



# AL-Raida



Lebanese American University

Volume XX, No. 99 Fall 2002/2003

The Pioneer الرائدة

# SEXUALITY

&

**Arab Women**

## ABOUT IWSAW

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). Initial funding for the Institute was provided by the Ford Foundation.

**OBJECTIVES:** The Institute strives to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

**PROJECTS:** IWSAW activities include academic research on women, local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures and films; and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the Women's

Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and pamphlets on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Eight children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include The Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided above.

## ABOUT AL-RAIDA

*Al-Raida* is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P.O. Box 13-5053, Chouran Beirut, 1102 2801 Lebanon; Telephone: 961 1 867618, ext. 1288; Fax: 961 1 791645. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, U.S.A.; Telephone: (212) 870-2592; Fax: (212) 870-2762.

**PURPOSE AND CONTENT:** *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research of the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University.

Each issue of *Al-Raida* features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

**REPRINT RIGHTS:** No unsigned articles may be reprinted without proper reference to *Al-Raida*. Permission to reprint signed articles must be obtained from the IWSAW.

**SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES:** We seek contributions from those engaged in research, analysis and study of women in the Arab world. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced typed pages. Please send a hard copy and a diskette. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Editorial</i>	2	• "Le désir amputé, Sexual experience of Lebanese women": Fifteen years later	61
<i>Opinion</i>	4	• Roundtable: Sexuality	68
<i>Research Notes</i>	5	• Red Lips	72
<i>Quote / Unquote</i>	6	• Premarital Female Sexuality in Morocco	75
<i>News Briefs</i>	7	• Arab Lesbian Websites: A Brief Overview	84
<i>IWSAW News</i>	9	• Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?	86
<i>File</i>			
• File Introduction	11	<i>Special Features</i>	
• Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb	12	• A Young Lebanese Woman talks about her lesbian identity, her relationships and her perspective on homosexuality	91
• Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as "Sexual Objects"	23	<i>Conference Report</i>	
• The Importance of Genital Mutilations to Gender Power Politics	33	• Arab Women Journalists Slam Palestine / Iraq Sieges, Urge Skills Upgrade	95
• Harrassment, Honour, Gossip, and the Reputation of Young Women in Jordan	44	• Online Journalism and Development of the Arab Media	97
• Body Image and Breast Cancer	49		
• Abortion in Lebanon: Practice and Legality?	55		
• Let's Talk About Virginity	59		

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## Al-Raida

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Lebanese American University

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SUBSCRIPTION  
THE ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION FEE FOR AL-RAIDA IS US \$ 30. SUBSCRIPTIONS BEGIN IN JANUARY AND END IN DECEMBER.

# A "Hollywood" Fancy

Samira Aghacy

In an "Interview" with Michael Bacos on March 24, 2002, the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury was asked an interesting question: since Lebanese writers no longer have the benefit of a major event, the civil war, to inspire them, what are the issues they are writing about in Post-war Lebanon? Khoury's answer to this was that Lebanese writers are writing novels and are trying, through them, to express their lives<sup>1</sup>, a rather general answer to a question that, in my opinion, needs more in-depth study. Indeed, the fiction written in Lebanon in the post-war era can be described as diverse. Writers are broaching on a wide variety of topics, some still related to the civil war and the repercussions of the war, and others to modernization, the challenge of globalization, the internet, and sexuality. Indeed the war writers were generally more concerned with ideological, political and military issues and the problems of daily survival, and less with personal issues related to the family, male female relations and sexuality. Nevertheless, some women writers did write a number of novels and short stories related to women's freedom and sexuality such as Hanan Al-Shaykh, Maha Samara, Rafif Fattouh, Ghada Al-Samman, and others. Today, sexuality is a topic that many writers both male and female, are dealing with in new and innovative ways, where heterosexual as well as homosexual relations feature either directly or indirectly. It is interesting to note here that women are writing more explicitly, while male writers appear to be more reserved and allusive. The reason for this is that homosexuality is still seen as a direct attack on manhood and many writers fear that anyone who

writes about it is automatically accused of being one. Nevertheless, the past ten years have witnessed a proliferation of fiction dealing with private issues, including sexuality and the body. Among such works are the novels of Ilham Mansour on lesbian relations, pornography, as well as straight and aberrant sexuality. Rachid Al-Daif has published a number of novels including *Learning English* (1999), *Meryl Streep Can Suit Herself* (2001) and *Forget the Car* (2002) where he deals with topics such fatherhood and the authority of the male patriarch, sexual practices void of feelings or emotions, and masculine identity in the aftermath of the civil war. Such topics clearly shock the reader into re-considering the generally accepted views on marriage, sexual relationships, virginity, and homosexuality, in the unsettling world of post war Lebanon.

In Lebanon today, and at a time when many people are questioning the extent of political freedom accorded to individuals as well as groups, it is clear that writers are exercising a great deal of self-discipline when it comes to political and religious issues despite the fact that Lebanon is the only country in the Arab World where the publishing industry is not subject to government censorship. Indeed, many of them have opted to write about sexuality, a subject they believe is more tolerated by the government though it can get entangled into political and religious issues at any time. As the Egyptian writer Edward Al-Kharrat succinctly puts it, censorship in the Arab world is a "beast" that lurks in waiting and attacks its victim whenever it deems necessary. According to Al-Kharrat, "If there is a bit more free-

dom available now than it was fifty years ago when it comes to the erotic in literature or, what is referred, to as pornographic literature, this space is too narrow and fragile and subject to erasure according to the whims of the politicians and under pressure from any authority be it religious or military. It is true that the ghost of dark threats and chaotic oppression is still there but the artist who is faithful to his message will not be intimidated by these ghosts."<sup>2</sup>

A bird's eye view on some reviews published in the Lebanese papers on works of fiction written in the wake of the civil war reveals that reviewers notice a prevailing use of "pornography" in Lebanese fiction. Writing on Al-Daif's *Forget the Car* in *Mulhaq AN-Nahar*, Aql al-'awit asserts that the "pornographic light burns" cruelly without any feelings or emotions. According to the reviewer, sex in Al-Daif's work is commodified and is transformed into "a sort of service that takes place at a personal level and sometimes at a group level." Revealing his reservations about such kind of writing, al-'aweit adds sarcastically that the reader will be faced with "very modern characters" too much "a la mode" and will discover hearts that are automated and devoid of feelings. These characters are quite capable of immersing themselves "in purely pornographic needs" without batting an eye. Accordingly, the novel is seen as nothing more than a "sexual, pornographic film" whose subject matter does not transcend brute sexual encounters. The reviewer suggests that such practices are alien to our culture though he adds sardonically that perhaps Al-Daif appears to be more familiar with what happens behind closed

doors.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, writing about Abbas Baydoun's first novel *Blood Test*, Suleiman Awdeh asserts that "the sexual instinct and the sense of smell are the only means through which the characters communicate. Sex is a means and a tool, and one always smells the lust that fills the air. It is a kind of sex that comes from a pornographic memory, lacking any feelings and burning with lust."<sup>4</sup>

The question that arises is why this concern with sexuality? Is this about lack of subjects after the war or is this an escape from disappointing ideologies that sanctioned and supported a vicious war? Indeed, the works written during the war were largely dominated by commitments to ideology or to the struggle for socialist justice and for the liberation of the country from alien forces. Little space remained for private concerns of the individual, except when these happened to symbolize the collective situation of failure or frustration. Today, many Lebanese writers have shifted to individual problems, particularly issues related to sexuality and gender relations. Within this context, the general trend is to name names and shock the reader by breaking taboos. But why are Lebanese writers so intent on shocking readers? One reason for sexualizing their writings through the depiction of sensationalist scenes is perhaps to produce best sellers, but this is hardly feasible in Lebanon where the best known writers rarely sell more than 200 to 300 copies. Another reason is a vigorous "Hollywood fancy"<sup>5</sup> nourished by a desire by writers to imitate Western writers and the Western way of life, and create a world that, according to many people, is alien to our culture and values. For instance, Najwa Barakat's novel *How Great!* (Ya Salam) is compared by the poet Shawqi Bzey' to Paul Auster's novels that are rife with "murder, lust, sex, provocation and perversity."<sup>6</sup> A third reason exclusively related to women writers, is their desire to ensure that the freedom they acquired in the war is maintained and solidified, and that they do not have to return to the domain of the private space the way Algerian women were forced to do after the revolution. Writing on gay sexuality, some women such as

Mansour want to interrogate a rigidly divided world in which heterosexuality is the norm, and to break free from the stigmatizing logic of gender differences where male is privileged over female. Another reason is the challenge of modernization represented by a strong awareness of changes in gender, and a reaction against the unmaning war. In his interview, Khoury asserts that the war ended because in a sense it died. It reached a point where it became totally meaningless. Did the sense of failure felt by many men after the war affect their masculinity? Did the war unman its men? Indeed, some works of fiction reveal that many men began discovering that in their absence (in the war) women entered the public male space and began negotiating power relations that the men thought to be essential and unchanging. Indeed, one could say that the weakening of masculine potency can be attributed to the castrating impact of the war and the sudden and unexpected rise of women. As a result, men felt anxious and defensive about their masculinity, and the stable gender relations are destabilized. Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (Rihlat Gandhi Al-Saghir) and Al-Shayk's *The Story of Zahra* (Hikayat Zahra) - two novels written during the war- underline the fact that boasting of success in the war, on the one hand, and of sexual potency on the other, reveal that the two are interrelated. Men are hunters (they wield phallic guns) while women are the captured animals.

Accordingly, since man's reality after the civil war has been essentially ugly, frustrating, and disappointing at all levels (the personal, economic, political, and religious) any one who wants to translate this reality into adequate literary form can no longer do this through the traditional, socially acceptable manner. It involves breaking taboos and telling the whole truth whatever the taboos in the readers' minds. Indeed, the issue of sexuality remains inextricably bound up with political and religious issues so that it is difficult to separate one from the other. In other words, when writers write about sexuality, they are in effect writing about religion and politics indirectly. The increasing shift towards individualism makes individual plea-

sure the "sole yardstick of sexual ethics."<sup>7</sup> In this manner, the male writer undermines the solidity of relations of domination and subordination not only at the personal level but also at the religious and political levels. Accordingly, sexual desire points to internal as well as external, private as well as public phenomena in such a manner that it becomes inevitably trapped within a system of oppression and liberation. Indeed, the notion that death haunts sexual desire is so pervasive throughout many areas of 20th century cultural production that some critics have gone so far as to insist that certain desires, especially male ones, are in themselves murderous. Referring to the protagonist of al-Daif's *Forget the Car*, Al-'Aweit compares the narrator's sexual promiscuity to an act of murder. He asserts that this ruthless objectification of the human body told by the author with equanimity, self-possession and detachment "reminds us of the deeds of professional killers who commit their murders, and then wipe their mouths with the sleeves of their shirts and move on as if nothing had happened."<sup>8</sup> These authors tell their stories in cold blood to challenge the institutions that have forged the manacles that have chained the individual and deprived him of personal, religious and political freedom.

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2. "Al-Riqaba Wahshon Uubaddidu al Kitaba," *Al-Adab*, 50 (November-December, 2002), pp. 77-78.
3. *Mulhaq AN-Nahar*, (December 8, 2002), pp. 10-11.
4. *Al-Nuqqad*, 138 (December 16, 2002), p.24.
5. *Ibid.*, p.24.
6. *Al-Adab*, (March- April, 1999), p. 29.
7. Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 29.
8. *Mulhaq AN-Nahar*, p. 11.

She shreds the lettuce with a vengeance. ... she says she didn't know a man and a woman kissed on the lips. She shreds more lettuce. She says it makes her angry to admit she didn't know a man and a woman could kiss on the lips ... it makes her angrier to see the look of disbelief in my eyes. She thinks she should shred more lettuce.

## The Art of Cooking and Kissing!

Abir Hamdar

She doesn't think I would understand ... she shrugs nonchalantly. She puts the shredded lettuce aside. She admits it never crossed her mind to wonder about that kind of kissing. Nothing triggered the wondering. There was no TV ... or rather there was one they could only watch at certain hours. During those hours only Egyptian series were broadcast: "They merely kissed on the cheeks. And when any two characters got married, they closed the door to the viewers." She still watches Egyptian series. ... It's become an addiction. She discusses the controversy over Ramadan's latest series "The Family of Hajj Mitwalli."

She asks me to wash the tomatoes.... She recalls her mom loved tomatoes. Her dad wouldn't eat them. She does not remember why. However, she can still remember that she never saw her mom and dad kissing on the lips... not even on the cheeks. She wished they would kiss on the cheeks like the Egyptian movie stars ... They did nothing of the sort. But sometimes on Thursday night they slept earlier than usual. Now that she's married and has three kids, she figures they retired early to have sex. She doubts they kissed when they had sex: "My dad probably only inserted his penis in my mom's vagina..."

She complains about the tomatoes. They are too wilted. When farmers don't keep the area around the roots moist, they wither. At least that's what their biology teacher once explained to them. He also explained other things, including the science of human procreation. In that long-ago session, the teacher specifically stressed that babies were formed when the penis penetrated the vagina. He never mentioned anything about kissing.

She sends the janitor to buy new tomatoes. She admits she had a crush on her biology teacher. She had a crush on all her male teachers. She never thought about kissing them. She only thought about their penis penetrating her vagina ... she wanted to have their babies. The janitor rings the bell. She is displeased with the newly bought tomatoes. She dices them.

She asks if it's okay to add onions to the salad. Some people have an aversion to raw onions. She has never had such a problem. Her only problem has been the kissing phenomenon. When her husband first introduced her to the art of kissing, she thought of how much she hated her biology teacher, her favorite Egyptian stars, and her parents. She

hated her husband most. Soon, she stopped hating anyone and got used to the kissing part. She never got used to the intimacies and sensualities that accompanied a sexual relationship.

She says it's been thirteen years. Thirteen years since her marriage. Still ... she feels awkward about her body in its connection to the opposite sex. She struggles to give me details. She says her

husband has never seen her body in full perspective. She refuses to shed all her clothes except in the dark. And in the middle of the sexual act, "I look for the bed-covers to hide myself or any piece of my flesh.... Sounds silly really. It's all silly. I don't know how not to be silly." I nod my head in faked impassiveness ... I try not to let my astonishment show.

She continues to struggle with the details. She says she refuses to have a shower with him, feels awkward when he massages her and stiffens when he takes his time ... She stresses she doesn't mind his penis penetrating her vagina. It's the teasing, the kissing ... the whole process of foreplay: "I don't know how to enjoy it. I can't tease back." And most important, "I can't feel comfortable with and about my sexuality ... if I have any."

She says she should try to avoid chopping onions. They make her eyes water. She rubs her eyes with the sleeves of her blouse. She says the whole sex issue has been a point of constant debate between her and her husband. He accuses her of being frigid, cold and a bore... Sometimes when he loses control he tells her she's screwed up. She retorts by calling him an animal and a sexual monster .... She thinks he's none of these. She rubs her eyes again. The onions make her eyes water a lot.

She squeezes some lemon. She talks about an American movie she watched years ago. She doesn't remember its name. She can still remember the woman in the movie. The woman was tempting a man: "She took hours to remove her stockings. She let the hero kiss her all over ... even on her toes. In the morning she stood in front of the mirror, without a bra, and brushed her teeth." She squeezes some lemon vigorously.

She says the salad will be ready in a minute. She mixes the vegetables ... adds the garlic, oil, lemon, and the sprint of thyme ... She admits she hated the woman in the movie. She still hates her: "I hate her because my mother was never like her ... I'd like to be like her ... my husband wants me to be like her ... I can never be like her."

She invites me to try the salad. Her eyes are still watering. She says she has forgotten the salt ... "Nevertheless, it's delicious" I tell her. She says her mom was a great cook. She taught her all about the art of cooking.

## Recent Publications

Majaj, Lisa Suhair, et al. (2002). *Intersection: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*. Syracuse: University Press.

Dank, Barry M. (2000). *The Politics of Sexuality*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

## Announcement

### Call for Nominations /Applications - Editor-in-Chief Journal of Middle East Women's Studies

The Association for Middle East Women's Studies invites nominations and applications for the position of Editor-in-Chief for the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies (JMEWS). *The Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* is the official publication of the Association for Middle East Women's Studies. AMEWS is a multi-disciplinary, international organization officially affiliated with MESA.

The purpose of JMEWS is to forward the field of Middle East Women's Studies, gender studies, and Middle East Studies and to make contributions to its represented disciplines in advancing theories, epistemologies, pedagogies, and methodologies. The goal is to publish original scholarly research in the field from all disciplines, to promote quality research, to publish reviews of recent literature and films, and to engage with current issues and pedagogies in the field. JMEWS will be a peer-reviewed journal of 120-140 pages with 5-6 articles per issue. It will appear three times a year. In addition to the articles, there will be sections for discussion, debates, short communication and book reviews.

AMEWS is currently negotiating with publishers to found the journal by the year 2004-5. The Editor, once selected, will participate in the selection of the remaining members of the Editorial Board through a process outlined by the AMEWS Publication Committee. The Editor must be a member of AMEWS.

Applicants/Nominees are requested to submit a letter of approximately 3-4 pages outlining their vision for JMEWS. Please include, in the letter, what form of institutional support your affiliated institution is likely to offer (for example: office space, staff support, mailing, direct funding). Please also enclose your vitae and a list of three possible references, should the committee request letters of reference.

Please send the nominations / applications and direct your questions to :  
Suad Joseph, Chair,  
Nominations Committee,  
JMEWS, Anthropology,  
University of California,  
One Shields Ave, Davis,  
CA 95616.  
Deadline:  
March 1, 2003, or until filled.

**Erratum:** An error of composition occurred in the article entitled Citizenship, Civil Society & Women in the Arab Region by Valentine M. Moghadam, in *Al-Raida* Vol XIX No 97-98 Spring / Summer 2002, on p.13. It should read as follows: "In this view, international NGOs seek to pressure states and institutions of the global market -- such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization-- to make them more responsible."

## Films

### "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown."

Directed by Pedro Almodovar  
95 minutes

The international box office hit is a hysterical portrayal of love, heart-break, misery, and loneliness. Pepa is heartbroken because she is jilted by Ivan, the love of her life. To cheer herself up she decides to rent the flat that they shared because it is full of memories. In the process her house becomes overcrowded with people from whom Pepa learns a lot about loneliness and insanity.

#### Awards:

1988 New York Film Critics Circle Awards, Best Foreign Language Film.  
1998 National Board of Review, Best Foreign Language Film.

### "Behind the Veil: Afghan Women Under Fundamentalism."

Directed and produced by Ricardo Lobo.  
26 minutes, in English.

This documentary offers an insight into the oppression suffered by Afghan women. Through testimonies of women, who have survived years of brutal gender and religious prejudice, the massive human rights abuses in Afghanistan are exposed. Women are reduced to walking tents where their only source of livelihood is begging or prostitution. The documentary also provides live footage of public executions that take place while the crowds watch.

"Women must begin to write more truthfully about the profound mystery of sex. I think that race is also a mystery. Which is to say that neither can be fully comprehended except as deeply mysterious expressions through which we can learn profound lessons about life. It is almost impossible not to learn something about yourself in the sexual act. So it's important for women to be alert to the spiritual growth and self-discovery they can attain by paying close attention to their sexuality." (Alice Walker, *By the Light of my Father's Smile*, "A Conversation with Alice Walker", Interview by Evelyn C. White).

"On my wedding night I did not bleed. My husband cut his finger so there would be blood to show on the sheet. The next morning he took me straight to the doctor to have my hymen examined. Although my hymen was intact, he still sometimes treat me in a condescending manner. Until today, I still had no idea that it is natural for some women not to bleed." (Pinar Ilkkaracan, (Ed.), *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, p. 194)

"The most common referral for virginity surgery by physicians is the term "repair" which has different connotations. 'Repair' simply refers to a thing or a product which is broken and not functioning properly. In order to be able to use this thing a specialist needs to repair it. If a woman's virginity is 'broken,' it is assumed that she won't function properly in patriarchal society where virginity is an asset, if not a prerequisite, for marriage. It can be asserted that a woman's body in the physicians' psyche is a thing, repairable by medicine - and not human. For a woman with sexual experience prior to marriage, repair by a physician through reconstructive virginity surgery is needed if she is to exist properly in patriarchal society." (Pinar Ilkkaracan, (Ed.), *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, p.222).

"The tension between pleasure and danger is a powerful one in women's lives. The exercise of our sexuality can be pleasurable, a joyous exploration; it can also be fraught with guilt, repression and sanction. The negative side of our sexuality is that which victimizes

us, which makes us vulnerable to all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, such as rape and incest and bondage against our will. This vulnerability makes us aware, sometimes too aware, of the potential dangers of exercising our sexuality. The threat of sexual attack is one of the most powerful tools of control of women in contemporary society." (*Women in Action*, No. 1, 1999).

"I began having sex in 1974, right after I turned 16. Part of my conscious feminist ethic then was to sleep with whomever I was attracted to and not allow the world to impose a double standard on my desires. Of course, up until I was 23, much of my sexual freedom was assisted by drugs or alcohol. I would meet a man, usually in a bar or at a party, and be able to have sex with him mainly because I was high. I never learned how to wait - I learned how to wake up with strangers. According to the world then, I was sexually liberated. But my liberation forced me to deny my disappointment when I ended up alone. I couldn't create a balance between my sexual desire and my emotional needs. I just know I needed to be free, and somehow in the process I confused my rebelliousness with desire." (*Ms. Magazine*, March/April 1996, p. 94).

"I seem to refuse to stick to rigid gender identities. I do not refuse being a woman, and do not want to adopt being a man. I am not a very masculine woman, and do not want to be a feminine man, well maybe I would not mind the last one for a short while! I might not be able to express it literally at this stage in my life, but the closest I could express is the following. Not only individuals who believe they are born in the wrong body are transgendered, not only individuals who have physical characteristics of the opposite gender (feminine men, masculine women) may be transgendered, people can be transgendered in their minds. I could be one, I accept my feminine, masculine, and androgynous genderhood, womanhood and transgenderhood. When I want to play and be a man, or someone other than a woman, in my mind I feel a certain transcendence, I feel a bit more free. So I do that from time to time, to get away from the suffocation that was imposed on me by pinning me down to a certain diameter on the basis of my physical sex. (<http://www.bintelnas.org/03desire/sexcult.html>).

### From Jordan

Rana Hussein

Last week marked the first anniversary of government-introduced amendments to Article 340 of the Penal Code that scrapped penalty exemptions for killers in what are loosely termed "crimes of honour." The amendments, which kept reductions for men, entitled women also to benefit from reduced penalties if they committed murder after discovering their husbands had committed adultery.

Activists and lawyers, however, charge that the move made little to no impact on the existing situation because the number of reported honour crimes has remained the same. Killers, they point out, still received lenient sentences - not exceeding one year. Twenty-two people, including seven children and one man, in 17 separate incidents, were murdered in crimes where the perpetrators cited honour as their motive. The victims of such crimes last year numbered 19, according to officials. "We have not felt a substantial change since Article 340 was passed. Having 10 to 15 so-called honour crimes this year is a lot and close to last year's reported number," said the head of the Jordan Family Protection Project, Momen Hadidi. In addition, legal experts say courts are still applying Article 98 of the Penal Code, sentencing killers to shorter prison terms even in cases where the perpetrators did not catch their female relatives "in the act".

Since the law was passed, *The Jordan Times* reported eight cases where the Criminal Court applied Article 98 in the sentencing of killers to prison terms ranging from one month to one year. In four other cases reported by the paper, killers were sentenced between 10 to 15 years after tribunals established they could not benefit from the article, instead convicting them of premeditated murder or manslaughter. In almost every case, the family of victims - most often also the family of suspects - drops charges against defendants, immediately halving their sentence.

#### The History of Article 340

The controversial Article 340 met fierce opposition by conservatives and some Islamists when amendments

were first introduced by the government in 1999, failing to win Lower House approval on two occasions. It was only later passed as a temporary law on Dec. 13, 2001. Opponents to changing 340 - a law originating from Ottoman and Napoleonic codes - accused activists working to scrap it as being "driven by the West to destroy women's morality and society."

For their part, activists and lawyers say the wrong article was changed, stressing that the focus should now be on amending or scrapping Article 98 altogether since it is the clause being used to reduce penalties in most all cases. "Changing Article 340 was an indication the government was interested in this topic, but there is an urgent need to amend Article 98, which includes the 'fit of fury' clause," said Hadidi. In some cases, Hadidi added, the fit of fury period granted a killer to kill his victim is "extended ... meaning it is not an instantaneous action by the killers, likely signifying they are not enraged when they commit their crime. And yet they still benefit from the law."

Article 98 stipulates that a person committing a crime in a fit of fury due to the unlawful action of the victim will receive a reduction in penalty. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock, going out with a strange man, leaving the family's home for a period, marrying the man of a woman's choice, and uttering words such as: "This is my life. I am free to do as I choose", were all considered unlawful and dangerous acts on the part of the victim by courts cited in last year's verdicts - which then reduced killers' sentences.

Amendments applied to 340 stipulated: Any man who surprises his wife or any of his female relatives in the act of committing adultery or in an unlawful bed and kills her, the man, or both immediately, or attacks her, or both, in a manner resulting in death, injury or permanent disability, benefits from a reduction in penalty. The second clause stipulates: Also benefiting is the wife who surprises her husband committing adultery at their home or in an unlawful bed, killing him immediately or the woman with him or both or attacking him

or both in a manner resulting in death, injury or permanent disability. "Article 340 speaks to victim/s being caught committing adultery. None of the cases heard in Criminal Court this year match this condition. That is why judges did not apply it in their verdicts," one legal expert pointed out.

Veteran judges and legal experts charged that the previous government "was not serious about the change," amending the wrong article to placate certain parties since 340 has only been used once in court in almost 40 years.

### The Value of Article 340

In addition, a political observer explained that when the article was introduced to Parliament it met swift rejection by some deputies because they needed something to object to and this law suited their purposes. "Article 340 was a scapegoat. It was the easiest law to oppose at that time," said the observer, who asked not to be identified.

Human Rights activist Asma Khader agreed, maintaining that changing 340 was considered a symbolic positive change, "but it is not the article that courts are using in their verdicts."

She explained that legislators ignored a proposal suggested by the Royal Commission on Human Rights (RCHR) to lift the minimum punishment in Article 98 to at least five years for killers as one possible solution, as well as banning families from dropping charges against the perpetrators of such crimes. "Although our proposal would have put an end to the reduced sentences killers received in such murders, legislators rejected it. We do not know the reason," said Attorney Reem Abu Hassan.

A legal expert, who also asked not to be identified, said the existence of Article 98 has virtually paralysed Article 340, opening the door for judges to use it, since no murder cases this year represented a clear case of adultery. Further, legal experts said some lawyers advised killers to add new details to their original confession, saying in court: "The victim told them: 'I am free to do what I want,' which enraged them and pushed them to lose control and kill the victim." "Defendants sometimes summon witnesses to testify that the victim had a bad reputation and was engaged in several relationships," the expert added.

### Changing the Law

Many experts agree that simply changing the law will

not solve the problem. Psychologist Walid Sarhan argued that changing the law does not necessarily mean changing reality or, more importantly, the mentalities of killers, many of whom have no knowledge of the law. "I am not surprised that nothing has changed since the law was amended. I would be surprised if things changed because these issues are so deeply rooted in people's minds," Sarhan said. Honour crimes are not a new practice, explained Sarhan. It was a practice amongst bedouins in the past because they did not have a legal system. When bedouins moved into the cities they took the practice with them, where it has remained until today.

Sociologist Ibrahim Othman said the cultural heritage of women is such that they are the ones bearing the value of honour. "Their behaviour can threaten their families, while men are allowed to involve themselves in extramarital affairs and their actions are not considered threatening to their own community. They are even considered heroes." "A single [immoral] act by a woman reflects on the majority [of the family] creating cultural and social pressures that force them to rid themselves of those they think caused the shame - even if a rumour," explained Othman. "We need to work on changing people's beliefs. The legal side is not the only solution because of the value system that still dominates," he added.

### Interpretations of Sharia

Hadidi, who heads of the National Institute of Forensic Medicine where the victims of these crimes are examined, said changes in the concepts and implementation of Islamic Sharia are necessary. "A person should not take a decision based upon incorrect concepts not related to Sharia," Hadidi explained. Sheikh Hamdi Murad, a moderate religious scholar, agreed saying these crimes are not related to Sharia in any way. "This practice is the result of a deeply rooted tradition falsely attached to Islam," he explained.

Murad cited a Hadith, or saying, by Prophet Mohammad where a man came to the Prophet asking what kind of punishment should be given to him if he finds his wife committing adultery with another man and kills them both. The Prophet said either you bring four witnesses or you will be killed. He repeated this sentence twice, pointed out Murad. "It is clearly noted in the Hadith and the Holy Koran that there must be four witnesses of good reputation to an act of adultery for their testimony to be accepted. If it is proven, it is the ruler who decides punishment - not the individual," the religious scholar concluded.

## Visit to Australia

IWSAW Director Mona Chemali Khalaf attended a conference in Australia where she presented a paper on "The Status and Plight of Women and Youth in the Lebanese Society." The event was jointly organized by the Center for International and Public Affairs at the University of Sydney and the United Australian Lebanese Assembly.

While in Australia, Khalaf also met with New South Wales Governor Marie Bashir - who traces her family origins back to the Lebanese village of Duma. Bashir is planning an official visit to Lebanon in the Spring of 2003.



Lef to right: New South Wales Governor Marie Bashir and Mrs. Mona Chemali Khalaf

## Second Arab Women Summit November 1-2, 2002

Upon the invitation of Her Highness Queen Rania Al-Abdallah, Mrs. Mona Chemali Khalaf attended the "Second Arab Women Summit", held on November 1 and 2, 2002 in Amman, Jordan.

Mrs. Khalaf participated in the one - day colloquium which focused on the Arab Human Development Report (2002), and the formulation of recommendations raised to the Summit



H.E. Dr. Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, Assistant Secretary General, Regional Director, United Nations Development Programme and Mrs. Mona Chemali Khalaf

## Documentary

“Women in Time”. Part I. Profiles of Activists in the Lebanese Women’s Movement up to 1975.

The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University, screened its first documentary “Women in Time” at Irwin Hall Auditorium. The film, directed by Mohammed Soueid, was well received by the audience present. The documentary highlights significant landmarks in the history of the Lebanese women’s movement in the pre 1975 era.

The Institute is presently working on a sequel covering the period from 1975 until present.



Left to right: Mrs Mona Chemali Khalaf and Mrs. Anissa Najjar



The Lebanese delegation to the Women’s Conference that took place in Egypt in 1944.  
Picture credit: *Al-Mousawer*, 1944, issue 1055, p.9.

## Introduction to the File

The file deals with sexuality, a subject that has traditionally been a strong taboo in the Arab world. Since Arab societies have generally favored a collective rather than a personal or subjective identity, the family is the paramount social institution where issues related to women's sexuality continue to be under the control of a patriarchal society. The control of women's bodies by male members of the family underlines relations of domination and subordination in a culture where gender norms are deeply internalized and polarized, and where the right to choose a particular erotic lifestyle is clearly seen as a threat to the social structure. Accordingly, customs and traditions are resorted to with the object of controlling women's bodies to adhere to what the culture considers to be acceptable sexuality in women. Indeed, the patriarchal society is charged with gender inequalities in both the private and the public spheres, where the socially accepted sexual codes of conduct restrict women's mobility and ensure that they remain within the confines of the private sphere where marriage, family, and child bearing is the woman's sole preoccupation. For a male dominated society, the invocation of traditional values has the advantage of providing simple answers to vexing questions of identity enabling men to cling to a fixed, unchanging, and stable social order in the face of the intense upheavals that have rocked the area over the past forty years or so. Furthermore, the threat to identity by external, inimical forces has solidified the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. Indeed, sexuality continues to be viewed as a potential threat to the social and religious order resulting in the production of hegemonic narratives on gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the drastic changes that have taken place and are still occurring at the political, social, educational, as well as global levels, sexual polarities are shifting despite many attempts to resist change. Indeed, a deeply entrenched archetypal masculinity has been destabilized by modernization and the repercussions of wars that have devastated the area. With the looming threat of HIV and the changes that are taking place within Arab societies, particularly the sudden and random acquisition of rights by women, sexuality is emerging as a pertinent subject that merits investigation and study. It is within this context that the present file has been conceived in the hope that it will contribute to the debate on sexuality and gender relations in the Arab world.

The file consists of a number of articles. Pinar Ilkcaracan's article "Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb" deals with sexuality in Islam and the situation of Muslim women. While Hazel Simons article "Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects'" studies the differences between Orientalist and Muslim views of women. The article by Seham Abd El-Salam on male and female genital mutilation presents differences between the two within the context of gender power politics. Other articles deal with private as well as public sexual harassment in Jordan and the abortion issue in Lebanon. Marie Therese Khair Badawi refers to a study on sexuality and Christian women in Lebanon that was undertaken thirteen years ago and tries to determine whether her earlier findings are still applicable. Abdessamad Dialmy's article "Premarital Female Sexuality in Morocco" reveals how Moroccan society tries to reconcile pre-marital sexual practices with the culture's insistent demand for virginity. The file includes an interview with a young Lebanese lesbian and an article by Iman Al-Ghafari on lesbian identity in Arab culture with special reference to two Lebanese novels.

### Acknowledgment:

Many thanks are due to Mrs. Anita Nassar for following up the work on this issue of *Al-Raida* diligently and assiduously. Her contribution has been invaluable.

**Samira Aghacy**



# Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb

Pinar Ilkcaracan

Women for Women's Human Rights  
(WWHR)–NEW WAYS

## Introduction

In the present era of globalization, women's bodies and sexuality are increasingly becoming arenas of intense conflict around the world. Conservative and religious right wing political forces are fiercely trying to maintain or reinforce traditional mechanisms of control over women's sexuality and even to create new ones. Four UN conferences held in the 1990s – the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, the 1995 Beijing Conference, the 1999 five-year review of ICPD (ICPD+5), and the 2000 five-year review of the Beijing Conference (Beijing+5) – witnessed an unprecedented cooperation between the Catholic and Muslim religious groups to oppose and restrict women's right to control their bodies and sexuality.

At the same time, in the last decade, women around the globe joined forces to counter these moves from the conservative and religious right and engaged in an international struggle against violations of their sexual and reproductive rights – a struggle transcending national borders as well as real or constructed North-South and East-West dichotomies. A visible sign of success of this struggle is the significant change in the language used by the international agencies. As the global women's movement has become stronger and the "rights" approach has gained credibility, reproductive "rights" has increasingly replaced reproductive "health" and "sexual health" and become a focus of interest and a part of common terminology. The shift from "sexual health" to "sexual rights" constitutes the

last link in this chain of global change as introduced by the global women's movement.

In this context, several traditional cultural practices – such as honor crimes, the stoning of women accused of adultery, virginity tests, or female genital cutting, which constitute severe human rights violations in Muslim societies, including the Middle East, have increasingly drawn the attention of the Western media and public in recent years. The lack of information on Islam and on the wide diversity of Muslim societies, the parallel rise of the Islamic religious right, which claims such customary practices to be Islamic, and the tendency to "essentialize" Islam are some of the factors that have led to the incorrect portrayal in the West of such practices as Islamic. The depiction of these practices as "Islamic" is not only misleading, but also stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of women's movements in Muslim societies, which, in their fight against such practices, are campaigning to raise public consciousness that these practices are against Islam. In fact, this incorrect depiction coincides with the Islamic religious right's cause of vigorously trying to create extreme forms of control over women and their sexuality by incorporating and universalizing the worst customary practices in the name of religion.

In this article, I argue that the practices leading to violations of women's sexual rights in the Middle East and the Maghreb is not the result of an Islamic vision of sexuality, but a combination of political, economic and social inequalities through the ages. In this con-

text, religion is often misused as a powerful instrument of control with the goal of legitimizing violations of women's rights.

In making this argument, I will first provide some information on the contradictory construction of women's sexuality in the Qur'an and the early fiqh texts, which are at the root of the controversy. I will then explore some of the historical and socio-political factors that have had an impact on women's sexuality in the region today. In particular, I will consider the contradictory impact of modernization on women's sexual lives; the nationalist ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their efforts to create new mechanisms to control women's sexuality; and the rise of the Islamic religious right, which has placed the construction of an "Islamic" sexual identity of women at the top of its agenda.

## Sexuality in the Qur'an and the Early Fiqh Texts: The Initial Roots of Controversy

Several researchers have pointed to the contradiction between the notion of gender equality in the Qur'an and the patriarchal misinterpretation of it by male religious authorities in the early and medieval canonical texts traditionally accepted as establishing Islam's normative practices (Mernissi, 1987; Sabbah, 1984; An-Naim, 1990; Ahmed, 1991 and 1992; Hassan, n.d.; Wadud, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 2001). As in other monotheistic religions, the classical fiqh texts – that is, texts of early Islamic legal jurisprudence – ignored gender equality as it was presented in the Qur'an and introduced interpretations in line with the patriarchal social order. Thus, one can find several logical contradictions in the classical fiqh texts as they reflect two dissenting voices: an egalitarian voice inspired by the revelation (wahy), and a patriarchal voice incorporating the social order and social, cultural and political

pragmatism of the time and place where Islam was trying to ensure its survival (Mir-Hosseini, 2001). An analysis of discourses based on the Qur'an and the early literature of Islamic legal jurisprudence leads to contradictory conclusions about the construction of women's sexuality in Islam.

Mir-Hosseini (2001), for example, asserts that this contradiction is most evident in the rules that classical jurists devised for regulating the formation and the termination of the marriage contract – a product of tension in which the voice of the patriarchal social order outweighs the egalitarian voice of the revelation (wahy). Her analysis of the classical fiqh texts on marriage shows that the model of gender relations in the early texts of Islamic jurisprudence is grounded in the patriarchal ideology of pre-Islamic Arabia, which continued into the Islamic era in a modified form through a set of male-dominated theological, legal and social theories and assumptions, such as "women are created of and for men."

These theories stood in sharp contradiction to the Qur'an, which holds that the relationship of men and women is one of equality, mutuality and cordiality. In the Qur'an, Eve is not a delayed product of Adam's rib, as in the Christian and Jewish traditions; instead, the two were born from a single soul: "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord, who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (Surah 4:1).<sup>1</sup> It was not just Eve, but both Adam and Eve, who let the Devil convince them to eat the forbidden fruit.<sup>2</sup> Islam has recognized that both women and men have sex drives and the right to sexual fulfillment and has also acknowledged that women, like men, experience orgasms. The Islamic view of love and sexuality – in which pleasure and responsibility are

coexistent – removes any guilt from the sexes (Bouhdiba, 1998). Marital intercourse does not need the justification of reproduction and is based on the right to sexual fulfillment; contraception is permitted and abortion tolerated (Musallam, 1989). Women's ejaculation is recognized in the hadiths, the traditional body and texts of knowledge and memories of the Prophet's life, his customs and his words, where female sexuality is regarded as active, like male sexuality (Ahmed, 1989).

Mernissi (1987), in her classic work, *Beyond the Veil*, analyzes the double theory of sexual dynamics in the medieval canonical texts and historical interpretations of Islam. According to Mernissi, while the "explicit theory" of female sexuality depicts women as passive subjects who seek pleasure in surrender and subjugation, the "implicit" theory as reflected in Imam Ghazali's interpretation of the Qur'an, "casts woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim" (1987: 33). To highlight the dynamics of the implicit theory, Mernissi compares Ghazali's writings with Freud's construction of female sexuality, as representing Muslim and Western-Christian cultures. She concludes that in contrast to Western-Christian culture, in Muslim culture female sexuality is recognized as active, an acknowledgment that has threatening implications for the social order. The security of the social order is linked to that of a woman's virtue and consequently to the satisfaction of her needs. Social order, therefore, requires male control of women's bodies and sexuality. Male and female, particularly in terms of sex drives, are seen as opposites; men are rational and capable of self-control and women are emotional and lacking self-control. Female sexuality, if uncontrolled, could lead to social chaos (fitna).

Some Qur'anic verses, especially the story of Zuleikha and Yusuf, have laid the foundation for interpretations of women as capable of greater sexual desire and temptation than men – casting women as beguiling seductresses and men as susceptible to seduction but rational and capable of self-control.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, several of the customary practices aimed at controlling women's sexuality, like honor crimes, stoning for adultery or female genital cutting, cannot be justified by appeal to the Qur'an. The Qur'an forbids adultery,<sup>4</sup> like the other two main monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, and foresees heavy punishment (100 lashes) for both women and men guilty of adultery or fornication.<sup>5</sup> It requires, however, four witnesses to the act.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise, if a woman denies the accusation, then it is her word that must be accepted rather than that of her husband.<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to the Qur'an, the punishment for adultery, meant both for women and men, can only be carried out if conviction is based on the testimony of a minimum of four wit-

nesses. In addition, although it foresees a heavy punishment of 100 lashes, it is not stoning or execution – contrary to the customary practices of honor crimes or stoning as carried out in some Muslim countries. Stoning as a punishment in cases of adultery has only recently been introduced as an "Islamic" practice by the Islamic religious right in countries like Iran, Pakistan and Nigeria.

