

THE FEMALE BODY IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSES OF ARAB ISLAM

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This article intends to treat Arabian Islamic discourses on desire and sexuality. Precisely, the symbolic and imaginary aspect of the control of the female body will be examined.

The body is the main substance of social order. It is related to the social construction of reason and desire. According to Bryan S. Turner (1984: 2) every society is confronted by four tasks: reproduction of populations in time; regulation of bodies in space; restraint of the "interior body" through disciplines; and representation of the "exterior body" in social space. In turn, Jeffrey Weeks (1986: 27) mentions five broad areas being particularly crucial in the social organization of sexuality: kinship and family systems, economic and social organization, social regulation, political interventions, and the development of "cultures of resistance". Here I will especially concentrate on the regulation and representation of the female body and sexuality.

The human body is a social, historical and imaginary product containing power relations. Similarly, desire is the product of historical discourses (Foucault: 1979). My purpose is to study discourses dealing with the question of desire in Arab Islam. I define discourse as a public representation implying a practice of speech and action; it also implies the subject and the object that is, relations of power (Haug 1987: 191). In Islam, the public discourses are directed by Muslim men, because the public realm is occupied by men. The basis of these discourses are the Koran and the tradition called **hadith** including **sunna**, the conduct patterns of Prophet Muhammed. All these are the foundation of the values and norms of the Muslims.

This paper will consider three Muslim discourses:

1. **Orthodox discourse** which is founded especially on the Koran and described by Fatna Ait Sabbah in her book, **Woman in the Muslim Unconscious** (1984). According to her, orthodox discourse is the discourse of

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power, authority and hierarchy. It is a spiritual, eternal, omnipresent and compulsory discourse, and I consider it in the perspective of marriage.

2. **Traditional discourse** which is based on **hadith** and **sunna**. These traditions can be read as texts. Traditional discourse includes the actual practises where the power relations are present. My standpoint is the control of the female body; and how the Muslim orthopraxis it tattooed on it.

3. **Erotic discourse** which is grounded on the fictive stories of female desire told by religious authorities; it can be considered as a counter discourse to the orthodox and traditional discourses, but it does not repeal their power. Erotic discourse is best represented by the picture of Muslim Paradise (cf. Sabbah, 1984).

Orthodox discourse

Orthodox discourse is the discourse of spirit. Its subject is God to whom human needs, sexuality included, are subordinate. In the sacred reality constructed by God, sexuality is placed within marriage outside of which it is forbidden. Orthodox discourse maintains the social hierarchies by localizing sexuality within marriage, because in this way it keeps the monopoly of organizing and describing the reality. Its basic project is to regulate pleasure.

However, as opposed to Christianity, Islam sees sexuality as an elementary part of life in this world, as well as in its image of Paradise. Celibacy is considered an abnormal way of life. According to Imam al-Ghazali (1058-1111), a sexually satisfied man can concentrate better on prayer. Consequently, a righteous Muslim man used to marry frequently (al-Ghazali 1984: 61-62).

Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1985: 86), describes Islam as an economy of pleasure that integrates the sexual into the sacral. Because Islam is an orthopractical religion rather than an orthodoxic one, this economy takes place especially in the practises of marriage. Marriage has its sacral foundation in the divine law, **Sharia**: sexuality is a sacrament fulfilled only through marriage. According to Bouhdiba (1985: 138) "canalizing the spirit and spiritualizing the flesh is the essential feature of the Islamic undertaking". A famous hadith declares that "the man who marries takes possession of half of his religion" (1985: 11). The sexual function becomes in itself a sacred function, a "sign of signs" (ayat-al-ayat) through which the power of God may be recognized (1985: 7, 14).

In practice, men represent the power of God. As Sabbah (1984: 35) sees it, Muslim marriage is an exchange of a woman between two men: between the future husband and the "wali" who is the representative of the Muslim order. Wali is always of the male sex: father, brother, paternal uncle, etc.

"Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted, Great." (Surah 4: 34).

"... And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them.. Allah is Mighty, Wise." (Surah 2: 228).

"Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet Him. Give glad tidings to believers, (O muhammed)". (Surah 2: 223).

These surahs of Koran, obviously, define women as subordinate to men. Sabbah (1984, 74-75) describes the relationship between men and women as a pyramidal hierarchy: the divine being takes place before a human being of the male sex, who goes before a human being of the female sex, who goes before children. In the sacred construction of reality the relationship that links the divine being to human beings is asymmetrical. The divine being, as the source and incarnation of power, delegates the power to those who are charged with direct duties to him. Those who do not have that direct relationship have no power. Thus, the natural order of relationships in Islam is hierarchical: "The Muslimah is responsible as wife to her husband, and receives her spiritual rewards as such, and at the same time, her children are responsible to her as mother, and receive their spiritual rewards as such" (Schleifer 1986: 85).

