

## Critique of the Normative Discourse of Girlhood and the Reconfigured Girl Subject Position in *Desert Flower* by Waris Dirie and Cathleen Miller\*

Yilin Yu

National Ilan University, Yilan, Taiwan

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### Abstract

Girl crisis and girl empowerment are two prevalent discourses informing the current prescription of contemporary girlhood. Yet, the theoretical contours of the extant discourses fail to encompass additional differences that exist. For instance, the girl crisis discourse drawn from the experiences of teenaged girls in the developed nations cannot adequately describe the varieties of distress faced by endangered girls in the developing nations. Despite the fact that existing formulations of discourse cannot resolve this girl issue, attending to the real voices and experiences of endangered girls in their stories can serve to redress this imbalance. By providing a textual analysis of a narrative such as *Desert Flower*, this paper aims to shed light on the ramifications of third-wave feminist discourse. It proposes that Waris Dirie utilizes her transition from victim to heroine not to comply with the preexisting framework but to disclose a restructuring of girlhood identity.

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### Key words

Third-wave feminist discourses, contemporary girls' studies, girl subject position, Waris Dirie, *Desert Flower*

## Introduction

Contemporary girls' studies' recent engagement with third-wave feminism has not only rendered itself a thriving sub-discipline of cultural studies but has also resonated with the theoretical trajectory of the third wave. As an extension of third-wave preoccupation with the issues of generation and age, contemporary

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girls' studies have flourished—especially in research into relatively advantaged teenage girls in the developed nations. Although several feminist scholars and writers have taken due note of the marked differences between girls of different classes and races, their research is far from resolving the conundrum faced by many endangered girls in the developing nations: how to enact self-help to accomplish the transition from being an ultimate victim to a self-assertive heroine when they are being molested and their lives threatened. While neither of the two influential third-wave discourses on girlhood identity, girl crisis and girl empowerment, can rigorously address the needs of endangered girls in the developing nations, the memoirs as narrated by the then endangered girls can help fill the void left by what Ortega (2006) sees as the “loving, knowing ignorance” within feminism (p. 56).

Commencing in the 1990s, a recurring theme that runs throughout most memoirs and testimonies written or narrated by *saved* girls/women is their flight from the primitive and persecuting developing nations to the civilized and redeeming developed ones, with most of them residing in America as their final destination. In these refugee/immigrant narratives, the rescued women usually recount first the girlhood plight that triggered the ensuing escape to a world of alleged salvation and freedom.

The story of the international supermodel Waris Dirie provides an example. As a Somali girl, Dirie was subject to female genital mutilation (FGM) from the age of five, a torment that continued throughout her girlhood. Even after she fled to the UK in search of a better life, she still suffered from pains caused by FGM. After she succeeded in becoming an international supermodel, she started her campaign against FGM and became the United Nation Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. In her international bestseller, *Desert Flower*, Dirie's narration focuses in particular on her transformation from an impoverished desert nomad and an oppressed Somali girl to international supermodel and a UN special ambassador. Through her first-person narration, Dirie creates a girl persona that resists being bracketed solely by the image of victimhood due to her enhanced awareness of the gender discrimination surrounding her. Her subsequent success in the developed nations, which brings her fame and fortune and entitles her to privilege, does not make her vulnerable to the dictates of assimilation into mainstream society as is so often the case in stories of Americanization or Westernization. Even when she becomes a symbol of girl or female empowerment within the UN, she finds it hard to fully endorse the UN mission when it runs counter to beliefs and practices at home.

As mentioned earlier, what Dirie's narrative highlights in relation to the current

development of girlhood discourses in contemporary girls' studies is the inadequacy of these discourses and their blindness to differences and other existences. Although the way in which Dirie completes her remarkable transition from girl crisis to girl empowerment seems linear, progressive, and unidimensional, and while the above-mentioned two discourses that prevail in Western cultural studies appear to vividly express her experiences, she does not, when all is said and done, construct her notion of girlhood identity in conformity with the portrayals and representations in the developed nations. Her troubled girlhood and her transition from girlhood to womanhood are, in effect, undivided by the dichotomy between girl crisis and girl empowerment. They coexist in her narrative about African girlhood and womanhood. Moreover, her frequent location in the transit region between different nations, borders, homes, and languages enables her to possess fluid, multiple, migratory, and transnational subjectivities. Her multiple subjectivities as complicated by her gender, race, class, and nationality allow her to reconfigure her girlhood identities and claim her girl subject position in a manner distinct from her female counterparts in the developed nations. Her story charts a different contour that works beyond the usual scripting of third-wave discourse. However, since the extant third-wave discourse of girlhood and girl subjectivities cannot truly account for the genuine experiences of endangered girls in the developing nations, an exploration of these narratives that have emerged exponentially over the past decade deserves to be made to mark their existential significance.

