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Citation for published version:

Mahadeen, E 2013, 'Doctors and sheikhs: "Truths" in virginity discourse in Jordanian media', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 80-94.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of International Women's Studies

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Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 14

Issue 4 *New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies: Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2012 Feminist and Women's Studies Association's Annual Student Essay Competition*

Article 7

Dec-2013

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Recommended Citation

Mahadeen, Ebtihal (2013). Doctors and Sheikhs: "Truths" in Virginty Discourse in Jordanian Media. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(4), 80-94.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss4/7>

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Doctors and Sheikhs: “Truths” in Virginitly Discourse in Jordanian Media

By Ebtihal Mahadeen¹

Abstract

This article is concerned with the role Jordanian media play in circulating certain discourses on virginitly, namely religious and medical discourses, which are presented as "truths" that ultimately maintain the conservative status quo with regards to Jordanian women's sexuality. It is argued that media discussions (on the textual, production, and consumption levels) largely perpetuate patriarchal control over women's sexuality and render invisible more progressive points of view. Simultaneously, critical opinions expressed at any of these levels, while vastly important, operate from within the same discursive fields and are thus rendered less radical.

Keywords: virginitly, sexuality, media

Introduction

Jordanian media has seen a surge in coverage of phenomena related to virginitly in recent years. Issues such as honour crimes, hymen reconstruction surgery, fake hymens, and virginitly tests have all come to the surface and stirred considerable controversy in Jordanian society. This recent de-tabooisation of female virginitly in the media is a significant change, given the enduring sensitivity of discussing sexuality in Jordan. The surfacing of such discussions also offers a unique opportunity to unpack the role of the media in re/framing the terms of the debate surrounding sexuality, and virginitly in particular. Moreover, the discussions stimulated by this coverage are important to understand contemporary Jordanian attitudes towards female sexuality, which are difficult to research in other contexts.

In this paper I address these issues by focusing on two discourses used throughout the Jordanian media cycle—production, text, and consumption—to tackle virginitly. I focus on medical and religious discourses which predominate in representations of virginitly in the media and which are portrayed as “truths,” absolute and uncontested. I broaden the scope of my investigation to include texts on fake hymens, hymen reconstruction surgeries, honour crimes, and virginitly tests. Through this analysis, I unpack the discourses used to discuss these phenomena in a way that illuminates the interaction between the producer, the text, and the consumer within the media cycle itself. Concurrently, I argue that media texts themselves are simultaneously sites of hegemony where dominant virginitly discourses are displayed and reinforced in favour of a conservative and patriarchal status quo, and sites of resistance where other discourses challenge that hegemony by proposing a liberal, yet rarely radical, approach to women’s sexuality.

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Virginity and Honour in Jordan

It is important to dismantle the link between virginity and honour in order to properly understand the social and cultural context of Jordanian media's treatment of the subject. Numerous studies recognised the connection between women's sexual conduct and the idea of honour in Arab societies (Becknell, 2005, Faqir, 2001, Saadawi, 1980, Araji and Carlson, 2001, Ali, 2008, Awwad, 2011, Devers and Bacon, 2010). This connection exists in Jordan as well and very visibly so in the media and in the reception of stories on sexual behaviour and virginity. However, discussions of honour in Jordan, academic or otherwise, usually concentrate on honour crimes (Ruane, 2000, Faqir, 2001, Nsheiwat, 2004) and ignore other manifestations of honour in public discourse and practice. This study aims to broaden the scope of these discussions by focusing on virginity, itself at the centre of honour as a concept, and by exploring other phenomena besides honour crimes.

The demand for female chastity in Jordan manifests itself in language and popular sayings. In a linguistic study of Jordanian Arabic and women's place, Abd-el-Jawad differentiated between /bint/ and /mara/. The study found that /bint/ (meaning girl) is used to address an unmarried woman regardless of her age and that it denotes virginity, while /mara/ (which means woman) is used to address and refer to married women who are no longer virgins and is also used as an insult to men (Abd-el-Jawad, 1989). The fact that the same word used to call a non-virgin is also an insult to men is telling: through language, it conveys the imbalance of power in gender relations in Jordanian society and the marginalisation of Jordanian women through sexist language. Virginity, or lack thereof, establishes a whole different category of women, a category which extends to men who are not manly enough. Of course, as in other languages, there are also derogatory terms used to label women who are not virgins outside the acceptable context of marriage. This elaborate categorisation of women according to their virginity confirms one tenet of critical discourse analysis: texts and language reflect social realities that exist in the "real" world through imbalances of power and domination. Popular Jordanian sayings also reflect an emphasis on female virginity or, more broadly, sexual inexperience. One Jordanian saying compares women to soda cans that, once opened, cannot be closed again and cannot regain their original value. Another compares women to delicate glass which also cannot be repaired after it is broken. These sayings and others inform Jordanians' opinions and also reflect the reality of Jordanian society where women are valued or devalued based on their sexual behaviour. Hussein's anthropological research on virginity in Egyptian culture found very similar sayings in Egypt which, according to her, are only a part of the "virginity discourse" which comprises physical and behavioural elements as well (Hussein, 2010).