Likewise, the Qur'an does not mention female or male circumcision. Female genital cutting (FGC) is a customary practice primarily found in Africa and those countries influenced by African culture. Although the practice was prevalent before Islam in African communities, and although the practice has continued in some Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities in Africa after the advent of Islam, "it is often strongly associated with Islam because some African Muslim communities cite religion as the reason for performing it, and because Westerners have mistakenly related FGM to Islam." (Toubia, 2000: 421). In the Middle East, FGC is prevalent in Egypt and Sudan and in the majority of Muslim communities – the practice was unheard of until it became a topic of media attention through the advocacy efforts of women's groups.

Islam has set consent of both the woman and the man as a pre-condition of marriage. In the main classical schools of legal jurisprudence of Islam (Hanafi or Shi'a law, for example), a girl who has attained maturity age is free to contract marriage without the consent of her father or any other relative and cannot be forced into a marriage by her male relatives (Carroll, 2000). Accordingly, the practice of "forced marriages" in Muslim societies constitutes a clear violation of the basic premise of marriage as specified in the Qur'an.

The diversity of Muslim societies shows that Islam does not have a static or monolithic tradition. Islam has absorbed not only the practices and traditions of the two other monotheistic religions – Judaism and Christianity – from the region of its birth, but also other pre-Islamic practices and traditions from the geographic location in which it strove to survive and gain power as a cultural and political system. Thus, it is very difficult to define what is intrinsic to Islam in shaping sexual behavior. The issue becomes even more complicated when we attempt to analyze its interaction with various socio-economic and political systems. In the following, I will explore some of these factors, which affect the norms governing and practices related to women's sexuality in the Middle East and the Maghreb.

#### Gender Inequality and Sexuality in the Middle East and the Maghreb

The past two centuries witnessed radical political, economic and social changes in the Middle East and the

Maghreb. Since the nineteenth century, there have been modern legal, economic and social reforms concerning the position of women, and women have increasingly participated in political movements and debates. The era of post-colonial state formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was accompanied by the rise of a feminist consciousness in, for example, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Iran.<sup>8</sup>

The Middle East shows a great degree of diversity in the formulation of legal codes and their application to women's everyday lives, which is also the case in the rest of the Muslim world. The extent of the legal reforms redefining gender relations varies greatly between countries. While in Turkey, for example, modernization included the adoption of Western legal codes and aimed at complete secularization,<sup>9</sup> most Gulf countries preserved their interpretation of Islamic legal jurisprudence as the fundamental law in all juridical areas. It is striking that most other countries in the region abandoned Islamic jurisprudence in all other areas but retained an "Islamic" interpretation of the "personal status law", which includes mainly the laws on family, (that is, the private sphere and the status of women), but with certain reforms, like in Egypt or Iran during the Shah period. The reforms in Turkey were the most comprehensive, followed by the Bourguiba reforms in Tunisia and reforms in Marxist Yemen, Syria and Iraq (Moghadam, 1993; Esposito, 1998; Keddie, 1991).

Despite the positive impact of all modern legal, educational and economic reforms on the position of women and the growing strength of feminist movements, the majority of women living in the region have not benefited from the opportunities created, especially in the economic and political spheres. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2002 report on Arab Human Development states that the Arab world shows the fastest improvement in female education of any region, with female literacy expanding threefold since 1970, and primary and secondary enrolment doubling. However, in terms of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which the UNDP introduced in 1995, the Arab region's ranking is lower than any region except sub-Saharan Africa. Arab countries have the lowest rate of women's participation in the workforce and the lowest rate of representation in parliaments. More than half of Arab women are illiterate. The maternal mortality rate is double that of Latin American and the Caribbean and four times that of East Asia (UNDP, 2002). The collective mechanisms aimed at controlling women's bodies and sexuality continue to be one of the most powerful tools of

patriarchal control of women's sexuality and a root cause of gender inequality in the region.

#### The Contradictory Impact of Modernization on Women's Sexual Lives

Modernization movements and efforts occupied a central place in the regional political discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Middle East. Women's status has occupied a central place in the modernization efforts in the region; for decades, the modernists argued that reforms in the position of women in the economic, educational and legal spheres would lead to more "modernization", and consequently, to greater gender equality in all spheres. Women were among the first who recognized the complex and contradictory nature of modernity, and that modernization projects did not necessarily lead to real gender equality for all or in every sphere.

In Turkey, the new feminist movement of the 1980s was based on an analysis and critique of the official discourse, which claimed that the problem of the status of women had been solved through the modernization reforms of the new republic. Several female researchers have developed a critical perspective on the impact of modernization on women's lives in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Hatem, 1997; Haddad, 1998). The impact of reforms has been divergent for women, depending on their class, race, or ethnicity. In general, those who benefited from the modernization movement were mainly women from the urban middle and upper classes or dominant race. At the same time, modernization could also mean a restriction or loss of traditional modes of power for women of other classes or for minority women.

Mervat Hatem (1997) illustrates a good example of the contradictory impacts of modernization on women's sexual lives in her research on the professionalization of health in nineteenth-century Egypt. The school of Hakimahs, which was established in the early nineteenth century and was the first modern state school for women in Egypt, aimed at replacing local midwifery practices with modern female professionals. While the local Egyptian midwives (dayas) performed circumcisions on girls, thus implementing patriarchal control of women's sexuality, they also provided women with folk-based means to control their reproductive lives, such as supplying them with information on fertility and providing quick and effective abortions. Although the establishment of the Hakimahs

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school provided an opportunity for middle class women to become professionals, it also led to a loss of power for traditional midwives, and contributed to the extinction of women's indigenous knowledge and to a state policy of criminalizing abortion. Moreover, the new midwives from the middle class were given the task of policing working class midwives (dayas) and their middle and working class clients.

Sonbol's (1997) analysis of rape laws in Egypt shows how modern legal reforms could have a negative impact on women's lives. In Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, new legal codes handling rape were imported from France as part of the centralization efforts involved in nation-state building. The standardization of the penal codes led to the application of uniform laws and brought criminal procedures under the authority of the state. However, the new laws superimposed a system that did nothing to discourage rape, and simultaneously, introduced new forms of discrimination based on gender and class. Financial compensation for rape became very hard to obtain and justice turned into a commodity that could be accessed only by women who could afford to hire lawyers and pay legal expenses. An example of the negative impact of modern legal reforms on women's lives and sexuality is reflected in the present situation of Kurdish women living in Turkey. Our research, based on a representative sample of 599 women living in eastern Turkey, the majority of whom were Kurdish, has shown that several customary practices, such as early and forced marriages, polygamy and honor crimes, continue to shape the lives of women living in the region, despite legal reforms in Turkey prohibiting them since the 1920s. While a minority of Kurdish women who have had access to education could benefit from the legal reforms, those who had never been to school and spoke no Turkish (19.4 per cent) had little or no possibility of applying to legal institutions in cases of violations of their rights within the family. This was because Turkish is the official language in all governmental organizations, including judicial ones (Ilkcaracan and Women for Women's Human Rights, 1998).

**The Nationalist Ideologies and Women's Sexuality** Nationalist movements and ideologies that accompanied the foundation of nation-states in the Middle East have posed contradictory roles for women. On the one hand, they allowed women – especially those from middle and upper classes – to participate more fully in social and political life, disrupting traditional gender

roles and relations. On the other hand, they redefined women's role as mothers and bearers of the nation and its newly constructed legacy (Kandiyoti, 1996; Mehdid, 1996; Pettman, 1996; Saigol, 2000). This led to the emergence of new strategies to control women, and especially their sexuality, which was meant to serve the reproduction and maintenance of the newly constructed "national identity" and "uniqueness" of community.

In Turkey, for example, the foundation of a secular nation state and the "modern" Turkish Republic set revolutionary changes in gender roles as a priority in order to destroy the links to the Ottoman Empire and to strike at the foundations of religious hegemony. However, nationalist discourses almost competed with Islamic discourses in their zeal to regulate the sexual identity and behavior of Turkish women. The leaders and the ideologues of the Turkish nationalist movement took great pains to establish a new nationalist morality regarding women's sexuality in which the new rights gained by women in the public sphere could be justified as an integral part of the newly constructed Turkish culture (Kandiyoti, 1988). The leading ideologue of the Turkish identity, Ziya Gökalp, went so far as to construct the principal virtue of Turkish women as chastity, *iffet*. In fact, this construction has been so powerful that Turkish women are still faced with the human rights violations it causes. The Statute for Awards and Discipline in High School Education, enacted in January 1995 states that "proof of unchastity" is a valid reason for expulsion from the formal educational system. This statute, which served to institutionalize a customary practice, led to the suicide of girls whom school authorities sent for so-called virginity tests. Female students were forced to undergo virginity tests even in such cases where a girl was merely seen walking with a male classmate on the playground. As a result of the Turkish women's movement's protests and campaigns, the Ministry of Justice banned virginity testing in January 1999.<sup>10</sup> However, in July 2001, the tests were reinstated for student nurses through a decree of the health minister, who is from the far-right Nationalistic Action Party. The reinstatement of the tests led to extensive protests by the Turkish women's movement and international human rights organizations. Finally, in 2002, the Ministry of Education changed the Statute for Awards and Discipline and deleted the provision that stated "proof of unchastity" as a reason for expulsion from the formal educational system.

Saigol (2000), concentrating on the imagery of desire, eroticism, and male gaze in poetry, songs,

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plays, and popular films in Pakistan, analyzes how the "sexual" and women's bodies have become a terrain of projection in the construction of communal or national identity in Pakistan. Stressing that gender ideology lies at the heart of nationalist and militarist thought, she asserts that women's bodies have come to signify the country and the nation, the object of "male desire and gaze," reflecting the displacement of private passion onto the public sphere of the nation. The songs that became popular in Pakistan during the 1965 war with India served the contradictory construction of masculinity/femininity (active/passive) as also reflected in war imagery, which associated strength, valor, and bravery with masculinity, and associated defeat and weakness and the need for protection with femininity – thus enabling the entire population to absorb militaristic national ideology.

In Algeria, despite the wide and effective participation of women in the war of liberation between 1954 and 1962, their role "as implicitly projected by revolutionaries, was conceived of purely at the level of the symbolic, as others of the Nation, reproducers of its militants as well as guardians of its cultural memory and ancestral values" (Mehdid, 1996: 80). Just one year after independence, an attempt was made to pass a new repressive family law, which drew women into widespread protests and demonstrations (Mahl, 1995). However, women's bodies and sexuality became increasingly an arena on which the violent struggle between the religious right and the state was played out. The repressive law, which legalized polygamy and denied women the right to the marriage contract and the right to initiate divorce, was finally promulgated in 1984 by the one-party state in an attempted reconciliation with traditionalists. Mehdid argues that the underlying concern of the repressive Family Law was the control of "female sexuality and the safeguarding of patriarchy" (1996: 100). In the 1990s, armed Islamist groups like GIA (Armed Islamic Group) adopted violence against women (including rape and murder) as a more overt strategy in Algeria. They killed women for not wearing hijab, for expressing their opinions or working in certain professions, such as hairdressers and writers. They killed, raped or abducted women who opposed their rule in rural areas (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The Algerian case has demonstrated a very tragic example of the impact of the cooperation between the so-called modernists/ nationalists and the Islamic religious right in their efforts to control women's sexuality.

#### **The Rise of the Islamic Religious Right and Its Efforts to Control Women's Sexuality**

In the decades since World War II, several factors have

contributed to the creation of a rather difficult and unfavorable atmosphere regarding the extension of liberal reforms, including ones in the area of sexuality; and encouraged the growth of religious right-wing movements in the region. The failure of attempted social and economic reforms resulted in an increasing gap between the Westernized elite and the majority, leading to disillusionment with Westernized rulers. The widening gap of economic and political power between Muslim societies and the West, along with urbanization, migration and increasing poverty, has contributed to the creation of an atmosphere where religious right-wing movements have gained the support of the masses. The founding of Israel and the resulting occupations and war contributed to an increasingly hostile atmosphere towards the West and facilitated the construction of the West and its perceived culture as an "enemy" by the Islamic religious right.

The religious and nationalist fundamentalists make utmost use of this perceived threat against "Muslim" identity by constructing a "Muslim" or "national" female identity, as a last sphere of control against the "enemy": the West. Thus, pressure on women to become bearers of constructed group identities and the control of women's sexuality are currently at the heart of many fundamentalist agendas. Their strategies are manifold; here, I will attempt to outline some of them. The dress code, the most perceptible form of identity creation, has been high on the agenda of the Muslim religious right, which wanted to use the code's visibility as a demonstration of its political power. I would like to note that the misuse of hijab by the religious right as a demonstrable sign of their power has had a much more persistent effect on the Western audience than the Muslim one. The reaction of Western society is reflected in Esposito's analysis:

Few images better capture the stereotype of gender relations in Islam, and the threat of a resurgent Islam to women's status and roles in society, than that of Iranian women covered by black chadors during and after the revolution. For many in the Western world, and for some in the Muslim world as well, the reality and threat of political Islam or 'Islamic fundamentalism', has been epitomized by the Islamic republic of Iran. (Esposito, 1998: xviii).

Aware of the power of the imagery of hijab as a demonstration of its influence and authority, the Islamic religious right has sought to prescribe or violently enforce extreme forms of veiling that were only specific to certain communities (for instance the chador or burqa) as universal uniforms for Muslim women, not only in the region but throughout the world, even in places where they were previously unheard of, such as Uzbekistan, Kashmir, or Senegal. Extinct cultural practices that are

disadvantageous to women have been re-appraised as “Islamic”, such as in the case of mut’a, temporary marriage, in Iran (Haeri, 1992). The temporary marriage, one of the various forms of marriage practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia, was incorporated into the Islamic legal school of Shi’a jurisprudence in Iran after the arrival of Islam. Accordingly, after the Iranian President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, revived this extinct practice in 1990, Islamic religious right groups declared it “Islamic” and imported it to other Maliki or Sunni Muslim communities. In Sudan, where the majority of the population is Sunni, temporary marriage was introduced in the 1990s and even legalized in 1992 (Grow, 1997).

The Hudood Ordinance, introduced in 1979 in Pakistan under the military dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq in an attempt to consolidate his power by an Islamization campaign, extended the definition of zina, sexual intercourse with other than a legitimate partner, to include rape. Extending zina to include rape shifts the focus of all subsequent prosecution from the aggressor to the victim, by putting the emphasis on proving or disproving consent instead of on forceful coercion or violation. Afiya Sherbano Zia argues that the Hudood Ordinance has facilitated the collusion between men, police, and courts in dealing with sex crimes, resulting in an institutionalization of violence against women and the re-victimization of women who experience this violence (Zia, 1994).

In the last two decades, the rise of the Islamic religious right has caused women in countries such as Iran, Algeria and South Yemen to suffer the loss of previously gained legal rights, especially within the family. In 1979, two weeks after the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty through the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Family Protection Act of 1967 – which restrained men’s legal right to polygamous marriage by requiring either the court’s or the first wife’s permission, enforced a woman’s right to divorce with mutual consent, and improved women’s chances of retaining the custody of their children or at least visiting rights – was scrapped as un-Islamic (Hoodfar, 1996). Women were dismissed and barred from the judiciary and higher education (Najmabadi, 1998). In Algeria, in July 1984, the government adopted a repressive family law that legalized polygyny and rescinded Algerian women’s rights in the family. Algerian women were quick to mobilize wide and fierce opposition but their strong resistance remained ineffective (Mahl, 1995; Moghadam, 1993). In 1990, the unification of North and South Yemen, which had fostered hopes for political openness and democracy in the country, resulted in a major disappointment for Yemeni women, both from the south and the north. Yemeni women in the north had hoped to profit from the egalitarian laws of the socialist regime in the south. These were basically

secular in orientation, defining marriage as a contract with equal rights and responsibilities for men and women, including financial responsibility; they also abolished polygamy, made women’s consent a basis of engagement for marriage, ended a man’s right to unilateral divorce, and set the minimum age of marriage at 15 for girls and 16 for boys. However, because of tribal rebellion, urban terrorism, sharp cuts in Western and Gulf countries’ aid programs in response to Yemen’s refusal to join the anti-Iraq coalition after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the two factions in Yemen were usurped by open warfare, which contributed to the rise of the Islamic religious right. As is very often the case in war, the losers were women. Upon unification, the progressive family laws of the south were abolished. Not only did the women in southern Yemen lose the legal rights they had enjoyed since 1974, but the women of North Yemen, who had hoped for the incorporation of the greater degree of gender equality enshrined in the southern codes, had to bury their hopes (Boxberger, 1998; al-Basha, 2001).

#### **The Impact of Changing Social Values and Feminist Activism around Women’s Sexual Rights**

The violent imposition of practices leading to the Islamic religious right’s violations of women’s sexual rights presents a contradictory picture to the changing social values regarding sexuality in the region. Although premarital sex is still strongly prohibited in many countries, there is evidence, for example from Morocco, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey, that it increasingly forms part of the experience of young people and that this change has created a social conflict between the patriarchal control of women’s sexuality and the socio-economic changes taking place in the region (Obermeyer, 2000; Khair Badawi, 2001; Belhadj, 2001; Mernissi, 1982; Cindoglu, 1997). Female genital cutting, which clearly has nothing to do with Islam, is now outlawed as a result of the efforts of women’s advocacy groups in Egypt (al-Dawla, 2000). In recent years, activism against honor crimes in Palestine, Jordan, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey has grown, and women’s NGOs have succeeded in putting the issue onto the agenda of national and international bodies (Albadeel Coalition, 2000; Yirmisbesoglu, 2000; Rouhana, 2001; Tadros, 2002; International Women’s Health Coalition, 2000; Clarke, 2001). A popular Friday night television program in Lebanon, Al-Chater Yehki, topped the ratings with its live debates on sexuality, with issues ranging from masturbation to incest and homosexuality (Foster, 2000). A meeting organized in September 2001 by Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) – NEW WAYS, based in Istanbul, brought together women, academics and representatives of women’s NGOs from several countries in the region to discuss essential women’s human rights related to sexuality, sexual rights, power, and gender roles, and to exchange ideas and strategies on the topic “Women,

Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Mediterranean”. The meeting showed the great need for the exchange of information and a common attempt to deconstruct fundamentalist notions of female sexuality, along with a need for the development of networks and alliances for common strategies and action for sexual rights among women in the region.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the legal setbacks in Iran, Algeria and Yemen, the advocacy and lobbying efforts of the national women’s movements in Turkey, Egypt and Jordan have led to legal reforms towards greater gender equality in the family. In Turkey, the reform of the civil code in 2001 scrapped the supremacy of men in marriage by removing a clause defining the man as the head of the family. Through the reform of its civil code, Turkey has become the only predominantly Muslim country that has legally established full equality of men and women in the family. The new Turkish Civil Code raises the legal age for marriage to 18 both for women and men (it was previously 17 for men and 15 for women) and makes the equal division of property acquired during marriage as the default property regime. The concept of “illegitimate children”-that is, children born out of wedlock-has been abolished and the custody of these children is given to their mothers. [12] In addition, in October 2001, Article 41 of the Turkish Constitution was amended, redefining the family as an entity that is based on equality between spouses. In Egypt, amendment of the Family Law in 2000 challenged men’s unilateral right to divorce for the first time in recent history. Based on a progressive interpretation of hadith, Egyptian women now have the right to request and be granted divorce on the grounds of equality; women, however, must forgo alimony and are required to repay their husbands any dowry (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Zuhur, 2002; UNDP, 2002). In Jordan, amendments to the marital status law in 2001 have permitted women to file for divorce, raised the legal age of marriage to 18 (it was previously 15 for women and 16 for men) and introduced legislative amendments to Article 340 of the penal code, which now stipulates that perpetrators of the so-called honor crimes are no longer exempt from the death penalty (“Jordanian Women can Appeal for Divorce, Raising Marriage Age”, 2001.)

The last two decades have also witnessed the emergence of a reformist discourse that argues for equality in Islam on all fronts. This reformist discourse seeks to analyze “women’s sexuality as defined by social circumstances, not by nature and divine will” (Mir-

Hosseini, 2001:12). As such, it removes the issue of sexuality or women’s status from the domain of fiqh rulings to social practices and norms, which are neither sacred nor immutable but human and changing. This new movement is opening new windows by bridging the gap between the traditional divide of the so-called traditionalists–ranging from conservatives to the religious right–and the so-called progressives, including the feminists, blurring the traditional fixed fronts in Muslim societies as constructed in the last century. In addition, women are increasingly traversing the domain of production of religious knowledge, a domain of power traditionally controlled by men.

#### **Conclusion**

The sexual oppression of women in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world is not the result of an oppressive vision of sexuality based on Islam, but a combination of historical, socio-political and economic factors. Although an analysis of the Qur’an and the literature traditionally accepted as establishing the normative practices of Islam leads to contradictory conclusions about the construction of women’s sexuality in early Islam, several customary practices that constitute violations of women’s human rights in the region-honor

crimes, stoning, female genital cutting, or virginity tests-have no Qur’anic basis, as researchers and activists in the region point out. Moreover, the prevalence of such practices varies greatly among the countries in the region.

This article has examined three of the historical and socio-political factors that have had an impact on women’s sexual lives in the region today; modernization efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalist ideologies that accompanied the foundation of the nation-states; and

the rise of the Islamic religious right. Analysis shows that modernization efforts had a divergent impact on women’s sexual lives depending on their class, race, or ethnicity. While many women from the urban middle and upper classes or a dominant race or ethnicity generally benefited from the legal, educational and economic reforms, modernization often meant a restriction or loss of traditional modes of power for women of other classes or minority women. Nationalist movements also posed contradictory roles for women. On the one hand, nationalist movements allowed women – especially those from the middle and upper classes – to participate more fully in social and political life at a time when traditional gender roles and relations were disrupted. On the other hand, these nationalist movements redefined women’s role as mothers and bearers

*Marital intercourse does not need the justification of reproduction and is based on the right to sexual fulfillment*

of the nation and its newly constructed legacy. This led to the emergence of new strategies to control women—especially their sexuality which was meant to serve the reproduction and maintenance needs of the newly constructed national identity and the community's sense of uniqueness. Finally, the rise of the religious right, which placed the construction of an "Islamic" sexual identity and the control of women's sexuality at the forefront of its agenda, led to a loss of previously gained rights for women in countries such as Algeria, South Yemen, and Iran; it also led to the dissemination of the worst customary practices as "Islamic" in communities or countries where the Islamists gained power.

However, the changing social values in the region and women's groups' increasing activity in the last decade

have begun to act as powerful agents of change that have led to new attitudes toward sexuality, especially among young people, and to new progressive legal and social reforms. These have established the basis of new rights regarding women's sexuality and their status in the family in, for example, Turkey, Egypt and Jordan. The last two decades also witnessed the emergence of a reformist discourse that argues for equality in Islam on all fronts. This reformist discourse seeks to analyze "women's sexuality as defined by social circumstances, not by nature and divine will" (Mir-Hosseini, 2001:12). As such, it removes the issue of sexuality or women's status from the domain of fiqh rulings to social practices and norms. This approach builds a bridge with the old fixed fronts in their struggles of power over the construction of women's sexuality as constructed in the last century.

## ENDNOTES

- All references to the Qur'an in this article are to the translation by Pickthall (1953).
- "And We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will; but come not nigh this tree lest ye\* become wrongdoers. But Satan caused them to deflect therefrom and expelled them from the (happy) state in which they were; and We said: Fall down\*\*, one of you a foe onto the other! There shall be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a time." (Surah 2:35-36) (\* Here, the command is in the dual, as addressed to Adam and his wife; \*\* Here, the command is in the plural, as addressed to Adam's race.)
- For an analysis of the discussion of the story of Zuleikha and Yusuf in the Islamic tradition, and the need for and possibilities of alternative feminist readings of the story, see Merguerian and Najmabadi (1997).
- "And come not near unto adultery. Lo! It is an abomination and an evil way." (Surah 17:32)
- "The adulterer and the adulteress, scourge ye each one of them (with) a hundred stripes. And let not pity for the twain withhold you from obedience to Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a party of believers witness their punishment." (Surah 24:2)
- "And those who accuse honourable women but bring not four witnesses, scourge them (with) eighty stripes and never (afterward) accept their testimony- They indeed are evildoers." (Surah 24:4)
- "As for those who accuse their wives but have no witnesses except themselves; let the testimony of one of them be four testimonies (swearing by Allah that he is of those who speak the truth; And yet a fifth, invoking the curse of Allah on him if he is of those who lie. And it shall avert the punishment from her if she bear witness before Allah four times that the thing he saith is indeed false, And a fifth (time) that the wrath of Allah be upon her if he speak truth. .... Why did they not produce four witnesses? Since they produce not witnesses, they verily are liars in the sight of Allah." (Surah 24: 6,7,8,9, 13)
- See for instance Badran (1995); Paidar (1996); Abu-Lughod (1998); and Ilkharacan (1996).
- The Turkish Civil Code was translated and adapted from the Swiss Civil Code of the time and the Turkish Penal Code was adapted from the Italian Penal Code.
- For a discussion of the virginity tests in Turkey from a human rights perspective, see Human Rights Watch (1994) and Seral (2000).
- For a more detailed summary of the meeting on "Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Mediterranean", see Ilkharacan (2002).
- For a more comprehensive analysis and description of the reform of the Turkish Civil Code, see Women for Women's Human Rights-NEW WAYS (2002).

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# Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as “Sexual Objects”

Hazel Simons

Edward Said's book *Orientalism* paved the way for a new discourse on the Colonial and Western interpretations of the Orient and the Middle East. During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries especially, Europeans visiting the “East” recorded their travels in literary texts, autobiographical writing, paintings and photography. Said suggests that within these works, the creators transposed their own ideas and pre-conceptions of the East, thus creating and mythologizing a view that belonged not to reality, but to a colonial concept representing domination. Many of these Orientalist works project an image of the East as different, the “Other”, and objectify and scrutinize all its elements. Said argues that in this way, “European culture was able to manage- and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively.”<sup>1</sup> Within this general discourse, the Arab/Muslim woman is subject to constant prying, de/re-construction and devaluing. She is represented, amongst other things, as an object of desire, a sexual being there to be appropriated and dominated.

As the subject of Orientalism is too vast, this essay will not discuss the art work produced by painters such as Jean-Leon Gerome and Delacroix which often concentrate on scenes of naked or half-naked women in the harem, in bath houses or women being sold as slaves.<sup>2</sup> Neither will it discuss contemporary, Western representations of Muslim women as seen in the media. Instead it will focus on the written texts by some of the European travelers to the “East” in order to make a direct comparison with those written by “Eastern” travelers to Europe. This demonstrates that the discussion of ‘native’ women was a prime tool, and provided the body on which all power/political discourses were written, seemingly regardless of culture. As Fatna Sabbagh states, “The female body as a field of writing, initiation and discourse on power, domination and exploitation seems to be a constant aspect of human societies.”<sup>3</sup> The study will then look at some of the Arab/Muslim texts, both erotic and orthodox, which when featuring women, also appear to focus on certain sexual elements. Finally, it will

look at more contemporary information to see how these discourses have affected women in Arab/Muslim societies. As this information is limited, I have concentrated the discussion on Iran with brief mention of interviews with women in Morocco and Lebanon.

Said argued that Europe's knowledge of the East was constructed in order to gain control over it. Within the Orientalist works, he identified "manifest" or conscious, stated views about society, and "latent" views that reflect the site of the unconscious, "where dreams, images, desires, fantasies and fears reside."<sup>4</sup> Adopting Foucault's ideas on discourse and power, Said suggested that Orientalists always represented the nature of the orient and the Oriental as "inferior to the west,"<sup>5</sup> and the West's knowledge of the 'East' was bound with its domination over it.<sup>6</sup> If the Oriental "Other" was presented as irrational, erotic, exotic and despotic then the 'west' was therefore rational, moral and justified in its actions. For Said then, orientalism was less a body of knowledge than a discursive construction, "with no necessary relation to the actual cultures that it supposedly described and understood," where the oriental "Other" is confined to fantasy and never allowed to speak.<sup>7</sup> Foucault stated that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together"<sup>8</sup> and discourse itself "transmits and produces power."<sup>9</sup>

Within discourse, Foucault suggested, the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, sexuality and race.<sup>10</sup> This seems to be true of Orientalism where women are not only the racial Other, but also female. Said writes that, "women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing."<sup>11</sup> Because much of what is recorded is from a male perspective, Malika Mehdid, following this argument, suggests that "Orientalism becomes the narrative or visual device for the expression and the identification of male desire,"<sup>12</sup> where the Orient was full of sexual promise and luxuriant women. It "was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe"<sup>13</sup> especially during the Victorian period when sex was a taboo subject. Foucault suggests that sexuality is an especially "dense transfer point for relations of power" not just between men and women but also between administrations and population.<sup>14</sup> Philippa Levine suggests, "knowledge of sexual habits, preferences and boundaries" enabled Europeans "to exert certain kinds of authority in the

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she gives*

colonial setting."<sup>15</sup> Foucault states that particularly from the Eighteenth Century onwards, woman's body was analysed in order to construct a knowledge of sexuality concerned with "the sensations of the body" and "the quality of pleasures."<sup>16</sup> Foucault suggests that the "deployment of sexuality has its reason for being in ...proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way."<sup>17</sup>

Mehdid maintains that the constant re-working of texts, about Arab women, real or imaginary meant that the authors, through their work, were "appropriating her body and identity and possessing her again in sexual and textual terms"<sup>18</sup> and thus perpetuating the myth surrounding her. Unlike Said, both Mehdid and Yegenoglu believe that sexuality does not take a secondary role in this discourse, but that it actually "governs and structures the subjects' every relation with the Other."<sup>19</sup> This is perhaps illustrated by Edward Lane when on arriving in the East, "felt like

an eastern bridegroom, about to lift the veil of his bride, and see, for the first time, the features that were to charm, or disappoint, or disgust him."<sup>20</sup> The 'East' then, automatically becomes female, something mysterious to be revealed, and something seductive, sexual. Just as the land becomes a colonial acquisition, so too the people in it, are appropriated but also constructed, through the discourse of Orientalist texts. The expectation of the sexuality of the Eastern woman takes great precedence in these works. As early as the seventeenth century, Jean Dumont described Turkish women

as "charming creatures" who seem to be "made for love; their actions, gestures, discourse and looks are all amorous."<sup>21</sup> Western writers have produced a cultural discourse which has not only mixed their own fantasies and desires in their representation of the orient and it's people in general, but has also taken the Arab woman and "systematically devalued her."<sup>22</sup> This domination over the native women was part and parcel of European man's power and control of her native land.<sup>23</sup>

The image of the sexual, Oriental woman was transposed into the oriental texts where in a repressive age, it was "coveted as the permissible expression of a taboo topic" in Europe.<sup>24</sup> Although set in the Congo, the tale of the *One Thousand and One Nights* is told within the plot of Diderot's "Les Bijoux Indiscrets",

written in the Eighteenth Century. In this story the Sultan has a magic ring which allows him access to the "most intimate desires and sexual exploits" of the harem by making the "jewel", or genitalia of the women, tell the truth about their infidelities.<sup>25</sup> It demonstrates the kind of "voyeuristic promiscuity"<sup>26</sup> which frequently appears in the texts, especially about the harem which was a forbidden, and therefore imagined space for men. Voyeurism is seen in some of Flaubert's letters where he refers to women being used sexually by others. A letter to Louis Bouilhet recounts how Mohammed Ali's jester sat a woman "on the counter of a shop, and coupled with her publicly" just "to amuse the crowd."<sup>27</sup> Whether in Egypt or Turkey, Flaubert describes women purely in physical terms and often refers to his liaisons with prostitutes.<sup>28</sup> Even in the Egyptian tombs at Thebes, he concentrates on the scenes with "young girls in transparent dresses, the most whorish shapes imaginable, playing the guitar with a lascivious air. It's a bordello scene."<sup>29</sup>

Flaubert describes the oriental woman to Louise Colet as "no more than a machine," making "no distinction between one man and another."<sup>30</sup> The Egyptian Kuchuk Hanem, is "a regal looking creature, large breasted, fleshy," with "slit nostrils."<sup>31</sup> Flaubert is one European writer who describes woman in the most obvious sexual terms. She is a "creature," sharing similar characteristics to animals "of which unbridled sexual ardour" was undoubtedly one,<sup>32</sup> and the inability to have emotions another. Not only was she a machine, "you may be sure she felt nothing at all emotionally,"<sup>33</sup> she is as Said puts it, "less a woman than a display of impressive, but verbally inexpressive femininity" representing carnal temptation and "unbounded sexuality."<sup>34</sup> She is quiet, passive, and acquiescent and "relapses into the state of nature,"<sup>35</sup> enabling Flaubert to fulfill his needs and desires. Lowe suggests she is in fact a "masculine fantasy of pure erotic service."<sup>36</sup> It is likely that Flaubert used her as a prototype for the female characters, Salamambo and Salome in his novels,<sup>37</sup> thus perpetuating the myth surrounding her. Kuchuk represents everything the European woman he is writing to is not. Colet is cerebral, and virtuous as opposed to Kuchuk, the "machine" the "creature," the whore. This reinforces Colet's dominant position as a European over the Colonial Other.<sup>38</sup> Kuchuk Hanem's image in its original and re-written form becomes projected onto other women within the discourse and becomes Arab/Muslim women as a whole.

*Women have been  
framed, defined  
and understood  
through male  
projections, inhibitions  
and fantasies*

Women then are described at the "level of the libido, the carnal and the irrational,"<sup>39</sup> Kuchuk Hanem like Flaubert's fictional character, Salamambo, lacks "psychological density." The real and the fictional women are not described as individuals and are "devoid of an active role and emotional intensity."<sup>40</sup> Mehdid suggests there were two perceptions of Arab women in these texts, one carnal, like Flaubert's woman, the other more sympathetic, like Nerval's who rather than using the graphic language of Flaubert, wants to "unite with a guileless young girl,"<sup>41</sup> and refers to women as "frisky," having "natural abandon."<sup>42</sup> Some of the women travelers are perhaps more sympathetic, although even they, like Julia Pardoe, note the physical beauty of women in the harem.<sup>43</sup> In her descriptions of women she focuses on certain parts of the body, like the "bosom," "throat" or "dimpled arm" that were "almost unmentionable in mainstream discourse" in 1830s Europe.<sup>44</sup> Women "as the excluded Other" of Western society, therefore, occupy a dominant, "masculine position in relation to oriental women."<sup>45</sup> Mehdid suggests that although there are

slight variations in the Orientalist discourse, the "exotica/erotic element" is always "firmly present and ingrained in the mind"<sup>46</sup> much of it acquired from other writings and works of art.

Yegenoglu suggests the veil also took on a special meaning within the Orientalist texts, the veiled woman giving the sense of the exotic, sensual, seductive and dangerous.<sup>47</sup> The veil to the Western eye is both threatening, because what lies behind is invisible, unknown, and therefore an obstacle to control. Yet at the same time seductive. In describing Turkish women, Edmondo de Amicis states that they can use the veil "to display, to conceal, to promise," to use in the art of seduction although there is also "something virginal and holy about it."<sup>48</sup> Lady Montagu wrote that the veil gives women "entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery" as their "gallants"<sup>49</sup> seldom know who they are. In other words, she suggests that the anonymity provided by the veil allowed them to conduct their love affairs and gave them "sexual and social license."<sup>50</sup> The veil thus becomes directly related to the woman's sexuality, where she is seen as both chaste and immoral.

But what formed the original basis for the creation of this mythical, sexual East? In part it was probably due to European exposure to *The Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of folk stories derived



from Persian, Arabian and Indian cultures.<sup>51</sup> This text, itself reflecting the “secular imagination of the East,” and containing fantastic tales of adventure, magic and “candid bawdry,”<sup>52</sup> was introduced to Europe in the Eighteenth Century when Galland’s translation was published. Galland removed all candid references to sex as he considered it to be inappropriate for his own society. Lane’s version published between 1839-41, however, offered a more “bowdlerized selection intended for the drawing room.”<sup>53</sup> Burton’s version published between 1885-86 seems not only to focus on sexual matters within the stories, but also continues and expands his discussions on sex within the footnotes.<sup>54</sup> Rana Kabbani suggests that what “he felt himself unable to say about European women, he could unabashedly say about Eastern ones”<sup>55</sup> and in this way projected onto the Other woman, sexual drives denied to middle class women in Europe. He appears to focus on sex seemingly for his own gratification and supposedly that of his European audience. It was partly this text, read in translation, which conditioned the European mind in its perception of the Eastern Woman.

Regardless of the translations, Kabbani suggests the stories themselves showed certain “negative stereotypes” that embodied “all the vices traditionally associated with the female....they are fickle, faithless and lewd.”<sup>56</sup> In the prologue the Sultan sees his wife frolicking naked and being unfaithful to him with a black slave “who mounted her after smothering her with embraces and kisses.”<sup>57</sup> The same had happened to his brother and the two men leave town. On their return the king kills his wife and vows to take “a virgin in marriage to his bed each night, and kill her the next morning.”<sup>58</sup> Bouhdiba suggests the two deceived brothers believe that woman “is essentially a thieving, libidinous creature, devoid of feeling.”<sup>59</sup> In “The Tale of the Enchanted King”, the wife is also fickle, referred to by the slaves as a “black souled whore” and a “harlot who revels away her nights in the beds of thieves and cut-throats,” and regularly visits a Negro after drugging her husband to make him sleep. Furthermore, she humbles herself before the slave even though he insults her because she needs him to satisfy her sexually.<sup>60</sup> Both of these women are unfaithful because of their need to satisfy their desires.

The image of woman as sexual aggressor is also portrayed. When the Sultan leaves town with his brother they meet a young girl held captive by a jinnee who

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immediately asks them to “pierce” her with their “rapiers”, (i.e. copulate with her), on pain of telling the jinnee. Afterwards she adds their rings to a collection of 98 men she had seduced in the same manner. In “The Porter and the Three Girls from Baghdad”, again it is the women who are the active agents. The three girls stripping naked in turn, pointing “down to that which was between her thighs....her delicate parts” and asking the porter to name it.<sup>61</sup> It is clear here that the girls initiate the scene. The same is true of the women in the three tales of the one-eyed dervishes that follow. One of the dervishes spends a year with forty young girls, “reveling away the nights” with each in turn.<sup>62</sup> In “The Tale of Khalifah the Fisherman”, the Caliph after spending the night with a slave girl, is “so delighted with her talents,” (presumably in bed), that he “forsook for her his wife.”<sup>63</sup>

If all these tales represent sexual acts outside of marriage, the wife too within the marriage is often portrayed as the active sexual partner. In “The Tale of Ma’aruf the Cobbler,” it is the bride who tells the bridegroom to come to bed and “gird your loins for the merry sport” on their wedding night.<sup>64</sup> There follows a description of their first night together where “she pressed close to him, so that tongue met tongue....the citadel was breached and the victory won.”<sup>65</sup> As well as being sexual predators, women are nearly always physically perfect, of “surpassing beauty.”<sup>66</sup> The porter notes “the roundness” of the breasts and the “graceful quivering thighs” of one of the girls.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere they have “lips like rubies,”<sup>68</sup> and are “more beautiful than a priceless pearl” with “breasts round and shapely.”<sup>69</sup>

Burton’s translation included footnotes that contained ‘juicy titbits’ of information concerning sexual/erotic details, in themselves often irrelevant to the story being translated. In the Prologue, when the Queen meets with the black slave, Burton notes that “debauched women prefer Negroes on account of the size of their parts.”<sup>70</sup> Burton also suggests that harems “are hot beds of sapphism” and seems intrigued at the idea of sexual perversity. Kabbani suggests that for him “the woman was reduced to ‘privaties’....for his articulation about sex,<sup>71</sup> but it also seems to reinforce his dominant Colonial position. Even Shahrazad, the intelligent heroine of the story, becomes a sexual object. Fadwa Malti-Douglas, suggests that in her wedding scene in Burton’s translation, she is reduced to an object of desire, where “in place of her intellect

it is now Shahrazad’s physicality that comes to the fore.”<sup>72</sup> The brothers are “bewitched” and filled with “amorous longing” for her.<sup>73</sup> Bouhdiba mentions Dehoy’s “L’Erotisme de mille et une nuits” where Shahrazad “describes the joys of the flesh”<sup>74</sup> and refers to women being “driven by some irresistible desire....panting and bubbling over with so much pleasure.”<sup>75</sup>

Kabbani believes that many Europeans confused “the real East with the East of the stories”<sup>76</sup> and in some ways the *Thousand and One Nights* became an Orientalist text. Although the stories are Eastern, those translating and editing it were European, able to cut out or add footnotes to emphasize particular aspects of Eastern society as a whole, and its women. It was those images which influenced European perceptions of the East in general, and which other European writers picked up on and incorporated into their own work, both fictional and autobiographical.