Based on this observation, I first outline and vigorously address the underlying politics involved in the Western feminist discourse of girlhood and girls' subjectivities. I then demonstrate how the politics of girlhood identities operates with a close reading of Dirie's narrative. By elaborating on a feminist reading of the text, I interrogate how the textual transgression of different generic terms and domains in the narrative has resulted in the advent of a transnational girl subject and signaled a poetics of different narratives and identity formations.

### **The Politics of Girlhood and Girls' Subjectivities within Third-wave Feminist Discourses**

For Dirie and others who share a similar fate, girlhood denotes what Croll (2000) describes as a "perilous path" (p. 12). In her seminal work, *Endangered Daughters*, Croll (2000) unravels her observations of prevalent discrimination and violence against girl children, with a special focus on China and India, by saying

that “it is not just girls in difficult or vulnerable circumstances who are at risk, rather it is girlhood itself which may be a difficult and even perilous path to traverse” (p. 12). Croll draws our attention by arguing that the girl crisis should not be seen as girls’ problems only; other social, cultural, and political factors contributing to the crisis phenomenon also merit scrutiny. As a corollary to the son preference embraced by a clear majority of parents and families in China and India, a girl child, whether unborn or born, is often unwanted; the higher likelihood of being aborted before birth, or of being neglected and abandoned after birth, makes it difficult or even impossible for many to pass through girlhood at all, let alone adulthood. Today’s girls, in Croll’s opinion, can never be tomorrow’s women owing to their pitiful circumstances (2000, p. 12).

Though Croll investigated what was defined at first as a regional phenomenon, her raising of public awareness regarding the endangered girl crisis has become a widespread phenomenon that operates on a global scale. The Youth Advocate Program International (1996), a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, has listed “three life-threatening practices”—“female infanticide, female genital cutting, and honor killing”—that have incalculable impacts on “the lives of millions of girl children” who reside in South Asia and Africa (“Discrimination against the Girl Child”). Although the endangered girl crisis has been ubiquitous across countries and regions for decades, it was not until 1990 that UNICEF prioritized girls’ rights by placing them at the forefront of successive campaigns in the Girl Child’s Decade that ensued. Halfway through this endeavor, the Beijing Platform for Action emerged in 1995; nine strategic objectives were accepted by 189 governments as common goals in combatting discrimination and preventing violence against the girl child (Croll, 2000, pp. 154–55, 158).

### **The Discourses of Girl Crisis and Girl Empowerment**

Following a similar trajectory to that of the Girl Child Campaign, the girl crisis discourse championed and popularized by Mary Pipher in her best-seller *Reviving Ophelia* sparked a nationwide initiative in the United States of rescuing girls at risk, known since 1994 as the Ophelia Movement (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005, pp. 48–49). Pipher (2005) regards the 1990s as the decade that produced the “girl-poisoning culture” through which girls are obliged to create false selves that comply with mainstream cultural values. This repression of girls’ true selves leads to low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation (pp.17–28). As one of the two dominant discourses foundational to contemporary Western girls’ studies, and deriving



from the vibrant third-wave feminist movement, the girl crisis discourse not only reflects the positioning of the new subject in late modernity, but also echoes through many popular texts and academic studies. This has gradually led to the widening of the scope of feminist studies on at-risk girls.

Although both the Girl Child Campaign and the Ophelia Movement stand in close proximity in historical moment and social agenda, what distinguishes them is the different social and cultural milieus in which their targeted subjects are situated. The girl subjects each focus on are different in terms of age, class, and race. The Girl Child Campaign concentrates on the girl child of a much younger age than the teenage girl of the Ophelia Movement. There is also a stark contrast between them with respect to the familial and social resources allocated to each. The endangered girls in the developing nations are often illiterate, despised, exploited, and even unwanted by their families and societies, whereas the Ophelia girls in North America receive attention and love from concerned and devoted parents, clinicians, educators, and researchers; some resort to expensive measures to get girls back on track.