In addition to the linguistic clues about the social demand for the performance of virginity in Jordan, the law itself emphasises the importance of virginity and codifies it. To understand Jordanian law's approach to virginity, it is useful to explore its treatment of rape. Zuhur (2008) found that several Arab countries, including Jordan, treat rape as a crime against society, not an individual. She maintains that in tribal laws rape is an act of physical damage to virginity and a theft of sexual property that reduces a female's financial worth. Furthermore, this tribal understanding of rape is strengthened by the view Islamic law adopts of it. In Islam, rape falls under *hiraba*, not adultery: *hiraba* being a group of crimes including public disruption, killing, and banditry, all crimes carrying a severe punishment (Zuhur, 2008). Modern legal codes in Arab countries agree with this classification of rape and it is because of this that the emphasis in the codes of some of these countries is on rape as a crime against the family and society, not

against the woman. Exemplifying this, in Jordan, as in Lebanon and Iraq, a rapist can walk free if he marries his victim, which is often a solution sought by the victim's family to conceal the crime and to avoid scandal (Zuhur, 2008). This legal provision effectively means that the victim has no right to demand justice for herself and that the family (and society at large) is the party injured by the rape, and not her. Furthermore, the Jordanian penal code distinguishes between the rape of a virgin (which incurs heavier punishment) and the rape of a non-virgin. Its very definition of rape is problematic as well, as it only considers as rape forced penile-vaginal penetration and all other forms of sexual assault are seen as lesser crimes deserving of lesser punishments.

Based on this brief exploration of the meanings attached to virginity in Jordan, two main conclusions can be drawn which directly affect my arguments here: first, that women's place in Jordanian society is reflected in language and texts, and second, that there is a direct link between virginity (or honour in a broader definition) and a woman's social value. The dominant social group in Jordanian society is men and it is this group that sets the rules and determines the dynamics of social relations. The state represents these patriarchal interests through their codification of laws, which discriminate against women, licensing their sexual and social oppression by Jordanian men.

Methodology

This paper is situated on the intersection between sexuality and feminist media studies. The main theoretical inspirations for it are different approaches to critical discourse analysis, such as the works of Wodak (2001a, 2001b), Van Dijk (2001, 2003), and Fairclough (1995, 2001a, 2001b), and Foucauldian discourse analysis (1984, 1996, 1972, 1980). It draws on explicitly feminist tenets of critical discourse analysis, as set out by Lazar (2005): it perceives gender as a structure of ideology where power relations are complex, and as produced, reproduced, and contested through discourse.

Relying on a close and critical analysis of materials published in a selection of Jordanian e-media outlets (Al Ghad and Addustour newspaper websites, Khaberni, Jordan Zad, and Ammon News news websites), I focus on four main topics tackled in both news reports and opinion columns. These topics are honour crimes, virginity tests, hymen reconstruction surgeries, and fake hymens. The span of time in focus is the years 2008-2011. I also account for influences present outside the texts themselves by examining both the production and consumption processes of these texts. To this end, I analyse not only the stories but also the audience's reception of them through their comments. On the production level, I examine authors' attitudes and influences by analysing data obtained during a fieldtrip to Jordan where the authors of the texts in question were interviewed.

The Medicalisation of Virginity

Virginity in Jordanian media is heavily medicalised. Reports on all the phenomena examined in this study routinely quote gynaecologists or forensic doctors to contribute scientific information about the hymen, the marker of virginity. These medical experts are seen as the ultimate authority on the subject of virginity "loss." They often provide information about the anatomy of the hymen, its different kinds, and causes of its "loss." For instance, Dr.Moumen

Hadidi, the director of the National Centre of Forensic Medicine, listed the possible reasons for hymen “loss” in Manar Muawwad’s 2009 report on hymen reconstruction surgery:

Vaginal intercourse, falling on a protruding object, horse riding, riding bicycles and swings, high jumps, masturbation where objects are inserted in the vagina, gynaecological examinations, using vaginal douches, and using high-pressure water hoses for personal hygiene (Muawwad, 2009a).