This same kind of discourse, a kind of reverse “Orientalism,” can be seen in the writing of some of the Nineteenth Century Iranian travelers to Europe. Just as the Orientalists perceived Eastern women in sexual terms, so too did the Iranian travelers about European women. Tavakoli-Targhi suggests that the female body came to serve as a metaphor for “delinquent self and other, Iran and Europe, Islam and Christianity.”<sup>77</sup> Just as for Lane, the East was like a “bride,” so Europe became “an emporium of beauty” and English women, according to Luft-allah, “nymphs of paradise”<sup>78</sup> and full of mischief. An image was created of Europeans as “irrational, immoral and aberrant”<sup>79</sup> based mainly on their impression of women and their sexuality. Sahhafbashi, commented that “virgin women are rare,”<sup>80</sup> and Garmrudi that women are “generally pantsless and without veil and have a constant desire for able pummelers,”<sup>81</sup> (ie, for sex). Mirza I’tisam al-Din suggested that a man and woman can “commit fornication....in any place whatever” with impunity.<sup>82</sup> They, like the Orientalists in the East, see or imagine, the relative sexual freedom of the Other.

Garmrudi may have been responding directly to the Orientalist interpretations of Iran. He criticizes Europeans, “with all their imperfect attributes and obscene behaviours,” for being unjust to the Iranian people in their books.<sup>83</sup> He warns the Iranian govern-

ment to remain distant from Europeans to prevent damaging the state and religion.<sup>84</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi suggests that in Iran these negative images of the West based on “the European woman as imagined by Iranian male travelers”<sup>85</sup> was projected onto their own women. The images entered into Islamic, political discourses on the “danger of unveiling in the twenties, women’s suffrage in the 1950s and 1960s and the protest against moral corruption.”<sup>86</sup> Unveiledness and the sexual freedom of women were viewed as the cause of corruption and the moral degeneration of Europe.<sup>87</sup>

However, even if some of the Orientalist texts emphasise women as sexual beings, some earlier Arab/Muslim texts exist which suggest that the woman’s body had already become “a pawn in the game of textual sexual politics,”<sup>88</sup> her personality and personhood absent or subordinated. Sabbagh suggests there are two discourses in Muslim writing, the erotic, meant for the individual, and the orthodox, coming from God and therefore compulsory for all.<sup>89</sup> Both of these texts present women in sexual terms.

Numerous works of erotic writing exist in the Arab/Muslim tradition some of which date back as early as the Eighth Century,<sup>90</sup> and most of which portray woman as sex objects and sexual aggressors. Perhaps the image of the sexual object is best found in the writing of Ibn al-Wardi and the mythical island complex of

al-Waqwaq where trees “bear fruit like women, with shapes, bodies, eyes, hands feet, hair, breasts and vulvas like the vulvas of women.”<sup>91</sup> Malti-Douglas suggests she is the “ultimate disposable woman” because the man can experience a unique sexual pleasure, fulfilling his needs, and she dies after intercourse.<sup>92</sup> Two famous erotic works are Nefzawi’s “The Perfumed Garden” written in the twelfth century and Ibn Sulayman’s “How an Old Man can regain his youth through sexual potency” written in the fifteenth century. In both, the subject is woman, “her body, desires, wantonness and mysteries.”<sup>93</sup> She is portrayed in exclusively physical terms, the perfect woman having “the thighs and buttocks hard, the hips large and full.”<sup>94</sup> However, Sabbagh suggests the texts imply that a woman’s character is basically determined by “what she has between her legs.”<sup>95</sup> Just as Flaubert mused about Kuchuk Hanem, this woman “speaks and laughs rarely, and never without reason.”<sup>96</sup> She exists for one thing, and one thing only; sex. She is the “omnisexual woman.”<sup>97</sup>

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In this writing, the woman's sex, becomes a force of its own, where "voracious sexes" are "able to seek out and draw the available prey"<sup>98</sup> and "certain vulvas, wild with desire and lust...throw themselves upon the approaching member"<sup>99</sup> to obtain orgasm. Within the stories women copulate not only with men, but animals, and are thus reduced to beings controlled by their sexes. Indeed, the general belief is that even if one were to copulate "night and day for years and years with a woman...her thirst for copulation is never assuaged."<sup>100</sup> In fact, "a woman only appreciates life if one copulates with her...she blooms and is rejuvenated when she smells the scent of a man."<sup>101</sup> These texts represent male fantasy where social and moral barriers are eroded and men and women can copulate in freedom.

Alternatively, the orthodox Islamic discourse, sets itself up as "architect of reality" and social order,<sup>102</sup> although women are still referred to in terms of their sexuality. Sabbagh suggests that within this discourse, the relationship between God, man and woman is defined; man serves God and women can serve God by serving man.<sup>103</sup> Imam Moslem cites a hadith declaring that "the world is a possession and the best possession is a virtuous woman."<sup>104</sup> Sabbagh suggests that sex and sexuality is confined to the domestic space, and within this space, woman's greatest role is in reproduction.<sup>105</sup> Imam Bukhari and Imam Ghazzali suggest that man invokes the name of God before the sexual act and at the point of orgasm "to keep the devil away" from the man and "the fruit" of the union.<sup>106</sup> It seems this is an attempt to "divert the believers attention from the female body"<sup>107</sup> which offered not only a child, but also physical pleasure and carnal desire.<sup>108</sup> God is not provoked to protect the woman, because she is seen as evil along with the desire she invokes in man. Indeed according to Imam abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Jawzi, Iblis (the devil) asserts that his surest arrow, "the one that never misses its victim, is woman."<sup>109</sup> Not only is woman desire, she is associated with the devil because she incites the believer to evil. Although Islam condemns celibacy,<sup>110</sup> the sexual act is a problem for the believer because within it are revealed some of the very notions considered opposite of the divine will, and therefore likely to lead to disorder and chaos. A woman then is a constant temptation because of the pleasure she gives. As sexual union is only allowed within marriage, a man who is tempted by another woman, should follow the Prophet's exam-

*Spouses do not talk  
about sexual pleasure  
and that only  
the man has  
the right  
to show his desire*

ple and "hasten to his own woman"<sup>111</sup> to relieve his desire.

Despite this, Bouhdiba suggests that paradise in Islam is "a place of sexual pleasure"<sup>112</sup> where every man who has observed the fast is married to a 'houri,' a perpetual virgin with an "appetizing sex."<sup>113</sup> Here the Muslim, (male), will experience "infinite orgasm,"<sup>114</sup> his sexual potency is increased and "paradise is the total and absolute satisfaction of desire."<sup>115</sup> The houris are there to be sexually consumed by the male believer; they have no character and they do not think. At the same time Tarmidi asserts that, "every wife who passes the night at the side of her satisfied husband is sure to go to paradise."<sup>116</sup> In other words, a woman who is able and willing to please her husband, and not refuse his sexual advances during their lifetime, will be rewarded with the gift of heaven.

It seems then that within the Arab/Muslim texts woman is expected to be both angel and virgin, seductress and sex goddess depending on their marital status. It is acceptable to present women within the erotic texts as the omnisexual woman with a voracious sexual appetite because it is voyeuristic, nourishes the male fantasy and gives men something they want, but cannot necessarily have in reality. At the same time, the society in which these texts were read would consider such behaviour by women as totally unacceptable in reality. In Bouthaina Shaaban's book, *Both Right and Left Handed*, a Lebanese woman suggests that most Arab women live in two different worlds, before and after marriage. "Before marriage they are supposed to be saints, holy virgins who never like to know or hear anything about sex," yet, once they are married "they are supposed magically to change into sexy wives."<sup>117</sup>

Within this context, it is necessary to neutralize, master, control and subjugate woman, the cause of desire, in order to maintain the order of society.<sup>118</sup> In Nineteenth century Iran this included a text by an unknown author, entitled *Disciplining Women*. Throughout, the woman's virtues and vices are defined purely in terms of how they affect the man and in many cases this relates back to the sexual. Even the way a woman walks can be interpreted to show that she "is in quest of passing pleasure" because "only street lovers turn their heads and move their haunches as they walk."<sup>119</sup> In this respect, in public, any sign of sexuality or even femininity must be avoided to prevent arousing men. In 1920s Iran, texts were designed to teach women "the duty of policing

and gendarming themselves" so as not to attract unwanted attentions or undermine the social and cultural order.<sup>120</sup> Najmabadi suggests this was meant to create more freedom for women in the public space, though, the implication is that woman's body in itself needs to be controlled.

It is different when it comes to the behaviour of married women. One chapter of *Disciplining Women* is "devoted to what the wife should and should not do in bed,"<sup>121</sup> and it is here that she is expected to become as alluring as possible for her husband. She is to be constantly ready for his advances whether it be "preceded by tender cajolery and exciting play or not,"<sup>122</sup> and sometimes she should make the first move, there being "no question of reserve at such time." Regardless, she should "excite his senses...cover him with kisses and invent him a thousand provocations."<sup>123</sup> After being taught in the Orthodox texts about controlling desire, it is now stated, "shamelessness is better in bed than prudery." The author of the book suggests that it be taught to young girls and followed, so that "a calm and joyous life would be assured."<sup>124</sup> Moghissi suggests, women's sexuality and her moral conduct therefore were, and still remain "a central preoccupation of Muslim men."<sup>125</sup>

Moghissi states that Islam sees woman as having a "pernicious seductive power"<sup>126</sup> which threatens "communal dignity and social and cultural continuity."<sup>127</sup> The honour of the family and community is linked to woman's body, and her 'value' therefore, depends on her remaining chaste until her marriage when she is subjected to "a public performance to prove her virginity."<sup>128</sup> A Lebanese woman states, "if the woman was dishonourable, the whole family was dishonourable, and the woman's virginity was the most crucial ingredient to family honour."<sup>129</sup> Abu-Odeh suggests that woman run the risk of becoming a victim of an honour crime,<sup>130</sup> a practice which seems "targeted to pre-empt subversive sexual practices" and stop Arab society descending into the perceived, "dark pit of western sexual life."<sup>131</sup>

Azari and Najmabadi suggest that in Iran since 1979, attempts to 'control' woman's sexuality has included the sexual offences laws, sexual segregation and compulsory hijab.<sup>132</sup> The image of the "sexual woman, seething with appetites and desires, externally held in check by the veil," and seducing men, however, continued to exist.<sup>133</sup> The veil, proscribed by the Qur'an to cover a woman's body,<sup>134</sup> is now used to cover her desires. A 1920s satirical poem by the Iranian Iraj Mirza reveals these conflicting images. In the poem a woman enjoys sex with the poet, yet keeps her face veiled lest she be considered a whore.<sup>135</sup> Bouhdiba implies that the contradictory images projected by the Orientalists of veiled woman as chaste and immoral

may still exist both in the West and in the East: "In practice, a good half of society spends its time hiding itself from the other half, while trying to imagine it or surprise it!" Voyeurism then, just as it was for the Orientalists, becomes "a refuge and a compensation"<sup>136</sup> for what is unavailable.

Because Islam has made sex and sexuality such a taboo subject and has presented woman as the epitome of desire, women are unable to express their sexual feelings. A survey in 1960s Iran by Paul Vieile revealed that spouses do not talk about sexual pleasure and that only the man has the right to show his desire. The man actually considers himself the "revealer of the latent erotic powers of the woman" and "if woman contains a great potential of desire, a man can use it as he wishes;" after all "he is only responding to what is awaited."<sup>137</sup> Mernissi's collection of interviews in Morocco suggests that sex is not discussed and at least one woman "felt reduced to a thing...his thing" when making love with her husband.<sup>138</sup> Mernissi herself asserts that, "beauty and sexuality, (in the narrow sense of seductiveness) are supposed to be the major poles around which the life of a woman revolves."<sup>139</sup> Because of the taboos surrounding the woman's body created within discourse and society, many Arab/Muslim women have become frightened of sex. For some "it is something they have to do for their husbands" and "they are relieved when it is all finished." Some still find it difficult to "look at sex as something enjoyable, beautiful and clean."<sup>140</sup>

As Foucault suggests, woman's body became an obsession and was exploited and appropriated physically and textually as an "object of knowledge and an element in relations of power."<sup>141</sup> Within the Orientalist discourse, it characterized Western dominance of the East. In the these texts, Arab-Muslim women have been "framed, defined and understood through male projections, inhibitions and fantasies" of the harem and an "enduring imaginative tradition working on the indelible trail of the Arabian Nights."<sup>142</sup> Once the discourse was formulated it re-generated itself through the addition and re-working of texts. However, some earlier Arab-Muslim erotic texts also concentrated on women as sexual beings. In many, women are reduced to "genital apparatus,"<sup>143</sup> and are perceived as sexual aggressors that challenge the social order. Within some of the orthodox texts, women are seen as necessary for reproduction, yet at the same time, "female beauty is a bait that leads to perdition, to damnation."<sup>144</sup> In all of these discourses, mostly constructed by men, women are generally represented as either whores or virgins. Man speaks for the woman, who is a representation "mirrored in man's thought."<sup>145</sup> For the Orientalists, this discourse signified their dominance over the Other; for Muslims, it seems to represent male dominance over woman.

## End Notes

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3. Fatna Sabbagh (1984), *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. New York: Pergamon Press, p. 17.
4. Meyda Yegenoglu (1998), *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 23.
5. Reina Lewis (1996), *Gendering Orientalism, Race, Femininity and Representation*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 16.
6. Ibid., p. 16.
7. Robert C. Young (1995), *Foucault on Race and Colonialism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 57-58.
8. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol 1, an Introduction 1978, p. 100.
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10. Young, op.cit., p. 64.
11. Said, op.cit., p. 207.
12. Malika Mehdid (1993), *A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The Oriental Female*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan, p. 20).
13. Said, op.cit., p. 190.
14. Foucault, op.cit., p. 103.
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16. Foucault, op.cit., 1990, p. 106.
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18. Mehdid, op.cit., p. 38.
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20. Lane, cited in Rana Kabbani (1994), *Imperial fictions, Europe's Myths of Orient*. Pandora, London: Harper Collins, p. 67.
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22. Mehdid, op.cit., p. 18.
23. Rana Kabbani, (1994). p 81.
24. Ibid., p. 7.
25. Suzanne Rodin Pucci (1990), *The Discreet Charms of the Exotic: Fictions of the Harem in Eighteenth Century France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 154-155.
26. Ibid., p. 169.
27. Flaubert letter to Louis Bouilhet December 1, 1849 in Francis Steegmuller (1980), *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830-1857*, p. 107.
28. See for examples ibid pp. 110-111, 124 & 134.
29. Ibid. p. 119.
30. Flaubert cited in Said Orientalism p. 187.
31. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*. p.30.
32. Kabanni, p. 8.
33. Letters of Gustave Flaubert, p. 32.
34. Said, p. 187.
35. The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, p. 181.
36. Lisa, Lowe, *Critical Terrains French and British Orientalists*. 1991, p. 76.
37. Said, p. 187. For a detailed discussion of this see Lowe, pp. 80-84.
38. Mehdid, p. 32.
39. Ibid., p. 34.
40. Ibid., p. 41.
41. Cited in Mehdid, p. 42.
42. Cited in Mehdid, p. 35.
43. Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East 1718-1918*, 1992.
44. Ibid., p. 116
45. Yegenoglu, p. 12.
46. Mehdid, p. 43.
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48. Cited in Yegenoglu, p. 28.
49. Lady Montagu cited Lowe, p. 43.
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53. Ibid., p. 9.
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63. Ibid., p. 312.
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65. Ibid., pp. 387-388.
66. "The Tale of the Third Dervish", in ibid., p.28.
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79. Ibid., p. 106.
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83. Ibid., p. 109.
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86. Ibid., p. 110.
87. Ibid., p. 110.
88. Malti-Douglas, p. 35.
89. Sabbagh, p. 18.
90. For details of some see Gert Borg, *Lust and Carnal Desire: Obscenities Attributed to Arab Women in Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures vol 3*, no. 2 2000, p.p. 149-164.
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93. Sabbagh, p. 24.
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97. Ibid., p. 26.
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104. Bouhdiba, p. 88.
105. Sabbagh, p. 98.
106. Sabbagh, 1984, p. 106.
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135. See Iraj Mirza in Najmabadi, pp. 510-511.
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137. Cited in Azari, p. 106.
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# The Importance of Genital Mutilations to Gender Power Politics

Seham Abd El-Salam

## Introduction:

Male and female genital mutilations (known as circumcision) are known in some cultures as rites of passage and purification (Kennedy 1970; Toubia 1993; Turner 1985). However, I argue that they have another less declared but very significant aspect: they are functions and tools of patriarchal gender power politics. This paper deals with both types of genital mutilations, male and female, though it gives more attention to Male Genital Mutilation (MGM) because it is a muted gender issue. It is based on a study that I carried out in 1999-2000. It is a qualitative field study on the attitudes of 23 Egyptian intellectuals towards MGM\*. All of the respondents are active against female genital mutilation (FGM) but tolerant to MGM. I interviewed them on semi-structured one-one basis. One important result of this study is that MGM as practiced in Egypt today is based on gender power politics (Abd el Salam 2000). Following is an elaboration on this point through interpretation of some observed beliefs and practices related to MGM and FGM.

## Theoretical Overview:

### Physical Description of MGM and FGM

The usual and most widespread forms of MGM and FGM (known as circumcision) are the partial or total removal of the male prepuce and the female clitoris and labia minora. Severer forms of both of MGM and FGM are reported among some cultures. This includes flaying of the whole penile skin as well as the skin of the lower part of the abdomen and upper part of the thighs (Salkh), and incision of the lower surface of the penis (subincision), and removal of the whole external female genitalia with subsequent suturing (infibulation) (Hastings 1980). The removed parts, even in the slightest forms of MGM or FGM, are the most sensitive parts of the human genitalia. They contain specified erotic nerve cells, immune cells, cells that produce a natural lubricant that makes the sexual act easier, gentler, and more pleasurable to the male and the female partners, and feromones, which are natural aromas that facilitate sexual attraction. (Taylor 1996; Immermann 1998; Cold and Taylor 1999; O'Hara 1999). The procedure has many hazards. First and

foremost, the loss of functions of the severed parts. In all cases there is pain, which culminates in some cases to irreversible shock. Bleeding, infection, urinary tract problems, septicemia, and even death are reported in some cases. Circumcised men and women have expressed their suffering from immediate and remote hazards of the procedure (Assaad, 1980; Toubia, 1993; NOHARMM, 1994; Abd el Salam, 2000).

### Origin and Social Function of MGM and FGM

It is widely acknowledged that female genital mutilation (FGM) is a patriarchal invention to control female chastity and ensure the patrilineal purity of offsprings who will inherit their father's wealth (Assaad 1980; Dorkenoo 1994; Toubia 1993). On the other hand, the cultural origin of MGM is controversial. Nevertheless, the different theories of its origin base MGM on gender power politics. One theory suggests that MGM is based on male jealousy of female fertility that appears when women experience menstruation; and that MGM is a symbolic identification with this female attribute. Another theory states that MGM is considered a symbol of superiority of the father over junior males that

threaten his relationship to the mother, thus severing the most sensitive parts of junior males' genitalia ensures their submission to senior males, who will then feel less anxious (Bettelheim 1954). I argue that MGM could be explained by combination of both theories. In patriarchal societies MGM has a symbolic sexual role, because erection is considered a significant sign of male adulthood. Exposure of the head of the penis by circumcision gives it a perpetual appearance of erection. Accordingly, the procedure transfers the child who is not yet sexually mature, making him a symbolically mature male, separating him from the female world. Traditionally, the genital cutting is accompanied by rituals, such as dressing the male child in female attire and jewelry, and segregating him till the wound heals, then allowing him to be regregated into the community in his new circumcised, and presumably more masculine, status. The accompanying rituals are significant because they imply a symbolic death of the child and resurrection of a new male figure (Kennedy, 1970). This new birth comes from the father not the mother. That is the circumcision of male children plays a dual symbolic role reinforcing male authority: the first of which is by giving the child a mature male appearance, ensuring his possession by the male community, and giving him the privilege of the bio/social feminine sign of fertility, shedding of genital blood. And the second is that this new birth and symbolic mature masculinity is given to the child by the father not the mother (Bettelheim 1954).

Another evidence of the patriarchal origin of genital mutilations is that FGM and MGM did not take place in pre-patriarchal societies that were based on sexual equality, for example, in communities of fruit gatherers. Adoption of MGM and FGM as a tradition is associated with the rise of the patriarchal society. FGM and MGM continue in our modern time because of the persistence of old patriarchal values, in spite of the different motives behind them in antiquity and present day societies (Montagu, 1991).

The power political aspect of Genital Mutilation is evident in practice as it is suggested in theory. One of the main political objectives of MGM is to separate the child from his mother and link him to the male community through a painful experience (DeMeo, 1997). For example, an interesting anthropological research carried out by Victor Turner shows that in the "Ndembu" tribe in Zambia the motive behind MGM is a modification and reorganization of the male child's relationship with his parents. In this tribe, mothers link children to one village, whereas, the father who acquaints them with other groups from several villages in which their cousins live makes their relationship with others broader. Naturally, male children are attached to their mothers before being circumcised,

helping them in their daily chores, but after circumcision, they become more attached to their fathers, brothers and other male members of the tribe having similar activities. Because of the attachment to the mother, male children are considered polluted and immature. And accordingly, they do not deserve to be guided by their fathers and other male figures. In these tribes, when leaders find that children are increasing in number and that there is a lack of laborers, consequently disturbing the tribe's male/female power balance, there are immediate preparations for male circumcision. It separates the male child from his mother before they develop a stronger mother/son attachment that is difficult to separate. Moreover, the father/son relationship becomes stronger after circumcision, as the child before circumcision was considered polluted and immature and not worthy of taking instructions from the father because he is still under the mother's control. Evidence that Ndembu male circumcision separates the child from the mother, is that they believe that the male prepuce is analogous to the female labia majora, thus, its removal is significant in that it cuts the mother/son bond. Circumcision is a ritual that takes place to which all relatives - not only males but also female cousins too from the villages close by - are invited. Therefore, the child's relationship with the world becomes broader because it is not only attached to the mother but becomes involved in the world of the father's kinship network which involves interaction with the males in the surrounding villages (Turner, 1985).

Severing the mother/child bond by MGM as is explained in this tribal model applies also to modern society. Modern feminist activists noticed the patriarchal political nature of male circumcision. One of them is Miriam Pollack, who refutes that circumcision has a religious significance. She says that it has a political background in general and is specially significant to gender power politics:

Circumcision is based on men's domination of women. By this procedure, the child is separated from his mother who does not have any authority on him any longer. This harms the child, for at this stage he needs his mother most and she cannot defend him, in spite of the fact that they are attached to one another at this early age. The knife that is pointed to the child is in fact pointed to the heart and soul of the mother. Circumcision is actually an injury to the mother; it is humiliating to her since it implies that 'Your authority over males is limited; moreover, this child belongs to the male community.' In this manner, the relationship between man and woman is disturbed and similarly the relationship between mother and child. The child's separation from the mother is a preparation for his separation from her when he is recruited by the army (Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh 2000).

#### Similarities between FGM and MGM

There is evidence that MGM and FGM are of equal significance wherever they are practiced. For example, the anthropologist Hanny Lightfoot-Klein found that the African justifications of FGM are the same as the American justifications of MGM. Such similarities are found in the opinions that say that circumcision does not deprive the child of an important part of its body but it only takes off an unnecessary piece of skin; and that it is a beautifying procedure; that it also has health benefits such as the prevention of infection, and other diseases; and since doctors agree to do it, it has to be beneficial. In both sexes, men and women do not find any relation between long term complications they may have and circumcision that they experienced at a very early age. It was claimed that neither females nor males would find a partner if they were not circumcised (Lightfoot-Klein, 1994, Lightfoot-Klein, 1997).

Some beliefs and practices related to genital mutilations, especially MGM, give evidence that they are both tool and function of gender power politics.

#### Denial of Pain and Age Discrimination:

The disturbance in the relationship between mother and child, and child abuse by infliction of unnecessary pain all contribute to the continuation of the patriarchal society (DeMeo, 1997). Some activists against FGM state that MGM is not equally traumatic because it is done in infancy, when a baby does not feel pain as equally as adults. The widespread belief that infants can tolerate pain more than adults reveals bias against children. Pain is a subjective feeling that ranges from slight discomfort to severe agony. The only one who can assess the degree of pain is the person who experiences it, or the disinterested observer who detects the objective signs of pain as they appear on the sufferer (Chamberlain, 1991). However, those who believe that children tolerate pain are subjectively judging juniors, who are under their custody and who occupy a lower social rank in comparison to adults. Some objective studies on infants' perception of pain invalidate the traditional beliefs about children's tolerance of pain. Cortisol - which is the hormone that is released by the suprarenal glands in response to pain, shock, and stress - was measured in the blood of infants after circumcision and other less stressful situations, such as binding the children's limbs or pricking their heels. It was found that the blood cortisol level after circumcision exceeds its level after other stressful experiences (Goldman, 1997; Gunnar, 1985; Gunnar, 1988). Thus, contrary to the dominant belief that MGM is not painful, both FGM and MGM are painful experiences to the individual and his/her parents. Not only laboratory results prove this fact, but also field study. In my research on Egyptian intellectuals (Abd el Salam, 2000), one respondent recounts his son's circumcision:

We spent three miserable days. He cried such a lot. It wasn't a pleasant experience at all. Imagine a father watching his son being circumcised and the poor boy is screaming! To me it was a horrible experience.

Another respondent said that they were worried and tense for three weeks after the circumcision because the baby was having a lot of pain. His wife said, that the difficult period was longer than that:

He was in a very bad state for a month and half after the procedure, and I felt that he had changed a lot. The baby was sick and tired and so was I. He had become very nervous and cried a lot. He had a great deal of nervous movements. It was then that I felt that perhaps he had got a shock and I was worried and scared.

A respondent described the experience of her two sons:

It was a tragedy in both cases! No matter what I say, I cannot find words to describe it. The screaming!!! Oh my God!!!! I will never hear like it again! I left the clinic and went out and my husband was the one who stayed. After everything was over they called me to nurse the baby. On entering the room, I found my husband's face as pale as a white sheet "bafta bida" and the blood vessels bulging out of my son's face, just like the pictures you see of the African children in the famine. His face was so pale too "bafta bida." I could see an extraordinary expression of questioning on his facial expressions. I gave him my breast and all the time I was crying.

When I asked her about the expression on her son's face, she said:

With his eyes he was asking me, 'What have you done to me? Didn't you have mercy on me?' I will never forget what happened to my two sons when they were circumcised. It was really terrible. When I was feeding him he stopped sucking every now and then from the pain and kept looking at me as if he wanted to tell me something. It was a real tragedy. I hated myself. The conclusion is that I hated myself for circumcising my two sons.

This means that circumcision in both sexes and all ages is a sort of severe, painful stress, and that denial of this fact represents a social bias and discrimination against children.

In my research (Abd el Salam, 2000), the respondents' testimonies show a relation between age and rank and denial of circumcision hazards. The more senior respondents - in terms of age, or social, or profession-

al ranks – expressed more denial to the fact that male circumcision is painful and unnecessary. This attitude is an additional evidence of the relation between circumcision and patriarchal gender power politics. In patriarchal social organization, aging and possession of leadership offices or ranks imply possession of power. Such powerful individuals usually sympathize with the weak within limits that do not threaten their status as people responsible for social control (Janeway, 1980).

The age factor as a function of power may explain the contradictory statements of some doctors who justified their performance of MGM without anesthesia by the fact that the prepuce has no nerves; nonetheless, they observed that children suffer pain on circumcision. The feminist scholar Nancy Scheper-Hughes described three levels in dealing with the human body that start from the concrete to the abstract. The first and the most concrete level is the individual body. On this level, the body is treated as a human body that feels pain and pleasure. This is the level on which the individual is able to experience and respond to subjective concrete sensations. The second level is the social body, on which the body is treated as an abstract object without any individual attributes. On this level, society can inscribe its symbols on the body through concrete acts, such as circumcision. The third level is the body politics, on which society interferes to define and control the limits of what an individual can do with his/her body and what is forbidden (Scheper-Hughes, 1987). I suggest that in the case of the above-mentioned doctors, their observation and interpretation of the children's reaction to circumcision originate from two different social positions. Observation occurs at the level of the individual body and from the position of an individual relationship between the adult doctor and the child. Hence, the child's agony is acknowledged. On the other hand, interpretation occurs at the level of the symbolic social body, which is too abstract to experience concrete sensations and from the position of a communal relationship between senior adults and junior children. At that level, both doctors and children are representatives of abstract social categories rather than actual concrete individuals. Hence, the powerful party can comfortably deny the weaker party's sufferings.

#### Body Symbolism

In my field research, the respondents rarely acknowledged the fact that FGM and MGM imply loss of extremely sensitive tissues, and that both procedures violate bodily integrity. They often took erection as their point of reference as regards their beliefs about the male prepuce. Some respondents expressed their belief that the male prepuce hinders erection or at least

makes the penis look feeble. For example, one of them said: "the prepuce is nothing but a soft and dangling piece of skin", "hitta medaldelel mortakheya". Such beliefs imply a deep conviction that the male prepuce is symbolic of femininity and hence its retention compromises a man's masculinity. This analysis is augmented by the respondents' perception of masculinity. Most of them stated that masculinity equals virility and both are reduced to erection. This perception is shared by both MGM proponents and opponents. MGM proponents said that the prepuce hinders erection, so, its removal is a prerequisite to fulfill complete masculinity, while MGM opponents said that the prepuce does not prevent erection, hence, circumcision is not necessary for full masculinity. This mode of reasoning reflects an adherence to the patriarchal thought that privileges erection as a symbol of sexual potency, and hence of political power (Paige, 1978). I argue also that this is the basis of the belief that FGM is more severe than MGM because FGM implies removal of an erectable organ. Some feminists also adopt this patriarchal belief that acknowledges erection while it neglects the fact that both FGM and MGM imply loss of extremely sensitive tissues, and that both procedures violate bodily integrity, and the human right to determine what is to be done with one's own body.

So, male and female circumcision do not serve men, women, or children as social categories. It rather serves the persistence of patriarchal gender power balance that presupposes a peculiar symbolic formation of the body to establish a clear gender differentiation. Accordingly, circumcision removes the delicate, protective, wet, and sensitive (all feminine characteristics) part from the male genitalia; and the strong, hard, active (all masculine characteristics) part from the female genitalia. Because circumcision results into useless unnecessary pain and harm for the individual, it is not a health procedure. It is a practice with symbolic and political connotations. Its hygienic justifications are nothing but a tool to motivate people to put such social body politics into action.

#### Language

The language that is used in the social event of MGM indicates its role as a tool to separate the male child from women and attach him to men. In my above-mentioned research (Abd el Salam, 2000), all respondents stated that they perceived male circumcision as a sort of rite of passage into manhood, and that a usual phrase of congratulation to the newly circumcised boy, whatever his age, is: 'Now you have become a man' (*Maborouk Ba'ait Ragel*).

Language shows also how circumcision is meant to establish an aggressive male figure who is superior to women. One respondent recalled that she heard a sig-

nificant congratulation phrase after her son's circumcision. She said: "My cousin congratulated the newly circumcised baby by saying, 'Never mind, this is the only time you will be hurt, after that you will hurt others.' " *ma'alihsh, el marra di inta 'illi ha tit'awwar, ba'd kida inta 'illi hat 'awwar*". She added that she was really surprised by this comment, and that she felt that her cousin was dealing with the circumcised boy as if he was a man although he was still a baby. This mother got the impression that her cousin wishes that the baby would have the upper hand and that he was going to be a man and injure women. She found that it was an audacious statement. Why should he injure women? Although this cousin was implying something sexual, the statement did not give the impression that that was all to it. It made the mother feel that she wishes he would have the upper hand in everything (Abd el Salam, 2000).

The experience of this Egyptian mother matches an interpretation of the high prevalence of MGM in the USA in that American men are socialized to be aggressive and violent. MGM reproduces the imbalanced gender power politics because adult men will do to the society what was done to them in their infancy and childhood. The American psychologist Roland Goldman argues that violence against women is a consequence of MGM. Because MGM is done to baby boys before they acquire the spoken language, as adults, they cannot express it in language. Thus, their early trauma finds expression in a behavior that is traumatic to others (Goldman, 1997).

Language is suggestive of power politics in FGM as well. In Egypt, people who observe traditional female circumcision call the clitoris *zanbour*, i.e. wasp. They think that an intact girl is aggressive because of the retention of this active organ. In order to render her docile, and hence marriageable, they remove it. The newly circumcised girl is called *al arousa*, i.e., the bride. The whole linguistic vocabulary used in MGM and FGM establish an aggressive male/submissive female relationship.

#### Women's Participation in Genital Mutilations

Gender politics are operated in another way through genital mutilations. The respondents stated that women played an active role in the implementation of circumcision. Female nurses suggested circumcision of the baby to one of the respondents when she showed

some tendency to postpone it. Another respondent mentioned that the female members of his family used to hold boys tightly in order to fix them for circumcision. This last means of female involvement in MGM suggests that MGM is a rite of separation of the male child from his mother and female kins, who submit the child by themselves to society.

This is the case also with FGM. Many mothers would like to spare their daughters the suffering of FGM, but they cannot face the society. Thus, if the case is that when a father leaves the decision of FGM or MGM to the mother it means that he leaves it to society's opinion. In other words, she has actually no personal say in the matter, even if it appears on the surface that she is the decision maker as regards her children's circumcision. Mothers feel worried and sad for their children's sufferings, but they submit both of their sons and daughters to the knives of circumcisors because they cannot face the society if they did not. Thus, women contribute by their silence to the continuity of the already established gender power politics.

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if they wish to  
be socially accepted*

Not only do women willingly offer their children to the patriarchal society as a sign of their acceptance of submission to patriarchal gender power politics, they are also not free to take decisions about their children. In patriarchal societies, women and children from both sexes have lower social status because of their economic dependence (Lerner, 1986). In such conditions, women are unable to make independent decisions. One of the women respondents stated

that leaving the son's circumcision decision to the mother means leaving it to the social opinion, not to her free choice for the baby. This situation perpetuates female inferiority because one of the signs of superior status is that the individual can control the products of his/her labor (Moore, 1988). Children are the most accepted and valued products of women by virtue of traditional patriarchal gender division of labor. However, children are not attributed to mothers and therefore do not belong to her but to their father and his kins after a period of maternal care. Thus, women are aware that they are not free to control what should be done to their children's bodies although most respondents who are mothers expressed worry and sadness for their sons' circumcision, exactly as many mothers feel towards their daughters' circumcision. By feeling obliged to act in this way, women, even the feminists among them, retain the feeling that they are

delegated by the society to implement the muted gender issues. Delegating women to reproduce and guard patriarchal norms and gender power balance is part of the traditional gender power politics (Janeway, 1980).

#### Who Really Imposes it: Men or Women?

Another evidence of the gender power political significance of genital mutilation is the difference between the reaction of men and women respondents towards it. Analysis of the responses of interviewees who were parents show that mothers were more expressive of their perception of their sons' sufferings from circumcision than fathers. Mothers were also more hesitant to allow circumcision than fathers. Following is an example of the difference between the reactions of a mother and a father to their son's circumcision. Both of them are intellectuals who support gender and reproductive rights and fight FGM on these basis. The father said:

She [the mother of the child] asked why we had to circumcise him? I told her, 'Because everybody has to be circumcised.' It never occurred to me to ask that same question. I added, 'He will be odd if he isn't.' She answered, 'Of course not. Who told you everybody is circumcised?' she was very nervous and anxious for her son. She used gender rights to support her argument. I told her that even all our Coptic friends were circumcised so why should we be the odd ones out? I couldn't keep him uncircumcised in a society in which everybody is.

While the mother said:

I asked the doctor before doing anything, 'Must boys be circumcised?' I was serious because I had no pre-established ideas. I didn't know why, but I found myself saying that there was no reason for male circumcision although I had no idea where I had got this information from. It just came to my mind by chance. Maybe because I was worried about my son. He said, 'Some people say it's not necessary.' I was surprised because the doctor was a man who observed religious rituals, such as prayers. I told him, 'Well, let's not do it.' I was about to take the boy and go home but his father insisted, 'It is over. We are here now'.

Another mother stated: "Although I did not refuse, it was his father who made the decision."

This is also the case with FGM. Although it is said that FGM is a procedure done by women to women with no male intervention, many women stated that they have to circumcise their daughters to ensure their chastity as girls and marriageability as young women, because men refuse to marry an intact girl. Even some

of them said that a husband may return a bride to her family if she is not circumcised. Thus, men play a role in both FGM and MGM. This role is sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, but it always exists.

#### Medical Justifications as a Gender Power Game

Male and female genital mutilations were introduced to modern medicine in nineteenth century Victorian England, and spread from there to medical schools in the colonies and English speaking countries (Wallerstein, 1980). Medical justifications play a minor role in FGM now, but it still does in MGM. I argue that the justification of MGM by its being a preventive measure against cancer cervix in women is of a specific significance in the use of MGM as a patriarchal game. It is part of the social politics that serve to define each gender as dangerous to the other, and hence help to perpetuate tension between men and women. Patriarchal society teaches men and women to take their guard from the other gender. Thus, each gender considers the other dangerous. Hence, it is easy for women to extend their inherited biases to imagine that the male prepuce is among the masculine dangers. Baby boys are a good medium to achieve this objective because a baby boy is both male and young; hence, he is an appropriate and pliable object to fulfill the gender political objective of this symbolic wound. If males are left intact till adulthood, they are less likely to submit to the belief that their intact bodies are dangerous to women, or allow any doctor to "protect" women from cancer through male circumcision. Empirical evidence shows that the whole preventive argument is false. Intact males mount to 80% of the human males all over the globe, as MGM is practiced by about 20% only of humans. Where MGM is not a cultural tradition, neither women get more cancer cervix nor require their male partners to be circumcised to "protect" themselves from it. Thus, when women present their male children to the surgeon's scalpel to eliminate the assumed "danger" of cancer cervix, they implicitly collaborate in the replication of a tool of gender power politics by establishing the male body as dangerous to females. Now, with the defeat of the false hygienic justifications for male circumcision, its ugly and unfair face is revealed: a blood and flesh sacrifice presented to the patriarchal society.

#### Gender-Based Chauvinism

It is known that FGM is an evidence of male chauvinism because it establishes a submissive female versus an aggressive male sexuality (Abd el Salam, 1998; Toubia, 1993). FGM proponents believe that such carved femininity is more satisfactory to men, and assume that it does not imply a significant loss to women. Similarly, many respondents who declare that they are feminists or pro-women negate any relation

between MGM and male sexual problems. They say that unlike FGM, men do not complain from MGM. They add that even if men have complaints, they have to raise their issues by themselves. Such feminist respondents say that they are ready to stand against any harmful practice for women because women as a social category do not find sufficient social care, but are not ready to do the same for men. This attitude implies gender segregation at the political level because it treats the issue of genital integrity differently on basis of gender. Such feminist respondents added that they are reluctant to raise the issue of male genital integrity because men are freer to express their sexual problems than women. This attitude implies female acquired feeling of helplessness which is dominant in traditional patriarchal society, and which is anti-hypothetical to women's emancipation and empowerment and gender equality. Thus, female chauvinism does not ensure stonger position for women.

Many feminist respondents consider gender issues in general, and the issue of genital mutilation in particular as issues of conflict between men and women in the first place, and not as issues of men's and women's equal rights. Such respondents who expressed their reluctance to raise the issue of MGM justified their attitude by saying that advocacy against FGM will bring a change in the social politics in the interest of women. MGM eradication will not bring such a change. This justification means that such feminists deal with a male child as symbolic of men who control women, hence they do not sympathize with him, which implies negligence of their own children's sufferings.

Feminist respondents stated that they are ready to fight against MGM if men explicitly pronounce that they have sexual problems because of MGM. This attitude implies indirect pressure on men. Men, like women, are besieged by a barrier of silence about genital mutilation. Women kept silent for a long period about FGM. They did not talk except when they were encouraged to do so. I suggest that men equally need public and social encouragement to declare their sufferings. Denying them such support is a function of female chauvinism, which is not analogous to feminism.

#### Control of Sexuality

One of the differences by which the respondents justified that MGM is not to be considered a gender issue is

that MGM is not part of the social politics that control sexual behavior. Some respondents noticed, through their fieldwork, that the majority of people intend to remind females of the pain that goes with circumcision as one of the tools of social control. Whereas males do not have to remember such a traumatic experience because it is not meant to impose such control on them. That is why FGM is delayed to a later age. MGM is not meant to intimidate boys regarding sex or guarantee their chastity, as is the case with females. That is why a girl is not circumcised when she is an infant because this would not teach her virtue, which means virginity. And in their opinion, also, this aspect of circumcision conveys a painful social message to females, as one of the respondents maintained: "When a female is hurt in this place and is conscious of it, she will be afraid; but,

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if this happens when she is an infant, she will not associate this painful experience with any disciplining lesson." The respondents considered that this message does not apply to males, even if they are circumcised between the ages of 7-12, since their circumcision is accompanied with celebration, and they are taught that this procedure is a beautification procedure that prepares them for masculinity, reinforces their sexual potency, and keeps them healthy. This is different from the situation in female circumcision that is followed by restriction of the girl's mobility in the public space, prevention from mixing with the other sex, affirmation of sexual taboos and prohibitions and stressing that circumcision is done to her to preserve the family honor.