Indeed, the coexistence of girl-crisis discourses in both the developed and developing nations brings to the forefront the issue of diversity in the constitution of girlhood and girls' subjectivities, as pinpointed already by several feminist scholars on girls' studies. Griffin (2004), for instance, avers that contemporary construction of girlhood and girls' identities has been built upon the representation of the modern girl "in predominantly Anglocentric terms"<sup>1</sup> which is in stark "contrast to 'traditional' girlhood, or the condition of girls and young women living in 'traditional' cultures" (p. 31). What Griffin (2004) has criticized is that the bifurcation of contemporary girlhood into "modern" and "traditional" not only widens the divide between girls residing in the developed and developing nations but also further "marginalize[s] young women of color from First World societies" (p. 31). In an analogous fashion to Griffin's argument, Ward and Benjamin (2004) call for "attention to intersectionality in the study of girls' lives" (p. 21). They argue against

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<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that the notion of whiteness and white girl identities have been constructed as fixed, static, and monolithic entities in anti-racist discourses (Bonnert, 1996, pp. 97 - 110). The discourses of girl crisis and girl empowerment that denote the white girl identities as either being vulnerable or empowering have also afforded a rather rigid prescription of the white girl subject position. In leveling a critique of the normative discourse of girlhood against the construction of girlhood identities, this paper attempts to address this embedded issue by arguing that there is also a need to view the concept of whiteness "as a temporally and spatially contingent and fluid category" (Bonnert, 1996, p. 97).

the overrepresentation of the middle-class white girl in contemporary American girls' studies, which renders this "as a sort of 'universal' figure without attending to the issues of class and race in researching girls' lives" (Ward & Benjamin, 2004, p. 21).

This feminist alert to the issue of diversity and multiplicity, which has been a salient feature in contemporary feminist critical thinking, was spearheaded initially by feminist women of color. Although there is no denying the different social, political, and cultural elements found in both discourses of the girl crisis, this recent change in the Girl Child Campaign has contributed to drawing the two sister discourses even closer than ever. This shift is what Campeau (2006) refers to as a change from "a 'needs-based' discourse to a 'rights-based' discourse in child-centered development policy and programming" currently underway in many developing nations (p. ii). As Campeau makes clear, the progress made to "the basic-needs approach" is the adding of a need for children's or girls' rights to let them "actively participate as newly defined development subjects" (p. 3). In other words, girls in the developing nations are now being "constructed as 'neoliberal development subjects' under the current rhetoric of 'rights-based' strategies" with the accentuation of their "agency and participation"; this entitles them to become separate and independent beings capable of realizing the "neoliberal conceptions of social development" (Campeau, 2006, p. 57). What is illuminating about this rights-based approach is that it brings girls, the once vulnerable and passive recipients of development programming, to the center stage where they become "actors in their own life" (Campeau, 2006, p. 57). This represents a dramatic but welcome change resonant with current Western feminist efforts to delve into and understand the real voices of girls.

What brings the two discourses of girl crisis together is exactly this fashioning of a neoliberal subject in late modernity. The neoliberal subject relies heavily on exerting their personal choices and individual capacities to advance their self-achievement in a late capitalist society, and they also take full responsibility for both their successes and their failures. Regarding the two American dominant discourses of girlhood, "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia," not as "opposing, competing, and contradictory" as they might have been, Gonick (2006) contends that they present "new formations of neoliberal subjectivities" by offering different subject positions for girls (pp. 1, 19). Girls are taught to understand themselves as either a success or a failure depending on how well they materialize their self-realization and individualization (p. 6). In other words, being empowered or disempowered depends on one's endeavors; one does need to shoulder responsibility

for the outcomes of one's actions. Being framed similarly within the neoliberal rhetoric, the move from a needs-based approach to a rights-based one in enhancing the development of girls in the developing nations can be said to echo a constant Western concern with transforming the status of girls from vulnerability to empowerment.

However, what is hidden behind this girl-centered initiative is the cultivation of a girl subject through the indoctrination of the development regime. As Campeau (2006) cautions us, “development as a modernist form of colonial practices” needs to be investigated to reveal its “embedded relations of power” (p. 20). What Campeau means here is that “the subjectivities of girls in the ‘third world’ are constituted, cultivated and even *imagined* through mainstream development discourse as represented through development policy and programming text” (p. 6, emphasis in the original). According to Campeau, the application of a highly Westernized notion of a neoliberal subject to the subject positions of girls in the developing nations can be problematic because, like their Western counterparts, girls in the developing nations are asked to bear full responsibility for their development—which, in most cases, their social and cultural conditions do not allow (p. 59). This poses a challenge to advocacy for girls’ agency, autonomy, and participation in the implementation of the current development agenda; whether this might serve the best interests of girls in the developing nations or illuminate the authenticity of their subjectivities remains a highly contested question<sup>2</sup>. In addition, what both girl crisis discourses have regulated is the management of girlhood and girls’ subjectivities to place them on the right track of development for womanhood in the future (Campeau, 2006, p. 99).