It is possible for the media to use this information to raise awareness of the non-sexual causes of virginity “loss.” On a simple level, providing this information is an effort by the media to advise the public of the various causes of virginity “loss” beyond sexual intercourse. This effort can be also seen as part of the media’s attempts to reframe the debate around virginity in Jordanian society; since non-sexual activities can cause its “loss,” then its intrinsic value must be reconsidered and the rigidity by which Jordanians view it must be relaxed.

Medical expertise is also sought to confirm the “innocence” of victims of honour crimes. What I call “the hymen status report” is present in the majority of stories covering honour crimes. This line, which often reads “post-mortem examinations found the victim to be a virgin,” can serve to educate the readers about circumstances of honour crimes. But it also serves a much more important function: to delineate the discrepancy between the perceived actions of victims (trespassing on socio-sexual rules) and the reality of their actions, which confirm their “innocence” and therefore solicit sympathy from the readers. Take, for example, the case of one honour crime where the victim’s brother found her with a man and subsequently shot them both. After being informed that the killer shot both his sister and her companion upon “finding them in an inappropriate situation,” the readers are told that “a medical source confirmed that the post-mortem autopsy revealed that the girl was a virgin at the time of her death.” In a way, this line performs a double function: it stresses the physical virginity of the victim, therefore confirming her “innocence” and clearing her reputation, and it also clarifies the nature of the compromising position she was found in. No details are given about the inappropriate situation that the two victims were found in, but by confirming that the woman was still a virgin, intercourse is ruled out. The readers are left to speculate about the nature of the encounter between the two victims. It is worth noting that journalists do not include this line when the victim is not a virgin to avoid portraying her as unworthy of the readers’ sympathy.

These efforts on the part of the media and the medical apparatus to educate the Jordanian public about the hymen and virginity usually backfire. Media attempts to garner sympathy for victims of honour crimes based on the status of their hymens may achieve this short-term goal, as many readers do sympathise with virgin victims, but they are on the whole counterproductive. By not challenging the underlying license to control women’s sexuality, these medical reports merely perpetuate the link between sexual behaviour and morality. On the part of the media, this naïve understanding and portrayal of virginity as localised in the hymen only translates into their endorsement of the hymen status line as “proof of innocence” of women slain in the name of honour and the withholding of sympathy to victims of honour crimes who are regarded as deserving of this violent fate. The implicit argument of the media becomes then, that if a victim’s hymen is still intact, she is not guilty of tarnishing her family’s honour; but if it is not, then she deserves her fate. Evidently, the consequences of this paradoxical definition of virginity adopted by the media are grave. Instead of building a public consensus against honour crimes, regardless

of their cause, Jordanian media's adoption of medical discourses in the form of the hymen status report reinforces the practice and even lends support to it.

The definition of virginity adopted by Jordanian media through its use of medical discourse is therefore one that sees virginity as limited to the hymen. It is at odds with large segments of Jordanian society which regard virginity more as an all-encompassing concept, much like Abu Odeh argued: vaginal, bodily, and social (2010: 919). However, the hymen status report is adopted to garner support for the victim, according to Muwaffaq Kamal, a journalist specialising in covering honour crimes: "Generally, most commentators support the killer. But if I include the hymen status report and the woman is a virgin, all the readers will sympathise with her against the male [killer]" (Kamal, 2010). Many readers resist the media's promotion of the hymen as the sole marker of virginity through medical discourse. Evidence of this can be found in reader comments which still question the virginity of the slain women, despite the presence of medical confirmation in the hymen status report that they were indeed virgins at the time of their death. Several comments posted to the above-mentioned story do exactly this:

Al-Ajlouni: So does this mean that a woman can do everything [sexual] with her "boyfriend" except intercourse and we [society] say nothing has happened because she's still a virgin? (Anonymous, 2008).

Mohammad Hasan: First things first, well done! Any honourable man would have done the same thing. About virginity: being a virgin means nothing because she was in an inappropriate position that provoked [her brother] to kill her (Anonymous, 2008).

