provides the reader with a chance to develop their ability to empathise with others, as well as enhancing their understanding of various cultures found in the surrounding world, both of which correlate with the guidelines stated in the educational frameworks mentioned above. It is important to open up the EFL classroom to real issues in the world and try to move away from solely teaching so called safe topics.

Much research has been done on the field of empathy in readers’ responses. In addition to Rosenblatt and Keen, Maria Nikolajeva is another prominent scholar studying the effect literature has on its readers. In her book *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children’s Literature*, she highlights the question to why readers care about characters in books (75). However, the teaching of trauma as a sensitive and controversial issue within the context of language learning remains to be further investigated. With this in mind, this Master’s Thesis argues that *Desert Flower* as an autobiography illustrates how bearing witness of trauma can serve as healing and even empowerment in the struggle to end FGM. Furthermore, it will argue for the possibilities of using *Desert Flower* in the EFL classroom when teaching sensitive and controversial issues, even if it could also be seen as problematic.
2 Trauma Studies

The following section aims to present the theoretical lens, as well as the pedagogical scope, which will serve as a point of departure to forthcoming analysis of the autobiography *Desert Flower*. Since the focus of this Master’s Thesis will be to analyse the aspect of FGM, the chosen theory will accordingly be trauma studies. Trauma studies will also serve as the basis regarding the pedagogical analysis, where emphasis will be put on the relationship between trauma narratives and education.

In an attempt to devise an ethical response to human suffering, trauma studies was developed in the late 20th century (Andemahr 1). Since then this field of study has become a prominent part in literary studies, putting emphasis on the aim to broaden the understanding about human functioning (Visser 270). One general definition which describes the conception of trauma is discussed by Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience - Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth states that trauma is often described as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). However, Justine Seran goes further into this definition and argues that trauma can be seen as repetitive occurrences of events that the consciousness cannot fully digest (84), something that aligns with Sigmund Freud’s studies on trauma. According to Freud’s claims, traumatic experiences increase the amount of stimuli making it too powerful for one’s consciousness to operate fully (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 315). Judith Herman offers an insight into the perspectives of witnesses as well as victims and explains that they are all “subjected to the dialectic of trauma”. This is further explained as a witness’s difficulty to comprehend what has just been witnessed, and the struggle to remain self-controlled and calm (Herman 2).
As part of Freud’s works on psychoanalysis, another term arises, connected to trauma studies. Trauma neurosis can be explained as a traumatic illness where the victim is unable to deal with the powerful experience since the increase of stimuli becomes too powerful. This, according to Freud, may lead to a complete stop for the individual who cannot continue life due to the constant reminiscence of the past (Lectures 315-16). Moreover, Freud concludes that humans’ ability to dream is closely linked with the mental processes affected by traumatic events. Freud describes that dreams repeatedly take the victim back to the traumatic event and leave the victim in fright once more (On Metapsycology 282). This gives a clear indication that the victim suffering from traumatic neurosis retains a suppressed fixation with the traumatic experience, which presents itself as reliving the traumatic experience in the victim’s dreams. Freud explains this as though the victims are unable to set the traumatic experience aside (Lectures 315).

However, feminist scholars critique Freud and argue that using Freudian theory poses some challenges. As a first challenge they claim that Freud’s treatment of the mind of women in his works on psychoanalysis could be perceived as works of genius as well as taking a misogynist approach. During the time of the Freudian era, women were not taken as seriously as they are in today’s society. According to Janet Jacobs Liebman, Freud took advantage of this and “used the most intimate details of his female patients’ lives to construct theories of development and personality that reinforced notions of female inferiority and weakness . . . (165). This could therefore be perceived as Freud utilizing the power-relations of male dominance when studying the female mind. Moreover, Jacobs Liebman claims that feminist scholars criticize Freud as also being too Eurocentric in his works. They believe that the fact that he was a male living in the Western world influenced his works on psychoanalysis, which was very much
aimed at female behaviour and development (167). The matter of trauma studies and its connection to Eurocentrism will be further commented on below.

All of the examples mentioned above point to trauma as connected to the psyche rather than the body. Roger Luckhurst states that there has been a shift in the way trauma is viewed. Going back into history, trauma was solely considered as a bodily injury, whereas the late nineteenth century entailed a new perspective, where trauma could also be connected to the mental realm. As Luckhurst mentions, “the meanings of trauma have stalled somewhere between the physical and the psychical” (3). Accordingly, this indicates that today’s view on the meaning of trauma is a fusion between the both.

2.1 Trauma Studies as a Means for Postcolonialist Analysis

Since Dirie herself is from a non-Western country, and due to the fact that the autobiography is partly about her life in Somalia where the oppression of females as victims of FGM is culturally ingrained, the aspect of postcolonialism becomes particularly relevant to include in the analysis of Desert Flower. Moreover, the way Dirie represents her story for the Western audience could be considered as taking on a autoethnographic stance where emphasis is put on representing oneself as a colonized subject (Bourget 36).

Although the field of trauma studies aims at studying human functioning while exposed to traumatic experiences, one must be careful not to take on a Eurocentric approach. Trauma studies has undoubtedly broadened the perspective regarding the relationship between cultural representation and suffering, however, critics within the field of postcolonialism argue that trauma studies has work to do in order to accomplish a cross-cultural undertaking (Andermahr 1). The archetypical view upon trauma as “a frightening event outside of ordinary experience” does not, as stated in Andemahr, always work in a non-Western society (2). Irene Visser further confirms this lack of not
fulfilling a cross-cultural undertaking, and argues that trauma studies has, although its importance within human functioning, unresolved matters to deal with in connection to postcolonial criticism (271).

As has been acknowledged previously, trauma studies does not only draw upon recent research, it does also inherit aspects from the Freudian psychoanalysis, which indicates a wide area of research despite its relatively recent emergence. However, to fully comprehend what trauma is about, it is essential to obtain a historical knowledge, something that can be seen as a severe stretch due to it being another discipline. Visser further claims that it is therefore not surprising that literary studies has been impacted by trauma studies (271).

Further critique towards trauma studies as being too generalizing in its views upon trauma is discussed by Stef Craps and Gert Buelens. They claim that many texts dealing with traumatic experiences “are almost exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences of white Westerners . . .” (Craps and Buelens 2). Moreover, the authors explain that although the idea with trauma studies is to promote solidarity between cultures, ignoring traumas that are not Western might result in the risk of generating the opposite effect which ultimately produces a Eurocentric approach (2). For trauma studies to enter a postcolonial reconfiguration, Visser argues that history plays a crucial part, and merely carrying a historical approach in mind might solve the aforementioned issue (274), regarding what is stated in Andemahr as “the West and Rest” (4).

As mentioned by Kali Tal, there might be numerous targeted groups within a society who might be more disposed to traumatization than other members within the same society. What determines the membership within a group is based on the assumptions enforced by dominant groups, where identity of race, gender, class and religion divide all members. Accordingly, in a society where oppression and where the risk of traumatization is salient to a greater degree, many members of those
marginalized groups will in fact become victims of traumatization whereas others will not. This, according to Tal, is what she refers to as a dilemma when speaking about survivors of traumatic events. The dilemma emerges out of the lack of refuge and safety, and survival can therefore be seen as conditional and temporary (9).

The subject matter of FGM can be viewed in connection to the intersection of politics in postcolonial studies, which has been highlighted above. To gather information about FGM, the choice of turning to the website of WHO seemed highly relevant due to the organization’s work which strives to improve the health for the people in our world. What defines FGM as a violation of human rights is that it is a non-medical procedure where the intention is to alter the genitals on young girls and women. The practice includes removal of the external genitalia to which girls and women have to endure inhuman torture that could ultimately result in death. One reason for this is to prepare the girls for womanhood and marriage, which is why Dirie and her sisters were mutilated. Without the removal of their genital parts, the girls are perceived as less feminine and considered as unclean.