### Future Implications for Intersectional Feminism

As discussed already, a monolithic representation of girl identities and girlhood subjectivities, drawn from the model set by the Western rendition of girlhood, has been treated as the norm. The interpellation of this normative discourse of girlhood has also called into question other formations of girlhood identities. What several of the above-mentioned scholars have urged is greater heed of embedded

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<sup>2</sup> In arguing against the neoliberal construction of girlhood subjectivities, this paper does not deny the fact that there is another possibility where girls’ agency and participation can be enacted through “an alternative vision of collaboration” among girl children, NGOs, and government (Maitra, 2002, p. 108).

ethnocentrist and unitarian interpretations of contemporary girlhood identities and subject positions. Their warnings about bias in and misapplication of the Western version of girlhood has not only vigorously addressed the issue of difference and diversity, but also implied the necessity of resistant reading against the grain. The current theoretical and pragmatic ramifications of girlhood identities and subjectivities cannot possibly be applied to those of endangered girls in the developing nations since they are distinct from their counterparts in the developed nations. The discourse on endangered girls will need to be constructed by taking a different route. Therefore, an exploration of the girls' personal narratives can provide a valuable means of delving into their real voices and experiences; we have a chance to emerge with a better approach to constructing the possible discourse on endangered girls. Before I embark on a feminist reading of the narratives of endangered girls, I investigate how the endangered girls' narratives transcend the confines of different genres and borders. This investigation illustrates how varied and differentiated the subject positions of the endangered girls and their girlhood might be.

### **The Breaking of Generic and Border Boundaries in Endangered Girls' Narratives**

#### **The African Female *Bildungsromane***

Published in the 1990s and 2000s, many of the endangered girls' narratives that record their personal development and transformation from girlhood to womanhood share the features of several literary genres such as female *bildungsromane*, coming-of-age narratives, and coming-to-America narratives. For instance, a text like *Desert Flower*, co-authored by Waris Dirie and Cathleen Miller, resonates with the type of African female *bildungsromane* in which a protagonist's completion of her development is often determined by her resolve to fight against social hurdles (Lugano, 2005, p. 18). In the case of Dirie's memoir, her major goal is to combat the imposition of female circumcision on an African girl like her. As is common to most delineations in African female *bildungsromane*, the living conditions where the girl child protagonist is situated are usually dire and harsh, lacking even parental love and support. An African girl child often has to endure the hardships of gender discrimination and violence inflicted on her in the form of early marriage arrangements and female circumcision; these violate her integrity as a human being without heeding her own needs and interests. Thus, alienation from a place of origin which is repressive to a girl child has been inevitable in the portrayal of girl

characters in African female *bildungsromane* (Lugano, 2005, p. 156). What a girl protagonist opts to do to reverse her fate is usually to flee “from her small world” to “a much wider environment with the potential of exposure to varying degrees of change” which is also metaphorically “her journey of learning” (p. 155). In Dirie’s case, her escape from a rural village in Somalia to a urban city, London, contributes to her later fortune and fame as an internationally renowned supermodel, bringing her not only empowerment but also freedom from her restrictive culture of origin.

### **The Modified Combination of Women’s Coming-of-Age and Coming-to-America Narratives**

When we examine more closely the representation of subjectivities and narrative choices in a number of endangered girls’ narratives, however, they more closely resemble coming-of-age narratives than the female *bildungsromane*. To be more precise, most of them are a combination of coming-of-age narratives and coming-to-America or developed nations narratives. In her study on American women’s coming-of-age narratives, Rishoi (2003) regards this type of narrative as an “interrogative” text that “subverts traditional literary forms to construct new forms of subjectivity and resist the male-defined discourse of womanhood” (p. 8). That is to say, the development of coming-of-age narratives does not stick with the trajectory of “a coherent universal subject”; neither does it prescribe the process of “a social integration” which “requires the partial denial or repression of the subject’s identity” (p. 63). Instead, casting their protagonists as “outsiders” throughout, the subjectivities as exhibited in coming-of-age narratives are often constructed as “fluid,” “contingent,” and “provisional” (pp. 9, 63). Further, unlike fictional representations of women’s lives whose narrative choices often confine women to either marriage or death, coming-of-age narratives often provide women with a wider range of choices which in turn empower them to resist “normative femininity” in a productive way (Rishoi, 2003, p. 11).