These comments object to the application of the concept of technical virginity as Ozyegin (2009) defined it. Not only does Jordanian media's use of the hymen status report underscore the presence of technical virgins but it also highlights the tensions between the different understandings of virginity that exist in Jordanian society. In fact, readers often problematise the meaning of virginity in their comments. One reader writing under the name Zaher specifically comments on the hymen status report by saying that:

Of late we have increasingly seen the phrase "after the examination she was found to be a virgin". Is the virgin the woman who has not made the mistake [of intercourse] but has had [sexual] experience in other ways? The virgin is the woman who has never been touched by a man, not the woman who is merely unmarried (Anonymous, 2008).

This objection to the technical virginity promoted by Jordanian media as an acceptable form of virginity takes the previous argument to another level. The reader here offers an alternative definition of a virgin: she is the woman who has never had any sexual contact with a man, regardless of the level of this contact. She is not just the single woman (i.e. the technical virgin, with an intact hymen), but also a thoroughly sexually inexperienced woman. So in spite of the fact that the woman in the story was a virgin, that her hymen was not broken at the time of her death, she was still seen as guilty and deserving of punishment for breaking this code by being with a man whose company society deemed as illegitimate. Consequently, the deliberate inclusion of the hymen status report by the journalist did not serve its purpose.

Contrary to this definition, some tolerance of sexual activity on the part of the women can be found in other reader comments. Mohammad Qais made the following comment in an opinion piece discussing hymen reconstruction surgery and virginity tests:

[...] We are all aware that the hymen is irrelevant [to determine that the girl has sexual experience]. Even if the hymen is broken the girl can have an operation and reconstruct it. So it's not an indication. The real indication is morals in general, and the degree of self-respect that the man and the woman have for themselves (Hamad, 2009).

The hymen is discarded as a symbol of virginity, mainly due to the ease of its restoration and the accessibility of this procedure. The real indicator of chastity is found in the morals and self-respect that men and women have. Virginity is therefore displaced from the vaginal and the bodily to the behavioural and the moral. The active problematisation of what exactly virginity stands for is common in reader comments. These discussions are relevant for their exposure of a potential process of change underway in Jordanian society; a change in the way some Jordanians see virginity and in their related expectations. Moreover, these discussions are important because they open up the concept of virginity to debate and reframe its boundaries.

The medicalisation of virginity in Jordanian media does not stop at the level of defining virginity in medical terms, or at the level of medically certifying the virginity of dead women. It also manifests itself in journalists' use of medical terms and experts to dissuade women from pursuing fake virginity. The media thus play a double role in their employment of medical discourses on virginity: they emphasise the relationship between virginity and the female body through the concept of technical virginity which preserves the hymen, and they also maintain this link by condemning methods that may successfully mask the loss of this hymenal marker. This is made clear in media portrayals of the fake hymen as harmful to health. The "fake hymen" story was first published in *Al Ghad* on 22/11/2009 and was then republished by several news websites. The piece itself was written by Hanan Kiswani, *Al Ghad's* medicine and science reporter, and featured the opinions of several doctors, as follows:

Dr. Malek Abdul Malek, a gynaecologist, cautioned against the use of the fake hymen, explaining that it is "carcinogenic" and affects the woman's fertility in the future.

[...]

And this is what gynaecologist Dr. Ahmad Qteitat, who works in Al Bahseer public hospital, confirmed. Dr. Qteitat stated that the entry of any foreign body [into the vagina] leads to severe infections which travel to the uterus and cause infertility. Qteitat added that due to the scarcity of information about this product, it is important to intensify control measures and to apprehend the smugglers who contribute to the destruction of an entire society through tampering with the nature and composition of the female body (Kiswani, 2009).

This repeated mention of the alleged side effects of the product is an attempt to counter any temptation of readers to get it. No information is given about the product or its composition (which would have been possible if these doctors obtained specimens of the product from neighbouring countries). Perhaps more significantly, medical discourse is used again to establish

their side effects impact society at large, not just the female bodies that use the fake hymen. A significant metaphor here is “the destruction of an entire society through tampering with the nature and composition of the female body” (Kiswani, 2009). Women’s bodies are portrayed as the bases for a healthy society and, if tampered with, the whole of society is destroyed. Women’s bodies should remain virginal and if they are “damaged,” first by “losing” their virginity and then by restoring it, then all members of society will pay the price. Side effects ranging from infections to cancer to infertility will be suffered by damaging these female bodies. In this instance, the medicalisation of virginity serves to establish an intimate tie between the virginal body and the healthy society. In a parallel way, it relates the fake virginal body to an unhealthy, dysfunctional society. In doing this, the medical discourse employed here echoes the socially and religiously conservative discourses often used by readers and religious authorities to emphasise the importance of virginity or sexual purity to social well-being.