Accordingly, some feminist men and women respondents thought that MGM is not so significant as FGM because it does not imply curbing and controlling of male sexuality. Nevertheless, circumcision was used as a social tool to control male sexuality throughout history. MGM proponent doctors were aware that it curbs male sexuality. Moses Maimonides, a Jewish physician who lived in the thirteenth century, recommended male circumcision to weaken men's sexual power and pleasure in order to improve their morals and guarantee their chastity (Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, 2000). Similarly, Victorian British doctors introduced male and female circumcision to the medical practice in the nineteenth century to "prevent" and "treat" masturbation (Wallerstein, 1980). Other respondents expressed implied perception of the element of social control in MGM, and even insisted that such control should persist on the assumption that it is sacred. An outstanding example of this attitude is a respondent



medical doctor who said that circumcision is God's will at the philosophical level, and the father's will at the operational level. This view mixes God with father, and tries to give social control a sacred and philosophical nature. This respondent described circumcision as "tahzeeb," a term that means discipline, trimming and taming of the wild nature. He added that the objective of religion is to realize submission to social customs "inseia' lil 'urf." Of course, taming and submission apply to the weak party, the son by the father. This view identifies the father, who is the lord of the family, with the Lord of heaven, and makes the father the Lord's delegate who implements circumcision/control.

### Genital Mutilations and General Power Politics

#### Genital Mutilations and the Spirit of Capitalism

In the age of capitalist transformation, dominant power politics have defined acceptable sexual behavior and even what should be written or said or not said about sex. Since production is the most important capitalist objective, expression of sexuality was restricted to what helps the achievement of that goal. An acceptable sexual relationship was only that which is between a married couple for the sake of reproduction of labor force. Any other forms of expression of sexuality was socially unacceptable. Both religious and medical institutions did not hesitate to interfere to impose control over sexuality since it was considered a chaotic situation if left without rules to regulate it socially. (Foucault, 1984) When added together - social alienation that is one of the characteristics of capitalist relations of production and the patriarchal biases against women and children - it is not strange that the society practices its control over bodies of individuals in every possible way so as not to allow any diversion from the main capitalist objective, which is production of commodities in factories and children in families (Trask, 1986). This explains the masturbation mania of the nineteenth century in the west that resulted in the medicalization of MGM and FGM.

#### Conformity

The essential reason for the Egyptian intellectuals' insistence on circumcizing their sons is their fear of difference. Significantly enough, there is no standard degree of circumcision to make all circumcised men look similar. The respondents described different degrees of their sons' circumcision. Some children have loose and others have tight cuts. Even some children are left with scars with irregular edges. This is evidence that the only common aspect among circumcised males is that they experienced genital cut. This fact defeats the myth of the necessity of morphological correspondence between the child and other men members of the community, especially his

father. However, MGM ensures that all people similarly submit their children to pain and cut. Thus, I suggest that MGM has a new function: its use as a tool to control any tendency towards rebellion or non-conformity. I perceive conformity to the tradition of MGM as a vestige of tribal social organization, where similarity between the community member is imposed and highly valued. In such mode of "mechanical solidarity", any disobedience, tendency towards individuality, or transgression of the similarity is considered destructive chaos that deserves severe punishment (Durkheim (1893, 1984)). The age factor has a peculiar significance in terms of general and gender power politics. Tolerance of MGM, as a type of age discrimination, socializes people into submission to hurting their own children. Such submission curbs the development of critical thinking, which is a threat to despotic ruling system at the family and state levels, given that male children are particularly valued by the patriarchal family system. In other words, MGM is significant in that it replicates the terms of the patriarchal hierarchy, which requires submission of the lower to the higher rank age and/or gender groups. Thus, MGM has a significance in terms of the politics of social control. The element of conformity exists also in FGM, though for different reasons. Morphological similarity is rarely mentioned as a justificatoin of FGM.

However, conformity to the traditoinal honour/shame code comes to the forefront as regards FGM. It is assumed that FGM helps to guard the virginity of girls and the fidelity of married women; that is why women have to submit to FGM if they wish to be socially accepted.

#### Reproduction of Hierarchical Relations

In addition to its role in gender power politics, genital mutilation of both sexes establishes hierarchical power relationships at different levels of social organization. It encourages conformity to old traditions for no other reason than their antiquity; discourages taking any initiative towards change; and requires repression of any sympathy with individual sufferings if such sympathy challenges a tradition. Thus, continuation of FGM and MGM establishes a model of behavior characterized by absolute submission to the orders of seniors and an inclination to keep the status quo.

A study of 23 local communities that practiced circumcision found that a male member was not circumcised for his own good but for the sake of the leaders of the family or the tribe. These leaders used to force the father to circumcise his son without hesitating. The father's submission to the leaders of the tribe was considered a sign of loyalty to the patriarchal society. The ritual that expressed this loyalty was done by amputat-

ing part of the penis and not the ear for example, because it was the penis that was responsible for reproduction. Hence its relevance to the group's interests, since the departure of a senior male with his sons would weaken the power of the group that in turn would create a political and economic threat to the tribe. Interpretations of the Genesis story of circumcision in sociological terms shows that it represents conflicts within the tribe that increased in number and needed more males to defend it. That is why Jews identified circumcision in the Old Testament as a political agreement between God and Abraham, without giving it any medical or health explanation, as is the case with Jewish doctors and those who were convinced of their opinions today (Paige, 1978).

No matter what the cultural origin of circumcision, humans inflicted it on children as a tradition with the same motive: the predominance of senior males, and their superior social status over females and children. Therefore, circumcision sets the rule that states that it is naturally the powerful who have the upper hand, and make it an established part of social reality. (Montagu, 1991)

The same motive persists until now. The origin of social pressure to circumcise children is evidence of the role of genital mutilation in the reproduction of a hierarchical society. Senior kin and in-laws usually pressurize young parents to circumcise their children.

In my field research, respondents who are parents of male children did not think that they gain any personal benefit by circumcising their sons. They suffered because of their children's sufferings. However, they circumcised them because they were afraid to obey reason and challenge a conservative tradition. Acting like this, these intellectual respondents who used to lecture against FGM on a "rational basis" behaved exactly like grassroots people who circumcise their daughters. Analysis of the respondents' experience with their own sons' circumcision revealed that it is not in the child's best interest. They reported memories of bleeding, stress, pain, urinary tract infection, and behavioral changes after male circumcision, exactly like the women who recall the memories of their own and daughters' ccircumcision. Even the only respondent who could trespass the shock of his circumcision because he got a lot of psychological support and social compensation during and after his ritual circumcision ceremony said that other boys who were circumcised along with him were really shocked in spite of the supporting ceremony. Some of his peers resisted, tried to escape, and expressed verbal and non-verbal protest against circumcision. Nonetheless, when all of these respondents grew into senior men, they circumcised their sons. Thus, senior/junior heirarchy is always preserved and reproduced.

### Genital Mutilatons and Social Order

To put patriarchal society in order, gender lines of demarcation should be clearly defined. Genital mutilation is one way of fulfilling such demarcation, even though on a symbolic level. For example, in some African tribes, circumcision could be explained by its being a symbol of the sexual duality of creation. According to this belief, a human individual is born with both feminine and masculine attributes since femininity is inherent in the male prepuce in the same manner that masculinity exists in the clitoris. Accordingly, circumcision is considered a purification of the male from the female characteristics. The female spirit is considered something that prevents the male from the ability of rational thinking, and so, a non-circumcised male is considered socially inept. Masculinity and femininity are both socially constructed in their relation to each other. A male is considered a man as long as he is able to penetrate a woman. According to the traditoinal belief, he is able to do so only after removal of the feminine part of his body through circumcision.

Moreover, by circumcision, the male loses his individuality and becomes a social being. Circumcision is considered a severing of the unity of the human being when the feminine part of the body is cut off; therefore, the male searches for a reunion that can only take place through marriage. Therefore, it is an essential motive for marriage. Also, the female who has been robbed of the male characteristics by circumcision accepts it when she searches for a husband. Accordingly, this makes the procedure of circumcision a procedure that turns the individual into a social being, seeking continuation through marriage and child birth. (Montagu, 1991). Field observations in Egypt suggest that MGM and FGM still have this function. People report that circumcisoin of both sexes is meant to ensure men's masculinity and women's femininity "tikhalli el ragel ragel wi el sitt sitt". There is even a widespread belief that a non circumcised man will never be able to penetrate a woman in copulation, hence, humanity will vanish if men are not circumcised.

### How to Get Out of this Dilemma?

#### The Significance of the Intactivism Movement to Social Change

Intactivist movement is a worldwide action carried out by persons who advocate the right of bodily integrity for all people, hence, they act against both male and female circumcision, and consider them equally as genital mutilatoin. Many feminists share in this movement. Feminism is different from female chauvinism, since it has an objective of bringing about social change and a more fair society for the weak and vulnerable social groups (Lennon and Whitford, 1994). The feminist point of view sees that

such social change should serve women in the first place, taking their ethnic and class specificity into consideration. However, all social groups that are marginalized and denied their full rights under patriarchy are meant to benefit from social change. Such groups include children of both sexes (Sacks, 1989). Feminism is not for women only, it is there to build new and fairer social politics for both genders, especially children.

The well established feminist notion "The Personal is Political" applies not only to women, but also to all inferior social categories, whose priorities are usually pushed to the end of the agenda within patriarchal power politics.

To end the social bias against women and children, we cannot disregard or marginalize gender issues on the assumption that they are trivial and that the first priority should be given to issues of economic growth in developing societies. This rationale is an over-simplification since it disregards the patriarchal social power politics. Therefore, development cannot be complete without taking gender issues into consideration (Hatem, 1986). Exposure of social traditions in relation to sexuality enhances social change for the benefit of the weak (Foucault, 1984). This analysis applies to children of both sexes as well as women. Therefore, it is not good for women to keep silent when it comes to issues that harm their children with the excuse that it is not one of the priorities in improving women's social situation. When women revise their attitude, they will win the direct personal benefit of protecting their own children from a useless, hazardous, and maybe fatal injury. Second, they will get a general benefit, because their new attitude will prove that the women's rights movement is useful to women, men, and the society as a whole. When women acknowledge that gender issues include men's rights as well, more open-minded men will support women's rights.

Egyptian women in particular should always remember that the first advocates against FGM in Egypt

since the 1920s were male doctors. These pioneers availed their knowledge to the whole society. Knowledge in itself is power, but also the right to attain it is controlled by a network of decision makers that have the power to provide individuals and communities with information or deprive them from it. Thus, it is not appropriate for women to hide any knowledge from the public on the assumption that such knowledge is about male bodily integrity, which is not their priority or concern. Women who do so play the same oppressive role which was long played against them, and which is antihypothetical to their full emancipation.

Thus, women are recommended to combine forces against both FGM and MGM. They should take the initiative to encourage men to break the barrier of silence about MGM, to support them, and show understanding when some of them show resistance or denial. Bringing an end to the silence that surrounded such a taboo issue for thousands of years needs patience and persistent efforts to move MGM from the arena of political and ideological conflict to that of the right of bodily integrity for all as a basic human right. Women's defense of men's right to bodily integrity and their work against MGM will not have a negative impact on their struggle against FGM. On the contrary, work against MGM will defeat the argument that is used by some doctors that they can perform a minor sort of FGM analogous to male circumcision, on the assumption that the latter is a simple "beautification" and non-harmful procedure.

In case of gender issues, cultural carving of the feminine and masculine bodies are two faces of the same coin. Coining new gender power politics needs consistent critical thinking versus sanctification of old beliefs; confrontation of the biases of power holders versus conformity; siding with the weak and voiceless versus fear of the strong; promotion of social change versus fixation of the status quo; and above all, ensuring male and female children's right to bodily integrity as an absolute priority.

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“And then I threw the vase at him and ran away...”  
 Harassment, Honour, Gossip,  
 and the Reputation of Young  
 Women in Jordan<sup>1</sup>

Julia Droeber

Salwa<sup>2</sup>, who studies languages at the university, wanted to earn some extra money during the semester break. A friend had given her the address of an office that was looking for a part-time secretary. Although she first had some doubts, she eventually applied for the job (with the approval of her parents) because she desperately needed the money. The office was conveniently located in a huge office building between her home and the university, so that she could easily go there by bus, and go to the library after work.

After the first days of work, she appeared to be quite pleased telling me that work was “all right”. The only aspect that puzzled her was that the office was extremely small and run by only one man and another secretary. She had never done secretarial work before and was busy getting used to it, but as it did not seem to be very challenging, work soon became rather boring. This, however, did not bother her, as she was more interested in the money she would earn.

We did not meet for a few days, but when I saw her next, something had very obviously perturbed her. The usually very chatty Salwa hardly spoke a word. After having asked her at least three times what was wrong, she finally settled down to tell me her story:

Two days ago in the office, the manager asked me to run the office by myself, as he was apparently not happy with the work the other secretary was doing. I was very confused and did not know what to do. I had never run an office before. I didn't feel comfortable with that thought, especially that I can't go on working during term-time. But I thought, he's the manager, and he knows what he's doing. So I said nothing. Then, this other secretary was dismissed and I found myself alone in the office with the manager. He followed me everywhere and came really close to me. And then he said that if I wanted to go on working for him I should sleep with him. I was shocked, and of course said no, but when I wanted to leave he grabbed my arm. Somehow, I managed to free myself from that grip and got hold of

a china vase that stood on one of the chest of drawers. And then I threw the vase at him and ran away...

Salwa is one of the young women, amongst whom I was doing research in Jordan from 1997 to 1999. Like most of the other women I interviewed and whose life I was largely sharing during those two years, Salwa is educated and comes from a middle-class background. By the time she told me about this experience, we had become close friends and had started sharing intimate details of our lives. Also, by that time, I had heard and read a lot about the notorious “crimes of honour”, where more than twenty women yearly are murdered for allegedly sully their families' “honour”. For some time I had already been thinking about possible links between these killings, the notion of “honour”, sexual harassment of young women on a daily basis, and the destructive power of gossip.

But before I enter this debate, let me relate the rest of Salwa's story. After the incident, she went straight back home and told her parents about it, who, instead of consoling and supporting her – as I would have expected – scolded her for her behaviour. Like her, they were shocked by what had happened. Yet, her parents accused her of being, at least in part, responsible for what had happened. Of course, they forbid her from working, in this office, or anywhere else until she completed her studies. Salwa herself grappled with the consequences of this incident for months to come – she lost weight, complained about nightmares, headaches, and nausea, and

felt considerably less self-confident, and even talked of suicide. Maybe more than the incident itself, it was her parents' allegations and distrust that gave her such a hard time. She continued to pose a series of questions: “Why is it me to whom this thing happened? Where did I go wrong? Am I really the one to blame? What could I have done differently? How could God let this happen? Why did He want to punish me?”

At that time, I could not offer her an answer, but I did try to console her and tell her not to take these events too personally. Thinking about it now, I seem to be able to see some kind of link between this incident and other forms of harassment of young women in Jordan: the discourse about “honour”, the fear of tarring one's reputation, and the detrimental power of gossip. Of course, these problems are multifaceted and complex and need to be considered at various levels: violence against and the murder of women, (sexual) harassment of women in Jordan at the workplace, the home, and in public places, the rhetoric about such phenomena, and gossip as a force that can destroy reputations and entire lives.

So-called “honour-killings” in Jordan and elsewhere are an atrocious, albeit a much debated phenomenon that attracts much attention. Since much has already been written about them<sup>3</sup>, even in this very journal<sup>4</sup>, I will not reiterate the facts and fiction about those heinous crimes here. Suffice it to say that the majority of Jordanians – thanks to prolific reporting internally and by an international community – are well aware of such incidents and speculate about their reasons and consequences. What shall be of interest here, is the apparent conviction of the murderers that the women they kill (usually relatives) have, in one way or another, shown “immodest” behaviour towards men – “immodesty” being interpreted as anything from committing adultery to talking to a male non-relative, or the suspicion thereof. Even though the victims do not generally share the same class background, these crimes appear to be less prevalent in the middle and upper classes of Jordanian society and mainly concern young, unmarried women.<sup>5</sup>

There are various ways of looking at these killings. There is that of violence against women in general, which is likewise subject to an increasing public debate in Jordan as the number and intensity of incidents seems to be growing.<sup>6</sup> I have witnessed various cases, in which young women (most of them were not married) have been the victims of beatings by their fathers and brothers, sometimes their husbands. Some have interpreted such “honour killings” in economic terms,<sup>7</sup> but can also be viewed against the backdrop of the notion of “honour” that is prevalent in Jordanian society. This highly complex construct has kept social scientists busy for decades. It has been claimed that

notions of “honour” were (and are) a crucial force in Mediterranean societies, one upon which lives depend, and one that is placed squarely on the shoulders of mainly women, who through their (sexual) behaviour can destroy the “honour” of their male relatives and, thus, their families.<sup>8</sup> The abstractness of these ideas and the distance from everyday life experiences especially in the cases of women have been criticised by anthropologists, who have shown that notions of “shame” are much more relevant to daily lives of women (and men) and that they are a lot more flexible than previous theorising about fixed and abstract ideas of “honour” might suggest.<sup>9</sup> In everyday discourse, they argue, the Arabic ‘aib (shame) is considerably more prevalent than sharaf (honour), and the “code of honour”, if it exists, changes over time and space, just as its translations into practice differ from one place to another.

Here, I would like to have a closer look at the junction of ideas of “shame”, harassment of women in various places, and the discourse about such incidents. I hope to show that these different strands meet, where power relationships and hierarchies in a patriarchal social system are negotiated. In order to do so, let me first say a few words about some of the incidents of harassment of women in Jordan that I came across while I was staying there. I have already mentioned Salwa's experiences at work. Her case was the only “serious” incident in a work place that I have heard of during my stay in Jordan, yet this does not mean that they do not occur more frequently – it is more likely that my choice of target group (young women, often students) did not bring me into contact with more such cases. In contrast to domestic violence and “crimes of honour”, harassment in the work place and in public places is generally not perpetrated by family members, but by non-relatives. Most of the young women I interviewed have personally experienced harassment in public, but since they are intimidated by the admonitions concerning their reputation, they often do not dare to publicise these incidents, let alone confront the perpetrators. This caution with regard to voicing protest and talking about it might be due to the widespread notion that it is generally women who are to blame for those incidents as they are said to provoke men in one way or another, which, again, triggers an assault, just as they are seen as the responsible party in a situation that causes an “honour killing”.

Mariam, for instance, used to be harassed by a man every time she walked through a certain street on her way home from university. The young woman told her parents about it. Instead of comforting and supporting her, her father started shouting at her, telling her that it was basically her fault: “It's probably the way you dress that instigates such behaviour”, he told his daughter.

Mariam later told me that “it doesn’t really matter what you wear, or if you’re walking alone or with a group of friends. Nothing will stop them harassing you!”. She felt that Amman’s streets have become something of a hazardous territory for women, and that “harassment of women in public places is becoming something very common, something that is not condemned by most people”. Just as the perpetrators in “crimes of honour” have to serve only minimal prison sentences, men’s misbehaviour, i.e. assaults and harassment of women in public, is generally tolerated by many people. In both cases, aggressors are usually proud of what they do, and the victims feel guilty thinking they are the ones that have instigated such harassment.

Examples abound. Nisreen was sitting next to her brother on a bus. Suddenly she started feeling someone pinching her from behind. The young woman was puzzled about what to do. She could not confront the man since her brother was sitting next to her (and would have been forced to confront him) and she did not want to tell her brother what was happening in order not to cause an uproar. She did not say anything for a while but kept moving closer to her brother hoping that the man behind would stop. He did not, and her brother began suspecting that something was going on. He asked Nisreen if anything was wrong, but she kept saying no. Eventually, the young woman’s brother looked behind him and gave the rude man a threatening stare. The rest of the journey home went peacefully.

But this is not the only side of the coin. More young women are becoming aware that what happens to them does not have to be endured in silence. They often get the advice to confront the harassers audibly, and generally the people around them come to their defence. Basima told me how she was walking through downtown Amman with her ten-year-old cousin. Suddenly, a young man approached them and threw some dirty words at the young woman. Basima was furious and embarrassed, but at the same time, thought that she ought to do something about such rude behaviour. She stopped the man and confronted him with what he had just said. People who started crowding up to see what was happening began shouting at the young man wondering if he would like it if someone said the same thing to one of his sisters or his mother. The aggressor was speechless and turned away, embarrassed.

I observed another young woman riding on a minibus, which was half-empty. She sat alone, a man sitting behind her. Suddenly she turned around and shouted that he should never do that again, that he should never ever dare to touch her, followed by a tirade of curses and a final “Got me!?” Embarrassed he tried to make excuses, explaining that he only wanted to push the

curtain aside, but by then the other passengers had turned around with looks clearly showing their dismay. The young woman turned back again and could terminate her journey in peace. The perpetrator, however, had lost “face” in this situation.

I have experienced similar situations several times myself, even though this would fall into a slightly different category, as I was usually recognised as “Western”<sup>10</sup>, and therefore it was assumed that other norms and values apply to me. On a Wednesday afternoon, on my way back home from university, I was stopped by a flasher, whom I decided to ignore. He, however, grabbed my arm, and, when I started screaming, threw me to the ground and tried to strangle me. Somehow I managed to struggle myself free, got up, and ran away. While running I noticed a man not far from where it had happened, who must have heard my screaming, but did not interfere. When I told an acquaintance, and elderly Jordanian, about it, he was outraged, and immediately went to the next police station, and reported the incident. In his and many other people’s view, this was a clear transgression of several limits – the offender not only transgressed Jordanian law, he also committed a gross offence against societal notions of behaviour in public, of “honourable” masculine behaviour, of conduct vis-à-vis women, and of the treatment of foreigners.

A similar incident (several years earlier in Syria) when one of a group of adolescents lifted the skirt of my friend who was climbing some stairs in front of him, led to comparable reactions. Upon hearing of the incident, our host pursued the offenders and informed the police. As we had to bear witness in the police station, these young men were violently punished for exactly the reasons mentioned above – transgression of Syrian law, of the code of public conduct with regard to other persons in general, and women and foreigners in particular – and the police officers were on our side.

As I have mentioned earlier, these cases differ from those in which Jordanian women are the victims of harassment, and might more appropriately be seen in terms of an “orientalism in reverse”<sup>11</sup> or a neo-colonial context<sup>12</sup>. Yet, they show that women of all sorts of backgrounds are being harassed in public spaces and that these incidents are rather common. Another Jordanian friend of mine, wearing shar’iy dress, i.e. scarf and overcoat, reported how a man followed her, whistling and making comments, on her way from the bus stop to her home.

As such incidents become woven into a fabric of stories about the dangers for young women looming in public places, in the dark, or walking alone; they help to create a feeling of guilt among young women, as they are often portrayed, as in the case of Salwa or

Mariam, as having provoked men’s harassment. Yet, there are also stories about women’s protest against such shameful behaviour, and the refusal to take on responsibility for what happened. Just as the debate about domestic violence and “honour killings” is gaining momentum, it is becoming more customary to “speak up” in a situation of harassment. Even though this form of harassment is presumably a fairly recent phenomenon – in the past, women were less “visible” in urban public spaces –, it can be resolved according to the same “code of honour” that many perpetrators of harassment and violence claim for themselves. The feeling of public shame the bystanders experience if they do not scold the harasser can help young women not to “fall from grace”, or to be “shamed”.

As I have mentioned earlier, being the victim of harassment can mean considerable shame for young women, if they are considered at least in part guilty of provoking the offender. And according to the discourse and rhetoric of harassment, crimes, honour, and reputation, “shame” can lead to serious consequences for young women – anything from not finding a marriage partner, to death.<sup>13</sup> “Shame” is therefore closely related to the victim’s reputation, and even more directly to gossip (Arab. kalam al-nas) which is usually directed towards a particular individual, whose good reputation is then at stake. The narrative about harassment helps to enforce proper, not-shameful, behaviour among young women, as they are made aware of the potential consequences. Gossip can fulfill a similar warning function (for those, who are not directly involved), yet it has considerable destructive power for those concerned.

Even though, as I have mentioned earlier, stories about “crimes of honour” are quite experience-distant for the young women I met, and frequently evoke disgust among the listeners, they constitute part of a harassment-discourse which is upheld by nearly everyone, but particularly young women themselves and older women. I cannot count the instances when I was warned or heard other young women warn each other, or mothers admonishing their daughters about what might happen if they do not stick to certain rules. These rules included much more than mere security concerns, as Jordan remains, compared to many other countries, a fairly safe place. There were references to “attempted rapes” on a university campus that is locked at night and heavily guarded, i.e. to be wary of the dangers of walking alone, regardless where, and to go straight back home after work, and never be out after sunset.

While I was writing this paper, I read an article by Ann Stoler (2001), who, in a colonial Asian context, shows that controlling women in a patriarchal society constitutes a main element of maintaining the status quo. According to her, an outside threat to the colonial

social order in Southeast Asia, such as changing migration patterns, changing political or economic circumstances, or uprisings, resulted not only in increased allegations of rape and assault of “white” women by “native” men and their subsequent imprisonment and punishment, but also in stricter control and policing of these “white” women by the colonial authorities. The point here as well as in the case of the significance of the harassment-discourse for young middle-class Jordanian women is that it is not necessarily only actual incidents of harassment and violence that have an impact on their lives, but also, and maybe even more so, the body of narratives about them. They seem to be used to restore or re-create a social order that privileges men and puts young women into their “right” place. Whether this happens in response to an outside threat or perceived danger to the status quo remains debatable. It has been argued by Jordanians and Europeans alike that an increasingly felt influence of “Western” political, financial, military, social, and economic power is perceived as a threat to the social order and to “authentic” norms and values. This would subsequently lead to a return “to the roots”, an augmented conservatism, and stricter control over women (especially the young), who are often thought to be the bearers of “tradition”.

I do not have sufficient proof for this line of reasoning, since I have not spoken to men who harass or become violent against women. To me, it seems to be conceivable though. If arguments about “traditional, authentic values” receive renewed currency, then it might also be imagined that murders for whatever reason become sanctioned if they are claimed to be committed in the name of “honour”, and that this can lend larger self-esteem to the perpetrators. Another view is that harassment of young women in public spaces is mainly an issue of social class and an outcome of rural-urban migration – men from rural areas, who have only recently moved to the cities see, in contrast to the village environment they came from, large numbers of women in the streets and feel “they are theirs, they just have to pick them like fruit from a tree”.<sup>14</sup>

Speculation aside, the young women I met in Jordan are afraid of violence and fear harassment. Nearly all of them say they dread violence in general. Half of them are terrified by violence in the family, while the other half fear to become victims of theft and treachery. Not surprisingly, they also complain about depression, nervousness, tension and strains, and many have lost hope concerning the future. Half of the women suffer from frequent headaches, while the other half feel anxious and have constant worries.

By emphasising the significance of the rhetoric of harassment (as opposed to actual incidents), I do not

intend to minimise the problem – harassment in general and sexual harassment in particular are serious predicaments in the lives of young women in Jordan (as they are elsewhere on this planet). Likewise, it is not my aim to suggest that these young women, by actively participating in and maintaining this body of narratives, are themselves to blame for being victimised. The fact that they increasingly “speak up” and protest against harassment shows that they refuse to be viewed as “victims” in the first place. Perhaps the reluctance to talk about such incidents, as in Salwa’s case, is one strategy not to contribute to this rhetoric of harassment and violence against women, albeit a self-detrimental one. It cannot be denied, however, that this fabric of stories that is constantly re-woven as well as actual incidents of

adult harassment help to bolster patriarchal hierarchies in society.

One way of coping with such incidents and the rhetoric about them would be for young women not to go out into public spaces and, therefore, to subject themselves to familial (mainly male) control within the household. That this is not a viable option is obvious. Another way of tackling such incidents, a strategy that seems to be increasingly adopted by many young women, is to stigmatise such behaviour of men and to include it into the code of “honour” or rather that of “shame”. If male harassment is considered “shameful” and by wider sections of the society, then this could be a solution to the problem. Continued public debate about such issues seems to be a first step in this direction.

### End Notes

1. A much shorter version of this paper was published in ISIM Newsletter, February 2001.
2. I am using pseudonyms throughout this paper in order to protect the women I have interviewed.
3. UNICEF, (1997). “The Situation of Jordanian Children and Women - A Rights-Based Analysis”. Amman. Middle East, (1999) no.295, November, p.45ff.
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- News reports in *The Jordan Times*, *The Star*, *Al-‘Arab al-Yawm*
- See also: [www.amanjordan.org](http://www.amanjordan.org), the website of the Arab Centre for Resources and Information on Violence against Women (al-markaz al-‘arabiy lil-masadir wal-ma’lumata hawla al-‘unf didd al-mar’a)
4. Hussein, Rana, (2001/2), “Imprisonment to Protect Women Against ‘Crimes of Honor’: A Dual Violation of Civil Rights”, *Al-Raida*, vol. XIX, issue 95-96, Fall/Winter, pp.40/1.
5. UNICEF (1997); Kawar, Mary (1997), “Gender, Employment and the Life Course: The Case of Working Daughters in Amman, Jordan”. Unpublished PhD-thesis, London, p.180.
6. According to the study of UNICEF (1997:79), in the period between 1989 and 1990, 4694 cases of domestic violence against women were officially reported, increasing to 4962 cases in 1991-1992; between 1990 and 1995, an average of 34 rapes per year had been reported as well as 413 cases of sexual assault, equalling 11% of the entire crime rate in Jordan. This increase denotes, of course, a growing number of reports, and says little about the actual number of inci-

- dents – these cases only present a fraction of the actual number of mistreatments, since women tend to go to the police or a doctor only as a last resort in the worst of cases.
7. A Jordanian (male) friend of mine claimed that women are in fact an economic burden for many families, which is the main reason why they are killed.
8. Peristiany, John George (ed.) (1965), *Honour and Shame*. London: Weidenfeld&Nicolson; Peristiany, John George and Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers (eds.) (1992) *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Pitt-Rivers, Julian Alfred (1971) *The People of the Sierra*. London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Stewart, Frank Henderson (1994), *Honor*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
9. Wikan, Unni (1984), ‘Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair’. *Man*, vol.19, no.4, pp. 635-652.; Reichenbach, Anke (2001), *Mit Suesser Zunge. Höflichkeit und Nachbarschaft im Damaszener Christenviertel B\_b T\_m\_*. Gehen: Escher Verlag.
10. As a German, having green eyes, fair skin, and dark blonde hair, I represented a “typically Western” woman, despite adapted dress code; only when I started speaking in Arabic, people became confused and wondered if I was Circassian or Lebanese.
11. Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm (2000), “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse”, in: A. L. Macfie (ed.) *Orientalism: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 217-238.
12. For a lucid analysis of the problem of (alleged) harassment of women of colonisers by male colonised see Stoler, Ann Laura, (1991), “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia”, in: Di Leonardo, Micaela (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge. Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, pp.51-101.
13. The practical consequences of “shameful” behaviour often do not correspond with the discursive threats, and are treated with a lot more pragmatism than is theoretically demanded; see also Wikan (1984), Stewart (1994).
14. Personal conversation with Farideh Heyat.

# Body Image and Breast Cancer

Evelyn Accad

Granted, mutilations against women do not take place solely within the context of this disease, but cancer treatment provides the surgeon with all the necessary alibis. Misogyny is rampant in this field, where there are practically no female cancer specialists of note. How long must we wait before there is a commission of enquiry into female mutilations, and not only the excision of young girls, that poster child of cultural difference, but an enquiry into the whole range of mutilations inflicted upon females, excision in the name of custom, mastectomy in the name of cancer, and on-the-off-chance hysterectomies! Jeanne Hyrard, *Le Cercan* (p. 168)

During my ordeal with breast cancer and its mutilating treatments, the feminist philosopher/writer Françoise Collin encouraged me to carry my analysis further, talk about my relationship to my body, how the mastectomy made me feel. She told me that women were divided between those who loved their bodies and those who negated them, and that I was in between. Before, I felt at home in my body, I felt mutilated, and alienated. Not feeling good about one's body led to sexual problems. Françoise told me I had to analyze all this. It would help other women understand certain things about their bodies and their relationship to it through illness or mutilation. It would help them move forward. Dear Françoise helped me think and carry my thoughts and analysis many steps further.

During the disease and its treatments, my thoughts

went in all directions. Some metaphors described cancer as a struggle, a war. I did not like these images of violence, yet I felt my body was being invaded by foreign elements, cells dividing rapidly, capable of eating all my other cells, thus killing me. It was a frightening thought.

Father died and was buried the day I started to lose all my hair. I felt it was no coincidence that I was losing all of my hair that day. I was mourning my father's death. I was grieving over the loss of part of a past I cherished.

I was in the shower at the Physical Education Building, after swimming with my little flower Zahra, and chunks of my hair started falling out. It was frightening. I remembered when I started reading Dr. Love's book on breast cancer, I could not read about the effects of chemotherapy. It terrorized me. I did not know I would have to go through it! I pulled softly on my hair and it stayed in my hands. Bunches and bundles of hair were falling all over the place and I could see Little Flower looking at all the mess without budging so as not to alarm me. Going out of the Center, I tried to hide my skull and my massacred hair that I had always been very proud of in my life until then.

A few days later, Zahra came to help me shave my head. My anxiety left me with the last pieces of hair being shaved off my scalp. I felt light, free, with noth-

ing on my head. Petite Fleur said I had the head of a baby. It's true; it felt strange to the touch, like infants' heads. It was soft, bizarre in a way hard to describe, a strange sensation, it undulated.

**Bettina:** The image of a baby's head is very beautiful. It suggests that life is being offered to you again. It is like a rebirth.

My body started reacting to all the drugs I was taking. My breast was stinging and hurting. The tumor continued to react and got smaller. I learnt some visualization techniques to help it shrink, and hopefully disappear. My wonderful Samira taught me some, and my friend Cindy sent me some ideas and tapes. One of my favorites was where I imagined I was in a light mauve balloon, I felt secure in that place, surrounded with light and quiet. I breathed in deeply the sense of harmony the color and silence provided me with, and breathed out all the toxins I still carried within me. I did that until I felt my body rejecting all the poisons. I got out of the balloon and became a bird sitting on the branch of the tree I could see from the couch where I was lying. I felt free and ready to fly above the clouds. Did these techniques really work or were they just wishful thinking? At any rate, they helped me relax and gave me the illusion that my will could have a certain effect on my body, thereby having control over my disease.

With chemotherapy, my body started changing and I had no control over it. I was blowing up, my stomach was getting big and I lost almost all of my pubic hair, and all of my hair. Even my eyelashes were beginning to fall out. I felt different, and I didn't like what I saw. So I used all kinds of subterfuge to look pretty, like wigs, scarves, make-up, different clothes. And many people thought I was in great shape. If only they could see what was under it all and how I felt! But it helped me to have people compliment me on my "good looks," because I found it hard to deal with the aggression my body was suffering, its breaking down, and how terrible I thought I actually looked.

I had thought that my breast could be saved thanks to the chemotherapy which was supposed to make the tumor shrink to a sizeable dimension to only do a lumpectomy. So when I went in the operating room, I did not know if I would wake up with my two breasts. Later I learned that my surgeon, Dr Koty had tried to do a lumpectomy. But when he sent the tumor to the lab and they told him there were too many positive tissues around it, it was time to make the decision. He took into consideration that he had already removed a quarter of my breast anyway, closed the incision and performed the mastectomy. From then on, I belonged to all my sisters who had been breast-mutilated.

Amazons crossing Amazonia, one breast cut off, the other flowing freely in the wind.

My breast offered in sacrifice to the gods of modern civilization, Dr. Koty trying in vain to save it. Unsuccessful! Failed operation! Admirable surgeon doing his best, willing to listen and to talk, trying to give answers, admitting when he did not know! But seen from my end of the scalpel, he was no more than a particularly expert butcher, or one of these high priests who used to sacrifice their victims according to certain rites.

Then came the radiation treatment. What was hard with it was the relentlessness of it, every day. I could never stop thinking about it. It was always in my mind no matter what I did. Everyday, I had to go under those machines, one of which made a grilling noise as if it were burning my skin. One day, I cried my eyes out. I did not even know why, and to see my mutilated breast made me cry even harder.

While I was receiving the treatment, I thought of the male technicians looking at my chest, not even androgynous since I did not have a nipple, a chest mutilated by civilization. And I thought: "Here is a chest excised of its sexuality, a chest whose element of desire has been removed." I felt it was very difficult to be so hyper-aware of all this. I yearned for some release, not to dwell on it all the time, to be more trusting of doctors and medicine.

When I was under the first machine, I saw these two eyes looking at me, two red eyes in the middle of a cross, lights that stroke lightning bolts into my mutilated body. Before, I used to be proud of my body, now I saw it mutilated, stitched up, mended. In the other room, the machine was making grilling noises, the electrons penetrated my body, grilled my skin, made my teeth grind.

I hated the Polaroid pictures that the radiation technicians took of me and put in my records. They looked like concentration camp pictures. I looked like a deportee, a number in many concentration cases. Holocaust analogies kept popping up. I had huge scars that appeared disproportionate. I was fed up with the treatment.

I looked at my chest. On the right side, I still had a soft, tender breast, on the other, my skin was red and burnt. I was angry! I should not have taken the estrogens, the hormones that inflamed and activated whatever good and bad cells lied dormant in my body.

Fortunately, I had some wonderful friends surrounding me with their love and care. One of them, a photogra-

pher, Eva, from Sweden, came to visit me. We spent some wonderful moments together. She took amazingly sensitive and powerful pictures of my mutilated chest, of my wound, of the scar that was healing, of the markings of radiation, of my whole self as it expressed the Calvary I was going through. It was extremely therapeutic to have her photograph me, share with her the statement I was trying to make through my wounded body, my bleeding soul, my fears over this body I did not recognize, and my desire to have the world know about it, about what this civilization did to people, to women in particular. It was a way to control my anxieties and fears, to say: "Look at me. I am here. This is what you did to me, how your poisoned civilization poisoned my breast, invaded my whole body with its mad cells." I thought of all these women: Eva's aunt, the dean of her university... so many of them with disabled arms because of breast cancer. It was awful, the way their arms swelled, how Eva's aunt had lost the use of hers. She had to use her other arm to move it around, lift it, carry it, change its position. I had never heard of this phenomenon before. Why were women so quiet about their suffering? I was discovering a whole world I'd never known before, a world of pain and silent suffering, a world of tears well hidden, a disease still killing one fourth of its victims, unchanged statistics in spite of all the claims of progress in that domain.

Eva's pictures helped me overcome the imbalance and anxieties I had over my body. Through them I was able to say: "I am here, mutilated, without hair, with a big scar, with markings all around the scar, yet I am beautiful, I am not afraid to look in the eye of the camera and express what I feel!"

But some people found it difficult to look at these pictures. It saddened me that Rose could not bear to look at them. I told her to see such pictures, could be useful for her art (I was thinking of Eva who took them and the artistic statement she was making). And it hurt me that some people told me they could not sleep after seeing them and that I should not show them because they were disturbing. Why this hiding from life's painful realities? Was I like that before I got ill? Did I avoid looking at suffering? I didn't think so, but it's true that looking at suffering took on a different meaning for me then.

[Thinking more about it later, I remembered that actually, I had refused to look at Resa's reconstructed breasts when she had offered to show them to me in Paris twelve years before, at the hospital where she was recuperating after the operation. It is strange how one changed with time and life's experiences and how easily one forgot one's reactions. This is why it was good to be keeping a journal and write down what was happening every day, as much as possible.]

Jane: People find these pictures disturbing because we are raised to look at sexy pictures of perfect breasts on perfect bodies, or artists' paintings and sculptures of an ideal body. We're therefore uneasy when looking at a photograph of "ugly" but perfectly healthy bodies, let alone a photograph of an unhealthy or mutilated body. Our society has a low tolerance of any representation of imperfection. (My mother had her teeth "fixed" not because there was anything wrong with them, but because they did not look good in our family photos!!) This is why Diane Arbus's photos are so startling. She often photographs so-called freaks of nature, the insane, the very marginal.