In addition, as George (1998) clarifies, unlike the generic formulation in earlier coming-of-age/coming-to-America narratives—which chronicle a protagonist’s assimilation into mainstream culture as completing simultaneously his/her Americanization and growing up processes—the same narratives written and published in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries have formed what she characterizes as “countersites” (p. 136). Here, “they make explicit the incompleteness of such journeys and tacitly refuse to present normative

Americanization as a singular, logical destination or safe haven” (p. 150). This transformation in light of narrative structure can be attributed to the emergence of “transnational diasporas” instead of “immigrants” with designations of fluid identities and flexible global citizenships (George, 1998, pp. 148–149). As a quintessential outsider, the endangered girls’ migration to the developed nations, triggered by the abuses they suffer at home, does not guarantee them a life journey with peace and security owing to their marginal status. Neither can they integrate fully into their home countries because of their resistance to oppressive social customs practiced on girls and women there. Yet, their migration to the developed nations does make them representative of a transnational diaspora. Being a transnational person in effect reveals their great capacity for survival.

### **The Advent of a Transnational Girl Subject**

As we can see from the above discussion, the crossing of generic borders showcases the complexity of girlhood subjectivities. While we do need to pay special attention to the ethnocentrism inherent in the construction of contemporary girlhood and girls’ subjectivities, the fact that we are also living in an age of globalization where people come to identify themselves as transmigrants or transnationalists when they cross national borders can further complicate the issue. In particular, this emergence of transnational subjects has been infused with a gendered feature. The advent of globalization with the operation of neoliberal economic policy as its driving force has led to the increase of female labor in the workforce. This brings both opportunities and risks to women: female visibility and participation in the public sphere have become more pronounced than ever but they are also simultaneously subjected to “irregular forms of employment increasingly used to maximize profits” and asked to bear the double burden of family and work which increases their chances of “living under the poverty line” (Moghadam, 2005, pp. 6–7). As prominence has been given to women within this changing neoliberal environment, it is precisely young women, as is mostly true in Western societies, who have been represented as “an ideal late modern subject,” a “future girl” with the capacity to be “self-making, resilient, and flexible” (Harris, 2005, pp. 1, 6). Although I do not intend to evade the differences we find between girls of diverse backgrounds, the prevalence of girl subjects in the proliferation of life narratives about women in the developing nations who migrate to the developed nations, regardless of their different purposes and outcomes, highlights this emphasis on the figure of the transnational girl/woman subject. Waris Dirie, who

crosses the Somali border, migrates to the UK and several other European countries, and contributes her labor in the job market in those foreign lands, is one such example that articulates the transnational experiences of a migratory girl subject. In what follows, I evaluate the intricacies of this transnational girl subject and demonstrate how the existence of this female subject reshapes contemporary contours of girlhood and girl subjectivities in *Desert Flower*.

### The Reconfigured Girlhood Subjectivities in *Desert Flower*

As an apparent trilogy, the desert series—*Desert Flower* (Dirie & Miller, 2001), *Desert Dawn* (Dirie & d’Haem, 2002), and *Desert Children* (Dirie & Milborn, 2005)—recounts the odyssey of Dirie’s transformation from hapless victim of female genital mutilation (FGM) to international human rights fighter for the campaign to abolish the world-wide practice of female circumcision. As the first in the series and with a title that reflects the meaning of her name, *Desert Flower* is Dirie’s (auto)biography, encapsulating her struggle with the ordeal of FGM. While the second in the series, chronicling Dirie’s homecoming to Somalia, barely touches on the issue of FGM, the last of the series, *Desert Children*, details how Dirie worked together with several allies to embark on a full-scale examination of the practice of FGM and the availability of relevant juridical protection of girls’/women’s rights in several European countries. With the success of her first two books as international bestsellers feeding an international craving for life narratives about human rights violations (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 1), the publication of her third book establishes an especially meaningful link “between stories and actions” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 28), culminating in the drafting of the Waris Dirie Manifesto and the founding of the Waris Dirie Foundation to carry on her life-long campaign against FGM.

As a victim of FGM, the infliction of infibulation on Dirie at the age of five haunted her throughout girlhood and womanhood. On top of this horrendous girlhood trauma, her father’s arranging of a marriage with an old man at the age of 13 prompts her to escape from home and follow in her older sister’s footsteps. This dreadful plight of girlhood is figuratively captured right at the beginning of *Desert Flower* with Dirie in imminent danger of being killed by a lion during her flight across the desert. This initial narration highlights the endangered and vulnerable state Dirie finds herself in as she indicates that she has “no protection, no weapon” and no “strength to run” (Dirie & Miller, 2001, p. 1). Yet, instead of being overtaken by fear, Dirie summons up her courage by bravely facing death:

“Without any fear I opened my eyes again and said to the lion, ‘Come and get me. I’m ready for you’” (Dirie & Miller, 2001, p. 2). The lion, as depicted in the story, symbolizes a male predator under the patriarchy who constantly keeps an eye on a girl child as his vulnerable, sexual prey. However, casting herself later in the role of a survivor rather than a victim,<sup>3</sup> not only in this life-threatening scene but also in her life journey, Dirie provides a counterbalance to the apparent doom threatening millions of endangered girls in the developing nations by foreshadowing her upcoming journey as a survived diasporic transnational girl/woman subject. In particular, themes and tropes associated with the concepts of flight, journeying and returning, and home recur in Dirie’s narrative.