The medicalisation of virginity extends beyond the insistence on the hymen as an ultimate marker of sexual innocence as it also involves designating doctors as the only authority able to diagnose the causes of hymen breakage. In coverage of hymen reconstruction surgery, for instance, medical officials such as the president of the gynaecologists association and the director of the NCFM emphasise that gynaecologists examining non-virgins must and can verify the reasons leading to hymen breakage before agreeing to reconstruct it:

President of the gynaecologists association, Dr. Khalil Barbarawi, stresses the importance of knowing the motivations and the reasons that led to hymen loss, indicating that he supports hymen reconstruction surgery only in “critical or urgent cases, as in rape”. He also clarified that from a medical point of view “the hymen cannot be restored to its original state 100%, and this operation cannot be performed more than once”.

[...]

[Dr.Hadidi, director of the NCFM] confirms that a forensic examination “enables the specialist to know if the hymen was broken due to an accident or rape, since the tears in the latter case are recent and accompanied with bruises and other trauma in the pudenda and the surrounding area” (Muawwad, 2009a).

Again, medical authority over the hymen extends the social policing of the female body in Jordan. Doctors must confirm that the reasons for virginity “loss” were legitimate, that it occurred due to reasons beyond the control of the female patient. Rape, accidents, and presumably some of the other causes of hymen tears routinely supplied to the media by medical experts all qualify the patient to access this restorative operation. The only cause seen as illegitimate and undeserving of medical attention is consensual sexual intercourse. Doctors who comply with their patients’ wishes to restore their virginity in this case are committing immoral acts and even endangering society:

[This gynaecologist sees that] a doctor’s mere acceptance of conducting this operation constitutes “deceit and fraud”, and considers that all doctors must abstain from doing so, and that they must not encourage women to seek them in order to protect society and prevent future problems (Muawwad, 2009a).

Thus, medical discourses are used in very specific ways when addressing virginity in Jordanian media. The definition adopted in the media of virginity as localised in the hymen reduces it to a technical virginity that does not encompass the various meanings attached to it in Jordanian society. To propagate this definition, media coverage routinely employs medical discourses that support this understanding. These medical discourses are in turn portrayed as “truths” which are based on scientific and medical information and, by extension, intended to be indisputable. They are sometimes used to raise awareness of the anatomy of the female body and to alert women and society at large to the possible non-sexual reasons for hymen breakage. In the majority of cases, however, these medical discourses are used to establish a link between the physical and the moral to the benefit of patriarchal restrictions on women’s sexuality.

Virginity as a Domain for Religious Discourses

Similarly, religious discourses are frequently used in media coverage of issues related to virginity. Much like medical experts, religious authorities are perceived as knowledgeable and capable of issuing verdicts about virginity and wider sexual practices. They are portrayed as experts on all matters, generally speaking, but their ability to issue *fatawa* (the plural of *fatwa*, a religious verdict) is actively sought by journalists eager to contextualise their stories. An example how religious opinion is a central element in news reporting is found in Manar Muawwad’s coverage of hymen reconstruction surgery. The story, published by Al Ghad in 2009, featured religious discourse right from the subtitle: “Hamdi Murad: Shara’ Considers Hymen Reconstruction a Crime Bigger than Adultery.” Prominent Jordanian Muslim scholar Hamdi Murad is quoted in the interview as rejecting hymen reconstruction surgery “in absolute, under any conditions, and regardless of the motives” (Muawwad, 2009a). His rejection of the surgery is amplified by a *fatwa*:

Dr. Hamdi Murad, an Islamic researcher, rejects these procedures in absolute, under any conditions, and regardless of the motives. He indicates that the reconstruction of a hymen which was broken due to illegitimate intercourse is “a crime bigger than that of adultery itself”.

Murad vehemently rejects [the procedure] because it “constitutes cheating and deceit and it conceals a heinous crime that allows vice and obscenities to spread in Muslim society”. He adds that “starting a marital life with this lie and deceit is the worst kind of corrupted partnerships” and he considers those who do it (the girl and the doctor) and anyone who helps conceal it morally corrupt and depraved (Muawwad, 2009a).