As is mentioned by WHO, the mutilation includes both immediate complications as well as long-term consequences. One of the consequences that can arise, not perhaps as an immediate injury but rather as something that evolves after the procedure is psychological problems such as trauma, which is particularly relevant since the analysis will investigate how her circumcision has affected Dirie’s life. In a graphic representation of statistics, a so-called infographic, UNICEF reveals shocking insight explaining that over 90 percent of the women in Somalia, Guinea, Djibouti, and Egypt have undergone FGM (see Appendix A).

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1 Circumcision is often used as a synonym for FGM. However, this term must not be confused with the circumcision of men which is not considered as a mutilation as it is for women. On the contrary, according to NHS, the circumcision of men actually offers health care benefits while it for women causes severe health problems or even death.
However, FGM is also prominent in other parts of the world, which makes it a global concern. As WHO mentions, FGM is not generic for all women, it is rather a cultural phenomena linked to traditions evolved through history (“Female Genital Mutilation”).

2.2 Trauma in Literature

A commonly expressed notion about literary interpretations is that the reader speaks a common language with the author, that is, the reader can understand what the author wants to convey (Tal 115). Robert Eaglestone argues otherwise, and states that the understanding of literature is based on individuality and interpretations and can therefore exist in many forms (18). Although Eaglestone does not focus on trauma literature but rather literature as a general aspect, what he states about reading experiences is still relevant as a counterargument to Tal’s claim about a common language.

When it comes to trauma literature, Tal further claims that stories about traumatic events derive from a need to tell the surroundings and make it real to the community as well as to the victim (137). The strongest theme in literature of trauma lies within “the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of ‘normalcy’ and to testify to the people the truth of their experience” (120). Accordingly, literature of trauma is therefore defined by the author’s identity and the reconstruction of the traumatic experience (17), which could be seen as the author’s attempt to recover a fractured sense of self or struggle to heal by reconstructing the traumatic experience.

One criticism towards trauma literature originates from the existing language barrier. Textual representations such as narratives about traumatic events are always mediated through language, which essentially creates a chasm between the story and the traumatic experience (Tal 15). This is further explained by Emilé Beneviste who argues that “the difference between recognition and comprehension refers to two distinct
faculties of the mind: that of discerning the identity between the previous and the present, and that of discerning, on the other hand, the meaning of a new enunciation” (qtd. in Tal 15). Drawing upon Beneviste’s claims, Tal states that unlike survivors who carry understanding of traumatic events and therefore have the metaphorical tools for interpreting representations of others’ trauma, non-traumatized people do not possess these tools and can therefore not fully comprehend the traumatic memory explained by the author (16). This aligns with the matter of false empathy discussed by Keen. False empathy generates a kind of empathy where the reader does not fully understand the character within a story. The reader rather “pretends to understand and sympathize” with the individual who is from a different background. This generates the opposite effect where the reader instead takes an unsympathetic stance which could be argued as worse than not feeling empathy at all (157). This becomes particularly relevant when analysing Desert Flower, since Keen accordingly brings forth the dilemma of a postcolonial problem of how a Western reader can identify with or feel empathy for a non-Western character (152).

However, Herman opposes this by arguing that “the traumas of one are the traumas of another” (32), something that also Caruth aligns with (8). Pursuanty, Luckhurst goes further into explaining this notion and argues that trauma appears to be rather transmissible in the way that the mental and physical symptoms emerged from a traumatic experience can be transferred between victims and their listeners. He goes as far as to claim that this overwhelming sympathy that can be evoked, can be understood as a secondary victimhood (3).

Narrating one’s trauma can also be seen as a means for healing. Herman describes the healing process through various stages, whereas the second stage refers to the telling of one’s trauma in order to confront the past. However, reconstructing trauma must not be seen as an easy task. It is ambitious work, which must be manoeuvred with
delicacy. When avoiding the confrontation of the memories there is a risk for stagnation. On the other hand, confronting the memories too promptly only leads to a harmful reliving of the traumatic experience. Herman further states that the reconstruction of trauma “demands some tolerance for the state of being ill” (175-6), which enhances the arduous work a victim is confronted with when telling the trauma.

2.2.1 The Unspeakable

Drawing upon previous section, telling one’s trauma is not to be perceived as simple. As Herman argues, language is not always enough in order to fully and persuasively explain what one has witnessed or endured. Another stance to view this unspeakable aspect of trauma is that “certain violations of the social impact are too terrible to utter aloud” which correlates with the risk of losing one’s credibility when words are not enough. Furthermore, Herman claims the necessity for a rediscovery of a trauma if one is to be able to understand the trauma entirely (1-2), which essentially indicates that it is vital to relive the trauma in order to gain knowledge and to be able to reach a healing point in life.

Although telling one’s story, as described above, could be an overwhelming endeavour to undertake, the testimony of a traumatic event may have the power to unlock this unspeakability and reach other survivors who now dare to speak of their own subjection to atrocities. The hope is to widen the community of survivors to prevent similar atrocities to occur in the future (Tal 127). This parallels with Herman’s views upon breaking the unspeakable; that the power of this stigmatisation can be undermined if one dares to speak about their traumatic experiences, since it might bring other survivors forward with the courage to tell. This will accordingly lift the barriers of repression and denial (Herman 2). Telling or externalizing the traumatic experience can, according to Mari Ruti be seen as an attempt to regain control in life, a life that has once been shattered. Moreover, she explains that in order to regain this control over one’s
own life is poignantly connected to the response of others, that the response of others could help one to feel less lonely (Ruti 40).

The unspeakable aspects of trauma can further be seen through a political perspective. Tal argues that the testimony of a survivor might threaten the status quo within a society. Therefore, political forces will put pressure on the survivors not to tell (7). Courtney E. Ahrens takes further position in this and discusses it through a feministic perspective. The author problematizes the dynamics that arises from women’s abilities to speak about their experiences and argues that it is strongly connected to power structures giving voice to some while others are being silenced and therefore bereaved of their power. Moreover, the author claims that the victim’s choice for being silent evolves from the fear of negative responses (263).

Ruti further discusses this political perspective and argues that by telling one’s trauma can generate “acts of remembrance” which could serve as a necessity for building a society founded on solidarity. If one is put under pressure not to tell and simply forget what has happened, the oppression will live on (51).

3 The Pedagogical Use of Trauma Literature

The curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school offers no guidelines to how teachers can incorporate sensitive issues such as FGM or other traumas in the classroom. Since the syllabus for each subject is created to give leeway for teachers, the responsibility is put on the teacher to opt for adequate methods that benefit the pupils. As previously mentioned, Spear writes that teachers tend to view such issues as something that is difficult to teach, due to the uncertainty of pupils’ responses. Further, Spear points to the complexity of teaching narratives of trauma, stating that one cannot know the exact psychological effect that trauma narratives have on their readers since everyone carries different reading experiences and the interpretation is therefore individual (61). However, Spear also points out that teaching sensitive issues with
trauma narratives affords pupils with the possibility for self-actualization and ultimately social consciousness (53). Likewise, when looking at the syllabus for English level 6, this is in fact something that should be included in the teaching. The syllabus states that the teaching should cover ”living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts . . .” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. ”Syllabus En 6”), something that could include social consciousness and self-actualization.