### The Use of the Tropes of Flight, Journeying and Returning, and Home

Delineated as a quintessential outsider, Dirie’s migration to the developed nations, triggered by the abuses she suffers at home, does not guarantee her a life journey with peace and security owing to her marginal status. Neither is she seen as integrating fully into her home country, Somalia, because of her resistance to oppressive social customs enforced on girls and women there. Yet, her migration to the developed nations does make her representative of the transnational diaspora. Her thriving career as an international supermodel constantly requires her to travel around both Europe and America; her later devotion to eliminating female genital mutilation globally by launching the Waris Dirie Foundation illustrates her active participation as a member of the transnational feminist network. Entitling the first chapter of her book, *Desert Flower*, “Running Away,” Dirie already informs us of the flight she needs to take and her future fate as a transnational migrant (Dirie & Miller, 2001, p. 1).

Being portrayed as a transnational person in effect reveals Dirie’s great capacity for survival. Her first name, Waris, which means “desert flower,” captures the full spirit of her unique character as unfolded in her life narrative. Named by her mother, Dirie explains that

*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*

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<sup>3</sup> A survivor is differentiated from a victim in that the former is capable of enacting the agency of the subject concerned, whereas the latter is vulnerable to the abuses and the oppression imposed by others.



*finally the water pours down, cleansing the dusty landscape, and then like a miracle the blooms appear. The flowers are a brilliant yellowish-orange, and for this reason, yellow has always been my favorite color (Dirie & Miller, 2001, p. 35).*

Seen through Dirie's narration of her childhood experiences, Somalia is a barren land, both literally and metaphorically. Living with her family as a nomad in Somalia is hard for Dirie because essential resources such as water and food are scarce; on top of this, as an African girl child, she needs to contribute her labor to the family while at the same time enduring sexual discrimination and molestation. Nevertheless, instead of being a victim herself, Dirie chooses to struggle against these hardships and strives to survive each of them, including using her wits to escape several attempted sexual assaults and living through the cruelty of female genital mutilation. Desert flowers have become a source of inspiration and strength for Dirie: she indicates that the yellow color of a desert flower has always been her favorite color, and she dedicates the book to her mother who gives her strength to survive in a world hostile to girls and women.

Indeed, as shown in *Desert Flower*, Dirie lives up to the true meaning of her name. But, looking more closely, what is embedded in the construction of her selfhood is the subtle interplay between two prevalent discourses of girls' subjectivities: girl crisis and girl empowerment. Despite being a human rights fighter for the abolition of female genital mutilation, what makes Dirie most vulnerable and helpless is her lifelong struggle with her experience of circumcision. In describing how she copes with this brutal practice, Dirie marks her transition from being a victim to an action heroine: "I hate the term 'victim' because it sounds so helpless. But when the gypsy woman butchered me, that's exactly what I was. However, as a grown woman, I was no longer a victim, and I could take action" (Dirie & Miller, 2001, p. 215). Dirie's narration here displays how she makes a divide between girlhood and womanhood in terms of vulnerability and empowerment. As the meaning of "desert flower" strongly suggests to us, it is plausible that empowerment can grow out of vulnerability, as in the case of Dirie.

But what exactly is the subject position Dirie has occupied? When Dirie migrates to the UK and before she becomes a successful supermodel, she takes several menial jobs, such as being a maid in her uncle's house and an illegal cleaner serving at McDonald's. At this stage, Dirie is not only "geographically and linguistically estranged, but she is also economically deterritorialized" because "her black body predestines her to race-bound domestic labour" (Kebe, 2009, p. 140).

Besides, as an undocumented immigrant who is illiterate and speaks very little English, Dirie's situation is the lowest of the low. She has nowhere to live and no job to support her after she decides not to go back to Somalia with her uncle; she lives alone by herself in a foreign land. In Dirie's narration of her female migrant work, she informs readers of "how the lack of status" makes her "vulnerable to discrimination" and exploitation (Kebe, 2009, p. 141). Only after trying to seek the support she thinks she can find does Dirie finally grasp her chance of working as a model. She relies on bits of help offered by a new friend, Halwu from Somalia, and by fashion photographer Malcolm Fairchild, who has been following her for two years while constantly taking photographs of her to promote a potential career as a model (Dirie & Miller, 2001, pp. 106–118). As if by a miracle, or just sheer great luck, Dirie is selected to be a cover girl, with her photos appearing in some of the top fashion magazines; she even wins herself a role in a James Bond movie. However, this process of securing herself a modeling job that could promise a much better salary has also been represented as a great hurdle for Dirie, as she has constantly been in limbo, patiently awaiting the likely arrival of her future fame and fortune (Dirie & Miller, 2001, pp. 119–138).