This religious position on hymen reconstruction surgery is buttressed by another, given by a *Sharia*² professor at the University of Jordan. Thus the religious discourse bears resemblance to the medical discourse on virginity in that it stresses that said virginity must be protected and not faked in order to protect the integrity of society. It also mimics the medical discourse in equating the hymen to virginity. Perhaps more interestingly, however, is that despite being regarded as a quotable expert on the subject, Murad’s religious status enables him to position religious discourse as superior to legal and medical discourses when he pronounces that “anyone

² *Sharia* is the Arabic word for Islamic law and moral codes. *Shara’* is a synonym.

concealing adultery, be that the doctor or the woman or her family, is a criminal, even if the law enables them to do so” (Muawwad, 2009a). Murad also uses his religious authority to condemn the more permissive Islamic approaches to hymen reconstruction surgery, as the operation is allowed by certain clerics based on the principle of *sitr* (literally, concealment of wrongdoing), which is encouraged in Islam. Murad claims that the extension of *sitr* to hymen reconstruction surgery misunderstands Islamic principles.

Unsurprisingly, religious discourses are also adopted by readers of the hymen reconstruction story, sometimes in elaborate ways. For instance, one reader provides eight points against hymen reconstruction surgery based on a religious research on the topic:

Ghareeba il Nas: [...] first: hymen reconstruction may lead to the mingling of lineage, because a woman may become pregnant from the first intercourse and then get married after reconstructing her hymen, which leads to the offspring to be linked to the husband and this confuses *haram* with *halal*³.

Second: hymen reconstruction surgery means that the forbidden is seen [by the doctor]

Third: hymen reconstruction facilitates adultery because women know that they can reconstruct their hymens after intercourse.

Fourth: Muslim clerics have agreed that if the benefits of some action exist with harm we should strive to gain the benefits and prevent the harm, but if we cannot do this then we should leave the benefits in order to prevent the harm. Judging by this rule, hymen reconstruction surgery produces more harm than good and therefore we pronounce it forbidden [...] (Muawwad, 2009b).

Others simply pronounce it as *haram* without going into such elaborate details. They do, however, offer simpler reasons for their verdicts, as in the following comments:

Haram Wghosh: In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful. Hymen reconstruction surgery is *haram* and is considered as cheating. It spreads adultery and obscenities because a girl can rely on the knowledge that her hymen will be restored, and this is *haram* and cheating except in one case; rape or an accident. And to the doctors who do this operation I say fear Allah (Muawwad, 2009b).

Dina: In my opinion this is *haram*. The honourable girl must not be treated like the girl who has done these obscene acts and wants to be treated like any other girl. She should've thought carefully before doing this heinous act and [now she] wants to cover it up with illegitimate ways (Muawwad, 2009b).

These readers mirror the arguments proposed by the two clerics interviewed in the report but go into considerable detail in support of their opinions. Many readers oppose hymen reconstruction surgeries and frame them within the context of *zina* (adultery) and vice, prohibited in Islam. Very often moral and religious discourses are used together, as the procedure is seen as inviting moral decay and leading to the deterioration of the supposedly moral Muslim society of Jordan. This interdiscursive weaving of viewpoints on virginity renders it onto the hymen but, simultaneously, much more than the hymen: in the opinion of clerics and many readers, it is a religiously mandated state of being required of women before marriage. The dangers of

³ *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning forbidden (in Islam), whereas *Halal* indicates permission.

tampering with it are grave: sinfulness, moral degradation, lack of trust between partners, ruined families, and an overall damaged society.

This deployment of conservative religious discourses on the part of Jordanian media professionals is met with instances of more progressive approaches to religion, in some texts and also in readers' comments. In her column on virginity tests, feminist secular writer Zulaikha Abu Reesheh consults a *Sharia* scholar who argues that the hymen is not a condition for the validity of marriage in Islam:

Dr. Mohammad Sartawi, professor of *Sharia* at the University of Jordan, maintains that the hymen is not a condition for marriage in Islam. In other words, according to Islamic *Sharia* labelling a woman as a virgin [*bikr*] in the marriage contract does not mean that she has an intact hymen. It merely means that she has never been married before, and therefore she can be distinguished from the previously married woman [*thayyeb*]. Based on this argument, let not the ignorant tie the consequences of this shameful understanding of virginity to the woman along, as it includes woman and man. But these are sick customs and traditions which rendered the woman into a target for masculine venting, [the venting of a man] who is unable, due to political and economic conditions, to hold his head high and [protect] his dignity (Abu Reesheh, 2009).