Julie Rak takes this further by arguing that teaching narratives of trauma carries a twofold challenge. Firstly, one cannot avoid the silence that is often connected with a response to trauma. This silence jeopardizes the learning environment and it is therefore something that the teacher needs to problematize. The second challenge, however, is of the ethical stance of pupils witnessing trauma in the classroom (53), which connects to the controversial pedagogical decision that could inflict emotional pain on the pupils when teaching trauma narratives. However, as Rak further argues, the silence should not be viewed as solely a dilemma. It could also be perceived as a necessity when responding to trauma (53). She puts emphasis on trying to work through the silence rather than to break it, and this could be done by making the pupils understand their roles as witnesses to the trauma (67).

In *Something to Speak About: Addressing Sensitive Issues through Literature*, Mark Jackett offers another perspective on how teachers should view the teaching of sensitive subjects. He argues that “often the things that make us uncomfortable are the things that are the most important for us to teach about . . .” (102), which ultimately indicates the importance of teaching sensitive issues despite teachers’ reluctance towards it. However, Sarah Philpott and others view the teaching of controversial issues as a daunting mission and go as far as to claim that issues based on controversy can be dangerous for the environment in a classroom. The authors write, “dealing with these
issues in the classroom can disturb the peace and stability of the scholastic environment. It can set students against each other” (32). Based on aforementioned claims, one might be apprehensive of taking on the teaching of trauma narratives, but in agreement with Jackets writings, it could also be seen as an important aspect to interweave in the classroom.

When turning to literature as an educational tool, Louise Rosenblatt stresses the importance of literature as a medium for gaining knowledge of the world by participating in characters’ lives. This, according to Rosenblatt, gives readers insights about their own lives as well as the world around them (7, 37). Although Rosenblatt does not focus on trauma literature in her research, her thoughts on reader-response theory goes well with the teaching of trauma narratives. As mentioned in the introduction, literature and in this case autobiographies, can evoke empathy in students (Keen 4, 73). However, Leah Anderst emphasises the importance of acquiring a critical stance towards autobiographies. Pursuant to Keen’s thoughts on false empathy, one danger with this kind of literature is that they can produce what Anderst calls ”a false sense of closeness” where readers believe that by reading about people’s lives, they have shared the experiences and have therefore created a feeling of affinity. Anderst further states that one must be aware of the underlying power-relationship that might be hidden in the text. Although the autobiography might seem authentic, there could be expressions of power and others’ thoughts, which could ultimately have had an impact on the text (274). Spear offers another insight into this and argues that when teaching trauma literature and especially autobiographical texts, there is no need to interrogate the accuracy. What one should instead do is to accept the text as it is written in order to acknowledge that the text is only one version of the traumatic experience told in the story, a text that is filled with purposes and processes that should not be ignored (63).
Drawing upon the matter of teaching sensitive issues, Rosenblatt aligns with Jackett’s thoughts and argues that by evading ethical issues, the teacher do neither pupils nor literature any favour. There is no escaping the ethical aspects when dealing with any literary work. When teaching literature, the teacher, whether it is consciously or unconsciously, reinforces ethical attitudes (Rosenblatt 16-17). It is therefore important for a teacher not to take on a dogmatic approach and impose certain values and ideas on pupils (124).

4 Traumatic Aspects in Desert Flower

This analysis will put emphasis on the aspect of FGM as in connection to Dirie’s life in Desert Flower, both through the perspective of her as a young girl as well as the perspective of her adult life. In the depiction of childhood, the analysis will bring forth indications to how the narrator experiences the procedure of circumcision, whereas in her adult life the focus is further put on coping with the scars of that event as well as how she comes to an acceptance of the trauma she has endured. Living within a closed and embedded group, as Dirie and her family do, where social processes and patterns have been inherited amongst the members of the group themselves through history, this type of trauma could be perceived as unexpected for many readers who are not part of the affected group. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the act of FGM is not something that applies for all women in Africa, nor other parts of the world, it is rather connected to a cultural tradition. This analysis focuses on Dirie and her life in connection to FGM.

4.1 Bearing Witness and Being a Victim

The first time this cultural practice transpires in the autobiography is in connection to Dirie’s sister Aman’s circumcision. Due to the traveling life of a nomad family, they have accidentally missed the gypsy woman who performs the circumcision. Her sister has therefore come to the marriageable age and must now be circumcised in order for a
man to marry her. Dirie explains her jealousy and longing for her time to become a woman and compares it to the anticipation that Western children have for Christmas Eve and their birthdays (Dirie and Miller 41). This is an example of what was indicated earlier on regarding the differences in the way this cultural practice is upheld and rationalized in the autobiography. In Dirie’s case, circumcision is something that is desirable due to the cultural traditions that have evolved, whereas for others around the world it is not. Moreover, it is rather interesting in the way Dirie chooses to explain this procedure for the readers. Why is it that she goes to so much trouble in the narrative to explain the practice to the reader? It could be a result of Dirie wanting to narrate a story for Western readers, in alignment with autoethnography, in hope for them to view the practice as in connection to Dirie’s own thoughts, so that they also feel obliged to join the fight against it. Furthermore, this could then imply that as a woman living in London, Dirie finds the procedure uncivilized and barbaric but when growing up in Somalia she views it otherwise.

Thus, as a result of this longing for womanhood, Dirie begs her mother to be circumcised as well. This indicates the extent to which girls are brainwashed to believe in the necessity of the practice within their social group: “Mama, do both of us at the same time. Come on, Mama, do both of us tomorrow!” (Dirie and Miller 41). To her disappointment, her mother neglects her wish. However, as Dirie’s curiosity intensifies, she secretly follows her mother and sister on the morrow and hides in the bush to witness the circumcision. In the bush she bears witness to what she describes as “something I really wished I didn’t know” (42). Further Dirie explains that although she did not fully comprehend what had happened to her sister, she was now terrified of doing it herself. When asking her sister about it during her healing process, her sister replies:
“Oh, it was terrible” . . . she began. But I guess she thought better of telling me the truth, knowing that I would have to be circumcised, and then I’d be frightened, instead of looking forward to it. “Anyway, you’re not far from it: they will do it to you soon enough.” And that’s all she would say. (Dirie and Miller 42)

After witnessing her sister’s circumcision, Dirie expresses trepidation towards her own circumcision. Pursuant to Herman’s thoughts on being a witness to traumatic situations, Dirie did not fully comprehend what had happened to her sister during the act of mutilation. Dirie almost becomes absorbed with fear, making it difficult for her to put every piece of the puzzle together (Herman 2). However, as time goes by, the horror of what she witnessed passes and she, what she describes as “foolishly” decides that she wants to go through with it (Dirie and Miller 43).

The fact that Dirie did not fully comprehend what happened to her sister could also be connected to Dirie’s age at that time. As is described in the autobiography, Dirie was only five when it happened to herself and must therefore have been even younger when witnessing the procedure on her sister. This aligns with Freud’s views on the matter when arguing that traumatic events can engender an increased amount of stimuli which ultimately makes it difficult for the mind to comprehend and fully operate, which he further explains as one being unable to deal with what has been experienced (Lectures 315). Although Freud’s theory is not focused on children, the aspect of an increased amount of stimuli could refer to both children and adults. However, as mentioned above, Dirie’s age at that time could also be the result for her mind shutting down and she therefore represses the trauma she witnessed. Furthermore, it could also be the case that a young child would find the whole situation even more frightening, seeing her own mother holding down her sister with physical force, to hear the screams.
of her sister and ultimately to see the blood leaving marks in the sand (Dirie and Miller 42).