As vividly exhibited in the book, the female circumcision inflicted on Dirie has also made her different from other women in England. She encounters physical impairment and has difficulty in urinating as her vagina was sewn up by a circumciser to inhibit her building a relationship with any man. As Dirie discloses in the book, the pain her periods cause her troubles her tremendously. She therefore consults doctors for their opinions on relieving the pain. However, due to her feelings of shame about informing doctors of the female circumcision she has gone through, all the solutions the doctors offer come to nothing —until Dirie eventually makes the decision to have an operation to try and repair the damage caused by her circumcision and become "a new woman" (Dirie & Miller, 2001, pp. 139–148).

Apart from solving this physical problem, Dirie must also resolve a perplexing passport issue. She is an undocumented immigrant, desperate to obtain legal status in a foreign country where she needs to work and travel to different places to be a model. In order to secure a passport, she utilizes the strategy of a marriage of convenience: she goes through two such marriages, first with an Irish national and later a British national. As she engages with all these hurdles, she is emotionally harassed and abused by immigration officials, while both of the men that she marries she barely knows (Dirie & Miller, 2001, pp. 149–166).

## Dirie's Inhabitation of Space and Her Liminal Subject Position

As noted earlier, the hardships Dirie experiences during the process of sorting out her troubles concerning her circumcision and passport denote that she inhabits a liminal subject position. This situates her both inside and outside the sphere of power, as she needs to resolve these two pressing matters to place herself on the right track to survival and finally success. It also signifies her ambiguous position as she is located on the interface between margin and center. This in-between space, or what Margaret Lawrence terms a “discursive space,” becomes Dirie’s source of inspiration and strength. Here, she can refute the colonial and patriarchal stereotypes and myths surrounding African girls/women and consider non-standard and more affirmative reconstructions of her experiences (as cited in Kebe, 2009, pp. 6, 116). That is to say, although Dirie might have resided in a place of marginality as well as a place of deprivation with her multiple displacements, she also simultaneously occupies a space of resistance by fighting against all the odds and fixing all of the problems. Dirie’s sense of space as portrayed in her memoir is intriguing because she apparently treats London as a “not-home” space.” There is always a home in Somalia to which she can return, but she chooses not to for economic and political reasons. Yet, being pictured as an outsider without any official and legal status in England, not seeing London as her home provides her the possibility of being always somewhere else. Moreover, this traverse out of one’s space also signals “pushing against the boundaries set by race, class and gender” that enable “women of minority to negotiate their subject positions” (Kebe, 2009, p. 137). By so doing, an endangered girl/woman like Dirie can create their own space, a space that can accommodate their multiple identities.

Contrary to the idea of space that is more favorable to the formation of heterogeneous identities, the notion of home as depicted in *Desert Flower* is considered more problematic. Home is often delineated as the place a girl/woman has to escape. As home is designated as “the site of contradiction and unfulfilness [sic] for women,” it has been transformed into a “transnational concept of a non-territorialized notion of home that unfixes the boundaries of home as residing within the nation-state” (Kebe, 2009, p. 26). This concept of “home” is, thus, perceived as being nowhere for a transnational black girl/woman subject (Kebe, 2009, p. 10). In response to this inquiry about the idea of home, postmodern feminist geographers like Doreen Massey have proposed a redefined version of home that is “multiple, dynamic, and at the same time, fluid” (Massey, 2004, p. 17). In other words, since a home is viewed as being nowhere, it has to be reconstructed as an

“elsewhere home” in need of being restructured (p. 17). In the case of Dirie, home is seen as being somewhere but also nowhere. For Dirie, the notion of home is represented as perplexing to her because her home country, Somalia, is a place to which she can but does not want to return, whereas London is the place where she resides but does not belong. Instead of treating home as a stable and safe place that evokes the nostalgic yearning for returning home, Dirie counters singular and masculinist notions of home by suggesting a relocation of home that is diversified, vigorous, and adaptable following the formulation of her multiple identities. Indeed, Dirie is situated between two worlds, two languages, and between leaving and returning. Although she returns to Somalia in her second book, *Desert Dawn*, it is not a return that brings her home for good because it does not suggest the conventional and singular tropes of journeying and returning. It is the flight rather than the return that captures the full spirit of a diasporic narrative (Dirie & Miller, 2001, pp. 20, 144–145).