One of Nadia Tuéni's poems (that she translated herself for the *Chicago Tribune* of July 15th, 1982. Nadia died in 1983) also helped me come to terms with my mutilated self. The poem is taken from July of my Remembrance, a collection of poems assembled in 1991 as a "souvenir album, Nadia's gift to her 'house of the zodiac': born Cancer, she offered, for reasons not unknown, her last poem to July." (editors' note, p. 4):

A body whole, unscathed,  
is beauty to behold.  
Beyond the final gasp  
my life goes on, resisting  
like a sun many times dead.  
So open wide the window;  
let in the sounds of night.  
They shall be my bier,  
they shall be my shroud.  
On Lebanon draw down the shade.  
Let just the memory remain  
which, mingling with the air,  
brings back my short-lived prime.  
Let the mountain on me spread  
its gravel, wind and thyme.  
A name I shall become, imprinted on the shore,  
and for you, sometimes, that butterfly of night  
whose soared wings crackle from the scorch of light.  
(p. 31)

I found it difficult to live with my mutilated body. When I wore a prosthesis, it hurt because it was heavy; it rubbed and scratched my skin, and when I didn't wear it, my clothes all shifted on that side. My body was completely imbalanced. I thought about my body, of how it was before. I used to like the way it looked. I lived with two breasts for more than 35 years, now one side of my chest was breastless like in my childhood, but nippleless also. To learn to live with such a drastic change was extremely difficult. Even when I told myself that worse things could happen, I still could not adjust. I saw my body as if it were masculine on one side because lacking a breast (not even masculine since

there is no nipple and there is a scar in place of a breast) and on the other, my breast which reminded me of the one I was missing—android body? There was also my hair: it was growing back frizzy, woolly. I did not like the head I had.

At times, I felt old. How could the relationship one had with one's body change in less than a year? Things really did not progress slowly or subtly where hormones were involved. I cried over lost time, even though I had already achieved quite a bit in my life. Why was I so traumatized?

On a trip going to Beirut, I watched a fashion show on the television screen of the plane. I felt I would have liked to see the catwalks full of models in ultrachic clothes but with only one breast, in defiance of this civilization which gave me this horrible disease! I was sure it did! In defiance of accepted normal fashion. I had always been a rebel and I recognized those who were like me. I believed in rebellion. I thought it was healthy. It helped one grow, mature, create, not follow blindly, like sheep.

Was my breast acting out? Would the other act out, too? Why did breasts react to the environment like this? Was it that extra sensitive space that pollution stirred? Why didn't all breasts react to it? Why only one in seven? Was it like everything else in human nature, some more sensitive than others? Was it good to be so sensitive when it could lead to death? Could one be sensitive, creative, yet not be threatened with madness and death?

We were approaching Beirut. Soon we would land. Night was falling over Beirut. Beirut, magic city. Beirut, sensitive city, close to folly and death so many times. Beirut eaten up by a cancer, a devouring war over which it triumphed. Beirut, city of my childhood and adolescence. I missed Father, Father who would not be there to greet me with that broad smile of his. Father who tormented me during my childhood and adolescence only to apologize later and tell me I was an overly-sensitive child, he should not have been as strict with me as he had been. I cried over the loss of Father and the loss of my youth.

In Beirut, the hairdresser who came to do Mother's hair told me he was used to seeing hair that turned out like mine due to cancer treatments. It was radiation, particularly, that made it curly in this strange, electric way. In Arabic he told me that kahraba (electricity) brought kahraba. I had not believed it when people had told me hair reacted differently to these treatments, hair that used to be curly became straight and straight hair turned curly. I thought they were old wives tales. And I could tell people thought I was

making it up when I told them my hair was not curly like that before. In fact, I was having a hard time accepting my head because my hair was in an in-between state that I didn't really like, and its woolly texture disturbed me.

[Jane and others loved my hair this way, especially as it was in Tunis the summer of '95; Jane said that I looked angelic! But I had a hard time with it. Why was it more important how one felt about one's look instead of what people said?].

The Beirut hairdresser told me there were two kinds of cancer: the feminine and the masculine, the feminine was much more virulent than the masculine. It was very aggressive, a real killer. I pondered over his remark: gender differences applied to illness. I had always been interested in gender differences. It was the subject of one of my books. In it I studied how gender differences were closely linked to war. Sexuality and war were interconnected. This popular image of cancer reinforced my analysis in showing that the fear men had of women was manifested even in their portrayal of disease. The female brand of a disease (was there any such thing scientifically?) was much more dangerous than the male one? It killed faster. Where did the idea come from? Was it because of the rapid, mad division of cells? Why would that be more female than male? I wonder if I would find other notions like that, popular sayings, proverbs, folktales and what they would teach me about the disease.

Some of the books I read, the lectures I attended, the interviews I conducted, the friends who shared experiences with me, or sent me letters and words of encouragement, helped me come to terms with some of the questions I had in relation to body image and cancer.

I read many books on cancer, one of which was Andrea Lorde's *Cancer Journal*. In it she says that women who have had mastectomies ought to refuse to have reconstruction because if all the women who had been subjected to this mutilation were to march on Capitol Hill, bare-breasted, asking for radical changes in the way the environment is being poisoned, and more money for research on cancer, there would be more awareness and changes taking place. I felt she was so right! Her description of the nurse from Reach to Recovery who came to her hospital room after her mastectomy to show her how to hide her missing breast was incredible. She described how these women were trained to be upbeat and come in with clothes that emphasized their breast/prosthesis, hiding the whole tragedy under a normalization of the disease. If you appeared normal, you were normal, everything was OK! I liked

her political awareness of the disease and her raising the issues to that level. I felt we had to work on consciousness raising so that society and this decaying world could be transformed.

One day, I went with Ruth to Françoise Collin's seminar. Orlan was presenting a show taped on a video, and telling us about the auto-transformation (she did not want us to call it mutilation) of her own body. The title of her conference was: "I gave my body to art." Some people came for a few minutes and then left. They could not bear to watch a face being cut with knives, scissors, blood being wiped away. I also found it difficult to watch but her analysis, the discourse which accompanied the cutting and fixing of various parts of her body by doctors who had agreed to operate on her, allowed a distancing and a reflection concerning identity and the body (a bit like what I experienced with my mastectomy and which I was able to express during the discussion). Traditional norms of the body's beauty, what art is, or should be, or has become now, the capacity to transform one's body, to sublimate it, were also discussed.

To make it clearer to my readers, Orlan is a woman who made a name for herself by asking willing doctors to perform operations on her, not necessarily esthetically pleasing, like adding little lumps on her forehead above the eyebrows. She asked for the least possible anesthesia in order to stay alert during the operation (she had several operations, transformations of her body, especially her face.) She had people film the whole ordeal, while talking herself through it all. She then would comment on the whole performance, why she did it, why and how she gave her body to art, how it allowed her to express another form of art!

But some of my friends did not like Orlan's show. They found it to be gratuitously exhibitionistic. In their view, she was forcing brutal images down our throats, being violent with us and enjoying it, getting pleasure out of it. It was her own personal "trip" by which she hoped to immortalize herself and go down in History.

One of my friends and colleague, Caryl, who invited to give a talk at her University in the South, told me the story of one of her friends who recently had had a mastectomy of both breasts. She had immediate reconstruction and asked for her nipples to be sculpted into the shape of hearts. She had a celebration inviting all her friends to look at her new breasts with hearts. The story made me laugh.

I needed to hear such stories instead of having people start crying when they saw me, or feel sorry for me,

or act as if I had been hit by a plague or a curse to be warded off. I absolutely had to see and hear women like Caryl, or like her friends, who struggled for their lives and for the lives of others, for different values, more light and more justice, in this world. As for Caryl, she worked to revive the memory of forgotten women, the memory of the oppressed, women who were suffering. She described and analyzed it in the literature she taught, in her choice of authors she brought out of oblivion, and in her writings where poetry and commitment interweaved. Caryl believed that anger was necessary sometimes; it helped one take charge of one's life.

The novel, *The Multiple Child* by Andrée Chedid had special significance for me in that it dealt with the literal scars of war as it affected the body, and with attempts at covering up such scarring through the use of artificial limbs. Omar-Jo is the multiple child, born of an Egyptian Muslim father and a Lebanese Christian mother. The child had lost an arm during the Lebanese civil war, but he wore his amputation, his bruised stump, with pride. Once in Paris where he had sought refuge, he was offered a selection of artificial limbs to replace the missing arm and aid him in becoming "able" once again, but Omar-Jo turned them down:

With all his body, with all his being, Omar-Jo had summarily rejected the apparatus, the artificial limb that would have been joined to his mutilated but still living flesh. The child had gotten used to his stump little by little. Even the sutures, dissolved now in the closed wound, were part of it. He would forget the member momentarily, so that he could continue to exist and to function better. Yet, at the same time, it must always live in him as the representation of an amputation, of a permanent cry. You couldn't trade that arm for another nor betray its image. Its absence was a reminder of all absences, of all deaths, of all sorrows. (217-18)

Andrée Chedid expresses here what I felt about having my breast amputated, the questions I was asking regarding reconstruction and implants, and the relation I had with my mutilated country.

One day, I went shopping. I saw lots of bras with little pockets to fill underneath the breasts; it lifted and pushed the breasts up. They were called WonderBras (or something to that effect). It was fashionable at the time, it seemed, to show round breasts overflowing the bras. I noticed there were no bras with pockets for prostheses. No consciousness for the disease hitting a tenth of the population! I looked at these bras I could no longer wear, and "wondered", myself!



**Jane:** *If you have ever watched the Academy Award ceremony for distributing the Oscars every year, it seems to be a contest to see how much breast the actress can get to bulge out her wonderbra without the whole thing spilling over the edge. It's a real engineering feat! A "wonder"! My mother always laughs at the award ceremony of the Golden Globe Awards. She says the only globes the viewer sees are the ones bulging out of the women's dresses.* It is also interesting to note that many of those breasts are in fact implants to make the woman look bustier than nature had made her. I have two friends from my youth who had implants placed in their breasts, after they were already married! Something for their husbands to play with? Something to make them "look sexy" at work or on the street? (As if America had a "street" anymore!!) It's a true mystery to me why anyone would run the risk of implanting silicones in the body just to look like a Barbie doll.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the relationship I had with my body underwent a complete change with cancer. In the past, it was so automatic, I never had to think about it. My body existed as a part of myself, in perfect symbiosis with my self; I never gave it a thought. Everything became different with cancer. I was obsessed with the image of my body, as if it had become something alien to myself. The obsessive fear that my own body inspired in me permeated the book I was writing about it. Yet at the same time, this fear imposed upon me from without, this constant source of uneasiness, was something I categorically refused. If I spent so much time wondering about my body, it was also about the connection between the body, my body, and the world. Our bodies belong to Nature and to society, and society also belongs to Nature. The mutilations that I underwent during my treatment forever lead me back to the same question: where did this kind of aggression come from? It did not cause me to turn away from the world, to turn in upon myself, to regress, but rather to attempt to understand my relationship, my body's relationship, with nature and society. I sought to awaken or re-awaken within myself an awareness of this relation, which the prevailing ideological climate sought to interrupt and divert, in society at large, with all its agents, doctors and others, who repeated that cancer sprang from the individual, whether in his genes or in his mind, that the individual was responsible, that neither the society nor nature had anything to do with it. It was this same awareness that people such as Tubiana, a doctor and writer, sought to shatter by openly combating the idea that there could be anything new where cancer was concerned, demobilizing people by assuring them that those in the medical establishment had their best interest in mind and knew what they were doing. This is how they con-

structed individuals who were completely withdrawn into their own bodies, preoccupied with their bodily functions, having decided that the health care demands placed upon them by their own bodies required that they ignore their connection to the larger world, that they deny their existence as beings-in-the-world, in society. The irony was that this denial came at a time when they were all the more passive as subjects by their persistent refusal of that relationship. In other words, they were reduced to the state of medico-pharmaceutical super-consumers.

**Jeanne Hyvrard:** What we are questioning is not the ignorance of the species or its powerlessness in the face of disease; we feel no bitterness in that regard. It is rather the fact that we were subjected by a corps of physicians to a barbarian treatment that has left us weakened, without informing us of these effects or asking our opinion. This attitude is unacceptable. What we are questioning is that we were not warned; we were not offered choices (though it is likely that we would have opted for the treatment). (p.174)

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# Abortion In Lebanon: Practice and Legality?

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Induced abortion refers to the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (CDC, 2001). The debate whether it should be legal or not has become a political issue all over the world, particularly that social changes resulted in a continuous modification of legislation and social attitudes concerning abortion. However, in Lebanon, though a major public health concern, this issue does not seem to be of interest to the public or to policy makers. The Lebanese law declared abortion illegal decades ago. The virtual absence of attempts to amend this law ever since, as well as the absence of research concerning its effect on the community, reflects that abortion does not seem to be a public issue of concern. In theory, this law addresses the needs of the Lebanese community and everybody appears to be abiding by it. However, the real picture seems far from this. Experts in the field believe that Lebanese women are constantly breaking the law to accommodate their actual needs (LFPA, 2001). They also claim this violation is well known to policy makers. Yet, they are not willing to act accordingly. For many reasons, they are not ready to modify the law; at the same time, they are not enforcing its implementation but rather turning a blind eye to the perpetrators.

The Lebanese law states that "Any woman who, by whatever means, whether utilized by herself or a third person with her consent, aborts herself, shall be punished by imprisonment from six months to three years" (Nazer, 1971). It also punishes whoever aborts, or attempts to abort, a woman (Nazer, 1971). Abortion is permitted if it is only the means of saving the life of the pregnant woman with the consent of two physi-

cians other than the attending one (Dib, 1975). These acts reveal that any woman aborting and any person aborting her, except in specified situations, would be both committing an illegal act that deserves punishment.

Induced abortion, according to reproductive health experts, is practiced in Lebanon (LFPA, 2001). However, accurate numbers regarding its prevalence are virtually absent. In the developing countries, 36% of pregnancies are unwanted, and 20% of them end in abortion (AGI, 1999). Among the 46 million women having abortion each year worldwide, 20 million of them live in countries where abortion is restricted or prohibited by law (AGI, 1999). These abortions are thought to be performed by unskilled persons mainly in the developing world (Kleinman, 1989). More recently, the WHO report on abortion estimated the incidence of unsafe abortion in Western Asia to be 500,000 in the years between 1995 and 2000. Those abortions have resulted in 1,100 maternal deaths (WHO, 1998).

Many social and economic factors stand behind the need of Lebanese women to seek abortion. Social factors, for unmarried women, arise mainly from the community's intolerance of premarital sex or cases of rape or incest that may result in an unwanted pregnancy. For married women, social and economic factors such as being too poor to raise a child, reaching their desired family size, or wanting to space their pregnancies interplay in forming the need for abortion (Atwi, 2001). In addition, a deformed fetus may be a suffi-

cient reason for some couples to resort to abortion. There are also some couples that may choose to abort the female baby even when it is against the law because they are waiting for the male child.” As a result of pressures caused by the low status of females in her society, a woman may well wish to practice selective abortion of female fetuses. This is not in the interest of the community as a whole, and certainly will do nothing to advance the cause of women in general” (Brown, 1999).

Those women who choose to abort are bearing the consequences of committing an illegal act. These consequences may vary from mere medical complications and economic burden to social labeling and legal prosecution. Unsafe abortion accounts for many severe medical complications such as sepsis, hemorrhage, uterine perforation and reproductive tract infections (WHO, 1998). Where abortion is legal, maternal complications and mortality are generally lower, often because abortions are performed by trained medical professionals, which is safer and more readily available (Rahman et al, 1998).

The price of abortion is high. Medically trained practitioners are usually less willing to provide the service (Rahman et al, 1998). In addition, the specialist who performs it is charging for his work as well as for the risk of legal prosecution. A woman’s inaccessibility to abortion will oblige her to pay any fee that is set by the person performing the procedure. To roughly obtain an idea about the cost of abortion in Lebanon, ten consulted physicians practicing in Beirut identified the cost to be between 300 and 1200US\$, depending on the milieu of the operation whether in a clinic or a hospital operating room. Most of them charge 600 US\$ for an abortion performed in an operating room. One physician said that the price is negotiable according to the economic situation of the woman. It is important to note that this cost is not covered by any type of medical insurance.

A conservative community such as the Lebanese condemns a single woman who gets pregnant, since it is an unquestionable indication of premarital sex. Abortion seems to be her only way out to avoid shame and social stigma. However, abortion by itself is condemned because it is considered unethical by the majority. Thus, the woman is left alone to decide how to deal with her situation. The illegality of abortion further aggravates the situation by exposing the woman to legal prosecution. All of this renders abortion a traumatic experience.

*Abortion does not constitute a priority in a country politically unstable and suffering from major economic difficulties*

Unlike neighboring countries, there is no recent revision date for the abortion law in Lebanon. The Lebanese law was issued in 1949 and revised once in 1969; whereas, the Egyptian abortion law was passed in 1937 and revised in 1994 (AGI, 1990). Apparently, both the existing and the negative consequences of the current law are not a sufficient drive for policy makers to reconsider the issue of abortion. An interview with a representative of the Lebanese Family Planning Association (LFPA, 2001) showed that officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Public Health refuse to put the abortion issue on their agenda though they are well aware of its magnitude. In this manner, they are overlooking violations of the law; and at the same time, are not willing to modify it to meet the need they acknowledge. This discrepancy is a consequence of the complex political and religious structure of the Lebanese society.

The debate over abortion, as being evident from other countries, reflects struggles over gender roles, laws, relations between religious leaders and the state, and the way the policymaking system works (Kulczycki, 1999). In Lebanon, as well as in many other developing countries, the present system is characterized by limited participation, lack of responsiveness to public needs and the almost total lack of public scrutiny and accountability (Iskandar, 1996). This leaves room for the political elite, which is closely associated and backed up by religious leaders for keeping abortion laws at its status quo without trying to adjust it according to the actual needs of the society.

Power and efforts to enhance authority are key elements in local, national, or international policy debate involving gender concerns (Lane and Cibula, 2000). Abortion is a feminine issue, closely related to a woman’s body in a male versus female sub-cultures. According to the current Lebanese abortion law, the decision to abort does not belong to the woman. Females in such a society lack the legal power to choose whether to stay pregnant or not. Consequently, they lack the privilege of practicing their reproductive right that is defined as the right of the individual to decide “freely and responsively” (Obermeyer, 1995). This law generally favors the perspective of powerful men in such a patriarchal society. Changing it in favor of women would only imply empowering them, keeping in mind that not many women favor abortion. Some women who put their ethical and religious beliefs in the forefront, consider that abortion is killing an innocent soul. Accordingly, in order to pre-

serve their moral values these females are sacrificing their reproductive and natural rights.

The exchange of power among religious leaders and politicians in Lebanon is also a key determinant in the policy making process. In a sectarian system, politicians rely on religious leaders for support. In return, policies are highly influenced by the aspirations of religious leaders. This leaves little room for other pressure groups to interfere. Accordingly, the Lebanese abortion law is set in accordance to what the religious groups desire, though not all religious groups forbid abortion. In Islam, there are some groups that allow abortion before 120 days of pregnancy (Atwi, 2000). In Christianity, most Protestants approve abortion and consider it a private decision; Roman Catholics see that although a sin, abortion must not be illegal because a “sin is not a crime” (AGI, 1990). Obermeyer (1995) argues that we should distinguish between the “ideal of religion” and its implementation by different sects. This is because we have militant groups that compete to reach absolute monopoly even if at the expense of truth. The fear of promoting premarital sex stands as a major factor behind the religious leaders’ resistance to the legalization of abortion. Furthermore, they fear accusations which will risk their political power sharing. As Obermeyer (1995) puts it, women’s roles and reproductive rights are influenced more by local and international politics than by religion.

On the other hand, abortion does not constitute a priority in a country politically unstable and suffering from major economic difficulties. Political instability directs the public attention away from less important issues such as abortion, towards more critical problems such as border disputes and the escalating political turmoil in the Middle East. The economy is deteriorating, the unemployment rate is rising, the percentage of people under the poverty line and the national debt (Korm, 2001) are increasing at an alarming rate. All of these factors have diverted public attention to the amelioration of the economy rather than trying to focus on details not on the official priority list. Despite such problems, social change is needed to help pregnant women decide what to do; society as a whole must decide what range of options will be socially supported. The need for abortion arises most directly from the problem of unintended and burdensome pregnancies, which can be seen as both personal and economic. This is why creating awareness regarding sex edu-

*Lebanese law declared abortion illegal decades ago ... and Lebanese women are constantly breaking the law to accommodate their actual needs*

cation and family planning helps reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies, to start with.

However, the application of these issues may not always be practical. Introducing sex education in the Lebanese curricula at all levels of education and teacher training is not very feasible in Lebanon. Yet, government teachers, parents, and the community at large should be made aware of the importance of preparing young people for responsible sexual behavior. In Lebanon, the extent of contraceptive use is determined less by individual preference and more by availability. Access to contraception varies widely according to region, income, peer and family approval, age, legal restrictions, and even the time at which a request is submitted. Therefore, structural and personal obstacles to the practice of contraception should be recognized. A woman may not actually prefer abortion, but may find it difficult or impossible to use contraception. There may be no methods, or no effective methods available at all in her locality, or if available, their cost may be prohibitive, or she may be misinformed or actively discouraged from adopting contraception.

Regardless of all measures aimed at treating the problem of unwanted pregnancy at its roots, there is still a need to focus on the final stage where pregnancy has already occurred. Institutions may play a crucial role at this stage by providing medical and psychological support and taking care of the newborn after the mother leaves. “Le Bon Pasteur” is the only example of such institution in Lebanon. It provides shelter and support for unmarried females during their course of pregnancy. The expansion of these services to more people in the community may constitute an alternative to abortion. Therefore, more institutions of this kind are needed. They should be better promoted and more accessible. Speaking to the needs of working women, for instance, day care centers and child support institutions will reduce the tension between career and family and will render abortion less necessary.

Ideally, laws need to be tailored to meet people’s need. However, law is conventionally distinguished from ethics and justice (Rodee et al, 1983). Social inertia acts as an impediment to changing an unjust law, and thus very persuasive arguments for change are not necessarily acceptable to policymakers. The arguments in favor of the status quo, contribute to the stability of the legal “apple cart” (Rodee et al, 1983). Therefore, the present Lebanese law on abortion does not necessarily suggest the prevailing public opinions.

Restrictive laws that are widely ignored and unenforced remain on paper when public acceptance of abortion is widespread.

In conclusion, the desire for abortion entails failure, whether of personal relationships, contraception, or of society's ability to tolerate those who fail to keep its moral codes. The abortion issue is caught in a vicious circle: legislators who disregard the enforcement of the law and beneficiaries who are taking full advantage of the loose implementation and acting as if it

does not exist. At the same time, anti-abortion groups are constantly resisting any attempts to break this unspoken compromise. There seems to be an understanding among the different parties to keep the situation as is, a situation, which is most suitable to all of them.

**Acknowledgment:**

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# Let's Talk About Virginity

Rana Hussein

Taboo subjects such as the importance of virginity for Jordanian women and their sexual knowledge were open for public discussions in recent debates in the Kingdom. A private hospital which organised a lecture on virginity issues recently drew a large crowd that participated in an open and frank dialogue. For the first time in the Kingdom's history physicians and psychiatrists presented the issue from a social, psychological and anatomical angle. Medical experts agreed that virginity should not be a prerequisite for men in choosing their partners.

One psychiatrist, Mohammed Habashneh, said the issue of women bleeding on their wedding night to prove they are virgins has always been a source of fear and concern for both men and women in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world. Pathologist Ahmad Bani Hani of the National Institute of Forensic Medicine concurred: Women are afraid they might not bleed and men are afraid that their performance on the night of marriage will not lead to their wives' bleeding, he said. People place great concern and attention on a "simple body part [the hymen] without realising the grave effects it poses to women's mental health," Habashneh told the audience that "women in this part of the world are haunted by the idea of wanting to prove they are virgins from the time they become aware of this issue until their wedding night," the psychiatrist said.

The consequences for a woman not to bleed on her wedding night could be dangerous, such as divorce and in some cases murder by their families: "We had families coming to the national institute first thing in the morning after the wedding night, wanting to examine the woman because she did not bleed," said Bani Hani. "This is such a humiliating

process for woman. Men do not face similar embarrassing and stressful moments, and sometimes they are impotent but do not want to admit it," he told the gathering.

From a societal perspective, the pathologist said that bleeding on the wedding night takes precedence over more important issues such as having a happy and constructive marital life and children. Habashneh echoed Bani Hani's remarks saying that trust between couples should not be based on "drops of blood, but it seems that women in our part of the world are guilty [of not being virgins] until proven otherwise."

"The hymen is not 100 per cent indicative of virginity", Bani Hani said. From a medical point of view, gynaecologist Randa Abu Zarour said women might not bleed on the wedding night because hymens are not one size. There are women who are born without a hymen or where the hymen is elastic and does not break, she explained. Habashneh pointed out that there is nothing in the Holy Koran or the Prophet's sayings stipulating that a woman must bleed on her wedding night. But a participant disagreed: "Islam implied indirectly that women should bleed in order to prove that they did not engage in sexual intercourse before getting married," the man said.

A second man asked the experts if animals had a hymen "because I want to know if God placed the hymen in women for a certain reason." The experts could not answer his question. One male participant said the virginity issue is absurd because women are "our mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. The best thing to do is just to forget this issue altogether and to close your eyes on the wedding night."



Nabila Hilmi, *People Series*, 1993

But another participant recommended having his wife undergo a virginity test before the night of wedding “so that I will make sure my wife is a virgin and I will marry her with a peaceful mind.” A female participant said at the end of the lecture: “The whole issue of doubting a woman’s virginity is insulting. If my husband wants to take me to the Forensic Department to make sure I am a virgin, then I do not need such a man to start a life with or have children with.”

In a separate study released recently on sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour among married women conducted by a local psychiatrist revealed misconceptions on the subject. Jordanian psychiatrist Walid Sarhan said in his findings that the average educated couples in the cities think they know enough about sex, but their sexual life [is characterised by] little harmony and poor communication. Based on his study’s findings and examination of female patients, Sarhan maintains that female sexual non-satisfaction is greatly affected by male sexual knowledge ... and in most cases it has a negative effect. “Sexual issues are rarely discussed in Arab countries and research in this field is very limited,” Sarhan said. His study sought to obtain informa-

tion about knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour and practices among Jordanian women.

The questions focused on standard sexual knowledge and related topics. 150 questionnaires were distributed to married women in Amman aged 18 to 56 with a marriage lasting up to 40 years. Of the 150 women surveyed, 21 rated themselves as possessing an excellent level of sexual knowledge, 65 rated their level as very good, 50 as good and 14 as weak, he said. On the question of how important sex is to a married woman, 57 said it was very important, 77 said it was important, 12 decided it was not important while four said they didn’t know. Meanwhile, 37 women said they provided their children with sexual education, 88 said they do not, and the remainder did not have children. But in a separate question, 134 said religion would not stop them from obtaining education about sex, with only nine answering in the affirmative and seven saying they did not know. Sarhan, who is the general director of Al Rashid Hospital [for psychiatric treatment] pointed out that sexual education is lacking in the Arab world and is hardly touched upon in school curricula: “Teachers usually skip the subject because they find it embarrassing and fear they might have problems in their classrooms,” he concluded.

## “ Le désir amputé, sexual experience of Lebanese women” \* : Fifteen years later.

**Marie-Thérèse Khair Badawi**

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Clinical Psychologist., Psychoanalyst, and member of “Société Psychanalytique de Paris”.

It has been thirteen years and a half years since L’Harmattan published my work “Le désir amputé” on the sexual experience of the Christian woman in a traditional Lebanese society, and fifteen and a half years since it has been submitted as a PhD thesis. Ever since, solicitations concerning the same theme at meetings, in periodicals ... have been at the origin of further publications on sexual education, the male/female relationship, the experience of the body, etc ...

My work caused a scandal then and would definitely cause one today. The reactions after every communication on the subject whether published in a newspaper or broadcast on television are the best witnesses to this fact. The reactions focused on the same idea: morality. Talking about sexuality is an act that goes contrary to morality. I, a woman, living in an Eastern society where things related to sex are neither mentioned nor talked about, could only be malefic and amoral. So many comments and reflections have since altered the collective debates to include the personal individual level, questioning who I am, my way of life, my motherhood, my role as a wife, up to my physical integrity...

This is how my book started: “As a matter of fact, I am a woman...”. To be a woman in this part of the world, doing research, talking of sexuality, and above all of women’s sexuality, transgresses many taboos and inhibitions.

Because I was a woman, I needed to extricate myself from the general view that women are controlled by their feelings and emotions. There is no doubt that the

source of this work has been a subjective impulse, a passionate drive, which has manifested itself in scientific research. In his “Introduction” to the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel asserts that “nothing great in this world is accomplished without passion.”

What was I looking for? What were my findings? What is still left of them today? This is the itinerary I propose to follow after all these years.

### What was I looking for? Problematic and Hypotheses

The problematic of my research was enclosed in a double perspective: to understand the way women “live” within their erotic bodies, in the light of received ideas on sexuality, ideas generally transmitted by education, and sexual education particularly, and to discover the cause or causes which make one woman more satisfied sexually than others.

With that double perspective in view, I advanced the following hypothesis: if the basic sexual energy is repressed, this vital impulse would express itself and transgress the forbidden, and nothing could restrain desire. Indeed, desire tries to find a pathway despite the taboos of a forbidding education.

But how was I supposed to study such a subject loaded with so much feeling? After ten preliminary interviews, the questionnaire method ended up being the only one possible. For the sake of concision I will not talk about this now though I would be glad to answer any questions if this matter is of interest. I had to face the problem of sampling. In a fantasy

wish for generalization, I wanted at first to have a representative sample of the whole Lebanese feminine population. Confrontation with reality limited my first ambition. There too, I explain in detail the complete proceedings I went through to end up, after many successive renouncements, working with a sample constituted by one category of women, which was the only one accessible to this kind of theme: the Christian woman, living in the city, with a middle and upper middle class social and cultural status. To be more precise, a sample of 100 women (450 questionnaires were sent), 46 married and 54 unmarried, divided into three age groups 18/25, 26/33, 34/42 years old.

My sample is to be taken as it is. It represents a specific population at a definite period, and has no global pretence.

#### My Findings: The Emerging Variables

I was able to emit four principal variables characterizing the sexual experience of the women in my sample. These women seemed, during the investigation, a sufficiently representative sample of the impact of traditional education on the sexual experiences of women. This education has transmitted a certain morality, through school, family, religious teachings, social environment in general, and has created a halo of shame, guilt and dread around sexuality, as I have been able to demonstrate. Actually, it is those restraints that make women socially and sexually immature, causing future sexual problems as expounded by Françoise Dolto ( F. Dolto, " Sexualité féminine", Scarabée & Co/A.M. Métaillé, 1983). It is therefore with this burden that we must proceed: the impact of traditional education on the sexual experience of women.

What are the four emerging variables? ( The four variables end up rephrasing the reference text with minor differences. Refer to "Le désir amputé", pp 158 to 160).

#### The Educational Climate

The social conditions of the childhood environment – the attitude of parents and teachers in our traditional society – ignore and distort everything that is sexually related. They do not give any sexually related data (to cite only one example, the preparation to menstruation which is an unavoidable physiological event, was lacking for half of the sampled women, 38% of them did not even know of its mere existence!). Even when "they" gave information, it was either erroneous, or repetitive recommendations and moral orientations. Yet, without considering the

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contents, the youngest seemed to be more updated than their elders. For more detailed figures, please refer to the original investigation.

#### Virgins and Sexual Desire

Virginity constitutes by itself a whole field in the sexual experience of women, because of the taboos and the prohibition it carries. Half of the bachelors included in the sample are no longer virgins and those who still are have had no form of flirting (7.4%), light flirting (20.3%), sexual relations without penetration (16.6%) or with anal penetration (3.7%).

For virgins and those who remained virgin until marriage, I found a desire for a complete sexual relation, but it is the fear of going against social morality which makes virginity a value for marriage – that stops them from going further.

Thus, the taboo of virginity is in operation. Note that even those who are no longer virgin have lost their virginity with the partner they ended up marrying, as shown by the sample of married women who lost their virginity before marriage. Marriage still remains the only institution where sexual relationships are sanctioned.

#### The Autoerotic Practice

Masturbation plays an important role in sexual life since it arouses the body's erotic sensibility. Those who have practiced it are those who have had the greatest sexual relations before marriage, who more than others enjoy the stimulation of their erogenous areas and are the most sexually satisfied. The exploration of the physical self would lead a woman to acknowledge her aptitude to sensuality, to have a better investment of the erogenous body and to search for a sexual partner. This reveals the important role of masturbation and premarital sex for future sexual satisfaction.

#### Marriage, an Inhibition Factor?

Marriage and sexual satisfaction seem incompatible. It is this variable, severe in its institutional bearing, that imposed itself upon me, against any expectation. The married woman was revealed to be less sexually satisfied

than the unmarried who has sexual relations and who, of the same age, seems to live her sexuality in a more blooming manner even though, in the global evaluation of their experiences, they are both unsatisfied.

Actually, there is an inversely proportional relationship between sexual satisfaction and age, for bachelors and married women, in most observations:

- With age, the bachelor woman who has a profession (100%), seems to get progressively over the prohibited, since virginity has no importance whatsoever (respectively in the age pools 35.2%, 42.8%, 66.6%). She is no longer virgin (83%), and does not refuse sexual relations when she has the opportunity (66.6%). Since she is frustrated by the irregularity of partners and available places where she could have sex with a partner, she looks for frequent relations (66.6%). When she is with a partner, she initiates him to her erotic desires (83.3%). She likes foreplays, breast stimulation, mouth stimulation of her clitoris (even if she does not dare ask for it), vaginal penetration (100%) and most often ends up having an orgasm.

- While the married woman, as she ages, does not work anymore (68.7%) or has never worked before and seems more attached to general preconceived ideas concerning sexuality: she considers virginity as very important (68.7%), having herself had very little sexual contacts before marriage, having been a virgin on the first night of marriage (respectively according to age pools 57.2%, 69%, 75%). It is her partner who takes the initiative for the sexual relation, and we find that she has the highest percentage of rejection by her partner (68.7%). Her partner is progressively less preoccupied with her own pleasure (7.1%, 12.5%, 37.5%), and she does not dare ask for sexual stimulations (72.7%). As time goes by sexual intercourse becomes less frequent and leaves her dissatisfied. She thinks of herself as being frigid (50% of the age pool 25/32!) though she likes foreplays, and breast stimulation, but as she gets older, she does not like more daring contacts (14.2%, 43.75%, 62.5% don't like the mouth stimulation of their clitoris), has no pleasure in vaginal penetration (18.75%) and rarely has orgasm.

These bachelor and married women, who are nevertheless of the same generation, have had little sexual information: half of over 25 years old (bachelor and married) have had late or no sexual information; add to this the archaic use of contraceptives, since it is only the youngest that use the most efficient means.

Certain forms of behavior seem to be linked to the marital status:

- Fixation on the negative reactions to the first intercourse ( weeping, pain ), is occasionally encountered ( 13% ), but does not exist for unmarried women who have lost their virginity.

- We find few women who do not like vaginal penetration, but while no bachelor says she doesn't like it, all those that do not, are married and their number increases with age (7.14%, 12.5%, 18.75% ).

- Also, all the bachelors say they "like very much" or "moderately" the mouth stimulation of their clitoris, and it is the married woman who likes " a little" or "not at all" this kind of stimulation, their number growing with age ( 14.2%, 43.75%, 62.5% ).

- The extramarital partner thinks more often about his mate, while it is only in marriage that we find men who do not worry about their wives' excitement, their number growing with age ( 7.1%, 12.5%, 37.5% ).

Thus, marriage seems to constitute an inhibition factor in the erotic function of women: the married woman appears to be less satisfied with her sexual life than the bachelor of the same age who has sexual relations, even though in the global evaluation of their experience, they are all unsatisfied.

Indeed, the maternal function of women, especially in the East, seems to absorb all their energies and could lead them to renounce their genital sexuality. On the other hand, it is not the nature of sexual impulses that denies women satisfaction, it is rather the socialization of the human being (man and woman) which plays a major role in the suppression of the impulses (as developed by S. Freud, mainly in "Malaise dans la civilisation" and "Introduction à la psychanalyse"), which, in the case of women, is more exaggerated because they live in a world whose laws are regulated by men. (Refer to chapter 13 and the conclusion of "Le désir amputé" op. cit.).

#### What Remains Today: Updating of the Emerging Variables

At the time, my research was done in the context of a PhD thesis, I had to evaluate, measure, quantify, and compare, in order to emerge with scientific variables. Today, I cannot help thinking that I could have, maybe, done things differently. In this context, talking about sexuality implies the reduction of the sexual to descriptive behavior, without its psychic dimension. While sexuality is first of all psycho-sexual, " it has a biological aspect in its physical manifestations, psychological in its emotional expression; affective and relation related; erotic in its articulation of body and desire; historic and social in its function of creating the structure of family relations and the couple for the mere existence of humankind through history; and finally, an aspect related to morality which governs

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sexuality by a set of rules which act as laws and which are related to every culture as reported by the ethnologists ( M.T. Khair Badawi "Pédagogie morale et éthique de la sexualité" in "La génération de la relève; la pédagogie éthique" tome 3. Publication of the pedagogic bureau of the Saints-Coeurs, Beirut, 1993). A permanent concern of research in this field must correlate constantly the observed with the psychological and the social. This is nevertheless what I have tried to do, and what I am attempting to do today by updating the emerged variables. The question is to find out whether these variables are still verifiable, based on my clinical experience.

#### The Educational Climate (the immeasurable cleavage)

The educational system has not overlooked sex education which remains part of the curriculum. Accordingly, an introduction to sexuality has been progressively included into the textbooks according to class level. Indeed, rather than ignoring sexuality, the books explain it, dissect it, dismantle it, as if it were a kidney or a brain, in the frame of chapters mainly focused on reproduction, included in the biology courses of the 3rd and 4th grades. The Lebanese curriculum overlooks the fact that sexuality is above all psychosexuality and that in addition to a biological and physical aspect, it has a psychological, affective structuring dimension for the socialized human being. It is this aspect linked to affectivity which scares educators and leads them to overlook it, targeting only the informational aspect in what they call sexual education. The data they give is definitely important, yet it can only be given as part of the psychic, the affective and the social. I have debated this subject at length in two articles in 1989 and 1993 ("Les jeunes filles et leur famille face à la sexualité", in "La génération de la relève; une pédagogie nouvelle pour la jeunesse libanaise de notre temps", tome 1. Publications of the pedagogic bureau of the Saints-Coeurs, Beirut, 1989, and "Pédagogie morale et éthique de la sexualité", 1993).

At every meeting with young people, I never fail to notice that most of the questions are related to the emotional aspect: at what age can we kiss a boy (a girl)? What is flirting? Why do I have to keep my virginity? Does masturbation drive you mad? A 22 year old girl asks: "Is it true that losing her virginity before marriage can be detected on a girl's face?". A 20year old student came to see me after a lecture and told me that last night her boyfriend kissed her on the mouth and that she couldn't sleep all night. What was he going to think about her?

At the same time, we can come across as many conservative girls as daring ones. I would mention the example of a 20year old girl who told me, with panic,

that she was pregnant. She had already had an abortion at the age of 18! This shows us that there is no homogeneity within the group of young ones. Everything is possible as established 15 years ago including ignorance! In this context, I would like to mention the case of a 13year old girl, from a bourgeois and educated family, who was brought to me by her parents, suffering from insomnias and anorexia owing to her first period. After a few interviews, I realized that the girl didn't even know about the existence of a menstrual period before having it and the sight of blood gave her a real shock.

In the classroom, the questions asked by young people are those related to their emotional lives. The answers given by teachers are scientific and biological, without any hint to the emotional factor. The essence has not changed, only the appearance, and this has created a cleavage and a misunderstanding.

But, even the information speech – whose content has been criticized – has been removed from the program. Actually, a decree from the Ministry of National Education has excluded the chapters on fecundity from the biology courses, because of morality reasons, and under the pressure of some religious and influential authorities. Therefore we are now back again demanding their reinstation into the school curricula. Concerning this topic, I would like to report the fact that having had a broadcasted discussion with the mentioned religious authorities, I discovered that they are still at the level of denying the mere existence of child sexuality! Moreover, this debate allowed me to find out how much the religious framework is still operative on the social level in Lebanon, and especially in the field of education. Therefore, I cannot avoid citing Freud in this context: "It is impossible to accomplish a reform without changing the basics of the whole system" (S. Freud, article: "Les explications sexuelles données aux enfants", 1907 in "La vie sexuelle", PUF, 1972, p.13).

Even though psychoanalysis has taught us that the sexual information received by the child does not stop him from creating infantile sexual fantasies which correspond to his own growing stage (article of S. Freud, "Les théories sexuelles infantiles", 1908, in "La vie sexuelle", PUF, 1971), it has also taught us that nothing justifies omitting information that needs to be given to him. Freud maintains: "I don't think that there is any good reason to refuse explanations to children who are eager to know... If the children do not get those explanations they ask their elders about, they will go on tormenting themselves with this problem secretly and try to find solutions in which the guessed truth mingles in a most remarkable way with the false grotesque; or they would whisper among

themselves information in which, because of the guilt feeling these young researchers have, sexual life gets the print of the terrible and the disgusting" (S. Freud, "Les explications sexuelles données aux enfants", pp. 11 and 12).