The circumcision of Dirie could be argued as one of the most harrowing descriptions throughout the story. Here, instead of bearing witness, she becomes a victim of what she in her adult life calls as a “ritual of ignorance” (Dirie and Miller 225). With a broken and reused razor blade, the gypsy woman begins the procedure between Dirie’s legs:

The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals, being cut away. I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin . . . There’s no way in the world I can explain what it feels like. It’s like somebody is slicing through the meat of your thigh, or cutting off your arm, except this is the most sensitive part of your body. (45)

This, according to Dirie, was not even the worst part. After this experience she is sewn up with white thread and thorns from a tree, all the while wishing for death as the only way to escape the pain. The aftermath of her circumcision leaves her with immense pain during several weeks of convalescence in enforced seclusion, making it difficult and painful to urinate: ”The first drop came out and stung as if my skin were being eaten by acid . . . As the days dragged on and I lay in my hut, my genitals became infected and I ran a high fever. I faded in and out of consciousness” (47). Dirie further illuminates her recovery from, what she mentions as, her sacrifice.

When analysing this section, it is interesting to delve into the way she copes with it. After having been cut Dirie is left alone beside the blood stained stone where the remainings of her sex are visible (47). During the moments when she is left alone to recover, she has nothing to do but to think. In these moments Dirie could have developed different defence mechanisms in order to be able to cope with the incident. Although it is not explicitly highlighted in the autobiography, it could be explained
through Herman’s concept regarding the healing process referred to as doublethinking (101). During these instances, Dirie must find a way to preserve hope and meaning and try to dismiss any feelings of despair. Often children of abuse seem to rationalize and minimise the experience and therefore alter it in the mind (101-2). This could be the case with Dirie and her way of coping with her bodily repercussion. It could be viewed as Dirie having an understanding that this was her fate and there is nothing she can do about it now, and the best way of moving on is to forget what has happened in order not to live life in the shadow of despair.

Eventually, when she enters puberty, pains connected to her menstruation were intensified due to her mutilated genitals. Accordingly, this sequence and the descriptions of the aftermath could be explained through Luckhurst’s views upon trauma, explaining that rather than perceiving trauma as solely connected to the psyche, it is in fact a fusion between both body and mind (3).

Although Dirie never indicates that her circumcision has left her traumatized, it can still be explained through Caruth’s description of an overwhelming experiences that emerges as uncontrolled and intrusive phenomena (11), which ultimately becomes apparent when Dirie is constantly reminded of what she has experienced when suffering from the bodily pain caused by the mutilation. Although the bodily assault might heal, the person having been through the act of FGM will nonetheless suffer from the consequences throughout life. The fact that Dirie in her adult life does not view her experience of FGM as traumatizing could be a result of denial and displacement. Dirie explains her work with the WHO as her mission in life, and that God chose her for a reason (Dirie and Miller 233). Due to this, Dirie could therefore have repressed the memories of her circumcision since she believes that her life has been outlined by God and that God made her beautiful so that she could use her position as a supermodel to undertake the challenging work to abolish FGM. Dirie’s undergoing of her circumcision
could on that account be viewed as a necessity regarding the work to diminish this procedure on women.

Regarding the repetitiveness of trauma, which Seran puts emphasis on, it can be viewed in the way Dirie is constantly reminded of what she experienced as a child. According to Seran, a traumatic experience is connected to the repetitive manifestations that become palpable (84), which is the case in Dirie’s life. Although the act of the circumcision does not repeat itself more than once in a girl’s life, the memories and the consequences from it are nevertheless a burden that the women have to live with.

The procedure of the circumcision upon Dirie has undoubtedly had an immense scarring effect. Yet, she could still be considered to be one of the lucky ones since she in fact survived the mutilation. As Dirie alarmingly describes, millions of girls are dying from it, her sister Halemo being one of them (Dirie and Miller 49, 227). WHO confirms that FGM is in fact a common cause of death. Infections, haemorrhage and fever are often the results of the circumcision (“Female Genital Mutilation”). This becomes validated through following quotation:

The operations are usually performed in primitive circumstances by a midwife or village woman. They use no anesthetic. They’ll cut the girl using whatever instruments they can lay their hands on: razor blades, knives, broken glass, sharp stones - and in some regions – their teeth. (Dirie and Miller 230)

Aforementioned quotation highlights the unsanitary procedure of FGM, which is enforced regardless of accessibility to proper equipment. This makes it almost impossible not to suffer from infections due to the unclean tools, which ultimately endanger the girls’ health.

Another aspect that could give indication to Dirie as one of the lucky ones, becomes evident in her adult life. Due to the fact that she is now living in London, she
gets the chance to change and operate what has been done to her in regards of FGM. However, this is not the case with many other women around the world, who will never be offered this opportunity and will therefore live their lives in immense pain. Even for women with access to health care in European countries, it can still be difficult to go against the norms of the mother country. This becomes evident in the doctor’s statement after Dirie had her surgery. He explains that he has had many women from all over the world coming to him in hope for surgery. Many of the women are pregnant and are afraid that the birth will be dangerous for them as well as for the babies. The doctor further explains that the women come to him in secrecy because neither the husband nor the family would ever give their permission to change what has been done to their wives or daughters (Dirie and Miller 157-58). This aligns with Uma Narayan who asserts that women are in fact constructed as the carriers of culture and further explains it as a cultural essentialistic view where the women are attributed with different cultural characteristics (87-88). This shows that women are bound to live with the burden of FGM as carriers of a cultural tradition. The events of Dirie getting the chance to operate will be highlighted further on in this paper.

4.2 The Perception of FGM

When considering the matter of postcolonialism in terms with what Visser argues regarding history as a crucial part to trauma (274), Dirie gives her readers an insight to how FGM is viewed among her nomad tribe as well as by others who are at risk for the procedure. As mentioned before, Dirie explains the practice of FGM as a “ritual of ignorance”, and further describes it as an act that has been on-going for over four thousands years in Africa (Dirie and Miller 225,232). According to Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, the origin of FGM is difficult to determine and is therefore solely

2 In Sweden there is a specialized unit dealing with victims of FGM. However, this unit can only be found in one hospital in Stockholm.
speculative (2). However, Dirie explains that many view it as an expression of religious belief, yet, neither the Bible nor the Koran mention this act as something to do in order to please God. The reason for it rather lies at the hands of men, “ignorant, selfish men - who want to assure their ownership of their woman’s sexual favors” (Dirie and Miller 232), which ultimately indicates the power-relationship between women and men (WHO “Female Genital Mutilation”).

The fact that Dirie describes the practice of FGM as something to please men also connects well with what Tal mentions regarding the degree of exposure to traumatization within different targeted groups. According to Tal, the aspects that dominant groups decide to inflict on subordinate groups are due to different attributions, where one such is based on gender (9). As can be read in Dirie’s story it is in fact the men who take on the role of the dominant group as they target women by forcing them to undergo circumcision all because they want to view their wives as their properties (Dirie and Miller 232). Therefore, the women in Somalia are more inclined to be victims of traumatization than men are. Raqiya D. Abdalla talks about the three feminine sorrows that are inflicted upon the girls and women by men, explaining FGM as a tradition that “robs them of a carefree youth, deprives them of pleasure on their wedding night, and even denies them the experience of . . . the miracle of childbirth” (188). This further shows the oppression that women live under, where men inflict harm on female family members due to their curtailing of female sexuality.

Moreover, the readers get further insight to this oppression in the way Dirie describes that the suffering from FGM is done in order to prohibit women from having sex until they have become married. It is explained as the husband’s prerogative to either cut their woman open with a knife or penetrate his way inside his woman the first time having sexual intercourse (Dirie and Miller 48).
Furthermore, how men perceive girls and women who have not been circumcised becomes apparent several times in Dirie’s story, especially when she talks about her youth. She explains how men’s comments on the fact that she had not been circumcised yet used to agitate her: “Get away from me, you two unsanitary little girls. . . You haven’t been circumcised yet!’ He always spat the words out as if the fact we weren’t circumcised made us so disgusting that he could barely stand to look at us” (43). This comment comes from a friend to Dirie’s father, and pursuant to WHO, without the removal of their genital parts, the girls are perceived as less feminine and considered as unclean (“Female Genital Mutilation”), even by a man close to her family. Subsequently, this means that a girl must in fact undergo the traumatizing procedure of FGM in order to become accepted within her society. Another instance in which this becomes evident is when Dirie talks about a boy she likes. This boy, Jamah, always ignores her and instead has his attention on her older sister. This causes Dirie to believe that Jamah views her sister as superior due to the fact that she has been circumcised, whereas he views Dirie as nothing but dirt (Dirie and Miller 43).