Referencing Dr. Sartawi, Abu Reesheh attempts to unlink the hymen from the Muslim marriage contract as the intact hymen is not considered a condition for a valid marriage in Islam. Abu Reesheh distinguishes between the “previously unmarried” woman and the “virgin,” underscoring the irrelevance of the state of the hymen to the Islamic marriage contract unless it specifies that the woman must be a virgin. Linguistically, the Arabic word for a previously unmarried woman is *bikr*, the opposite of *thayyeb*, or the previously married woman.⁴ A common understanding of the word *bikr*, and indeed of the unmarried woman it represents, is that it also indicates virginity through an intact hymen, but by defining the boundaries of the word, Abu Reesheh places it within the larger Islamic marriage discourse and counters the link between the hymen and virginity so often taken for granted by Jordanian media and public. She also argues that men and women are equally capable of virginity based on this religious understanding of the concept, not tied to a physical marker but rather to the marital status of the person concerned. This is an intriguing approach to virginity from a religious perspective, as it effectively blames social traditions for emphasising the importance of the hymen and distances *Sharia* from this linkage.

Another prominent theme in the religious discourses used to discuss virginity in Jordan is a general nostalgia of a Muslim utopia and the return to the *Jahiliyya*⁵ – this relapse is itself the reason for the perceived moral, religious, and social decay. For example, Hussein Rawashdeh's 2009 article against virginity tests attempted to identify the factors leading to the emergence of

⁴ In *Lisan Al-Arab*, the most comprehensive Arabic language dictionary, *bikr* and '*athra*' are synonyms and mean “untouched by a man”. The root is '*athara*, which denotes difficulty. *Lisan Al-Arab* quotes Ibn Al-Arabi as explaining “a woman is called '*athra*' due to her tightness”, hence the difficulty of penetrating her. There is no reference to the hymen in either definition.

⁵ Pre-Islamic Arabic culture, which is widely used (and politically so) in Arab and Muslim thought as an example of the supposed “dark ages” in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam.

this phenomenon. The entire article, entitled “How Did These Disasters Enter Our Society?” speculates about these reasons:

I also wonder: why did our society reach this “wretched” [quotation marks in the original] state and where did these “disasters” and germs enter it? And what about vice and immorality “hotspots” which are widespread without stirring any reaction from us, and how are they related to this issue? What are our social organisations and religious institutions doing to confront this phenomenon? Is it enough to issue a fatwa declaring the test “*haram*”? Is it enough to demand the fortification of the family? And what of these calls we hear about women’s liberation and CEDAW, do they have anything to do with the state we’re in? Finally: I am fully aware that traditions and customs have triumphed over religious texts and regulations in our societies, and that our discourse on women still misses the fact that Islam has focused on honouring her and has been clear about this (Rawashdeh, 2009).

Jordan is in a “wretched” state (akin to the *Jahiliyya*) where disastrous practices like virginity tests have appeared. Earlier on in his article, Rawashdeh focuses on premarital virginity tests requested by single women in order to verify the state of their hymens before marriage. At the core of his argument, he rejects virginity tests generally and women’s premarital sex (which leads to virginity tests) more specifically. He proposes many hypotheses as to why these “disasters” came about: he suggests that the silence and inadequacy of social and religious institutions have led to this state, that calls for women’s liberation have led to moral decay, and that distance from *Sharia* has led the entire society astray, particularly since it favoured its own traditions over divine law. The religious and anti-feminist sentiment in Rawashdeh’s piece is unmistakable: he links Jordan’s endorsement of CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and virginity tests sought by unmarried women to insinuate that feminist calls have brought about vice and distance from religion. In the Muslim utopia, religious and social institutions would be able to counter these feminist calls, fortify the family unit, and single women would not engage in premarital sex or seek virginity tests. Simultaneously, Jordanian men would not demand these tests because they would trust their future partners.

The implications of using religious discourse as Rawashdeh does to stigmatise premarital sex and virginity tests simultaneously can be seen clearly in comments on his article. All his readers focused on blaming women for the tests, regardless of whether or not they sought them or were forced to undergo them. Two comments, in particular, adopt his longing for a Muslim utopia:

SOJ: Dear sir, our situation is difficult and complicated. There is no middle ground amidst the flood of globalisation, TV series, and movies. Partial return to Islam is an impossible solution. In my opinion, the current state of Muslims will not be rectified until religion is implemented by the Muslim on himself and in his home and on everyone under his charge, before implanting it widely in society (Rawashdeh, 2009).