#### Virgins and Sexual Desire (the mothers' grip)

Even if young girls today seem to be more sexually active, the over investment of the hymen and virginity remains a fact. It constitutes a kind of fetishism, since the hymen membrane corresponds exactly to Freud's definition of the object of fetishism, according to the explanations provided by Françoise Couchard (F. Couchard, "Emprise et violences maternelles", Dunod, 1991, p. 108) and as I reported in a previous article ("Pouvoir sur le corps, Pouvoir du corps", in "Bahithat" No 1, 1995, annual book of "L'association des femmes libanaises pour la recherche").

Today, as my sample indicates, we still find more virgin than non virgin girls, but all those who remained virgin have had sexual contacts without the tearing of the hymen "for fear of not being able to marry", even if they had the desire to go further. Moreover, the bachelors who remained virgin while awaiting marriage, "do it" at an age which seems to be around 35 years, after losing all hope of marriage, in a society like ours, where marriage at an early age is recommended and where social pressure still forces girls to marry at an early age.

I will mention that, in clinical practice, we notice that the relationship with the mother is immediately touched upon when we talk about virginity. I would like to quote the words of a 22 year old girl who describes her first sexual relationship with her fiancé



Nabila Hilmi, *People Series*, 1993

(she will end up marrying him 6 months later): "When I lost my virginity, after a sexual intercourse with my friend, it seemed to me I was hearing my mother's footsteps in the corridor, even though we were miles away from home and there was no way she could know what I was doing!". Another 24 year old girl asserts: "I was so scared that my mother might find out that I was no longer a virgin just by looking at me walking around! She has always told me that a virgin had a different gait than a non virgin!". This reminds us of the example mentioned earlier of this 22 year old girl who thinks that her mother will find out that she had lost her virginity by merely looking at her face. Another 18 year old girl also refers to her mother when she talks about sexuality: "My mother always tells me that she knows by the tone of my voice that I am lying to her about what I am doing with my boyfriend. She always tells me to watch out for the limits, without ever telling me what those limits are."

This shows us the extent of the mother's grip on her daughter's body which contributes to the acquiring of a maternal Super Ego, often intrusive and persecuting (developed in "Pouvoir sur le corps, Pouvoir du corps" op. cit.). Indeed the virgin's desire for a sexual relationship still holds, but the factor that seems directly linked to it seems to be the mothers' control of her daughters' body.

#### The Autoerotic ARACTICE (Masturbation)

We have wrongly used masturbation and autoerotic practice as equivalent terms, but we know now that we can label as autoerotic the first two year period, and as masturbation what comes after since it is accompanied by phantasms and constitutes an "intermediary between the autoerotic and love" (Freud, "Les premiers psychanalystes, Minutes de la Société Psychanalytique de Vienne", 1912-1915, tome IV, Gallimard, 1983, p. 43).

I had found in my sample a relation between masturbation (always accompanied by phantasms) and the awakening of the erotic body's sensibility which creates an urge to look for a partner and allows a more satisfying evaluation of sexuality. Yet, we find in the daily clinical practice that masturbation is impregnated with guilt, and generally experienced in frustration and as a primary impulse to the search for a partner, as illustrated in the two following examples. (In women, I have not encountered a repetitive, compulsive masturbation, leading to the confinement of the person, except in cases where it revealed factors of a severe illness. Generally, on the other hand, masturbation for men appears to be more compulsive).

A 20 year old girl asserts after hesitating for a while: "I masturbate in the evening in my bed thinking about



X..., I would like him so much to notice me and go out with me... but in the meantime and after having done so, I wonder if this is normal". Another 36 year old unmarried woman says: "There are moments where the desire for a man in my bed is so great that I cannot help but masturbate thinking about things. After that, I feel disgusted with myself".

The relations we are talking about appear today as ample evidence since the explanation that psychoanalysis gives us about the notion of building up is the genesis of human sexuality. Actually, infantile sexuality, in its first trend, is autoerotic. The sexual impulses are partial since they come from multiple organic sources: the mouth and cheeks region, and the anus and erogenous zones (S. Freud, in "Trois essais sur la théorie de la sexualité" op. cit.). The stimulation of those organs, in the search for self pleasure through touch and masturbation, characterizes infantile sexuality. It is only progressively that these partial sexual impulses end up with adult sexual life and act in sexual relationship with a partner: "At their first appearance, they (sexual impulses) build up on conservation impulses... and follow also at the discovery of the object, the paths that show the impulses of the Ego" (Pulsions et destins des pulsions", 1915, in "Métapsychologie", 1912-1915, Gallimard, 1991, p. 24).

Therefore, from that point on, we can understand the part that masturbation has in the process of development. Masturbation, with the building up function of sexual impulses, helps sensitize the erogenous body and participates in the progressive routing of partial impulses towards the quest for a partner.

#### Marriage, an Inhibition Factor? (the couple, the family, the society)

I had therefore found out in my sample that marriage and its duration in time seems to be an inhibitive factor of the erotic function of women, and that the married woman, with time, is less satisfied with her sexual life than the bachelor, of the same age, who has sexual relations. Even though, in the global evaluation, dissatisfaction is a generalized feeling.

I realize that this is the variable I have studied the most in detail, to which I have given the most explanations. It is only today that I understand that it probably had struck me from the start, and sensing all the hostility it was going to generate since it touches various institutions, I had unconsciously tried to build "a defensive stronghold", made out of arguments that I wanted solid, objective, and scientific.

What I had feared proved to be true. This variable seems to be the one that shocked traditional minds and

provoked the wrath of the religious circles: I was touching the institution of marriage. But as I have always mentioned, it is a variable that imposed itself upon me and I had no choice but to develop it, underline its slightest meanings, try to explain it... and over all those years, the clinical experience just confirmed it!

Actually, it is married women who talk of frigidity, lack of desire in their sexual relationships with their husbands, the husband who "takes his pleasure and turns his back." The bachelors, on the other hand, seek pleasure through a partner who cares about their pleasure, etc. ... The words of a 40 year old married woman do not sound outdated: "After he has had his pleasure, he relaxes all his weight on me and I feel a kind of aversion... he doesn't care about me anymore, turns around and goes to sleep..." Similarly, a 35 year old woman (married for 13 years) speaks of a "monthly boring duty". Thinking that she was talking about her menstrual period, I found out later that she meant the monthly intercourse with her husband! Contrary to the experience of married women, a 30 year old bachelor describes sexual intercourse with her partner as "floating after love and being thankful for having a partner".

This last example introduces the notion of the frequency of intercourse. If it is true, as shown in the poll, the frequency of intercourse decreases with the duration of marriage, I would like to underline that during my clinical experience I have encountered many married couples, with children, who after many years have not only decreased the frequency of their sexual encounters, but have stopped them altogether. For some the link seems severed, cut, and the couple live in mutual indifference. For others, on the other hand, the link seems to remain tenacious, and the couple live in shared tenderness inside a structured family: "The mutation of direct sexual tendencies, who have a short life span, into a durable simply tender relationship, is also something very usual and the strengthening of marriage contracted with loving passion, relies mostly on this process" (S. FREUD, "Psychologie des foules et analyses du MOI", 1921, in "Essais de psychanalyse", 1915-1922, Payot, Paris, 1981, p. 212). This is related to the function of the displacement phenomenon, where the energy discharged is invested in socially valued objects, professional life, children... etc.

But why "displace" when we live as a couple and sexual impulse is a fact? Besides, don't the couple basically come together to realize the sexual impulses in the only form sanctioned by our traditional society, marriage and the foundation of a family? Yet, even in this form, the sexual impulse seems

damaged in a permanent way as indicated by Freud: "The civilized education tends only to the temporary repression of the impulse until marriage... the repression goes often too far which ends up in this undesired result that the sexual impulse, once liberated, appears damaged on a long term... due to this artificial postponement of the loving function, young women leave to the men disappointments only... they are frigid... the traditional education creates exactly this kind of women... preparation to marriage helps the mere goals of marriage to fail" (S. Freud, "La morale civilisée et la maladie nerveuse des temps modernes", 1908, in "La vie sexuelle", 1907-1927, PUF, 1972, p. 41). Moreover, we notice that the sexual specificity of the couple in marriage is eventually absorbed into the family and seems to be diluted within the family entity. The family whose basic structure must be built around the couple, ends up reducing the dual sexual link to the inevitable process of its own perpetuation. This leads us to add to the earlier factors presented above (marriage and maternity as factors that minimize the genital sexual function of women, and the access to civilization through the family which presumes the renouncement of impulses, and specifically the repression of women), a new factor that highlights the problem of the traditional family.

As a matter of fact, a new field of comprehension is offered to us. It seems moreover to link the four variables together: the family is the first vehicle of the educational climate denying sexuality; it absorbs the couple's sexuality and constitutes the bias through which the mother seeks to have a grip on her daughter's body, repressing all sexual manifestations whether in the form of contacts or primary relations. As a result, we can say that the traditional family constitutes a collective force of suppression and contributes to the formation of a tyrannical guilt feeling, the Super Ego.

So, does one expect the family to disintegrate and die? This death, so often predicted, will never be realized since the family is, was, and will remain the basis for the formation of the individual, his individuality and his necessary belonging to a socialized collective space. But we have to acknowledge that it is time to start questioning it.

Does the family as an entity not sacrifice the particular for the collective, destroying individuality in the interest of the community? Could not the family give a breathing space for the individual, by tolerating the blossoming of sexuality, instead of denying it? Could not the family be built around the couple and still preserve this couple as a living entity, instead of diluting and erasing its identity?

The family has a role in the process of the suppression of impulses as imposed by the socializing phenomenon. But in the same manner, should not the family respect the potentialities of the individual's development and therefore contribute to the yielding of a protecting Super Ego that would liberate, instead, and replace this tyrannical Super Ego evoked earlier?

\* \* \*

Clearly, work on women's sexuality ends up questioning the relation between man and woman in the family and its necessary integration in society as a whole. It is true that I have favored the sexuality/society relation in most of my attempts at understanding, starting with the pressure imposed by the social "tools", the school, the family, and marriage that I had long thought of as misleading. But it is because I have discovered the importance of that link between the global cultural and the experience which apparently seems to touch only individual intimacy, that I have tried to find answers to these questions. Anyway, the sacrifice – in the sense of suppression – of men and women's sexuality imposed by civilization, as developed from the start by Freud, helps us to understand sexuality as playing a major role in the formation of individual psychic development, the social link, and the access to culture.

It is only after this that we can understand that a definite society, at a definite time, uses its institutions (school, marriage, family...), which constitute the collective forces of suppression, to maintain the status quo. We can then understand, in the light of those four variables that we have uncovered, that in our form of society, the intensity of the suppression seems to touch women more than men. Indeed, more sacrifices are expected on the feminine side than on the masculine (refer to the general conclusion of "Le désir amputé" op. cit.).

But why then, is this fate reserved to women in our part of the world? Many psychoanalysts – mostly women – have attempted to find an answer and it is still premature to come to a conclusive decision. Some talk of "feminine denial", others of "fear of annihilation by the primitive mother", and others still talk about "fear of castration". The diversity of these contributions reveals the complexity of the issue.

\* Marie-Thérèse Khair Badawi "Le désir amputé; vécu sexuel de femmes libanaises". L'Harmattan, Paris, November, 1986.

This paper was read at a conference "Sexuality in the Middle-East" organized by the American University of Beirut and the University of Oxford, on June 23rd - 25th, 2000, the Middle East Center, St Anthony's College – OXFORD.

# Roundtable: Sexuality

Myriam Sfeir

A roundtable discussion on sexuality took place at the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University (LAU). Among the participants were undergraduate and graduate students from various Lebanese universities. It was moderated by Dr. Marie Therese Kheir Badawi.

**Marie Thérèse Kheir Badawi:** Why, in your opinion, is the issue of sexuality such a taboo subject especially when it has to do with a woman's body?

**Ali:** I strongly believe that the only two issues that will remain illegitimate (forbidden) to discuss throughout one's life are those of sex and death. Had sex not been the reproductive tool and the indirect source of life, it would not have received such attention. Hence, the importance of sex stems not from the actual act of sex and the pleasure it produces, but rather from its outcome. Therefore, the consequences resulting from sexual acts are what gives it such a sacred role, be it on the religious, social, or educational level. Moreover, the importance of woman stems from the fact that she is the source of birth. Besides, the importance of her body, in my opinion, has nothing to do with pleasure but with life, despite the fact that in our society anything that has to do with bodily pleasure is looked down upon and equated with shame or haram.

**Jamal:** It is true that early on, society and religion proclaimed the sexual act important just for the sake of procreation. However, nowadays the situation has changed. Women are looking for sexual pleasure not just within the confines of marriage and for the sake of procreation. Sexual intercourse is no longer restricted to marriage; women are engaging in premarital sex and view sex differently. They admit that they have desires and are willing to talk about them. However, the way a patriarchal society views sex has not changed. Moreover, men are afraid of this change and fear the power of women's sexuality. Women's sexual potency is greater than that of men, and hence society and men want to control and repress it because it scares them.

**Maxime:** According to me and based on my observations, most premarital sexual relationships among my generation stem from the repression (forbidden) in society. Engaging in sexual activity for the youth is a revolt against the norms and traditions imposed by society. Given that we want to be liberal, we are tempted to do what we feel like doing irrespective of the consequences. Hence, our revolt has no vision or goal other than acting out what we feel like doing. I have many foreign friends, French to be specific, who are very open about their sexuality because sexual repression is less pronounced in France. In Lebanon, this suppression makes the suppressed desirable and urges the repressed individual to act out his desires in secret.

**Marie Thérèse:** Are the people around you open about their premarital sexual experiences and do they publicize them?

**Maxime:** Not really, most of my friends who are sexually active either hide the fact that they are engaging in premarital sex or publicize it only among their friends and within inner circles.

**Jamal:** Prior to living abroad, I used to think that the sexual freedom prevalent in the West enables women to be more content than we are. However, when I went abroad and after engaging in many discussions related to sexuality I realized that the sexual freedom they enjoy is not helping them overcome their personal problems. Women suffer various problems that are difficult to overcome. For instance, rape is widespread and women suffer a lot as a result.

**Sahar:** I agree with Jamal. Having the freedom to express oneself sexually does not imply that one no longer has problems. We mistakenly equate engaging freely in sexual relations with the absence of problems and that is not the case. I also believe that we women are not the real problem, the problem lies in men. Women are demanding to be emancipated and free, yet I strongly believe that prior to that we need to liberate men. If women move on and men remain where they

are nothing will change. Women in fact are well aware of their sexual needs and desires; however, they repress them or act them out in secret because they fear society and men. Eastern men are afraid of the potent sexual powers of women, and that is why they subordinate them and try to dominate them through the taboos imposed by society.

**Marie Thérèse:** How does one know if a woman is really a virgin or whether she had had her hymen repaired (hymenoplasty)? How do you judge a woman who after falling in love with a man sleeps with him believing that they are going to marry, yet, they don't end up together?

**Samar:** Can I say something before we try to answer this question. I think we are focusing on the end result and forgetting what caused the problem in the first place. I strongly believe that the main problem in our society is really not sexuality or virginity which are taboo subjects, but rather the gap between our generation and that of our parents. There is a communication problem between the two generations; we can't really talk to our parents and that is why sensitive subjects such as sexuality and virginity have become taboo subjects not to be discussed. People of my generation are hesitant to talk about sexuality even among each other for they are brain washed not to discuss such issues. Hence, the main problem is that of communication. If we can voice our opinions and lift the barriers imposed on this kind of communication, half the problem will be solved. If I am discreet about my opinions concerning sexuality, people will judge me upon their own conclusions. Their assumption could be wrong. However, if I am open and honest about my opinions, then people will know exactly where I stand. Even though a lot of people are engaged in premarital affairs no one talks about them.

**Marie Thérèse:** If we don't communicate with our parents and parents don't voice their opinions, then who is responsible for this brain washing?

**Maysa:** Mothers are the ones who instill such values in their daughters (virginity). Girls are socialized to view sex as a taboo, and the way women view sexuality greatly affects the way men view the relationship they are involved in. I don't know why, but those who try to hide their sexual affairs are the ones whose affairs are publicized the most.

**Samar:** I think the answer is very simple: this round table is about sexuality and virginity, and automatically we assume that it is targeted towards women.

**Marie Thérèse:** Women are the ones who possess a hymen that is expected to bleed when ruptured. They are the ones who lose their virginity not men.

**Samar:** In my opinion, virginity is more a principal than something physical.

**Sophia:** It is true but not for many people for there are a lot of women who engage in all sorts of sexual activities (sodomy or anal sex, oral sex, foreplay) where everything is permissible except the actual act of penetration. Given that the hymen proves a woman's virginity, rupturing it implies losing one's virginity.

**Jamal:** I believe that being virginal is the biggest lie ever. How does one define virginity? I understand women who undergo hymen repair operations or engage in sexual acts but never the act of penetration. Men have imposed such a fake condition and they deserve the false (fake) virginity they are receiving.

**Samar:** I disagree. Why would I want to be involved with someone who is obsessed with the fact that I am virgin or not. Why would I want to pretend to be something that I am not just to please a man or get married to him. I would never do such a thing and I hope no one participating in this round table does that.

**Marie Thérèse:** Why?

**Samar:** Because I am never going to sell out. This is who I am and if the man doesn't like what he sees then good riddance. We are always worried about people's talk, how society will view us, ruining our reputation, etc. and in my opinion that is wrong. Each and every person is free to think the way they want but let them not impose it on me. I want to live my life according to my rules and not those dictated to me by society. I decided to live outside of society and refuse to abide by its rules. Who said that society and what it stands for is right? Isn't it possible that society is wrong?

**Marie Thérèse:** Who is society?

**Samar:** It is the people around us.

**Marie Thérèse:** Maysa was saying that it is not society or men but the relationship between mother and daughter and how the former instills in the latter those values that enforce these inhibitions. What do you think?

**Samar:** I disagree, not all mothers do that.

**Maysa:** I agree totally with Samar that one has to bear the consequences of one's actions. However, there is a problem in Lebanon that prevents women from doing so and it is our legal system. The law can interfere, and couples may face imprisonment for engaging in premarital sexual activities. This is the problem in Lebanon.

**Ali:** To go back to the issue of virginity. Based on my research, and after much investigation on why men view virginity as a requirement I came up with the conclusion that irrespective of ones religion, 95% of all the men I interviewed don't like their partners to compare them with other men. They go mad if they sleep with an experienced woman and she compares them to another man. This is why men refuse to marry sexually experienced women.

**Marie Thérèse:** Would you go out with and even contemplate marrying an experienced woman?

**Ali:** I have no problem dating or getting married to a sexually experienced women. On the contrary I prefer my wife to be experienced. Why should I be bothered if she compares me to other men. We might not be sexually compatible, and I might not be the right person for her. Let the best man win.

**Marie Thérèse:** How come you are different from the men you interviewed?

**Ali:** I don't know why I am like this. I hate stereotypes and have worked hard on myself.

**Marie Thérèse:** Had all men been like you, we wouldn't have a problem

**Samar:** It is all about freeing ones mind of stereotypes and the ingrained habits of the mind.

**Ali:** In Lebanon there is no one society but different societies that form a confederation where bad laws rule. Lebanon has an underground society. An act is not deemed wrong until someone sees it. Hence, as long as I am doing something in the dark it is not wrong. The minute someone finds out then the problem arises.

**Marie Thérèse:** You claim to have no problem with the issue of losing one's virginity, does that apply to your sister?

**Ali:** I believe in personal freedom, hence I have no right to tell my sister what to do with her life provided that she is mature and knows what she is doing. If she knows the difference between what is right and wrong, and if she chooses to do wrong then it is her problem.

**Sahar:** You used the word wrong, what do you mean by that? Losing one's virginity?

**Ali:** We are supposedly talking about a mature woman, and in this case I have no say in the matter. If my 25 year old sister decided to engage in a premarital affair then it is her choice. But let's suppose my sister is a 16 year old girl who is under the impression that she

knows what she is doing at her young age. I will interfere in such a case and try to talk some sense into her. Being aware of the consequences is all that matters, and lets face it the consequences are grave and endless when one doesn't know what he/she is getting into (sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, abortion, illegitimate children, etc.). It is unfair to bring an unwanted child into this world. Conceiving out of wedlock is a crime. Why should a baby be punished for something he/she didn't do. Illegitimate children are considered social outcasts and this rejection affects them throughout their lives. It is important to note that one can't live outside society and that we are not living in the wild.

**Marie Thérèse:** You are very liberal, it is very rare to find such men.

**Ali:** I doubt I will get married to a Lebanese woman. Lebanese women are unable to shed the ingrained habits of the mind that they have acquired from their upbringing and society. They are too weak to fight them.

**Sophia:** The same applies to men. A lot of my female friends refuse to marry Lebanese men because they view them as backward, traditional and patriarchal. There is a communication problem between men and women.

**Maxime:** When choosing a wife the least important variable to consider is whether she is a virgin or not. Intellectual maturity, spiritual compatibility, ethics, etc. ought to be among the criteria considered. The issue of sexuality is not discussed openly because people are afraid to express their opinions openly. As a result, one starts to censor oneself for fear of being rejected by society.

**Marie Thérèse:** Who is society in your opinion, Maxime?

**Maxime:** I agree with Samar, society is the people around us.

**Ali:** There is a gap between what I want to be and what society expects me to be. Society imposes things on us.

**Maysa:** None of the participants in this roundtable believe that premarital sex is wrong. I personally talk openly about sexuality even in front of my parents who are conservative. I managed to change them and with time they adjusted to the fact that I am not against premarital sex. My father knows that I am sexually active even though I didn't go up to him and tell him I am engaging in premarital sex.

**Marie Thérèse:** What you are saying is that your father knows that you have premarital affairs and he has no problem with that?

**Maysa:** Whether he has a problem or not is not the issue. We reached a compromise. My father was very strict with me and my sisters when we were growing up. There was a huge list of dos and donts. Besides, there was flagrant discrimination between the girls in my family and our boys. However, step by step things started changing. I became economically independent and bought my freedom. I worked hard to earn it. In my opinion, economic independence is liberating, but when one is economically independent that does not imply that he/she is free. I know a lot of economically independent friends who are still influenced by their parents.

**Samar:** The only manner I can discuss sex with my dad is jokingly.

**Sophia:** Sometimes parents don't monitor their children's actions but there is auto censorship.

**Marie Thérèse:** Where did this transmission come from?

**Jamal:** It is funny how we talk about women as victims.

**Marie Thérèse:** Why are women always at a disadvantage?

**Maysa:** I believe it is high time women started taking responsibility for their actions. It is our problem and we should stop blaming men. Let's start talking about us and stop blaming the other.

**Ali:** The educational system also takes part in this censorship. I remember when I was a student our biology teacher used to skip the chapter on reproduction. This was at La Sagesse, a Christian school, not in Al-Makassed.

**Sahar:** What do you mean? What difference does it make?

**Ali:** My point is that when you are in a Christian missionary school that uses a foreign language talking about sexuality is easier than in Arabic. Moreover, it is pertinent and expected. I also believe that the Makassed is more strict than the Sagesse.

**Marie Thérèse:** I agree with Ali for when sexual education was no longer obligatory, the schools that taught in Arabic decided to delete it, but in schools where the subject was taught in French or English, it remained a requirement.

**Sahar:** I strongly believe that we are leaving out a very important variable which is religion. Given that religion plays a very important role in this part of the world it is partly responsible for the repression prevalent. With the widespread of secularism, people in the West became more liberal and free. There is one question I would like to ask Maysa: Many women believe that in engaging in sexual relations their problems will go away. Was that the case with you, did premarital sex solve your problems as a woman in the Arab world?

**Maysa:** I was never under the impression that once I become sexually active all my problems would be resolved. I had general problems like any teenager for I didn't have the freedom to go out and wasn't allowed to go to parties etc. However, engaging in sexual activity didn't solve or increase my problems. Also I disagree with you on the issue of religion. People in the West are secular, it is true, but the impact of religion and the aura surrounding it have not disappeared. The guilt feelings surrounding sexuality still exist despite the relative sexual freedom prevalent in the West. Hence, religion still has an impact in the West, the only difference being its intensity.

**Maxime:** I believe the problem is less related to religion than to society. If we take Paris as an example, no one knows or cares about what the others are doing with their life. On the contrary, in Lebanon everyone knows everyone and expressing ones sexuality openly will lead to a scandal. One of the most powerful tools used by society to restrict sexual relations is gossip or people's talk. People gossip about each other because they have nothing better to do.

**Jamal:** It is not just that, it is a totally different mentality. In the United States and at the height of the sexual revolution, feminists were visiting doctors and asking them to rupture their hymens. The exact opposite happens over here: women flock to doctors to repair their hymens prior to getting married.

**Sophia:** The guilt surrounding the sexual act as a result of the effect of religion is still very prevalent. I have a friend who got married recently to her boyfriend of many years. Given that the groom was living in France, they got married over there and contracted a civil marriage. According to her, the fact that she wasn't married to the guy religiously bothered her and prevented her, temporarily, from fully partaking in the sexual act. She had a problem sleeping with her husband prior to contracting a religious marriage. This legalization of sex via marriage was something she and I both found weird. It is important to mention that the friend in question is secular and was brought up in a secular environment.

# Red Lips

Mai Ghoussoub

## The artist's circular announced:

'We are building an Installation on the theme of refugees. One part of the installation consists of objects that you could carry along if you had to leave your home, at a short notice, with an unknown future.' The objects sent to the artists carried mainly memories of survival: keys, deeds, diplomas, radios, purses... One item looked puzzling and defied what seemed essential for a future of migration into the unknown: a red, strong strident lipstick tube! A light and superfluous memory into the future, or was it so?

Not for me, I understood immediately from where the sender's survival reflex drew its source. She, for it cannot be but a woman, or a man who feels like a woman, was ready to move onto a dark road carrying a strong message of life and a defiant energy. I understood because of the red lipstick marks that are still haunting a corner of my memory, hidden like an explosive dream in a now abandoned convent that stood discreetly on a hill, high up in the Lebanese mountains...

I was a teenager preparing for the Baccalaureat exam with my friends Nada and Joumana; the location was ideal for tranquillity and concentration. Silence and a long dissuasive distance from the city and its attractions, were definitely crucial for our studious goal. A convent run by Italian nuns for young novices secluded like we needed to be (only for two weeks as far as we were concerned) from male presence. 'Retraite' was the word we used in those days: Retreating, withdrawing from ordinary life, from our routine but

mainly from the lightness of normal being. The convent was hauntingly silent, for we learned from a somewhat less rigorous Italian nun, that the order was hosting young, very young girls coming from 'respectable families' whose fortunes had known better times and who for lack of a dowry were un-marriageable. A convent was the most suitable alternative for these would-be spinsters and this one in particular where only girls from 'a bonne famille' were admitted. The deadly silence that surrounded us was immaculate thanks to the binding oath made by every newcomer - 'a privileged girl' as our nun put it- to be mute for six months. The few Italian nuns who run the place spoke as little and as softly as possible out of respect for the novices' vow and out of love for 'the tears of Mary and the suffering of her son, Jesus Christ'.

There were tens of novices, rushing silently through the dark corridors. We met them briefly on our way to the dining room and our curious eyes searched eagerly for their faces that always managed to escape our gaze. Their eyes avoided us, fixing incessantly the tiled floor whenever they walked passed us. Their bodies looked small and fragile under their neat black tunics. Only the Mother-Superior appeared tall and upright in this convent. Her instructions, uttered through her thin lips, on the first day of our 'retreat' Nada, Jaoumana and I were as stiff as the rules that presided over the lives of this community of secluded and hushed women.

We were scheduled to spend two weeks in this haven of perfect isolation, but on the seventh day, the scene that recurs like a dark red dream in my sleepless nights, turned the convent into disarray cutting short

our worthy and scholarly endeavour. It is because of this scene, on the seventh day in that remote convent, that I understand how a refugee can proudly hold a lipstick tube in the face of a threatening future.

**Red is the Absolute: it is pure.**

**Its dazzling power stands for the warmth of the sun and the mystery of life.**

**Red is transgression, Red is energy.**

The Mother-Superior's lips loosened into a delighted smile, when she informed us that today was the Pope's feast and that the novices would be allowed to roam freely around the convent, to enjoy themselves the way they see fit as long as the vow of silence is respected. Soon, a few novices stood near the door of the large room that Nada, Joumana and I were sharing. Their steps, first timid and hesitant became more assertive upon our insistent hospitality. They were obviously amazed by our messy and overcrowded room and their faces turned crimson and more candid when Nada produced a large tin full of biscuits. They were suppressing their giggles, hiding their mouths with their hands, as Nada was battling with layers of clothes and books, mingled with some make up kits to free a box packed with sweets and chocolates. A bullet like stick fell away rolling noisily on the bare floor. Joumana picked it up and moved towards the mirror. Joumana could never resist a lipstick; she pulled its golden cover revealing a bright glittering magenta that she spread magnificently over her stretched lips.

**Since the ancient Egyptians, women have been staining their lip with everything from berry juice to Henna, from a paste of red rocks to the combo of wax. Ancient Egyptians went to their graves with rouged lips.**

I do not have a clear memory of how it all started. All I can see now is a room turned upside down by a bewildering frenzy. The novices were scratching their faces with all the lipsticks the three of us had carried with us, they took hold of our make-up kits like famished birds of prey competing over their victims. They were snatching them from each others hands, looking for more under the sheets, behind the books, under the tables. Red, cherry red, Mulberry, burgundy paste everywhere, all-around the novices lips. Red like cranberry juice, like deep wounds. Graffiti red, dark orange patches over white skins and pale necks. Soon the novices started exchanging shades of red from lips to lips, rushing back and forth towards the mirror looking victoriously at their own reflection, tearing off their veils and their collars, revealing shaved and patchy skulls, sweeping the mirror they had kissed over and over to make new space for more lip-marks, fresh red stains over its surface.

**Red, the colour of fire and blood.**

**It is the fire which burns inside the individual ... Below the green of the Earth's surface and the blackness of the soil, lies the redness, pre-eminently holy and secret. It is the colour of the soul, the libido and of the heart. It is the colour of esoteric lore forbidden to the uninitiated.**

A novice, short and wilful looking with her flushed baby face went onto wild intoxicating motions. She kept bending her torso throwing her shaved head downwards, then springing her body upright flinging her arms in all directions. She seemed to perform an angry and disconnected ritualized dance, oblivious of the uproar and chaos surrounding her. Noises emerged from the red faces that twirled and rushed around filling the room with a buzzing mad clatter. Sounds like shrieking laughter came out of red candy throats and brown glitter tongues. Screams like warriors seeking a desperate victory emerged from the now revealed and shaved heads of the frantic novices. Patches of hair scattered over their skull like a badly tended lawn. I suddenly realised that more novices joined in the frenzied feast, turning our room into a threatening sight of violet and wine-dark surfaces.

**Red embodies the ardour and enthusiasm of youth.**

**It is the colour of blood, the heat of the temper, it gives energy to excitement and to inflamed physical condition. With its warlike symbolism, red will always be the spoils of the war or of the dialectics between Heaven and Earth. It is the colour of Dionysus, the liberator and Orgiast.**

The tall and dark figure of the Mother-Superior stood straight putting a sudden end to the uncontrollable vitality of the room. She must have been there unnoticed for a while until silence fell upon the space that looked like an abandoned and desolate battlefield. A heavy and long silence that emphasized the languid embrace of two novices oblivious to the sudden change of mood around them. Her eyes half closed, her head leaning on the wall, one of the two was lustfully offering her neck, full of red lip marks, to the passionate kisses of the other.

Rage, like red burning arrows, tensed the lips of the Mother-Superior, intensifying the paleness of her complexion. She appeared like a colourless mask strapped inside her black tunic, rigid like a rope-walker immobilised in a snapshot. 'Stop it' she finally managed to scream. Her cry had the effect of a slap hitting the two novices on the face. They disentangled their bodies furtively and rushed out of the room.



Henri Matisse, *Odalisque in Red Trousers*, 1921 Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.

**Red the colour of the heart. Red like in forbidden, free, impulsive.**

**Red roses like the petals of desire. Did you know that in the 1700s the British Parliament passed a law condemning lipstick stating that 'Women found guilty of seducing men into matrimony by a cosmetic means could be tried for witchcraft. How was this law received in the' red district'?**

Her words resonated in the soundless room as if they were slashing its air. Her skin was pink with frustrated anger, her cheeks dreadfully colourless. She emerged like a general summoning a fallen army in a desolate and chaotic battlefield. The novice who was dancing and spinning like a drunken scarecrow was now lying on the floor, smiling through her half-opened lips – pink-purple lips- in a state of placid and satisfied absence. Looking straight above the chaos of our room, the Mother-Superior seemed like anger itself, controlled and obstinate.

**Red is anger.**

**Red warns, forbids and awakens vigilance. Red is blood, Red is fire, Red like full-bodied wine is the devil's choice.**

'Evil. Dirty. Evil'. Words emerged from the depth of her mouth as if struggling through her thin lips. 'The devil has conquered your souls and your flesh. The womb of your mothers has rejected you and you

have fallen into a dark abyss. Shame, shame on you, on your families. Ugly girls, your lips are scarlet like the sinner's lips. Jesus will not be sacrificed twice, you will not be saved. Your bad blood has pierced your skin and stained your tunics. You will burn in hell, in deep red flames. Only fire will cleanse your puffed lips and your spoiled innocence'.

The Mother-Superior's tongue was moving fast, spinning like a wounded snake inside her wax-pale face. She was shaking but holding herself upright, stiff and furious; she was exhorting the forces of evil that had bewitched her novices. 'Go back to your rooms and lock yourselves in. You have wounded Jesus-Christ and desecrated his home.

**Nocturnal red is the colour of the fire which burns within the individual and the earth. It is the colour of the devil's laughter, of hell's flames. Red is revolt.**

There was a war and the Convent is no longer there. It is said that two novices had stayed behind. They had rented a house not far from the abandoned convent. The villagers claim that two women still live in the brick house not far from the convent, they keep to themselves and live like hermits. But all those who have come close to their house swear that their lips are always bright and heavily painted.

# Premarital Female Sexuality in Morocco

Dr. Abdessamad Dialmy

In the Arab world, the study of "illegal" and/or "anomalous" sexualities have disturbed the political powers. Indeed, studying these sexualities as social phenomena is a way to recognize their existence and the difficulties faced by the religious authorities to limit sex to the marriage institutions. Therefore the study of these sexualities could become an ideological weapon to contest the Arab/Islamo political power legitimacy.

This situation explains difficulties that researchers may encounter in the field of sexuality. Indeed, it was the apparition of AIDS in the Arab world that weakened this resistance by the states that have begun to see the need for sexual studies. Indeed, the threat of AIDS has obliged some Arab states to study sexual behaviors independently of their legality and normality in order to understand their logic and to produce adapted messages of prevention.

Premarital female sexuality is at the heart of what is considered "illegal" sexuality. Virginity remains the incontestable condition and proof of the general intolerance to premarital female sexuality. Let's signal here the patriarchal reduction of sexuality to genital activity and to defloration. In fact, it is this view of sexuality that imports to the functioning of such a system since it determines filiation and inheritance. The other shapes of premarital female sexuality, non genital or without defloration, are not menacing. And in the setting of an incomplete modernity, an explicit consensus settled progressively around the definition of a virgin as some one who has not been deflowered. Such consensus means an effective recognition of the other forms of premarital female sexuality. In the context of

this incomplete modernity, medicine makes itself paradoxically an accomplice of both the girl and the patriarchal system while preventing pregnancy and proceeding to the suture of the hymen. To the girl, medicine provides the possibility of a sexual activity without risk of pregnancy and of recovering "virginity", and to the patriarchal system it saves the male honor and guarantees the purity of lineage.

This paper that intends to synthesize results of studies on premarital female sexuality in Morocco structures itself into three parts. In the first, it is about showing how premarital female sexuality is the indirect output of Moroccan feminism even if such a feminism does not fight for woman's right to sexual pleasure, as a basic human right independent of the matrimonial stature. In the second, we will view premarital female activity as a direct result of the age at the first marriage and describe it as a sexual substitutive practice because of the taboo of the virginity. We will expose some problems relative to this sexuality such as multi-partnership, homosexuality, virginity and prostitution.

## Feminist Struggle

My interest in sexuality emerged after writing a bibliography' that covers the notions of family, woman and sexuality (from 1912 to 1996). Owing to the emergence of AIDS, the subject of sexuality has currently shifted toward a kind of epistemological autonomy in the sense that it has begun to be studied independently of the subject of family and woman, and without being cautioned by the "morality" of family or woman. At the quantitative level, the pure sexual themes occur

py a minor status in relation to family and woman as the following two figures demonstrate:

**Figure 1: Distribution of Writings on Family-Women-Sexuality**

Period Theme	Colonization 1912-1955 %	Independence 1956-1975 %	Neo-national 1976-1996 %
Family	41,2	31,3	15,6
Woman	41,0	47,3	58,4
Sexuality	17,8	21,4	25,0
Total	100	100	100

**Figure 2: Distribution of Writings on Sexuality**

Period Theme	1912-1955 %	1956-1975 %	1976-1996 %
Behavior	1,6	1,9	7,5
Body,	3,2	1,9	3,5
Virginity			
Prostitution	3,2	0,0	2,5
Fertility	9,8	17,6	4,5
STD-AIDS	0,0	0,0	7,0
Total	17,8	21,4	25,0

As one notices through these two figures, sexual themes have recently acquired a relative statistical importance. Initially (1912 - 1975) sexuality was presented mainly through the demographic perspective (fertility and contraception). It is only in the third period that the demographic prism relatively fades away so that notions of sexual behavior and risky sexuality attract more attention. Indeed, concentrating attention on the family meant studying sexuality only through its institutional demonstrations. Variables of social studies of family overlook behaviors and sexual practices outside marriage.

Women studies took precedence during the last two periods, after-independence (1956-1975) and the neo-national era (1976-1996). These studies are mainly focused on themes like the veil, education, employment, the use of contraceptives and virginity. Consequently, the object woman was a stage in the progressive discovery of sexuality as "object" by social studies.

The emergence of the object "woman" is indeed correlated to the public production of the female body in a society that had to break with one of its ideological foundations, the public eclipse of female body. Education and employment particularly raise the question of the veil while the absence of contraceptive use reinforces in the same sense the female body as a purely reproductive entity devoted to pregnancies. The veil

is in fact the socio-religious mechanism that serves to eclipse the female body from the traditional urban public space.<sup>2</sup> And it was quite normal that, after Independence, Moroccan society had to deal with the issue of the veil when facing the question of female education and employment. The construction of a modern Morocco could not be effectively carried out in a setting divided into two hierarchical worlds, one public and male and the other private and female. National powers anxious to give woman a role in the process of development waged a battle against the veil and the seclusion of women. In this context, and as early as 1952, Allal el Fassi wrote that "the veiled woman is not less exposed than the unveiled one to the danger of prostitution."<sup>3</sup> He went a step further to assert that "homosexual practices" are related to the separation of spheres. In doing so, Al Fassi was clearly under the influence of Egyptian reformists (like Mohammed Abdou) or Egyptian feminists like Hoda Shaaraoui. But there was also the impact of the western<sup>5</sup> family model on the Moroccan family. Consequently, after Independence, the veil was no longer recognized as a sign of resistance to colonization. The battle of the veil is highly symbolic because it translated the historical necessity of the emergence of woman as a productive body in the productive space. The liberation from the veil was a kind of liberation from submission, from the patriarchal image of the home as the domain of woman. Indeed, public unveiling of the female body, reinforced by progressively extended contraceptive use, challenged the earlier definitions of the female body as "a trunk of pregnancies", as D. Chraïbi's refers to it,<sup>6</sup> to an instrument of erotic pleasure.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the recurrent theme of virginity indicates the will of the modern woman to enjoy premarital sex that challenges the patriarchal institutions.<sup>8</sup>

This public production of the female body began with the battle against the veil and is continuing through the battle against virginity. A. Bouhdiba<sup>9</sup> asserts that Arab-feminism went through two main stages: the liberation from the veil between the two world wars, and the right to flirt and to sex (critique of chastity and virginity). But according to J. Berque,<sup>10</sup> as early as 1927, the Moroccan reformist Allal al Fassi addressed a petition to the town council of Fez in which he demanded that the exposition of the bride's linen on the wedding night be prohibited. The petition reveals that Moroccan reform is precocious, having adopted a proto-feminist critique of the taboo of virginity since the 1920s.