An interesting part brought up in Dirie’s story is the fact that the girls never know why their genitals must be altered. She explains it as a mystery where the girls only get to know that it is something special and something that they should long for (Dirie and Miller 41), which could be the result of their young age and the taboo topic of sexuality. In accordance with Visser’s thoughts on the role that history carries, the practice of FGM can therefore be seen as a normal act for different African cultures since it has been on-going for a long time (274). Dirie and her family know of nothing else and therefore they see it as normal and something that is a part of their culture. In her autobiography, Dirie does not put blame on her family for what she had to endure during the act of the mutilation. In one way, it can be seen as her defending them to some extent, explaining that her mother only did what she had to do due to her
powerless position as a woman and that her father enforced it in order for Dirie to become married later in life. She further draws parallels to her own victimhood where she tells her readers that her parents were victims of cultural practices just as Dirie herself was (Dirie and Miller 238).

Craps and Buelens also speak of this matter but rather focus on a generalizing view on trauma, where trauma is seen as a collective and social experience within a group (4). Often traumas are inflicted on a group from the outside. However, this is not the case with the nomads depicted in Dirie’s story. It is the nomads themselves who view it as something vital. This becomes apparent through Dirie’s description of the gypsy woman:

She is considered an important person in our community, not only because she has specialized knowledge, but because she earns a great deal of money from performing circumcision. Paying for this procedure is one of the greatest expenses a household will undergo, but is still considered a good investment, since without it, the daughters will not make it into the marriage market. With their genitals intact, they are considered unfit for marriage, unclean sluts whom no man would consider taking as a wife. So the gypsy woman . . . is an important member of our society, but I call her the Killer Woman because all the little girls who have died at her hand. (Dirie and Miller 42)

Even though a household can barely afford this act to be done to their daughters, they still see it as a necessity in order to sell them off to marriage. The nomads, as Dirie describes is the case within many African cultures, have therefore decided that this is important among the members of their own group. Assumptions enforced by men have led to the conclusion that it is something that must be done, despite the awareness of the suffering it causes women. Yet, one must remember that Dirie’s story is told from her
perspective and can therefore not be viewed as a universal matter. What Dirie thinks of FGM can therefore not be argued as the same way that other women view it (see Appendix A).

4.3 Helping Oneself and Helping Others

Despite the shame that surrounds the topic of FGM, the latter part of Dirie’s autobiography could be perceived as her deciding to tell others about her circumcision. As mentioned earlier, Dirie suffers from an immense pain due to what has been done to her genitals. She describes how she every month becomes paralyzed from the pain, a pain that becomes so intense that she starts to pass out. She decides to go to the doctor’s office, hoping for something to ease the pain she has to endure every month. However, during this time Dirie was not aware of circumcision as being a custom not practiced globally and she decides not to inform the doctor of this matter due to what she explains as a fusion of “ignorance, confusion, and shame” (Dirie and Miller 152). Moreover, her aunt makes it clear to her that what has been done between her legs is not something that is to be discussed with others, especially not with white males. Telling others about this is also something that Dirie thought would never be accepted by her family back in Somalia (153-54). An interesting thought on this matter is the underlying meaning of this code of silence, connected to the patriarchal society between men and women. In Dirie’s life as a nomad, female sexuality is perceived as a taboo subject to discuss and could therefore be the reason for her aunt forbidding Dirie to talk about it.

What has been described above aligns with what Ahrens mentions when talking about the distinction of being silent and being silenced. Being silent is described as in connection to the fear of negative responses (263). The matter of being silent becomes especially visible through Dirie’s unawareness about other cultures besides her own nomad customs. The fact that Dirie thinks that every girl looks the same and that being circumcised is perceived as a “burden of being a woman” (Dirie and Miller 153), is
something that could engender this fear of receiving negative responses from the people around her. If this is something that she believes is a universal matter for all women, why should she complain about it? Dirie might therefore believe that not giving voice to the matter would be the better choice. Yet, the act of being silent could also be argued as in connection to the shame that Dirie carries.

Contrarily, the act of being silenced is instead connected to the power structures through a feministic perspective (Ahrens 263). This becomes evident in Dirie’s younger life where she after her circumcision asks herself a question: ”What did I know about being a woman? Although I didn’t realize it at the time, I knew a lot about being an African woman: I knew how to live quietly with suffering . . . ” (Dirie and Miller 48). Through this quotation, the reader gets an understanding of the oppression that many women in Africa live under where some are privileged to use their voices while others are not.

When taking a postcolonial approach to this, it is interesting in the way Dirie chooses to refer to her as an African woman rather than a woman from Somalia. This could be viewed in connection to what Andemahr and Visser, respectively mean regarding the lack of not fulfilling a cross-cultural undertaking (Andemahr 1; Visser 271). In the quotation Dirie implies that all African women are under the influence of FGM and that all African women are oppressed. This could also be one way for Dirie to reach as many readers as possible, as part of her work to extinguish FGM. The more readers she can evoke empathy in, the bigger proliferation of her manifestations. However, by adopting this, what could be perceived as a trick to create a response from the reader (Keen 84), could ultimately jeopardize the authenticity of the autobiography as has been discussed earlier on.

Moreover, the case of being silenced aligns with Tal and her thoughts about the connection to political forces, where pressure is put on the survivors of traumatic events
not to speak up (7). This becomes evident when Dirie is being told not to tell anyone about it since her family would not accept her talking about their African custom nor going through with the surgery (Dirie and Miller 153-4). This, according to Ahrens, signifies loss of power due to this imposed demand (263).

Eventually, as mentioned above, Dirie recaptures her power and decides to visit another doctor to make use of her empowerment and voice. During this situation, Dirie becomes silenced once more, now by an African male who is called in to translate for her:

Right away, I could see the Somali man wasn’t happy. He pursed his lips and glared at the doctor. Between the fact that I did understand some English, and the Somali man’s attitude, I sensed that something was not right. He said to me “Well, if you really want it, they can open you up”. I just stared at him. “But do you know this is against your culture? Does your family know you’re doing this?” (Dirie and Miller 155)

Here, this male Somali puts shame on Dirie, questioning why she wants to change something that is part of their culture. Although Dirie has already spoken of the matter with a doctor, it can still be seen as a conceptualised imposition from the Somali man by the attitude he exhibits, again a proof of the matter of being silenced brought up by Ahrens. Furthermore, this quotation indicates that Dirie will never be fully accepted for what she wants to do. This can further be seen in connection to what was mentioned earlier regarding women as carriers of culture (Narayan 87-88). Although the act of FGM might not be linked to this way of thinking, it could also be an expression of how culture as the burden of women is perhaps even more strongly enforced by immigrants in the Western world. Shahrzad Mojab and Amir Hassanpour highlight the Swedish perspective on this and state that although Sweden has made a significant progress regarding gender equality, patriarchal relations are still prominent between immigrant
women and men (57). Evidence of this can be found in the way some women are obliged to follow a modest dress code whereas men are free to wear what they prefer.

Subsequently, Dirie decides to leave the hospital without scheduling an appointment for surgery. This partly due to the man’s accusing attitude, but also due to her own fear of going through the experience once more. This gives indication to how traumatizing the circumcision was for Dirie. Now when she is offered to change the bodily scars from her circumcision, she becomes afraid that it will bring back the memories and pain from her youth.