What has emerged out of the transnational girl subject positions is “migratory subjectivities,” whose sophistication defies rigid prototypes that cannot articulate the intermeshing feature of African girls’/women’s oppressions. This is what Susan Stanford Friedman has termed “the metaphors of multipositionality” as a means of narrating women’s differences based on race, class, and gender (as cited in Kebe, 2009, pp. 21, 25). Dirie’s subjectivity with its multiple (dis)placement and interconnection ruptures the dualistic thinking and contours of margin and center (Kebe, 2009, p. 23). This carving of her migratory or transnational subjectivities is also invariably linked with her “reclaiming of agency” that moves across the boundaries restricted by patriarchal strictures of nationalism and postcolonialism (Kebe, 2009, p. 74). That is to say, Dirie’s articulate narrations in her self-created work serve both aesthetic and political purposes because that work not only seeks to embrace the poetics of diasporic and transnational girls’/women’s narratives but also aims to interrogate how those once silenced female subjects “negotiate their silencing, and resist their erasure within the metanarratives of globalization, and ultimately, how they create an agency, and envision transformation and healing” (Kebe, 2009, p. 28). As is apparent in Dirie’s story, she is capable of overcoming the tortures brought about by her circumcision and her struggles to live in a strange land; she then establishes a foundation to help combat gendered violence and racial discrimination against African girls and women.

## Conclusion

Although both girl crisis discourses—Reviving Ophelia and the Girl Child Campaign—seek to rescue girls of different ages and from different regions and nations, the girl subject position they aim to mold is concurrently a neoliberal female subjectivity. It demands that a girl subject complete a transition from vulnerability to empowerment through her self-determination and strength. Many of the narratives delivered by girls residing in the developing nations who are in need of salvation from their deprived states have revealed their similarly concerted efforts in achieving such a remarkable goal, but they chart a varied trajectory of girlhood identities and subject positions with their marked differences in terms of race, class, gender, language, and nationality. Unlike their female counterparts in the developed nations, who are seen as the archetype of a universal girl figure but are not required to traverse nations and borders for economic and political reasons, the endangered girls in the developing nations are forced to constantly migrate to different places in pursuit of their survival and dignity; even so, their subject formations and narratives have often been overlooked. These two girl cohorts with their differentiated backgrounds and lived experiences occupy rather different subject positions that mark their different existential significances.

Despite the fact that the current mainstream discourses about girlhood cannot accommodate the needs and interests of endangered girls in the developing nations, it is significant that what has been unearthed from the narratives of endangered girls regarding their subject positions is the fluid, migratory, and transnational subjectivity that addresses their experiences and circumstances. This fluidity and flexibility are also delineated in the narrative structures of *Desert Flower* as they transcend the limits set by different genres, implicating the narratives' great capacities for diversity and complexity. In a similar fashion, Dirie offers herself as a girl subject whose identities are constantly in flux because of the flight and migration she needs to engage in to survive in a world that is harmful and hostile to her. The trope of making journeys or traveling between different places and spaces prevails in Dirie's narrative. She flees home by transiting to different towns and cities in Somalia. When she moves to stay in London, she also has to migrate to different cities in England and Europe, and finally travels to America in pursuit of her modeling career. Her girlhood identity is affected by her constant moving in and out of different spaces. They are formed as flowing, contingent, and provisional subjectivities because of the changing nature of unsettlement brought about by her continuous migration. As a result, it unfixes the conventional understanding of a

stable and safe home that endangered girls cannot possibly envision as a place to which they can return.

What has been uncovered and interrogated in this discussion is the politics of girlhood identities and subjectivities caused by the failure of the prevailing Western girlhood discourses to accommodate the existence of cultural variety. And what has been done to redress this theoretical inadequacy in attending to those different needs is examined above: the narrative of an endangered girl. Since current research about girlhood and girls' culture is oriented toward treating the girl subject as a producer rather than a passive recipient of her own stories and cultures (Ward & Benjamin, 2004; Mazarella & Pecora, 2007), delving into the writing of these narratives has proved genuine and insightful. In particular, the experiential significance of differences as manifested in an endangered girl narrative like *Desert Flower* has not only laid bare the politics embedded in the dominance of the girl crisis discourse concerned; it has also yielded fruitful results in terms of asserting the poetics of such narratives. Although their stories might be gloomy and heartbreaking, their aims and actions are often grand and influential.

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*Biographical Note:* Yi-lin Yu, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Ilan University in Taiwan. Her research interests include motherhood in literature, third-wave feminisms, contemporary girls' studies and TEFL. Her work has been published in *thirdspace*, *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, and *Asian Women*. She is the author of *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Peter Lang, 2005).

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