Of course, the veil and virginity are two main themes directly related to the body and sexuality, which raises the general question of compatibility between women's liberation (modernity) and Islam.<sup>11</sup> For current

Moroccan feminism that is expressed essentially through reformist female associations,<sup>12</sup> there is no contradiction between women's liberation and Islam. For this elitist movement of the Moroccan female intelligentsia, women's liberation and integration into development can be achieved with Islam and not against it. In other words, Moroccan feminism never claims secularism. Nevertheless, some feminist claims are unacceptable for fundamentalists - the latter insisting that the veil does not mean that Muslim women have rejected modernity. Owing to massive access to academic education, the fundamentalist veiled woman is both involved in acquiring the positive western knowledge and maintaining Islamic ethics.<sup>13</sup> This ethics is the setting in which western knowledge must be made use of; it is also the setting that sets limits to female behavior in society. Consequently, the fundamentalist veil<sup>14</sup> is the symbol through which woman is both Muslim and modern in a mixed public space without arousing the danger of chaos (fitna) induced by the seductive powers of the female body.<sup>15</sup> According to some fundamentalist students of al Adl wa al Ihssane interviewed at Fez university,<sup>16</sup> the traditional veil means effectively woman's exclusion, but the "true" Islamic veil "protects" woman from being perceived as a desirable public body. This "new" veil does not prevent woman from participating in production, knowledge and power, and guarantees her free circulation in the public zones of the urban space. Hence insuring that the public space does not turn into a place of excitation and sexual harassment. That is why it is necessary to create the concept of veiled feminism<sup>17</sup> to understand the internal logic of fundamentalist feminism. Far from defining themselves as anti-feminist, the fundamentalists see the veil as a symbol that underlines woman's refusal to be reduced to a sexual and seductive body-object. Thus the moralization of relations between sexes is secured through a bodily discipline represented by the veil. Nevertheless, there is a gap between this ideal and reality: according to Dialmy, twelve percent of veiled young girls favor premarital sex.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to this drawback, Islamic feminism falls short when it comes to the claims of the Moroccan feminist associations concerning seven major points related to the family status and to sexual and reproductive health. These points were presented in the Project of National Plan of Woman Integration in Development<sup>19</sup> (1999) as non-secular claims and as possible Islamic options. These points are: the increase of the legal age of marriage to eighteen years for girls, the suppression of the matrimonial tutor, the suppression of polygamy, the transformation of repudiation into divorce, the allotment of conjugal wealth after divorce between spouses, the installation of condom distributors, and the protection of abortion outside marriage. Nevertheless, the general Islamic rejection<sup>20</sup>

of these points shows the limitations of an Islamic feminism in Morocco and the resistance of juridical Islam to sexual and reproductive rights for women, revealing an unhistorical definition of Islamic sexuality and family. Facing this resistance, Moroccan feminists cannot claim clearly the right to free sexuality for non married people. Perhaps Dialmy's book entitled *Toward an Islamic Sexual Democracy*<sup>21</sup> is the only work that demonstrates that the necessity to protect premarital sexuality against STD/HIV risk is not incompatible with Islamic law and with the spirit of Islam. In the chapter entitled "Sexual Health and Ijtihad", Dialmy argues that *Ijtihad* with both the available sacred texts and beyond the texts is necessary to protect sexual health as a central dimension of public health. Since premarital abstinence is unrealistic, it is less dangerous to use condoms, particularly that premarital sex is practiced in secret with or without a condom.

The religious resistance to the seven main feminist Moroccan claims shows that there is no difference between official Islam (ministry of Islamic affairs and Oulema) and Islamic fundamentalism as far as women and sexuality are concerned. One Islamic group that took the decision to struggle against gender liberation asserts that these seven points have already received a definitive Islamic answer: sexuality is dependent on marriage, and woman is dependent on man. This double dependency is supposed to be an Invariable according to juridical dominant Islam. Mystic Islam,<sup>22</sup> which shows the possibility of an Islam defined as a possible component of sexual rights and egalitarian family, is both excluded by Muslim scholars and fundamentalists.

#### Premarital Sexual Activity

Sociologically, the increase in pre-marital sexual activity is bound to dissociate sex from marriage. This activity is characterized by sexual substitutive practices that reconcile the modern principle of pleasure with the Islamic-patriarchal principle of non-defloration.

#### The Rise of Marriage at Middle Age

Moroccan social traditions make of a girl's marriage a major element in the sexual and procreative strategy inspired by a patriarchal reading of Islam. Nevertheless, the early marriage has several advantages. It is a mouth less to feed and a way to avoid the risk of premarital defloration, that is to say the risk of dishonor. Consequently the rate of single women is lower than that of single men; masculine celibacy is, in fact, more tolerated socially. Less than 1% of women remain bachelors at the end of their reproductive lives.<sup>23</sup>

But some social and economical factors have lead to

**Figure 3: Matrimonial statute according to the sex**

Statute Sex	Bachelor	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Indeterminate
Men	44,1	54,2	1,0	0,6	0,1
Women	39,0	53,8	5,5	1,6	0,0

the rise in the number of women who marry at a later age. Indeed, urbanization and schooling, though still incomplete, are gradually undermining the patriarchal paradigm of marriage at an early age. A tendency towards delayed marriages has been illustrated by the different socio-demographic investigations since the 1960s. According to the last National Investigation on the Health of the Mother and the Child (ENSME/PAPchild 1999)<sup>24</sup>, the percentage of women that married before reaching 26 years fell from 863 to one thousand among women aged 25-29 years. In the same way, this proportion fell further among married women at the age of 20 years, from 638 to one thousand among cohorts of women currently aged of 45-49 years, to 273 for one thousand among those of the cohort of 20-24 year women. Marriage among teenagers is decreasing at a fast rate. Investigation has revealed that marriage age varies according to different generations of women : Marriage at the age of 18 concerns 45% of women; between 45 and 49,19% among those who are between 25-29; and only 16% for those aged between 20 and 24 years. The rate of those who marry earlier than 15 years is only 8,4%.

The recession of marriage is confirmed by the female average age at the first marriage:

**Figure 4: Evolution of the female age at the first marriage**

Year	1960	1987	1994	1997
Average Age	17,3	23,4	25,8	26,4

During 1996-97, the average age of the urban women at the first marriage was 27,8 years (against 24,7 years in rural areas). Between 1994 and 1997, the rate of bachelor women increased: out of 10 women reaching approximately 30 years, 4 are single. The number of married women who prefer celibacy to polygamy is systematically increasing. The proportion of women living in polygamous unions regressed from 5,1% in 1992 to 3,6% in 1996-97. Polygamy is particularly decreasing among educated women.

One of the main consequences of the rise of the female average age at the first marriage is the emergence of female premarital sexuality, which is sometimes precocious, beginning at 14 years<sup>25</sup>. By the late 1970s the first survey on sexuality in Morocco by

Dialmy<sup>26</sup> revealed that only 8,7% adopted the Islamic law of premarital intercourse (2,2% among males and 18,3% among females). Moreover, premarital intercourse does not necessarily presuppose a marriage project and is practiced for itself, for pleasure (67,7% among men and 45% among women). In the 1980s, according to Naamne-Guessouss, "the majority of young girls (65,3%) have had one intercourse at least"<sup>27</sup>.

However, sexuality is a highly problematic issue. Legally, sex is prohibited for males and females before marriage, but, traditional standards are more unfavorable to females. Females are more submitted to familial and social coercion when it comes to the strict relation between sexuality and marriage. Usually, the males in the family lead this coercion, and, these males' manhood is evaluated according to the extent of their control over and coercion of "their women"<sup>28</sup>.

Yet, some men are adopting feminist attitudes to sex<sup>29</sup>. For this minority of men, premarital female sexuality is seen as the woman's right or a fact that has to be admitted. The girl who makes love in "a reasonable and respectable" manner is considered to be as virtuous as the one who does not make love. Sexual stability outside marriage can decrease the extent of social condemnation if sex is the result of love.

#### Sexual Practices

The practices described below mainly concern the sexual activity of teenagers and youngsters.

#### Masturbation

Among boys, masturbation begins long before puberty, starting from the age of eight<sup>30</sup>, and takes place without ejaculation. Collective masturbation is also a game, "the challenge to determine who can last longer than others"<sup>31</sup>.

Girls speak less of their masturbation, but more of rubbing themselves against objects such as the cushion, the pillow or the table<sup>32</sup>. The factors that arouse the desire for masturbation are varied enough. The two main sources are watching sex movies, and the small size of the parental lodging. Indeed, many boys and girls feel a strong sexual arousal when they either see or hear their parents making love<sup>33</sup>.

#### The Brush Stroke

It is a common expression by Moroccan youngsters to say that the penis operates like a brush between the big lips of the vagina or between the girl's thighs, penetration often being refused and feared. In this case, one could say that both females and males are convinced of the value of virginity as a non-defloration.

Girls find in the brush stroke a means that allows them to pass with success the test of "the good premarital sexual behavior", which means having sexual pleasure without defloration. By refusing the temptation of penetration, girls feel a kind of pride<sup>34</sup> and forget the shame and guilt that are socially associated with premarital sexual activity.

#### Sodomy

Among males, heterosexual sodomy is common, but a large majority of females regret sodomy. The main reason for this originates in the social and religious vision of "the sexually correct" according to which sodomy is condemned. But females often have to let themselves sodomized,<sup>35</sup> since sodomy is a surrogate to vaginal penetration. It is a substitute that helps them to keep the loved men and allows the man to ejaculate inside, in an inside. Some females admit to have experienced it and express remorse and disgust in general.<sup>36</sup> No female admits to have enjoyed sodomy.

#### Oral Sex

Oral sex constitutes another palliative for defloration. The woman's refusal to let herself be penetrated gives the man the opportunity to put pressure on her to get a fellatio.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, in general, the fellatio is a practice of substitution associated with premarital sexuality, or in some cases to an extra-conjugal activity.<sup>38</sup> But within the conjugal framework itself, the normalization of oral sexuality is admitted among a category of youngsters who have a high level of education, even though for others the fellatio reveals the sexual selfishness of the dominant male.<sup>39</sup>

#### Sexual Satisfaction

As a result of the rapid increase in female literacy and the spread of TV since the 1970s, young women have more access to the themes of romantic love and sexual consumption.<sup>40</sup> In the same way, the expansion of video shops in the 1980s encouraged the consumption of pornographic movies that play a pedagogic role in the erotic domain,<sup>41</sup> and in the discovery of sexual pleasure by Moroccan girls. A girl relates one night of love: "All my family was sleeping. I left the house and I rejoined the driver of the truck. We descended toward the river, 500 m. away from our house. I told him that I drink wine... He went up then in the truck and fetched a lot of bottles of it... He also took out a mattress. We began to drink, then we fucked in all positions. It was

a magnificent night of love. All ingredients were there, the moon, the river, screaming of animals, wine, music, sex... It was romantic, in spite of the absence of love... We enjoyed each other four times... We didn't suck each other, my partner was only a countryman."<sup>42</sup>

For the "new" young woman, a lover or a potential husband is appreciated for both his sexual and economic potency. Furthermore, some young unmarried women go as far as to seek consultation for frigidity.<sup>43</sup>

#### Socio-Sexual Problems

Four sexual problems related to premarital sexuality seem very important: multi-partnership, homosexuality, virginity and prostitution.

#### The Multi-Partnership Model

For the majority of young people, the multi-partner relationships seem to be the norm. However, one can distinguish between a successive multi-partner relationship, that is change of the partner, and a simultaneous multi-partner relation that consists in having several partners at the same time.<sup>44</sup> The first type is more invoked by girls, like this student who asserts that : "When I was five, it was my teacher. Then my cousins kissed me frequently. When aged fourteen, it was a pupil in my classroom. After that, I met a taxi driver, one of my professors at Ghafsay, then another cousin who wanted to marry me. Then it was a boy in the high school, then another professor, the student whom I married, another professor at the university, and now a married man who works in a bank."<sup>45</sup> The three last partners she had affairs with simultaneously.

Another girl affirms that she tries not to have too many partners at a time. The sexually unsteady girl is said to be a "flirt". Indeed, she is compared to a prostitute even though she doesn't accumulate partners to accumulate money. She is said to be a prostitute because of her conduct. Sometimes the family, unable to face the accusing gaze of others, has to move out of the district. The girl's loose behavior "offends the masculine pride of the men in the family and reduces them to powerless males."<sup>46</sup>

But the simultaneous multi-relationship is more frequently invoked by boys: To have a "pure" fiancée and several dirty "occasional" sexual partners. This form of multi-partner relations saves morality, on the one hand, and satisfies the need for security on the other hand, ensuring an ego that is culturally submissive to the virility imperative.

#### Homosexuality

Girls are discreet and allusive on this topic. For them, homosexuality is not considered a safer substitute for heterosexual love (eventhough there is no risk of defloration or pregnancy in comparison with the het-

erosexual intercourse), but rather an immoral behavior, a perversion<sup>47</sup>. Made indignant by the question on adolescent homosexuality, one pupil took it as an insult : “you are mad... I didn’t have intercourse with boys and you want me to have some with girls... It is impossible”. The general attitude toward homosexuality is negative: 90% reject male homosexuality while 87,2% disapprove of male homosexuality.<sup>48</sup> The perception of homosexuality as an anomaly is expressed by the current Arabic translation, *choudoud*, which literally means perversion. It should be noted here that masculine homosexuality is not referred to as *liwat* nor is lesbianism referred to as *sihaq* in spite of the existence of these two terms in Arabic. The reason for that is that *liwat* and *sihaq* are more descriptive, with less perverse connotations.

Nevertheless, homosexuality is accepted when individuals are faced with economic problems. Seeing that emigration is her only way out, a girl prostitute is ready for all “perversions”: “I had sex with women. At the beginning, I was astonished. The first one was a Western woman who taught me what to do. She told me: if I enjoy it with you, I will save you of this work and will take you with me to France. We spent five hours in bed.”

For males, the homosexual intercourse is practiced as a means to prove a double virility. The active homosexual (*louat*) makes love to women and men without defining himself as a bi-sexual person. For this reason, the Moroccan male would report his first homosexual relationship only if he had the active role, the penetrating role. No one speaks about his first homosexual experience where his partner has penetrated him.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the situation of the *hassass* (who likes to be penetrated) and the *zamel* (the homosexual male prostitute), the two figures of “passive” homosexuality, is different. Their sexual practices are not taken into consideration because they are socially depreciated.<sup>50</sup> The *hassass* is more depreciated because he likes to be penetrated. The *zamel*, on the other hand, is considered more as a worker, a prostitute. For some homosexuals, prostitution can be a stratagem to live their homosexuality in a less dangerous way.

#### Virginity and Artificial Hymen

Dialmy asserts that it is necessary to distinguish between Koranic virginity and consensual virginity<sup>51</sup> in order to understand the evolution of sexuality as a socio-historical phenomenon. Virginity in the Koran means that the girl has no sexual experience, while consensual virginity is one way to keep the hymen intact. In the setting of consensual virginity, sexual activity without defloration has many advantages for the woman. She proves to her partner and the society that she is master of herself, worthy of confidence,

able to conform to requirements of her social environment, and respectful of taboos. Paradoxically, therefore, sexuality without defloration is a proof of the good conduct of the girl, an element in her strategy of marriage. It is about giving to the partner a foretaste of delights that awaits him, to enjoy oneself if possible without losing the hymen-capital.

Sexuality without penetration is therefore a construction of the consensual virginity by the girl. A worker of Fez maintains that “when I was young, my mother taught me that sex is shameful, illicit, painful... she especially taught me the importance of virginity and the fear of the man”. This type of education considers “the man as the real enemy of the woman” because “the girl is often the victim of the lasting sexual relation... Men are wolves... Virginity is the girl’s most important weapon... Thanks to virginity, the girl can prove her femininity, her chastity, her purity. And it is the only criterion that allows the man to distinguish between the prostitute and the girl of good family” (Law student, Fez).

The consensual virginity reconciles the demand for premarital sex and the demand of the neo-patriarchal man and the Islamic requirement for virginity. It is a compromise-test, an indication of social virtue, and a proof of restraint with the beloved man. Nevertheless, girls remain victims of a neo-patriarchal social order. Sexual modernization is far from being a complete process. For the vast majority “the goal of sex is marriage! and sex has to be practiced only with the husband, in legality... not in the street, like animals... It is better to suffer than to have sex with the fear of the police, of rumors, and of pregnancy....”

In the case where premarital sex leads to defloration, marriage becomes an obligation to avoid a social scandal particularly for the woman. The virginity-hymen is a form of capital for the girl’s family, through which she gains honor and profit. The hymen is convertible to financial capital when marriage is negotiated, and the dowry of a non-deflowered girl is always superior to the one of the deflowered girl.<sup>52</sup>

For this reason, males see premarital sex with girls as dangerous. They view it as a trap used by girls to force them into marriage. In certain instances, when the girl asks her partner to deflower her it is seen by many men as a feminine ruse that is more destructive than any male ruse.

However, gynecologists attest the existence of numerous girls who are deflowered and not embarrassed at all by it.<sup>53</sup> Among girls in higher education,<sup>54</sup> virginity must be preserved until marriage for only 9% of girls, and after engagement for 40%. Of course, opportuni-

ties of marriage decrease for girls of modest social origin (low classes and rural surroundings). In this case, consensual virginity is not a simple “bodily detail”; it is the only “capital “. In these surroundings, one even has to provide a certificate of virginity at the time of the marriage festivities.

Consequently within such circumstances, girls opt for an artificial virginity. According to the Director of Femmes du Maroc, the repairing of the hymen is the most frequent surgical “operation.”<sup>55</sup> It is a flourishing medical trade in the region of Casablanca-Rabat, costing “between \$US 500 and 600 per operation”. Some general practitioners perform the operation for lower prices<sup>56</sup>, \$US 50/60, but the suture may not hold and the husband discovers the subterfuge. For feminists, physicians who exercise the repairing of the hymen adhere objectively to a false notion of honor and, therefore, reinforce the patriarchal system<sup>57</sup>. Do they make the repairing to avoid a scandal for the girl, or do they do it for humanitarian reasons? Do they make it for merely financial interests? Further research on this topic is necessary to answer these questions.

#### Prostitution

Sex marketing is correlated to the poverty of women and the impoverishment of families<sup>58</sup>. Very often, prostitution is the consequence of a necessity to survive and to support others (a family) and remains the most accessible means to face unemployment and a precarious life.

#### Between Unemployment and Consumption

Trading in sex is one way to deal with the social and economical crisis (provoked by the Structural Adjustment Plan since 1983). Sex has become a means to earn money and to live up to the higher cost of living. The impoverishment of families forces numerous girls and boys, young women and men to sell their bodies in a market more and more organized within non-official networks. Indeed, prostitution remains a non-formal answer to unemployment and poverty<sup>59</sup>, and concerns girls, women, men and children. Since the Moroccan economy promotes itself so much through sex, one is able to speak of a “prostitution economy”. With the absence of a sustainable development policy, sexual work represents a solution or a relief from problems of unemployment. It creates a kind of dynamic consumption in certain regions and sectors (tourism) and serves to attract some foreign investors. All things considered, tolerance for prostitution remains the only option left for a realistic economic policy.

In Morocco, sex is growing into a business, a market, and an economically profitable activity providing a means of survival for several social categories. Girls (from age 14), repudiated women, students, unem-

ployed graduates, homosexuals, female workers in factories are the concerned social categories related to this phenomenon. Even victims of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), hide their infection from the customer in order not to lose him. Mothers take to prostitution, occasionally, at the beginning of the school year to be able to buy supplies for their children, or to buy the ritual sheep at the time of the Big Feast.<sup>60</sup> Masculine prostitution<sup>61</sup> is both heterosexual and homosexual. Women (not only foreigners) pay men for sexual services, a phenomenon that has started to be socially visible<sup>62</sup>. As for homosexuals, it is generally recognized that their number is increasing.

Sometimes, sexual work also responds to a need for luxury and consumption. Basically, a woman goes out with men because she needs to satisfy some elementary needs like a lipstick, perfume, a birthday gift. For girls coming from the middle classes, prostitution is not a means to make money, but a means to be able to consume more and better, to have a more comfortable and luxurious life<sup>63</sup>. Some women already financially independent use sex to enjoy more financial comfort. To be able to have better clothes, secretaries whose salaries are lower than the minimal salary, submit themselves easily to several men (though they do not identify themselves as prostitutes). The correlation sex/money has received a very strong boost owing to Arab Gulf tourism.<sup>64</sup>

#### Condom Use

Within the setting of prostitutional relationships, very few are aware of the risk of MST-AIDS, and thus do not bother to use condoms. One prostitute asserts that “when I have some doubts concerning a customer, I ask him to use the condom... I have doubts when the customer is too skinny, with a pale face or someone whose skin peels.”

But the majority of female prostitutes do not think about any elementary clinical exam because they know that if they try to impose the condoms, they might lose the customer. The relationship between customer and prostitute indicates that “the possibility to protect oneself is limited (...) when there is no equality in the relation.”<sup>65</sup> An almost mystical surrender to God’s will on the part of the Moroccan prostitute, a resigned and fatalistic attitude, forces her to admit that she does not master her fate. Since she has no capability to control the situation, she is unable to take preventive measures.

#### Social and Political Cautions

The transformation of sex into economic gain is done with social consent, that is to say with the approval of the community and the family. With the absence of adequate development policies, some poor families



have no alternative but to turn their children to prostitutes. Sometimes, children (including the males) are even encouraged overtly by their families.<sup>66</sup> In certain regions, villagers have demonstrated against police raids aimed at prostitutes, since “it makes people live” and improves the local trade.<sup>67</sup>

It is clear that the administrative authorities are conscious of the economic role of prostitution in certain regions. Indeed the banning of prostitution in these regions would produce a real crisis, and thus political decision-makers<sup>68</sup> turn the blind eye. Indeed, prostitution is a factor that delays a potential social explosion. This complacency and complicity on the part of the public authorities is ample evidence that prostitution is becoming a factor in the tolerated sexual liberalization. This policy of tolerance that consists of pretending not to see (prostitution) is interrupted by limited actions and campaigns by the government that serve several ends at the same time: to put pressure on the actors in the field, to remind the people that the authorities can lose their patience, and to prove to the fundamentalists that the state is fighting debauchery. Though it is generally unaccepted, prostitution and sexual liberation reveal a decided intent by the government to fight fundamentalism. Indeed, “prostitution rather than poverty” and “prostitution rather than the veil” would be the tacit slogans of the administration.<sup>69</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The socio-anthropological studies that describe sexual behaviors and practices in Morocco are generally qualitative. In fact, only four studies<sup>70</sup> have tried to assess quantitatively sexual behaviors and practices, and their sample is not representative. The political powers and the religious forces are clearly unequipped to assess Moroccan sexuality. The quantitative assessment of

“illegal” and “anomalous” sexual behaviors and practices would be an official recognition of their existence and their importance, an inconceivable thing within the logic of a state that essentially governs in the name of fundamentalist Islam attached to what must be.

These qualitative studies come to one essential conclusion: sexual behaviors and practices are characterized by an uncontrollability, not to mention anarchy.<sup>71</sup> Of course such a statement disturbs an Islamic state, which is unable to demonstrate the opposite. The last weapon is to declare the results of qualitative studies that are not representative.

But the sexual behaviors and practices described above are also referred to in two Moroccan newspapers, *Al Abhath al Maghribiya* (in Arabic) and *L'Opinion* (in French). “From heart to heart” and “Beyond taboos” are respectively the two columns through which personal sexual stories have appeared twice a week for more than 2 years. The magazine *Femmes du Maroc*<sup>72</sup> also deals regularly with feminine sexual themes. In doing so, these popular publications generate public discussion on sexuality through a story teller, the reader, the sexologist<sup>73</sup> or psychologist, thus undermining the social and political taboo of sexuality.

The main lesson that has to be learned from this paper is that the traditional hierarchical relationship of sexes is currently in transition. The traditional dichotomy between two hierarchical sexual identities is problematized by the evolution of the Moroccan society, and more precisely by the evolution of sexuality and reproduction. Female sexuality has been able to affirm itself outside the institution of marriage; it is a sexuality that is de-institutionalized and that is beginning to claim the right to auto-determination and independence.

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# Arab Lesbian Websites: A Brief Overview

Reviewed by Abir Hamdar

Two years ago, Lebanese internal security forces closed a gay and lesbian website and tried to track its owners. The case dragged for sometime and captured the attention of various international human rights organization. A year later, the Egyptian government organized a huge crackdown on its homosexual community. Consequently, the country's websites were shut because their owners were either arrested or feared arrest. Lebanon and Egypt are not alone. Almost all Arab countries prohibit, monitor or ban gay and lesbian chat rooms and matchmaking websites. They believe these sites foster communication among homosexuals, allowing them to become less of a minority group. Nevertheless, the Special Internet Crimes Unit some Arab countries have established have not been able to stop this community from making contact via the internet nor from making it clear that they do exist. After all, many of these websites are being run from abroad. And while an extensive search on the internet reveals that the number of Arab gay websites exceeds that of lesbians, the latter have still been able to establish their own communication forum. Below is an overview of these Arab Lesbian websites. The information does not seek to promote nor undermine the latter. Its main aim is to present a brief overview of them.

## Bint el Nass

As its French, English and Arabic homepage explicitly states, Bint el Nass or daughter of the people is a website whose mission is "to serve the needs of women who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer people in any state of transition ... and who are identified ethnically or culturally with the Arab world, regardless of where they live." And this mission, claims the site, is made possible by the Mujadarra Girls, a sponsored project of the Queer Cultural center that is located in San Francisco. For

both groups, the ultimate aim boils down to one thing: constructing a space that defies the "narrow and twisted images of queers, Arabs, and women," and a space that "creates something new; images of queer Arab women." So far, it appears the website has abided by its mission. After all, it has created a serious online cultural magazine whereby women can explore and focus on a particular issue of particular interest to them – each issue has a guest producer who manages the content material. Some of the issues discussed include dreams, god, sex and the community. Yet, it is their seventh issue – which is also their most recent – entitled "Native Land, Land of Exile: Looking for Our Territory" which is the most interesting. Through personal testimonies and essays – signed by first names and/or anonymous writers – the issue explores what it means to be an Arab Lesbian within familiar and foreign territories. It also tackles the notion of home, exile and land from the perspective of these women. For its eighth issue, Bint el Nass plans to embark upon the theme of "Bridges," one which it hopes will answer questions such as: "How do you experience bridges among the diversity of queer Arab women, across spectra of gender, and with non-Arab identities and worlds? Who else is here? Who, or what, is on the other side of the we that is here?" Finally, the site promises that, in the near future, it will integrate information and material related to film, photography and fine art.

## Sehakia

Like its predecessor, Sehakia ( Arabic word for Lesbian) is a cultural/intellectual website whose target is the Arab and North African Lesbian woman. This multilingual site (French, English, Arabic and Berbere) – a product of a group called the N'DeeSsees – emerged in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. On its homepage, Sehakia explains that

September 11 started the "rise of arabophobia and islamophobia worldwide." Thus, in the face of this "international political context and in the context of the dramatic situation of lesbians and gays in Arab countries," Sehakia has found it essential that Arab and North African Lesbian women make their voice heard. In short, they have thought it crucial to "organize ourselves in a collective as a place for reflection, action, and creation," and to make the language and culture of Arab and Muslim countries heard. As a result, the site tries to highlight all productions by the women they represent, be it art exhibitions, publications, and audio projects. More importantly, the site offers legal and juridical information "to be used as an interface for Lesbians or women who are in critical condition."

## Ahbab

Contrary to Sehakia and Bint el Nass, Ahbab is not an exclusively Arab Lesbian website. Rather it is one that targets the gay and Lesbian Arab community as a whole. Supported by the GLAS\*, the site both claims to "educate and entertain". Thus, it features an archive of articles and news-briefs about homosexuals that were published previously in Arab newspapers and magazines. It also provides a list of the latest publications on the theme of homosexuality as well as information and tips about HIV in the Arab world. Yet, it is their entertainment sections that take up the larger portion of the content material. These entertainment pages fall under various categories: The Radio Station page where visitors can chat with their peers live and can request or listen to a song. A Personals page where

individuals "looking for love, friends or just plain fun" can get in touch with other homosexuals, browse through pornographic pictures (lesbians and gays have separate photo exhibition ) and meet new friends. Of course, the page insists Ahbab must be informed of any success stories about finding Mr. or Miss Right.

## Lazzeeza

Lazzeeza is yet another project of the GLAS. Although it has not been officially inaugurated, the site still manages to offer a very brief synopsis of who and what they plan to be. In general, Lazzeeza appears to be the name of an Arab Lesbian group that hopes to feature cultural and entertainment material for women sharing their identity. Therefore, Lazzeeza has made calls for specialized and interested individuals to help in the actual setting of the site and to contribute with the content material. And in the time that entails to do so, Lazzeeza has provided its visitors with a list of links to other Arab Lesbian sites and to Lesbian resources online. Nevertheless, it is still hard to determine whether Lazzeeza will offer serious content material or will provide cheap entertainment.

\* GLAS stands for the Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society. It is an international organization established in 1988 in the USA with worldwide chapters. It serves as a networking organization for Gays and Lesbians of Arab descent or those living in Arab countries. GLAS explains it is part of the global Gay and Lesbian movement seeking to stop discrimination based on sexual orientation.

# Forthcoming

*Al-Raida Centenary Issue  
on the Arab Women's Movement*

# Is There a Lesbian Identity in the Arab Culture?

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The subject of female homosexuality in the Arab intellectual tradition has always been one of absence or dismissal. This can be attributed to the fact that female sexuality is mostly seen as primarily heterosexual in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Consequently, erotic relations among women are devalued as a temporary substitute for the love of men, and are considered of no real threat to the dominant heterosexual system as long as they remain undercover, or in the closet. Because homoerotic desire “defies social norms, breaks patterns and expectations for relationships” (Hart 69), homosexuality is a taboo subject that is rarely dealt with in Arabic literature. Hence, my main interest in this paper is to examine the grass roots of the lesbian identity in feminist discourse, and to relate the representations of lesbians in some interdisciplinary publications in lesbian studies to two recent Arabic novels: Misk Al-Ghazal (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, 1986) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, and *Ana, Hiya, Anti* (I am You, 2000) by Elham Mansour.

In Western discourse in general, and the feminist one in particular, the lesbian identity is perceived as the outcome of what is termed as “radical feminism”. This assumption denies the essence of the lesbian identity,

which existed ever since the dawn of history, and before the emergence of the feminist movement in the twentieth century. As a reaction against men, feminists have incorporated the term ‘separatist’ and ‘radical’ feminism as a means of exposing their revolt against the authority of men and the patriarchal system, which is exclusively heterosexual. This feminist tendency, which is sometimes perceived as lesbian, has nothing to do with lesbianism as an innate attraction towards women. In most feminist writings, lesbianism is still understood as a political reaction against the love of men. Amid feminist discussions around sex as power, there emerged an assertion of lesbianism as a political choice, a means of escaping relationships as decided and controlled by men. It remained the case that it was the lesbian separatist, wanting as little as possible to do with men, who set the pace.

With the exposure of Arab culture to Western cultures over the media, and pornography sites over the internet, lesbianism started to be more and more associated in the minds of the Arab viewers with heterosexuality in which the penis is replaced by a dildo. As Teresa de Lauretis asserts, “public forms of fantasy” regarding women’s desire for women are unavailable and sup-

natural’ holds sway twenty years after the woman’s movement began. The result is that both heterosexual men and women come to regard the penis as the ‘organ of pleasure’ and to generalize this perception to include all homosexuals who are portrayed as playing roles that correspond to men being active and to women being passive.

Consequently, lesbians are stereotyped as butch, playing the role of men, and femmes playing the role of women; a classification rejected by Elham Mansour’s lesbian Seham, who finds herself abused as a butch whose main role is to please women, without getting the love that she aspires to- a pure lesbian love that is void of the heterosexual meanings inscribed on her body. Therefore, she rejects the butch role where she is seen as a means of fulfilling the desires of heterosexual women for “(fuck)”, while not getting the true lesbian love and pleasure that she aspires to. (166). It is as Judith Butler argues, the figure of the butch/femme that exposes the naturalness of heterosexuality as a heterosexist presumption (Butler, 1990). Hence, in order for the lesbian identity to exist, there is a need to free lesbianism of both the heterosexual assumptions and the feminist ones that politicize butch/femme lesbian relationships. In fact, the feminist discourse that turns lesbianism



Elsie Hakim. *Thalia et son besoin d'être* 1977

pressed, and “Western cultures” hegemonically represent “lesbianism as phallic pretension or male identification.” (de Lauretis 75, 308). Thus, the heterosexual male model is put at the center of any representation of a female homoerotic relation. The clitoris is totally absent in any discourse about women in general, and about lesbians in particular, for two main reasons: ignorance of its existence, and the predominance of the heterosexual ideology that thinks in vaginal terms. Freud’s notion that clitoral eroticism is immature and that vaginal orgasm through penetration is ‘mature and

into a political choice is not liberating. Instead, it puts lesbians in a troublesome position where they have to play a major role in fulfilling the desires and fantasies of some heterosexual feminists at the expense of their true lesbian desires.

Because the dominant language in a heterosexual culture is “a heteropatriarchal language” as Celia Kitzinger refers to it (Mohin, 34), words such as “clitoris” are worthless, because they don’t bring any sort of pleasure to the typical heterosexual male whose

main interest is in achieving a vaginal penetration in order to assert his masculinity. Thus, it is the penis-vagina difference that establishes the heteropatriarchal desire. This heterosexual difference is put at the center of any discourse on lesbianism, which becomes an imitation of a typical heterosexual 'norm'. Physical difference is made to be erotic, so "natural desire" is seen as directed towards an "erotic complement"; i.e., a vaginal gap aspiring to be filled by a penis (Hart, 70). According to Nett Hart, "Heteropatriarchy eroticizes difference. It creates others, then makes these others the object of our "desire" ... Difference is made to be erotic so "natural desire" is for an erotic complement." (Hart, 70)

In the Arab world, however, the lesbian identity doesn't seem to exist, not because there are no lesbians, but because practices, which might be termed as lesbian in Western culture are left nameless in the Arab culture. Taking into consideration that the word 'lesbian' is rarely used in Arabic, and once used, it is charged with negative connotations, most lesbians avoid any public assertion of their identities. Besides, it is quite easy for Arab lesbians to deprive their emotional and physical intimacies of their lesbian connotations, because it is common in a conservative Arab culture that advocates separation between the sexes to find intimate relations among members of the same sex, without having to call such relations homosexual. Therefore, homosexuals can really manage to go with the mainstream, unless they decide to openly state their homosexual tendencies. Nevertheless, a lesbian identity becomes impossible under a separatist culture in which gestures of love among members of the same sex are tolerated, whatever their implicit connotations might be to the Western observer. Thus, it is Arab female homosociality that facilitates female homoeroticism.

Since sexuality is integral to most analyses of lesbianism, there is an essential need to look at the ways in which lesbian sexuality is portrayed in the novel. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, the contemporary lesbian fiction must be written by a self-declared lesbian, because "the nature of the lesbian makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it" (Professions of Desire 52). Hence, the lesbian novel "places love between women, including sexual passion at the center of its story". On the basis of such a definition, the lesbian novel does not seem to exist in Arabic fiction, except - to a certain extent - in the case of Elham Mansour's *I am You* in which the main focus of the novelist is a lesbian woman who faces a lot of problems in her attempts to assert her identity in a heterosexual society. Though Mansour adopts an autobiographical tone in her narration of the events, she manages to detach herself from that of her lesbian protagonist, Seham. In other words,

the reader can easily distinguish between the lesbian identity of Seham and the identity of the narrator who tries to remain detached. In this context, one could say that the writer/narrator cannot be regarded as a self-declared lesbian.

What adds to the ambivalent position in which the lesbian identity is put is that it is almost always portrayed from a male-oriented perspective, even by female writers who sometimes tend to assert the heterosexual perspective by giving a distorted picture of lesbianism which is portrayed as a means to an end as in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. The work can be construed as another misrepresentation of lesbians in homophobic cultures. Though in conservative and separatist cultures, same-sex relations are more tolerated than heterosexual ones, Al-Shaykh adopts the homophobic Western ideology, and tries to defend her privileged character against the charge of lesbianism. In other words, she seems to be aware of the way in which the word has been used as a slur. Although she does not condemn lesbianism, her attitude towards the lesbian affair between the Saudi Nour and the Lebanese Suha entertains the possibility that the writer is homophobic. Her novel asserts the stigma historically attached to lesbianism, which is associated with negative and undesirable attitudes, especially for a Westernized woman to whom the sight of two women dancing together is regarded as 'weird' and 'unnatural', and her thrill at being kissed by a woman, is immediately followed by a feeling of guilt, sickness and disgust. Hence, the writer forces the lesbian affair to abide by the heterosexual ideology that celebrates the kind of love that is based on biological difference.

In other words, Al-Shaykh's novel tends to assert the male-oriented perspective that regards lesbianism as an outcome of a conservative social structure that forbids women any access to men. Hence, lesbian relations are regarded as not chosen out of an innate tendency, but as imposed on women because of the absence of men, or the incapacity of some men to fulfill the sexual desires of women. In both cases, lesbianism is undervalued as a mere substitute for the love of men, that can be eliminated once women find suitable male partners, and once men learn how to please women. Such a perception disregards the fact that lesbianism is, for some women, a desired end and a true expression of their innermost feelings and bodily desires, that have nothing to do with either the absence or presence of men.

By giving a distorted picture of lesbianism, the novelist asserts the heterosexual perspective that contributes to the misrepresentation of lesbians in most cultures. The silencing of the lesbian discourse in Al-Shaykh's novel appears as an attempt on the part of the novelist

to assert the accepted social values that require women to make love to men, but not to women. These values tolerate lesbian relations only in the absence of men. This creates a dilemma for the lesbian character in Mansour's *I am You* who feels abused and exploited by women who use her desire for intimacy as a means of satisfying their unfulfilled sexual desires, but who abandon her once their desires are met. For instance, when she expresses her wish for a true lesbian love, she remembers herself spending "seven or eight hours in bed with a crazy woman ... and when I decided to sleep in her bosom, as a child, to hide in her breast, she accused me of not being fit for hugging ...." (166).

In other words, the lesbian is deprived of the chance to enjoy the kind of safety and protection that a same-sex relationship offers, a relationship in which the self and the other are one and the same.

The importance of Elham Mansour's novel is that it brings to light the difference between lesbian desire that stems from the body and the one that stems from feminist politics. The former is seen as authentic, natural, and forthright as in the relationship between the child and the mother; it belongs to the realm of the semiotic as it needs no language to express itself other than the body language. For Mansour's protagonist, the first discovery of lesbian sensations is experienced during childhood, first by the mother's touches and then by the hugs and caresses of her female school-teacher. Nevertheless, her lesbian love surpasses that of the mother-daughter relationship. Mansour's lesbian is described as a male-brained individual, who rejects traditional femininity, and is referred to as "garçon manqué". When she first had her menstrual cycle, it was a bitter mourning day for her" (Mansour 11). Though her mother tried to explain to her that she is now a woman and this is natural for all girls, Seham rejected this fact, and began to express her dislike of any kind of a female dress. She was always dressed in shirt and pants and was more comfortable in masculine shoes. Hence, cross-dressing is seen as a means of transcending her female identity and an expression of her lesbian sexuality. For her, dressing is the obvious compromise, if she cannot express her lesbian desire for a woman as the man does. At least she can be transsexual in terms of the clothes she insists on wearing.

In Mansour's novel, there is harmony between the gender dressing rules and one's gender identity that matches one's sexual orientation. Hence, the problem of self-representation for the lesbian is seen at its best in the character of Seham who is portrayed as a "true invert" whose attraction towards women has nothing to do with men who do not seem to be desired objects to her. She tells us: "I was never attracted to males" (75). Her main attraction was to the female

body: its femininity, softness and warmth. (37). The female is the only one, who can stimulate her whole being, and all her feelings and sensations (76). Despite the emphasis on dress codes, lesbian sexuality remains a sort of sexual, emotional and physical attraction towards women - an attraction that has more to do with one's "genes", as Doctor Layal asserts. (76).

In the case of Al-Shaykh's novel, lesbianism is seen as a novel experience that can be enjoyed as a substitute for unfulfilled heterosexual desires. Hence, the lesbian body becomes politicized in the sense that it can oscillate between the heterosexual position and the homosexual, depending on the woman's choice, and situation. In this novel, lesbianism is used as a means of revolting against the heterosexual system in which heterosexual women finding themselves incapable of subduing men, turn towards women in the harem. In other words, lesbians become sexual objects used to satisfy the desires of heterosexual women who exploit them either in the name of 'bisexuality', or 'radical feminism'.

The lesbian identity in the Arab world is still perceived from behind walls and mirrors that do not reflect the true essence of lesbian sexuality. Nevertheless, closets have opened to the Arab readers who have long been denied the right of approaching such taboo issues. In Elham Mansour's novel: *I am You*, the Lebanese writer crosses the barriers that have surrounded female sexuality for centuries. Unlike Mansour, Al-Shaykh makes all women potential lesbians. The title of Mansour's novel, brings to mind the words of the French feminist Luce Irigaray: "Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once." (Irigaray 1985: 209).