However, Dirie finally chooses to go through with the operation when she decides to show her Londonborn friend Marilyn her scars from the circumcision. Marilyn becomes horrified at the sight of what she sees and starts to cry: “It’s horrible, Waris. I can’t believe that anybody would do this to you . . . I can’t believe there are people in the world who would do this to a little girl.” (Dirie and Miller 156). Pursuant to Herman and Caruth, respectively, this could be an indication of what they refer to as the transferable trauma of the other (Herman 32; Caruth 8). Marilyn was not aware of FGM as an occurring procedure and could therefore not comprehend what Dirie was implying until it was shown to her. Here Marilyn becomes so upset of what she witnesses and could in this case be seen as assimilating the trauma of Dirie. Likewise, this could also be viewed as a secondary victimhood, where Marilyn as a listener to Dirie’s story becomes absorbed with an overwhelming sympathy for her friend (Luckhurst 3). Marilyn can further be viewed as an explicit addressee of the story that Dirie tells, much like the readers of her autobiography. When taking such an approach to analysing, it could be interpreted that Marilyn’s reaction is just the type of reaction that Dirie hopes to evoke in her readers; the case of deep sympathy. If her readers generate this empathy for what Dirie as the narrator has endured, it could promote
people taking action of the matter and help Dirie in her work to extinguish the act of FGM.

During aforementioned incident, Dirie realises that what she has been through is not something that all women have in common. She understands how different that makes her, and with help from Marilyn she goes back to the hospital and completes the surgery, which Dirie later describes made her a new woman (Dirie and Miller 156-58). However, as has been discussed above, Dirie’s fear of a repetition of the circumcision nearly made her change her mind:

When the morning came for surgery, she [Marilyn] got me up early and we went to the hospital . . . When I saw the operating table, I nearly turned around and ran out of the building. It was better than a rock in the bush, but I had little hope the procedure would feel much better. (157)

Just like her own mother did on the morning of her circumcision, Marilyn woke her up early. Already here it could be argued that because of the same circumstances of rising early for the operation, could be the result of Dirie’s fear of remembering the traumatizing event that happened when she was five. Subsequently, when seeing the operation table it could have internally brought her back to the flat rock where the gypsy cut her, therefore her uncertainty whether to run away or stay when faced with her fear of being traumatized once more. As a result, these intrusive phenomena bring forth flashbacks of delayed memories to which Dirie remembers the time of her circumcision (Caruth 11).

As has been described in the theoretical section of this paper, deciding to give voice to atrocities and the traumatic experiences is one way of lifting the barriers of repression and denial. Accordingly, this can be connected to the matter of helping others, others who have been through similar experiences but do not dare to share their stories and voice the unspeakable (Herman 2). The fear of telling others is something
that is also a current issue in today’s society. During the recent year, the Me Too movement against sexual harassment and assault has been widely spread as a global phenomenon with the result of people finding the courage to speak up with the help of others. This aligns with Tal’s thoughts on the matter to prevent similar atrocities from occurring in the future (127).

In the last chapters of her autobiography, Dirie starts to think back on the upbringing that she has had and the life of other women in Somalia. She expresses her gratitude for her adult life comparing it to the tough life she would have lived if she had stayed with her family. When speaking of her own son Aleeke and his birth, Dirie’s thoughts go to the circumcised and pregnant women in Somalia and their struggles and pain during childbirth. In the course of this narration, Dirie asks several rhetorical questions to which she at the end answers: “Unfortunately, I know the answer to that question. Many bleed to death out there alone, and if they’re lucky, their husbands will find them before the vultures and hyenas do” (Dirie and Miller 225). With this quote in mind, it could be argued that Dirie takes on an autoethnographic stance (Bourget 36), showing indications of what can be seen as survivor’s guilt for having escaped these struggles. She explains that she considers herself as “the lucky one”, which subsequently could be perceived as her implicating that the only way to overcome this tradition is to leave and that a nomad life is not a viable life to live. Although Dirie explains that a life in London is not a life free from struggles, she emphasises the supreme difference in struggles from a life in Somalia and a life in London (Dirie and Miller 225). However, a few pages later she highlights the fact that she does not want her readers to view her as not appreciating the culture in which she was brought up. She explains her pride in being a Somali woman and the only aspect that she thinks of as an issue is the act of FGM (234).
In order to prevent similar atrocities from happening in the future, Dirie decides to talk to a journalist about her experience of FGM. However, the process of giving voice to her experience does not unfold as an easy task for her. She battles with embarrassment and the fear of negative responses from other Somalis, which could be a result of political pressure put on survivors not to tell (Tal 7). As has been acknowledged previously, women in Somalia live in a patriarchal society. Dirie’s fear of receiving negative responses from other Somalis could be due to her being a woman, a woman who is not supposed to speak up for herself, nor to criticize what they see as a holy tradition which the Somali women have to go through in order to live a life of dignity. Despite those feelings she decides to set her dignity and fear aside and further describes it as her destiny, helping women living in cultures where FGM is prominent and perhaps just as important, to broaden the knowledge about this practice as something that is still occurring today globally (Dirie and Miller 225-27). This parallels with Tal’s writings on the matter of reaching other survivors through the speaking of one’s own experience (127).

Furthermore, speaking of traumatic experiences can also work as a means for healing (Herman 9). This becomes apparent when Dirie explains her reasons for deciding to speak to the journalist. The first reason is explained as some kind of healing process for herself. The circumcision she has been through is something that still bothers her deeply and affects her by depriving her the pleasures of sex: “If you ask me today, ‘Do you enjoy sex?’ I would say not in the traditional way. I simply enjoy being physically close to Dana [her husband] because I love him” (Dirie and Miller 227).

Although she does not like to call herself a victim as an adult, she does however clearly state that when she was a girl and “when the gypsy woman butchered me, that’s exactly what I was” (227). Keeping it to herself has made her angry, and talking to someone is something she needs to do in order to confront the past and reach an
empowerment in life (Herman 175-6; Ruti 40). Ruti further discusses the response of others as a means for healing, which is also the case in *Desert Flower*. When the journalist publishes the story, Dirie receives many letters from readers giving their support. The two negative responses she gets come from Somalia, which Dirie explains did not come as a surprise (Dirie and Miller 229). Although she felt reluctance towards telling her story to the journalist, because of the fear of letting the world know about her private issue, she decided to neglect that feeling. As mentioned earlier, in order for her to release the anger and confront the past (Herman 175-6), telling her story is therefore essential. The second reason is instead described as in connected to helping others rather than herself (Dirie and Miller 227).

Thus, by talking to a journalist, new doors reveal themselves to her and her work on helping other girls and women. Eventually, she gets contacted by the United Nations and she begins working with the WHO assisting their work on extinguishing FGM, in hopes to prevent it from happening to others. Nevertheless, speaking of atrocities like FGM and trying to extinguish it might threaten the status quo within a society (Tal 7). As Dirie describes in her autobiography, it could be a dangerous mission when working against such a rooted practice as FGM in fact is within certain cultures. According to Dirie, many fundamentalists view FGM as a holy practice, and by working against it could result in religious fanatics attempt to kill her. However, as Dirie clarifies at the end of her story, she is aware of the danger that her work to extinguish FGM might entail. Yet, she considers it her mission and when looking back at her life, taking chances is something that she has done all her life and she now needs to take a chance at this as well (Dirie and Miller 233).