Mona Khouli: Dear wonderful Hussein, we are in a time where adhering to religion is incredibly difficult. Vice is being exported to our sons and daughters

from everywhere. Yes, there are foreign ideas invading our sons' minds about freedom, emancipation, equality, and rights they do not have [which] form their personalities whilst their parents are shocked by what they see and hear. Yes, this is very dangerous. Our daughters are influenced by the programmes and series they watch, which facilitate vice to them and show them how to get rid of any moral problems they have. I know that the effort invested in protecting our daughters' honour is exhausting and difficult and results in many sacrifices on the part of the mother and the father [...] but we have to be patient to help them reach safety by adhering to Islamic *Sharia* in all aspects of their lives, because it is a strong fort which will make it needless for us to prove a girls' virginity or to doubt her morals (Rawashdeh, 2009).

Mimicking his attempt to diagnose the reasons for virginity tests (and moral looseness, which he argues is at the heart of why these tests exist), readers make their own attempts to propose reasons. Distance from religion, globalisation, foreign media, and "foreign ideas" about equality and emancipation are all to blame for the emergence of virginity tests. There are unmistakable similarities between the reasons given here and the ones given for honour crimes. They all point to the continued longing for a Muslim utopia where these two problems do not exist, and where *Sharia* acts as a filter of both morals and behaviour, effectively rooting out such "disasters." Similar expressions of nostalgia are found in other opinion columns and in many readers' comments on stories related to virginity.

To summarise, religious discourses used in media texts on virginity often fall into one of two main themes that exist both on the level of the texts themselves and in readers' comments. Deference to Islamic *Sharia* as the ultimate law to address problems such as honour crimes and hymen reconstruction surgery is a common theme. Media professionals play a role in promoting this theme through their active pursuit of religious clerics to supply *fatawa* and religious opinions, which normally give a specific and conservative reading of *Sharia* designed to curb premarital sexuality and to place prohibitions on any attempts to manoeuvre these restrictions. Clerics are portrayed by the media as experts, further emphasising their power and influence in discussions of virginity and sexuality. However, there are more progressive attempts to interpret *Sharia* in a way that affords new approaches to virginity in Islam. Further to the centrality of Islamic *Sharia* and the importance of the opinions of religious experts in discussions of virginity, a general sense of longing to an elusive utopia is also a recurrent theme that underscores the centrality of religious discourses to discussions of sexuality in Jordan.

Conclusion

Jordanian media frequently circulate medical and religious discourses on virginity. These are present on the production and textual levels, as well as on the consumption level, brought into the picture by readers. The media portray medical and religious authorities as experts capable of and supposed to use their knowledge (either of anatomy or *Sharia*) to diagnose and define virginity. In turn, the discourses these experts use are represented as "truths," further amplifying these experts' authority and lending their opinions an air of legitimacy. Not only do Jordanian media uncritically circulate these overwhelmingly conservative discourses at the expense of alternative, more progressive, viewpoints, but they also consistently employ specified medical discourses to emphasise technical virginity (as embodied by the hymen). The emphasis

on technical virginity reduces the meaning of virginity to the hymen only, and draws reactions from readers who consider that “being a virgin means nothing” if socio-sexual norms are violated by women. These reactions re-situate virginity as an umbrella for physical and moral attributes that extend beyond the hymen itself. By deploying such conservative medical and religious discourses, Jordanian media are involved in perpetuating the patriarchal control over women’s sexuality in Jordan. Moreover, by rendering invisible other opinions and critiques of these discourses, they actively form the public opinion in such a way that is detrimental to Jordanian women’s rights to control their own bodies.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. There are attempts to resist these dominant discourses on all levels of the media cycle. Critical writers and readers continuously try to push the terms of the debate towards a more progressive understanding of virginity, one that appropriates these usually conservative religious and medical discourses to more liberal ends. Nonetheless, even those critical attempts operate from within the conservative parameters initially set by the media. For instance, attempts to divorce the hymen and virginity often rely on medical and religious discourses, and thus acknowledge the “truth” value of these discourses without challenging it. To ground critical attempts within the same medical and religious discursive fields results in the absence of radical revisions of media coverage of virginity and, indeed, in the absence of radical critique of the discourses used to discuss virginity itself.

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