The earlier manner of perceiving women does not help the lesbian identity; instead it undermines any possibility of a legitimate existence. If all women can be lesbians, they can also become heterosexuals, and this essentialist thinking works in favor of the dominant heterosexual ideology.

It seems important to reinvent the 'lesbian identity' that is distorted by feminist misconceptions. By turning lesbianism into a political choice, feminists have neglected the ever-existing lesbian identity, which has more to do with body politics than with feminist politics. If lesbianism is a political choice for feminists, heterosexuality itself can be a possible alternative for lesbians, which contradicts with the true lesbian identity. By choosing lesbianism as a political choice, some feminists will end up denying their innate heterosexual identity just to prove a point and adopt a particular sex-

ual politics. In this regard, one can be accused of essentialism; that is essentializing heterosexual women as merely heterosexual, with no other desires or tendencies. Since lesbianism existed before the emergence of feminism, one can distinguish between two lesbian identities: the one whose lesbian body is a biological destiny, and the other whose choice is an expression of one's feminist politics. The third mysterious identity that is still locked within the two is a combination of body politics and gender politics: a sort of a transsexual and a transgendered lesbian.

Seen in the above light, one should not only distinguish between lesbians whose sexual attraction towards women is inborn, and the cultural lesbians whose lesbianism is a political choice, but one should realize the necessity of enabling inborn lesbians to choose to normalize their body politics, and their natural lesbianism. In feminist discourse, lesbian relations are interpreted within a heterosexual system where homosexuality is used as a means of threatening men, and showing them that women have their different ways of satisfying their sexual desires. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh* the feminist Suha insists that her first 'natural' attraction is towards men, and her discovery of lesbianism, despite its fun, was a temporary outlet. If feminism wins its battle against men in such a manner, lesbianism will surely lose its legitimacy, in the sense that there is no reason for its existence from a heterosexual perspective. Luckily, other feminist discourses have seen the lesbian body in a different manner and have enabled lesbians to reclaim the female body from the realm of abstraction to the representation of concrete bodies, bodies in the plural, bodies that speak different languages.

Nevertheless, a lesbian identity is still impossible under the current conditions where lesbian visibility remains a problem. Besides, the singularity of the lesbian identity as it exists nowadays suggests that there is something coherently shared by all lesbians, regardless of their different practices and desires. Of course, the problem of essentialism does not only contribute to the misrepresentation of female identity in general, but also lesbian identity in particular, taking into consideration the invisibility of lesbian lives, and the misrepresentation of lesbians in the Western media. The media makes assumptions about relationships between women such as the butch/femme relationship, or "the longstanding use of lesbians in male-directed pornography, both in magazines and in the cinema. Such stereotypes of the butch and femme are represented as excessively beautiful and stylish within the norms of the heterosexual judgments on such matters." (Mohin, 87)

Similarly, the lesbian identity does not seem to exist in Arab culture, and even when it does in some novels, it is either treated as a pathological case that reflects the

incapacity of the male to please the female, or as a result of the separation between the sexes in some conservative Arab cultures. In such a manner, even Mansour's novel that best reflects the fantasies of a true lesbian might be interpreted by some male-oriented readers as an educational lesson meant to explain to men how to please women sexually. Hence, man is set at the center of any lesbian discourse, either as a reader who has to learn, or as an absent character whose absence is seen as the cause of such behavior. In both cases, lesbians are denied the right to exist in a manner that appeals to them, and to express their innate desires that spring from their bodies, not from male expectations or social assumptions. Despite recent attempts by some female Arab novelists to bring lesbian lives and practices into light, there is still a dire need to shed a more positive light on lesbian love; a light that does not reinvent the heterosexual matrix in all its illusions and delusions. The issue at stake is the creation of a body politics and a new lifestyle that springs from such an understanding of lesbian sexuality, let alone bringing forth a new way of perceiving the dominant norms, laws and regulations.

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### A Young Lebanese Woman talks about her lesbian identity, her relationships and her perspective on homosexuality ....

Abir Hamdar

In recent years, Lebanon has witnessed a proliferation of the gay and lesbian community; at least that's one generalization many are willing to agree upon. But, agreeing is one thing and providing accurate data is another. In the absence of the latter, the issue is bound to remain subject to generalizations only. As a reporter seeking information on the topic, I learned this fact hands-on. I also learned my task was almost futile when it came down to the lesbian community. There were simply too many obstacles and hindrances. You just didn't go about investigating the way you did with other topics. One had to be discreet ... really discreet. "People will assume you're a lesbian if you go about asking about lesbian women," my friend bluntly spelled it out for me. She wasn't alone. I heard similar misgivings from just about anyone I asked for help. At one point the insistent warnings affected me, and I found myself unconsciously exhibiting a great amount of secretiveness. This, however, got me nowhere ... except perhaps through several dead ends. Thus, I realized I had to turn a deaf ear. The problem didn't stop here. For out of the 17 lesbian women I was able to contact, none agreed to speak about their experiences. Most were, in fact, absolutely adamant about the matter. That is not to mention the number of women some of my acquaintances approached. Strangely, some of these women had no previous qualms about divulging their identity to friends and acquaintances. But, when it came to speaking to the media, they just wouldn't budge. As Lebanese lesbian women, they felt they were a minority within a minority. They also claimed speaking publicly would only result in a scandal. Luckily, there was one exception; a twenty-three year old arts graduate whom I shall refer to as BINO – as she has specifically asked me to do. I have to admit that from the moment Bino agreed to be interviewed to the moment the interview actually took place, I was absolutely sure she would change her mind, but nothing of the sort happened. Bino simply took a while to settle on a day and time. She said she was busy redesigning and painting her room, and so

left the day and date of the meeting hanging. One day, she called to say I could meet her in a trading/ movie center around Beirut. I arrived shortly only to find her sitting in an internet café, chatting to other lesbian women on the net. She said hello, asked if I didn't mind waiting and continued typing on the keyboard. I tried not to intrude on her online conversation, but some tasks are hard to fulfill. Therefore, I abandoned all pretense of indifference and jotted down some of what was said between Bino and the other Arab woman named Laziiz.

After the chatting was over, Bino suggested we sit in a patisserie, which – according to her – is the site of the gay and lesbian community. We sat there for five hours. During that time, several people came in... winked and whispered to Bino about me, wanting to know if I was her new girlfriend... I felt slightly nervous. Soon, however, I became really nervous when an undercover police agent - identified by Bino as such - came into the place and watched us. According to Bino, such agents were regular visitors. They monitored the place to track down homosexual couples, plans for orgy nights, and drug deals. This really made me nervous. After all, in my haste to interview Bino before she changed her mind, I had forgotten my press card. Thankfully, the interview continued with no interference from the agent. Below is an account of what Bino wrote to her online friends, what she said and what she tried to say. I learned some things about Bino which I am not at liberty to disclose because she has requested that they not be included for she feels readers may recognize her. Furthermore, it appears that she's just too proud to admit life hasn't been easy on her.

Laziiz: What's your name?

Bino: Bino. Are you feminine?

Laziiz: Yeh

Bino: Do you like dikes or just normal feminine looking girls....

Laziiz: Dikes?

## Special Features

Bino: I mean masculine looking girls. I mean short hair.

Laziiz: No I don't like them. Do you?

Bino: Then you won't like me. I like feminine girls.

Laziiz:

Bino: bye, byeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

Bino cuts the line off abruptly. She grabs a cigarette, sighs exasperatedly and says women like Laziiz upset her: "I can't understand how they can be feminine and at the same time like feminine looking girls." I ask her what she likes. She responds by asking me what I think of her looks. "You have cute features," I say. The young woman doesn't seem flattered and immediately retorts: "Well some men have cute features." She snatches her smoking kit, pays her internet fees and invites me into a well known patisserie. Inside, she buys me juice, leads me to a table, and wonders if I mind her smoking - not that she listens when I tell her I do. By now, I have already changed my mind. I mean I still thought Bino had cute features, but nothing about her attitude and mannerism was feminine - at least not in the general sense of the word. At times I almost felt I was talking to a guy. And talking we did ... despite Bino's mood swings, her thought diversions and her resistance to certain questions.

Bino: It started when I was four years old ... yes write that. It's a very rare thing but at four I had feelings for girls. There was a girl in school who meant a lot to me. Abir Hamdar: But kids that age don't usually have these kinds of feelings?

Bino: It was very innocent, but the tendency was present at that age. I had strange feelings for her. I was jealous if she spoke to other girls. I loved her. This tendency increased with time. I continued to feel jealous when girls I liked talked to other girls ... A really strange feeling. I tell you it was innocent at the time. Now that I look back on it, I know it started at an early age. But I was seven when I tried things with a girl. I flirted with her.

AB: Flirted?

Bino: Hey, are you innocent? Yes, flirted. I touched her, kissed her ... and I don't know what awakened these tendencies. We flirted for several years. That doesn't mean there weren't other girls... girls that I fell in love with. But with them, I didn't reach the flirting stage. By the way, do you know my family name? AB: No...

Bino: (Sighs...) So now I can relax.

AB: Why, is your family so well-known?

Bino: That's not it. It's just that they don't know. My parents are probably the only people who don't know. I don't have a problem with the issue. But if they knew, they wouldn't be able to comprehend ...

AB: Is any member of your family/relative a gay or a lesbian?

Bino: I don't know ... perhaps my mom is a lesbian. Who can say! Ya ma taht al-sawahi dawahi ...anyway let's go back to when I was seven. I don't know what awakened these feelings at the time. And, as I've said, for several years I continued to flirt with the girl from our family.

AB: Did you feel, at the time, that you were doing something wrong?

Bino: No ...not at all. Not with this girl. I mean there was the fact that she was family. You always feel secure with family...

AB: You said there were other girls ...

Bino: Yes.

AB: But you were so young ...

Bino: Yes, but I felt something for girls. Sometimes when I experienced intense feelings for them, I would write them letters, love letters. Of course, this happened as I grew older. Every couple of years I felt attached to a certain girl.

AB: Were the girls that attracted you also lesbian?

Bino: Sometimes ... it usually started as friendship. Then, I would seduce them. Emotionally ... spiritually ...

AB: How is that?

Bino: Imagine a guardian angel. You become so used to it, you cannot live without it. That was how they felt towards me. I would become their guardian angel. Besides, each person has homosexual tendencies, but it's present in degrees. Some tendencies can be worked on.

AB: So you mean the girls that interested you also became attached to you once you provided them with emotional care?

Bino: Don't use the word emotional ! Between women relationships are always more spiritual. You have to understand there's a difference between gays and lesbians. For gays it's more physical. For lesbians it's something more ... that's my opinion. Take a father and mother ... Moms are more tender.

AB: Regarding the letters ...

Bino: (Interrupts) They were letters about feelings. It wasn't physically developed. I was afraid to show my fantasies ... fantasies that involved girls.

AB: But you said at seven you touched and kissed a girl?

Bino: Because she was family. Also, at that age society didn't matter. As you grow older things become different. I felt attracted to girls. My sexual fantasies were girls ... every second, every minute.

AB: At that age, did you feel there was something different about you?

Bino: Yes, I felt different from other kids. And I didn't trust anyone enough. In the beginning, you think

you're the only one in the world like this. Then you start meeting people like you who give you courage. Courage to be who you are. When I first started having physical relationships with girls, I felt disturbed. As if I was doing something wrong. That was in the beginning. Now I don't experience any such feelings. I am at peace with who I am.

AB: So, when did your first physical relationship with a girl take place?

Bino: I don't remember (silence. Lights a cigarette...) It was in a camp. I was probably sixteen. It was a one-night stand. She was a lesbian.

AB: How did you first know she was a lesbian? I mean when you feel attracted to a woman, how do you know she's going to respond? They say it's more difficult to identify a lesbian than a gay?

Bino: Yes, you can't easily identify a lesbian. Still, I simply look into their eyes and I know exactly what they are.

AB: Is that why you've been focusing on my eyes?

Bino: (Doesn't answer.) Do you want to see a picture of my ex-girlfriend?

AB: If you want to...

(Shows me the picture)

Bino: Isn't she pretty? Look at her eyes. They speak volumes. I loved her a lot. When I first met her I thought she was straight. She called me several times to ask for favors regarding men. One day, she invited me to her place to study with her. (Whistles) We studied a lot. A very hot lesson.

AB: If she didn't invite you, would you have approached her?

Bino: I rarely do that. If a girl comes, fine. If not, bye... unless she gives me the impression that she's desperate for my attentions. If she's straight, I would not think of coming near her, even if she asked me to rub oil all over her body. (Silent) The best thing about these relationships is when you think a girl is straight and it turns out she's not. It's an absolute turn-on. Very exciting ! Hey, you didn't ask me if I had relationships with guys?

AB: Did you?

Bino: I'm a girl. I'm supposed to date guys. So, one starts experimenting and trying. One ends up not feeling anything. It's like a question you ask yourself. What's my position with regard to men?

AB: What's your position?

Bino: Nothing ... terrible! Why terrible? Because I feel absolutely nothing for them. By the way, how old are you?

AB: 27...

Bino's mobile rings. It is her girlfriend. Bino talks to her angrily and then hangs up. "We fight a lot . We are both the jealous type." As she says this, she calls her girlfriend again, whispers to her and hangs up.

AB: Let's go back to your parents, didn't they and don't they notice anything?

Bino: Why should they notice? I mean it's not as if I was feminine and have become something else. I was always a tomboy. They don't feel any difference.

AB: Don't they notice that you don't date guys?

Bino: They urge me to go out with guys. I simply tell them I don't like anyone. I usually invent a solid reason. ... I need a haircut! Do you think I need a haircut?

AB: It is already too short...

Bino: My bangs need trimming.

AB: Weren't you ever interested in such things as make-up, fashion ...?

Bino: I've fashioned myself like a boy. From the beginning, I used to cut my hair very short. As for make-up, I only apply it on Halloween.... Were you ever attracted to a girl?

AB: No...

Bino: Following the one-night stand I had at 16, I fell in love. It was the first true love. I liked her femininity. She was a straight girl. Really straight. We became best friends. I didn't tell her anything about my feelings. She liked me a lot, but not the way I liked her. After three years of knowing her, I finally admitted my feelings for her. I was drunk and I called her. She was very cool about the matter. I felt extremely relieved. Imagine suppressing such feelings ... She's getting married soon. I introduced her to her future husband. Of course during those three years, I had other relationships.

AB: Were there other straight girls that you fell in love with?

Bino: Yes. I shared an apartment with a girl during my years in college. In the beginning she was straight. With time, I changed her.

AB: What exactly did you do to change her?

Bino: (laughs...) Well, for one we lived together. One day, something just happened. I also did other things ... But later I screwed up our relationship. I wasn't faithful. She sacked me or let's say I was forced to leave. She became a bisexual...

AB: You sound as if you're not in favor of bisexuality?

Bino: Yes, I am against it. I try to understand them. But, with bi's they are always more inclined towards one specific sex, which makes you wonder if they are really bi's...By the way do you think I am feminine? AB: Not really ... Why do you think you prefer girls? Does it have to do with your genes, a trauma in your life, or merely a choice ... Is there and should there be a reason for being who you are?

Bino: There are reasons for being a lesbian. It's not just biological. There's the environment. I don't know. But for me I think it was my mom's affection. I am an only child. As a child she gave me so much affection.

## Special Features

I grew used to female affection. That's how I see it. Besides with women relationships are more satisfying...

AB: In what way?

Bino: They have more depth ... When you click with a girl, a certain kind of telepathy occurs. This is one of the things that makes it so special. The things you can do with a girl you can't do with a guy.

AB: What things?

Bino: Everything. Women are so interesting. What's interesting about a guy? Rally? Cars? Blah, blah... They are not deep. Listen, you should come and live with me.

AB: Why? Do you want to change who I am?

Bino: (Laughs...) there are certain things I can't say or explain immediately. I need time.... Do you think my hands are feminine? Hands say a lot about one's identity.

AB: I don't know. You don't seem to give them a lot of care...

Bino: (Observes her hands again.) Don't they resemble male hands?

AB: Perhaps...

Bino: Remind me of the name of the magazine the interview will appear in?

AB: Al Raida ...

Bino: (Talks about her other relationships ... sometimes in great detail.)

AB: Do many people know you're a lesbian?

Bino: With straight people I'm straight. With homosexuals, I'm a lesbian.

AB: So you don't speak about it in public?

Bino: I think it's better to be silent. It's none of anyone's business. Many people claim they want to make you part of society, but they don't want to really...

AB: So it's hard to be who you are in Lebanon?

Bino: With me people are very natural. I mean people aren't revolted by masculine girls. There are a lot of masculine girls around. I think it's harder on feminine guys. People can't stand that. (Starts scribbling on the paper).

AB: When you have a relationship with a girl, can you court her the way other couples do? Can you go out for a romantic dinner? Touch her in public? Lebanon still prohibits these kinds of relationships?

Bino: Yes, we dine together. I can touch her in public, but only in certain parts of her body... Actually, there's something great about it. Not being able to be physically expressive in public makes the whole relationship more passionate.... You become very hot when you can't touch her the way you want to. By the way, did you know that 90% of males are obsessed with lesbians. They like to watch lesbians making love. That's the thing that really turns them on. Many males I know have insistently begged to watch me and my girl-

friend...

AB: Really?

Bino: Yes and if you don't believe me, I'll prove it to you. See that guy sitting there, I'll go and ask him and you'll see what he says.

AB: Did anyone ever watch you and your girlfriend?

Bino: (Silent...)No, of course not. Do you think I've had too many relationships?

AB: You've had an active love life...

Bino: Don't mention all the relationships I've told you about! Just include the main ones.

AB: What about marriage, kids ... doesn't that mean anything to you?

Bino: It's babies day out. Have you seen the movie? ... Look, I love kids. But, it's not my business to have them. I wasn't born for that... I am even against homosexual couples adopting a kid. It's a hard thing for the child...

AB: And marriage?

Bino: I want to get a job, find a girl to fall in love with and live together.

AB: Can you do that in Lebanon?

Bino: In Lebanon, there are no laws that prohibit two girls from living together. And even if there was a problem, I can organize a cover-up. I can marry a gay and my girlfriend can also marry one. We can live together. By the way, what do you think of me ... I mean as a person.

AB: I have only just known you. But you seem like a nice person. ...They say there are a lot of gays and lesbians in Lebanon?

Bino: (Whistles) Let me tell you something, any person you see on the street could be a gay or a lesbian ... (Laughs) Must be upsetting for you ladies. It prevents you from finding a straight guy to date.

AB: Why do you think that is the case?

Bino: I don't know. But it's bound to happen. From a wide perspective, it's good to have homosexual couples! It's one form of population control. In Lebanon, it's 'a la mode'. Many girls have asked to have a physical relationship with me. They are straight, but they just want to try this kind of relationship ... I hate these girls. Why be something you are not...? Straight men are trying it for the same reasons. Has a lesbian ever given you a compliment?

AB: No ...

Bino: You should be flattered if she does. It means you're really special. A compliment from a lesbian means a lot ... keep that in mind.

AB: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Bino: If a girl goes out with a lot of guys, remember that she could be dissatisfied. She could also be a lesbian. Some girls can't even have an orgasm with a guy. And remember a relationship with a girl is more spiritual and deep... Girls have more imagination ...



# Arab Women Journalists Slam Palestine/Iraq Sieges, Urge Skills Upgrade

Magda Abu-Fadil\*

Beirut, November 2002 — Arab women journalists meeting in Jordan this fall slammed the siege laid on Arab reporters in Palestine and Iraq and called for training programs to upgrade practitioners' technical skills and optimization of the Arab Women Media Center's (AWMC) website, notably through an online newsletter in Arabic and English.

"Participants hailed the struggle, courage and steadfastness of Palestinian women and journalists against Israeli aggression and denounced continued American aggression against the Iraqi people," read the Petra Declaration at the end of the conference.

It also praised Syrian women's struggle in the occupied Golan Heights and Lebanese women's resistance in the Sheba'a Farms area.

The four-day conference organized by the Amman-based AWMC, under the patronage of Princess Basma bint Talal, drew 35 participants from various countries, except the occupied Palestinian territories, where Israeli forces had barred journalists from attending.

Another 55 Jordanian women journalists took part in the event October 24-27, 2002 that included sessions held in the historic city of Petra and a visit to the Red Sea port of Aqaba.

"We're proud of what Arab women journalists have accomplished to date but the road ahead is still long as there are many challenges and pressing issues to be tackled," said Princess Basma, the AWMC's honorary chairwoman, at the opening ceremony. "They include a clear media vision to deal with women's issues far from seasonal upheavals and hesitance."

She also praised Arab women journalists' efforts to advance the cause by denouncing stereotyping and by focusing on issues such as politics, economics, culture, and the featuring of women excelling in these domains.

Princess Basma noted that the greatest challenge was overcoming the distorted portrayal of Arab and Muslim women in Western media, which she said required organized and sustained efforts.

"You, my sisters, are best qualified to convey the true image of self-confident Arab women and to take part in correcting this distorted picture of our Arab and Islamic society," she said.

In her own welcoming address, AWMC director Mahasen Al Emam said democracy and respect for basic human rights, as well as guarantees for human beings to exercise freedom of expression, were no longer a choice, if Arabs sought the recognition they deserved among the world's nations.

"Freedom is at the core of the profession of journalism," she added. "When we speak of press freedom, we're not just talking of a professional issue or a privilege. What counts is citizens' right to obtain true, objective and impartial media service."

Al Emam should know. She was the recipient of the 2002 Knight International Press Fellowship Award, to honor her outstanding work under difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

Al Emam was the first female editor-in-chief of a Jordanian newspaper in 1994, two decades after breaking into the male-dominated field, and has stood out for her defiance of government restrictions and for covering the Iran-Iraq war on her own when her newspaper's management refused to send her.

She established the AWMC, a non-governmental organization, in 1999 to help train women journalists, provide networking opportunities and organize gatherings geared towards empowering these media professionals.

Al Emam's efforts have resulted in two conferences for Arab women journalists and a series of training

## Conference Report

workshops all aimed at improving the lot of those in print, broadcast and online media.

Papers and presentations during the second conference in October 2002 dealt with press laws in the Arab world and their impact on women, various obstacles faced by the media, the role of women journalists in advocating human rights, war reporting, online journalism and the media's role under occupation.

The first paper from Lebanon, presented by this writer, underlined the importance of online journalism and development of the Arab media.

"We cannot treat journalism and professionalism in the 21st Century the same way we did media in the 20th. Technologies have changed and we're overwhelmed with volume, so our strategies must be modified as well to manage the flood," wrote the author.

She urged publishers to use the online versions of their papers and magazines as supplements to their print editions, not just copies of them, and to be more attractive to younger consumers.

The author discussed Google's new news service and the Columbia Newsblaster prototype, which let computers select from top stories and provide links to content – bypassing human editors – or the use of artificial intelligence to actually write the news.

Other options in online journalism include web logs (or blogs) – sites allowing journalists to publish their stories when constrained by their own media. Last, but not least, is research and reporting with the Internet and the design of websites. Full text of the paper is available on <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/200210/jordan1.html>.

Another speaker from Lebanon, LBCI TV reporter and correspondent Tania Mehanna, moved the audience with her graphic presentation and videotape of her coverage of demining in south Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal from the region in 2000 and the disastrous effects of mines on the lives of villagers there.

"Man's suffering from wars isn't limited to one country and perhaps the area that has affected me the most in the past two years was covering the war in Pakistan and Afghanistan for about three months," she said as the tape showing thousands of refugees escaping the ravages of the conflict rolled behind her.

Her live broadcasts, risking limb and life, showed the human tragedy that perhaps only a woman could portray so poignantly. She also ventured into Taliban-held territory, risked being a target of unexploded shells,

risked the theft of her crew's equipment and perhaps assault by Al-Qaida sympathizers.

Turning to history, Hanan Ballah Hassan, the secretary general of the Sudanese Women Journalists' Society (SWJS), briefed participants on the evolution of print and broadcast media in her country.

"A key element of women's presence in the press was the creation of the first SWJS in 2001 aimed at upgrading members' skills and providing them with training opportunities, as well as a forum for networking with other local and Arab organizations," she said.

Egypt's Sonia Dabbous, who is assistant editor of Akhbar Al Yom newspaper and teaches journalism at the American University in Cairo, presented a case study of women in the media in her country, past, present and future.

Looking to the future, Dabbous said that technology and globalization offered special opportunities for women. "There is power where women, news and the Internet come together."

She also said that women in the media viewed the Internet as a new professional outlet to establish their professional credibility.

Three participants from Syria discussed women's presence in the mostly official media, with speaker Hanan Al Fil describing her experience and struggles as director of Radio Aleppo, which offers programs for residents of that key city.

Raghda Al Ahmad, another Syrian delegate, discussed coverage of honor crimes and how women like her had fought to eradicate them by presenting rational arguments and establishing lines of communication with religious leaders who may condone such crimes.

Iraq's Majd Al Hashemi's paper was a tirade against what she called the US media war on her country.

"No country in peace or war, except Iraq, has been exposed to such an ongoing media assault since the Gulf War and in the run-up to another military strike," she said.

Other speakers at the conference came from Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United States of America.

\* [Magda Abu-Fadil, a 25-year veteran of international media in the US and Middle East, is director of university publications and of the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University.](#)

# Online Journalism and Development of the Arab Media

Magda Abu-Fadil

Paper presented at the Second Arab Women's Media Conference, October 24-27, 2002 in Jordan.

Your Highness, your excellencies, media colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Arab Women's Media Center, and particularly Mahasen Al Emam, for inviting me to this fascinating event and offering me the opportunity to discuss a very important topic, which has not been given adequate attention in the Arab World: online journalism.

There are a number of different interpretations of this term – online journalism – and I'd like to touch on all of them in the allotted time today.

One angle of OJ is creating news for Web sites, which most print and broadcast media seem to be doing, with varying degrees of success and credibility. You see and browse these sites of leading newspapers, magazines, TV stations, and radio stations with their Webcasts of programs and online publications available only on the Internet. It has also become part of the focus on convergence and pressures placed on journalists to produce for various media.

Another angle is the actual teaching of computer-assisted research and reporting with the Internet, which most schools of communication and colleges of

journalism today do, primarily in the United States. A third angle is the creation of blogs, or web logs, which means journalists and other writers posting their own news online on their own sites. This helps journalists who can't get published in mainstream media. But critics claim blogs lack credibility.

Finally, we're seeing self-generated news on sites like Google, where the latest trend is to let a computer using algorithms select from top stories of the day from 4,000 sources on the web and provide links to the content, hence bypassing human editors in that end-user process. We're also seeing computers that write the news.

But I'd like to reverse the order by discussing the last option first, because I find it intriguing and because it relies on an Arabic system of mathematics. We seem to forget that much of the knowledge we use today comes from our rich Arab roots. But we also dwell on the past and still haven't learned to make the best use of tools fashioned to help us master this knowledge to our best advantage.

All the weapons in the world cannot defeat what we have in our heads because, in the final analysis, knowledge is power. So let's rise to the occasion.

# Conference Report



Conference Participants

## News by Algorithms; Headlines and Leads by Newsblaster:

Algorithms means the repetitive calculations used in finding the greatest common divisor of two numbers and it comes from the Arabic system of numerals or the act or skill of computing with any kind of numerals.

According to Editor & Publisher, the search engine Google introduced a new version of its Google News service that collects news from 4,000 sources on the web and updates it every 15 minutes – without the use of a human editor, but thanks to a computer.

The computer selects the top stories of the day and the best coverage and provides links to them, and it's entirely automated. It's what Steve Outing of E&P calls the "global digital newsstand."

"The service calculates what are the most significant stories being published at any given time, and ranks them according to time published, number of links to the story, and credibility of the publishing organization. It then presents them in a way that highlights news by its importance," Outing reported.

The Google News main page is considered a "front page" of a global online "newspaper" or "wire service," with stories placed in categories including top

stories, US news, world news, sports, business, science-tech, health and entertainment, he added. Its news database keeps articles for 30 days and it is said to contain more than two million stories.

But critics would say: Where are the human editors, whose judgment is needed to determine what's newsworthy? Won't there be errors in the process? Will human editors continue to produce if they can't compete with computer news robots? Some say it fails to rank news reports on the basis of quality and according to a BBC report on the new service, Google News does not employ any journalists. Stories are listed according to how recently they have been published, the number of articles devoted to any given topic and the popularity of the news source.

Yes, admits Outing, there are bound to be errors but one must not forget that the stories selected by the algorithms were already chosen by editors at 4,000 news organizations whose human intelligence determined that they were worthy of publishing – whether online or in print.

"Google News makes its placement decisions on collective editing intelligence, so there's less likelihood of individual editors' biases influencing story placement," said Outing. Chris Sherman, a search

engine industry analyst said that this new development would change the way we get online news and urged publishers to take advantage of it. "It supports the news organizations with the best reputations because their content typically bubbles to the top of Google's story selections. It's also great news for small news sites, which can be exposed to a huge audience when their content occasionally bubbles up."

Google News is very useful for journalists wanting to know what other journalists have written about a given topic.

Another interesting development is the use of artificial intelligence to actually write the news. A lead (intro paragraph) to a story can be written by computer, thanks to researchers working at Columbia University's Department of Computer Science in the School of Engineering and Applied Science.

The experimental prototype called the Columbia Newsblaster looks at news reports from various sources. It's a tool for journalists and executives sifting through tons of information, according to a report in the Online Journalism Review.

Its artificial intelligence summarizes stories on given topics using natural language processing techniques to read what is written in published news reports, wrote John V. Pavlik.

He said Newsblaster interprets the importance of different facts, based on its own news judgment, reflecting factors such as where a fact is mentioned in the published reports, how often it is repeated across reports dealing with the same event or subject, and the news value of those individual facts such as how many were killed or injured or how much damage to property occurred.

The programmers have included other editorial judgment factors using spiders, or intelligent software agents, to search through each of the sources' web sites to track down the latest news reports and then sort and summarize them into categories or subjects.

Once it digests the information, the artificial intelligence writes the lead, Pavlik said, adding that Newsblaster also gathers photos and may eventually process multimedia as well.

"Human journalists make connections between facts and between events or stories that can add context to a current report. This kind of contextualization is something that Newsblaster cannot do," he cautioned.

Accuracy may also fall victim to this method of news-gathering and dissemination, especially if one report says a storm left ten victims in its wake while another says 25.

The author also points to the danger of a machine writing the lead since after days of culling news, the computer can offer stale reports, or can lack the edge journalists and editors put in their introductory paragraphs that grab readers' attention.

## Blogs, or Web Logs:

Journalists who feel constrained by their news organizations now have an outlet: their own sites through which they can publish stories, open up discussions with others on certain topics and have a forum for discussions.

Some of these personal sites exist independently, are part of the news organizations for which the journalists work, or are part of sites for other organizations, such as journalism education institutes.

The New York Times reports that a journalist got fired after his bosses discovered he was writing nasty things in his personal web log about people he covered in the paper for which he worked.

It would have been even more catastrophic if he had been writing it for a web log operated by that paper because there would be issues of liability and lawsuits. Quoting a professor of journalism, the Times said that if a news media organization edits a web log it would damage spontaneity and would become responsible for content.

## How did this new form of journalism come about?

It began in the late 1990s with software making it possible for anyone to publish and update in cyberspace. "Do-it-yourself journalists are able to link to and dissect freshly published articles, adding many voices to the national debate. Blogs have been promoted by some commentators as a potential challenge to traditional news media companies," wrote David Gallagher in the New York Times.

He added that the format also appealed to professional journalists who publish web logs as a creative outlet, or as a way to raise their visibility, or as part of their jobs. And the best part is that they don't have to be as formal or to abide by strict writing style rules as they do for their traditional media. And, they can make some money on the side with blogs.

But there is some editing. It's not entirely free of all controls. Journalists realize that if they're completely offensive or antagonize their readers, they may be out

# Conference Report



Magda Abu -Fadil  
Tania Mehanna

of business. They must also decide on where their content will go – on the traditional site, in the traditional paper, or on the web log. In other words, which venue gets priority.

Unofficial estimates put the number of blogs at 200,000-500,000. On September 11, 2001, masses of people logged onto traditional news sites to get more information on the attacks against New York and Washington but many of those sites crashed from the sheer volume and others failed to provide timely updates, wrote Renee Tawa in the Los Angeles Times.

But bloggers got a lot of traffic on their sites and in emailed comments from the public which were posted instantly in a forum likened to an infinite and unedited letters-to-the editor page, she added.

“As a result, bloggers, who typically have day jobs, turned into ‘do-it-yourself journalists’...seeking out sources and sometimes assembling these ideas for others,” she quoted a study conducted about September 11 and the internet by the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

It’s become so fashionable that the University of California at Berkeley is offering its first course on web logs and students in the class are scheduled to launch their own blog in November.

One of the aspects the students will examine is intellectual property and copyright since a critical part of the blog is a link to a traditional news site or other copyrighted source, said Paul Grabowicz, the university’s director of the new media program at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism in an interview with

The Mercury News.

Although bloggers can’t engage in long-term investigative journalism, web logs expand the media universe, noted Scott Rosenberg in the widely read Salon.com ezine. “They are a media life-form that is native to the Web, and they add something new to our mix, something valuable, something that couldn’t have existed before the web.”

### Computer-Assisted Research/Reporting, or CAR:

Teaching reporting and editing with the use of computers is part of every curriculum I know of in schools of journalism in America. Without it reporters perish. Web course tools, or Web CT, are often found on the pages of faculty members who teach these courses and students are expected to communicate with their teachers via the Internet and email where they find much of their course work posted, where curricula are listed, where reading lists are available, and, often, where even exams are taken.

In 1999, I presented a conference paper based on a semester-long study about internationalizing a journalism curriculum using distance education technology. It was a pilot project in which I was involved, between the Lebanese American University, where I work, and the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

I exchanged assignments of my students via email and the Internet with a colleague in Missouri and we corrected each other’s students’ papers and graded them in almost real time – given the eight-hour time difference. My one problem was that Israel had bombed the power plant down the hill from my house so I was without electricity quite often and had to work in the dark, or whenever I had enough power for my com-

puter. Thank God the phones still worked so I could log onto the Internet and send email.

As the Internet has provided endless accessibility to information and newsrooms, that growth of data has meant that journalism in the old traditional sense has changed, as well. Which, in turn, has meant a need to teach new methods of collecting the information and using it in stories.

But as Nora Paul and Cary Perez Wauk of the Poynter Institute in Florida told participants in a seminar on online journalism, the genre needs grounding in good old journalistic ethical decision-making.

“Research takes time and patience. And while there’s a lot of important information on the Internet, there’s also a lot of junk and spoof and sound-alike sites,” opined Chris Harvey, the online bureau director of the University of Maryland’s College of Journalism, adding that journalists should approach their results with a critical eye.

He recommended the use of more than one search engine for an important search since no single search engine indexes more than about 20 percent of the Web. In evaluating sites and pages, he advised journalists to check and see who is authoring web pages, if the publisher is a scholar on the topic, if the writer is unbiased, or someone with an agenda, if the writer lists a bibliography or source or web link list and if the information is updated in a timely fashion since currency is important.

Last, but not least, the author said a site should prominently list a contact phone number and/or email address. Public records and databases fill up cyberspace but the trick is to find them quickly. The US government is probably the largest user of the Internet but since the September 11 attacks, it has removed much of the data it found out to be of national security importance and which it feared was being used by terrorists against the United States.

These records can be used to research people, check out telephone directories, find out about property transactions, professionals and their professions, read countless online specialized publications, connect to trade associations, learn about businesses, research political parties, investigate economic issues, and more.

Courses at universities can familiarize students with the basics of browsers, buttons, shortcuts, bookmarks, finding information, finding ideas, assessing data quality and reliability, and interviewing the sources of data. Other courses teach writing and editing content for the web. We, at the Institute for Professional Journalists at the

Lebanese American University, teach all the above to practicing reporters and editors. “Journalism students and educators will need a change of mindset,” wrote Dr. Stephen Quinn, a seasoned journalist, faculty member at Zayed University in the UAE, and author of *Newsgathering on the Net*. “We need to accept the need for ongoing or lifelong learning.”

He advises his students to pick up new skills for the new century by running their own web sites, sending email CVs, learning hypertext markup language, understanding the other Internet languages, staying on top of industry trends, participating in online discussions, picking up design skills, looking outside traditional media organizations, and freelancing online.

“The Internet will prove to be the most significant human development since Gutenberg’s invention of movable type in the middle of the 15th Century. Indeed, it may prove to be the most significant development since the discovery of fire. Its possibilities for journalism are only limited by the boundaries of the imagination of individual journalists,” he wrote.

That’s why The New York Times Foundation, among other organizations, launched an initiative in the United States to give high school students and teachers information and tools to publish online newspapers at schools.

But it’s also worth remembering, as John Lenger wrote for the Columbia Journalism Review, that cyberspace isn’t the answer to all our media problems. “Those of us who learned our journalism before the mid-1990s, when Internet use started to grow astronomically, understand that not all of the world’s accumulated knowledge exists on web servers, and probably never will.”

### News for the Web & Convergence:

In February 2001, web expert Mike Wendland wrote about the first living example of journalism convergence, a trend that has spread to many news organizations in the United States, Europe and Asia, and is being looked at seriously in the Middle East.

He was referring to the Tampa Tribune newspaper in Florida which spent \$34 million dollars on a building serving as headquarters for a newspaper, a local affiliate of a network television company and a website. The three media outlets are owned by the same company. The TV reporters do their stand-ups in front of the cameras and then write newspaper stories. The newspaper reporters write their stories and then appear on TV to do talk-back debriefings or their own stand-ups. And everybody – reporters, editors, photographers – “re-purpose” their work for the Web site, said Wendland.

# Conference Report

This cross-platform experiment is being seen in many other media companies and means you can get news when, where and whichever way you want it. But it also means reporters and editors have less time to evaluate the news, and in some cases it puts too much pressure on smaller operations with fewer resources.

Another newspaper, for example, sends out its video journalists who are reporter/photographer one-man or one woman operations, who report, videotape and back in the station edit the stories for TV as well as the newspaper, using digital video cameras and computerized TV editing software and a computer.

Naturally, the people who are upset are members of specific journalists' or photographers' unions, who see their jobs being eroded by the jacks-of-all-trades.

The University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication has decided to capitalize on the trend by offering courses in convergence journalism – creating graduates who work cross-platform.

Asked whether students could excel working for three types of media at once, the director of the school's online journalism program said it aimed to provide enough knowledge so that journalists would be comfortable in multi-tasking, like a print or online reporter being asked to supply a video clip for a web presentation.

The trick is to learn to write differently for the web than for print or broadcast, but not to lose sight of the importance of accuracy, credibility, timeliness, interactivity, and that one should write horizontally, not vertically, with the idea that stories, segments, sources, etc., must have links to other bits of information.

"The challenge is to think of the web as a different medium, not merely an extension of the newspaper," said Carole Rich, a professor of journalism at the University of Alaska to a conference of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

## Outlook & Recommendations:

Where does all that leave us in the Arab World? Can our journalism evolve, advance, serve us, and be credible?

We have to start with ourselves as individuals. With the will to change, improve and learn. We cannot treat journalism and professionalism in the 21st Century the same way we did media in the 20th. Technologies have changed and we're overwhelmed

with volume, so our strategies must be modified as well to manage the flood.

We cannot afford being dinosaurs long after that species has become extinct. It's the rule of "adapt, or die." And I'm certainly not ready to die yet. Are you?

So, to newspaper and magazine editors and publishers, I would urge you to use your internet version to supplement the print edition. Don't just regurgitate what you print. It's often boring, cumbersome and lacks vitality. Expand your market by making both venues interesting to draw in the younger crowd, for example.

Our greatest asset is our young people, and yet we often dish out news to them that's fashioned for dinosaurs. A recent study revealed that young people don't believe newspapers satisfy their needs. What are we doing about that?

These new generations of children will one day become consumers of goods and services, so why not start providing them with good news service from now and keep them as loyal consumers for later?

We've seen how the Internet can be a double-edged sword. I would argue that we need to keep the sharp edges to cut through nonsense and vacuous content to benefit our news consumers.

It's up to us, the news providers, to maintain high standards of professionalism and ethics so that recipients will find us believable in this vast universe of information and break-neck technology.

Which also means we may need to redefine our roles. Who is a journalist? Is your teenage neighbor with a digital camera and laptop computer connected to a web server a journalist? Is your editor who still doesn't know how to use a computer but keeps one for decoration in his office and asks his secretary to retrieve his emails really a journalist in today's fast-changing world?

I believe there's a happy medium we should adopt in the Arab world. We need to catch up fast with technological advances and learn to capitalize on what they can offer us. But we should not lose sight of journalistic principles of accuracy, timeliness, ethics, solid research, good sources and fairness.

All these factors can contribute to the making of great Arab women journalists. We already have some. We need armies more to counter the vicious campaigns launched against our culture and beliefs. If the men can't do it, let the women lead the charge.

Thank you.

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