5 Using Trauma Literature in the EFL Classroom

Previous section has provided insight to how trauma and the healing of trauma are depicted in *Desert Flower*. It is now time to highlight the pedagogical aspect of trauma
literature and narratives of trauma. Following section will therefore bring forth arguments to why *Desert Flower* and sensitive issues such as trauma can be relevant to teach in the EFL classroom. Moreover, the teaching of and the difficulties with such issues will also be taken into account.

5.1 Autobiographies of Trauma, the Possibilities and Dilemmas

To begin with, one can deem it relevant to reflect upon why the teaching of trauma can be perceived as useful in the EFL classroom. This could be done by questioning the subject matter itself. As has been mentioned previously, there are no guidelines to how trauma or other issues that can count for being sensitive or controversial can be taught in the classroom. Nor does the syllabus state it as a mandatory subject to teach. However, since the syllabus is created for teachers to utilize their interpretation of the educational frameworks, one can argue that the matter of trauma literature can thus be connected to various aspects found in the syllabus. Pursuant to Spears, teaching sensitive issues such as trauma can develop a greater self-actualization as well as social consciousness (53). When reading *Desert Flower*, the pupils might engender a greater self-actualization in a way that they could develop a deeper understanding of where the pupils as readers stand in the matter brought up in Dirie’s story. In some cases, the pupils might even relate to Dirie and her life, which could also foster a greater understanding of the self. The aspect of social consciousness will be highlighted later. Subsequently, one could argue that those aspects can be included as a part of the core content found in the syllabus for English level 6, where the teaching should cover “living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts . . .” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. ”Syllabus En 6”).

An autobiography by a Somali woman becomes especially relevant to the Swedish EFL classroom in regards of the number of refugees that have come from that
country due to the civil war. According to Statistic Sweden (SCB), statistics from 2018 show a table of the 10 most common countries that Sweden has accepted refugees from that year. Somalia is ranked as the 10th country on that list with a number of 2968 refugees in total, whereas 1503 are women (SCB). Therefore, incorporating a novel such as *Desert Flower* can provide one representation of a trauma narrative, providing its readers with a deeper understanding of what life could be like for a nomad girl from Somalia, the effect of oppression of women, and finally to read about someone who has endured the sufferings from FGM. Furthermore, the choice of using this autobiography allows Somali pupils to encounter a depiction of their home culture in a school setting and the symbolic importance that may have. This symbolic importance could be reflected in the way that the teaching of postcolonial literature such as *Desert Flower* may enable the pupils to understand themselves in the society that they now live in and ultimately their roles in it (Andreotti 262). However, a teacher must be careful about the view of Somali culture that this autobiography presents to all pupils in the classroom. One would not want to create a negative view of the culture depicted in the story. Therefore teachers must be well prepared in order not to encourage prejudice of Somali culture and to prevent Somali pupils from feeling embarrassed or ashamed. Subsequently, with well elaborated lesson plans, using this novel that depicts what can be viewed as a non-Western trauma, might prevent pupils from taking on a Eurocentric approach while learning about other cultures (Craps and Buelens 2).

Moreover, autobiographical novels can also work as a means for evoking empathy in readers (Keen 74). This could connect to the motivational factor where pupils could view the reading of autobiographies as more applicable than fictional literature where the narratives are not grounded in the real world. Such texts can also be preferable due to the possible enhanced identification that the readers can obtain. This scaffolding strategy could eventually make the more reluctant readers become interested
in reading. Nevertheless, it is important for the readers to acquire a critical stance when reading autobiographies. When pupils read about stories grounded in the real world they must be aware of the underlying power-relations that could have impacted the story in various ways.

One dilemma to this is the risk of pupils gaining a false sense of closeness when reading about other peoples’ lives (Anderst 274). This aligns with Keen’s thoughts on false empathy where readers pretend to empathise with someone, due to the difficulty to understand the character (Keen 152,57). Furthermore, pupils who have not endured the same hardships or traumas that are depicted in the literature do not possess the metaphorical tools for comprehending the traumas to a full extent, unlike survivors of similar traumas, who carry a different understanding of traumatic events (Tal 16).

However, in connection to Dirie’s work with WHO, the focus in her story is not that she wants to offer a Cinderella story, the focus is rather put on creating a response to what is written and spreading an understanding about the struggles that many women, including herself, have to endure. Additionally, who is to say that there needs to be a certain response to a text that pupils read? Although there is a risk of acquiring a false sense of closeness or false empathy, one could nevertheless perceive it as a response from the pupils which could ultimately present itself in educative discussions among the pupils.

5.2 Pupils’ Responses to Trauma Literature

However, aforementioned discussion all depends on what the teacher chooses to do with the text provided to the pupils. For the learning to become as productive as possible, the teacher needs to have a well-elaborated plan, especially when teaching a book such as Desert Flower, which contains sensitive issues. Dealing with traumatic experiences, like Dirie has done in her story, often generates an act of silence as an immediate response to the reading. Although this silence could be difficult for a teacher at that moment to work with, Rak explains that it is important not to view it as a problem that needs to be
solved but rather something to work through. Accordingly, by making the pupils understand their roles as being witnesses to what is explained in the story, along with contextualizing it, the silence can be transformed into valuable discussions (Rak 53, 67). By giving the pupils context to what they have read might help them to transform the shock of reality that might evolve when reading *Desert Flower*. This is not something that can be done solely by the teacher alone, but rather as a collaboration between the teacher and the pupils where the pupils need to understand their roles as witnesses in order to be able to fully comprehend what they have read.

Another pedagogical aspect when using *Desert Flower* in the EFL classroom is the risk of disturbing the peace and tranquillity among the pupils (Philpott et al. 32). If the silence occurs and when this silence has been worked through, there is a chance of pupils feeling differently regarding the reading experience. Although feeling differently towards certain aspects could be perceived as something positive, Philpott and others describe it as something that can set the pupils against each other (32). Although teachers want the pupils to be able to discuss freely, they still need to have an awareness of what is allowed to say and what is not. Here, the curriculum offers a twofold challenge. It expresses the need for a school that is open for encouraging pupils with different ideas and that they should feel free to express their thoughts. In addition, it is further stated that emphasis should be put on creating personal views. The dilemma here is that the curriculum simultaneously stresses the importance of working against discrimination. In fact the school should promote “equality between women and men” as well as “the inviolability of human life” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. “Curriculum” 4). The dilemma arises with pupils who do not share these values of equality. How does a teacher respond to that? For some, where the act of FGM is a part of their culture, Dirie’s story might not be viewed as problematic unlike the ways other pupils might perceive it and some might even object to the fact that Dirie works against the practice
of FGM. Pursuantly, this is what Philpott and others may refer to when claiming that issues based on controversy could set pupils against each other.

Although pupils might have different thoughts when it comes to some aspects, it is important to keep the discussions civilized and within certain boundaries, which ultimately makes school a good place to ventilate thoughts at (Chikoko et al. 6). It is therefore important that all pupils are aware of the democratic grounds that the Swedish school system lies upon, and what values and ideas that strictly go against these grounds. Moreover, this also corresponds to Rosenblatt’s thoughts on the matter of taking on a dogmatic approach as a teacher. If a teacher, whether it is consciously or unconsciously, prescribes own values and thoughts towards a certain text to pupils, the learning environment will not become as productive (124). This will rather lead to the pupils feeling stymied to contribute with their own thoughts about the text that they have read. But imposing pupils with certain ideas and values go against what is stated in the curriculum: “the school should be open to different ideas and encourage their expression. It should emphasise the importance of forming personal views and provide opportunities for doing this. Teaching should be objective and encompass a range of different approaches” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. “Curriculum” 4).

A question that arises in connection to what Spear talks about regarding the complexity of teaching trauma literature (61), is the arduous issue of how a teacher can know that the pupils can manage to deal with such topics. It can also be seen as the pupils entering a secondary victimhood (Luckhurst 3) where they become witnesses to another’s trauma. This problematic question also aligns with Rak’s thoughts on the matter, that one of the challenges of teaching trauma is the ethical stance of pupils witnessing trauma in the classroom (53). Given the vast wave of immigrants that have come to Sweden, fleeing from horrific circumstances in hope for a safer life is a reality for many of our pupils. Some come from Somalia and have perhaps been through
similar experiences told by Dirie in her autobiography. Incorporating *Desert Flower* in the classroom can therefore not only be seen as highly relevant due to the traumatic representation, but using *Desert Flower* can further be seen as troublesome, since the pupils could be reminded of their own experiences. As a teacher it would be counterproductive if it inflicted further harm or if it led to the risk of traumatizing the pupils even more. However, one can always argue that this could be the case with all types of literature, whether it brings up the issue of trauma or not. All types of literature carry a somewhat ethical stance, and when avoiding to teach ethical issues, the teacher does neither pupils nor literature any favour (Rosenblatt 16). Although the teaching of trauma can make a teacher uncomfortable due to the uncertainty of pupils’ responses, it can be considered important to teach despite teachers’ reluctance towards it (Spear 61; Jackett 102), again pointing to the importance of teacher preparation. However, the fact that teachers might feel uncomfortable when teaching sensitive issues it should nevertheless restrain them from incorporating it in the classroom. Teachers should rather focus on well-prepared lessons to avoid harmful consequences. Subsequently, one could argue that the use of *Desert Flower* in the EFL classroom should not solely be viewed as problematic. The use of Dirie’s story also demonstrates a valid choice of literature when the aim is to broaden the knowledge about various cultures, trauma, and its effect on people in our world.

5.3 Teaching Cultural Awareness

However, one must acknowledge that a literary work, even if it is an autobiography, only gives one fictional representation of the world. Therefore one must not view it as a non-fiction book presenting facts about a culture. After having read one book by a Somali author, one will still not know what it is like to live in that country.

As the Swedish classroom has become more multicultural due to the globalisation in recent years, the need for a cultural awareness has become even more
relevant. Luisa Rodríguez González and Miriam Puyal Borham consider this clashing of cultures in the classroom as a dynamic process, which ultimately leads to intercultural encounters. Furthermore, the authors turn to the usage of literature as a means for promoting this intercultural awareness. By using literature, pupils are given the chance to reflect upon cultural diversity and hopefully assimilate an acceptance for the target culture depicted in the literary piece presented to them (107-8). By teaching aforementioned contents found in the syllabus, the pupils can ultimately increase their knowledge about different cultures and therefore develop their knowledge about people and the different lives that we all live. Thereby, Desert Flower could afford pupils with an increased understanding of differences in various cultures and how some cultures can inflict traumatic experiences on people, which ultimately engender the social consciousness highlighted by Spear (53).

However, when doing so one must be careful not to enforce the assumptions of dichotomies of us and them. When using Desert Flower as a point of departure, the purpose is not to promote assumptions of negative stereotypes of nomad cultures. Aligning with what is stated in the curriculum regarding the understanding of and solidarity between people (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. “Curriculum” 4), the aim is rather to foster an approach of unity, an approach that entails that we are all in this world together. Therefore, it could be argued that by using a literary text such as Desert Flower, the pupils could take on an intercultural approach where they are given the chance to reflect on different attitudes towards cultural diversities. Moreover, by using Desert Flower which could be seen as both within the genres of autobiography and autoethnography, the pupils are given the opportunity to read about a narrator that describes cultural beliefs and experiences in a self-reflective manner, where an intersection between society and self is realized.
6 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to analyse Dirie and Miller’s *Desert Flower* and their depictions of FGM and its impact through the lens of trauma studies. Additionally, aforementioned book was also analysed through a pedagogical perspective where emphasis was put on problematizing the use of Dirie’s story in the EFL classroom when teaching sensitive and controversial issues regarding possibilities and potential pitfalls.

The theory section offers insight into trauma studies as a relatively new field of study which focuses on widening the conception of the human mind and its functioning. Common ideas among researchers within this field of study is that trauma is considered as events which the human mind cannot digest due to the increase of powerful stimuli. This can ultimately affect the victims of traumas in a way where the intrusive memories of the past make it difficult to live in the present. Moreover, since *Desert Flower* partly is about Dirie and her life in Somalia, the theory section also brings up the matter of postcolonialism in connection to trauma studies. Therefore, when reading *Desert Flower* one must be careful not to take on a Eurocentric approach which can ultimately enforce the assumptions of dichotomies of us and them, something that becomes particularly relevant to consider when teaching this autobiography in the EFL classroom. Further, the aspects of voicing the trauma as a means for healing is also highlighted.

Moving on to the literary analysis, results show that *Desert Flower* does in fact contain indications that bearing witness and the testimony of trauma can serve as healing and even empowerment in the struggle to end FGM. Firstly, when following Dirie’s narration, readers might create awareness of how trauma can affect people and how people can cope with it. Secondly, Dirie’s description of telling her story as a means for healing offers a chance for the readers to broaden the understanding of the effect that empowerment and voice could have on the life of a traumatized individual.
More specifically, as a woman coming from Somalia, where patriarchal relations are prominent and where the voice of women is often suppressed, Dirie, when living in London, shows signs of her strong character. Here she regains power over her own life when choosing to undergo surgery and when she takes control of her voice by sharing her story of her mutilation to a journalist.

*Desert Flower* undoubtedly offers countless thought-provoking and interesting aspects into FGM and its effect on Dirie’s life, yet, a teacher must nonetheless consider the usage of this autobiography in the EFL classroom with care. The teaching of *Desert Flower* might well engender many possibilities such as an increased self-actualization, social consciousness and intercultural understanding among the pupils. However, when teaching a sensitive and controversial issue that traumas of FGM in fact is, a teacher must bring the potential pitfalls into account where silence as a response, inflicting further trauma on the pupils and the differences in thinking could problematize the learning. This becomes especially relevant due to the globalisation since many of the pupils in the Swedish schools come from countries where FGM is prominent. Yet, with the help of a teacher who can help actualizing a peaceful and respectful classroom, and where the teacher can help the pupils understand their roles as witnesses to the story, these dilemmas might be worked through.

As has been shown in the analysis, feminism, as part of the autobiography is a matter that one can undoubtedly miss out on where the connection to the Me Too movement is salient. Although this Master’s Thesis has touched upon the matter, a feministic approach to analysing *Desert Flower* would also be interesting for further research, giving insight into yet another angle of the autobiography. There are numerous indications in the book that could serve as a basis for a feministic analysis. If time was not an issue and if it was not for the restricted scope for this essay, it would additionally
be interesting to analyse the aspects of intersectionality, which could provide a more multifaceted analysis.

In conclusion, *Desert Flower* as a story that depicts FGM offers an interesting narrative that, without any doubt, creates a response from its readers. Whether it is a response of silence, anger or hope, one cannot avoid being emotionally affected by its vivid descriptions to what Dirie has been through and how she lives with the ghosts from her past. As has been stated previously in the introductory quotation, Dirie’s first name symbolises the same flower that her autobiography is named after. She explains it as a flower that blooms despite the difficult circumstances it lives in, much like her own life as someone who has been a victim of FGM. But as has been acknowledged, Dirie eventually regains her power choosing a life free from the bodily pain that her circumcision has caused her. She now blooms, just like a desert flower, in her work to raise awareness of the act of FGM and in her work to distinguish it.
Works Cited

Primary source


Secondary Sources


https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/circumcision-in-boys/


Appendices

Appendix A The Prevalence of and Attitudes to FGM in the World

Fig. 1, Infographic. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/spanish/protection/files/00-FMGC_infographiclow-res.pdf