According to a hadith, "Paradise is at the foot of the mother" (Schleifer 1986: 88). Therefore, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and rearing of the children open the doors of Paradise for women. These are spiritual acts. And if the mother dies in childbirth, she is equal to the martyr who dies fighting for the cause of God. (Schleifer 1986: 51-56).

While the women give birth through sexuality and in the world of reality, the sacred gives birth to life through and in discourse. The sacred func-

tions are at the level of the word and abstract, at the level of perception and representation. As spiritual discourse, this denies to sexuality and woman the giving of life. In the biological time it is the woman who gives life to man, but in the sacral time, God becomes to be the reproducor of life (Sabbah 1984: 63-68).

Sabbah argues that, if one regards the monotheistic God as a projection of earthly man, the sacred can be intrepreted ultimately as a homosexual experience, as an attempt of the male principle at self-fertilization. The sacred is the fertilization of earthly man by the male principle erected onto a divine body. That produces the fundamental conflict between the heterosexual union and the sacred, which in Islam is focalized around the conflict between reason and desire (1984: 109).

A Muslim wife has to sacrifice her personal desire and respond to the sexual needs of her husband. "The woman who refuses her body and sleeps elsewhere than in her husband's bed is accursed by the angels until she returns to it", says one hadith. And according to other hadiths "a woman must never refuse her husband, even on a camel's back" and "even on the top-most edge of a burning oven." By another tradition the Prophet cursed the "maswwifa" and "mughallisa" women. The first is the woman who, when invited by her husband to make love, always replies "saufa" (not just yet, tomorrow). The second is the woman who falsely claims to be having her period (Bouhdiba 1985: 89). But man has to satisfy his wife also. He should not make love with his wife like an animal, says one hadith.

Subordinating the female body to the male desire is spiritually legitimated. As an instrument of spirit, it has the function of maintaining the hierarchical gender structures.

Traditional discourse

In traditional discourse, the female body becomes an instrument of the control of desire. It may be interpreted in a way that Islam is not against sexuality but rather against desire represented by the woman. The function of traditional discourse is the regulation of desire: the society imprints itself on the women's body by writing on it the limits of its own moral standards (or better, double standards). While the orthodox discourse deals with the sacred order of the world, the traditional discourse deals with its profane order, an order which has the female body as its symbol: the female body is the symbolic representation of the collective identity. The traditional discourse is based on the practices involved with the female body, and these practices maintain the profane order directed by the sacred heaven. The fundamentals of this discourse are the Koran, hadiths and the sunna.

The contradiction between sexuality and desire has an effect on the concept of "fitna". Fitna means disorder, chaos, catastrophe, scandal, and rebellion. It is also associated with attraction, beauty, seduction, temptation and incitement. The woman is considered as an embodiment of fitna, an incarnation of the dangers of sexuality (Mernissi 1987: 29). According to Mernissi, the Islamic society is threatened both from the inside by women and from the outside by nonmuslims. She interpretes the autonomy of women to be linked with fitna, and the fear of it as the heart of the Islamic family organization (1987: 43). Because of fitna, the mother may find herself in a situation such that her family is her enemy (Schleifer 1986: 62).

Thus, desire represents fitna as opposed to reason, order and divine will. Desire and reason are in a complementary power relationship where the strengthening of one is inevitably accompanied by a weakening of the other. The triumph of reason implies the control of desire- and the control of women. Reason is identified as the instrument of faith and divine love. According to Imam al-Jawzi, the struggle against desire was identified by the Prophet as being the "great jihad", the holy war, in contrast with the "small jihad", which is the physical war against the enemies of Islam. It is told by Fayad Ibn Nageeh, that "when a man's penis is in erection, he loses a third of his reason. Others say that he loses a third of his religion" (al-Ghazali 1984: 61; Sabbah 1984: 110-114).

In the traditional discourse, desire is regulated by sexual segregation applied in time, space and discourse. According to Mernissi (1987: 153, 157), in the Muslim world, sexuality is controlled by the sex specified territories. Therefore, different territories have gender specific meanings. However, this territorial gender segregation strengthens the sexualization of human relationships. The interaction between men and women, who are not relatives, is ritualized in complex ways. Hence, a territory is rather a social than a physical sphere.

So, in the background of the women's control is the idea of the sexual activity of women. This picture of a sexually active woman is reverse to the Freudian image of woman as sexually passive. It can be supposed, that the Western women's control is not that strong because of their supposed weaker sexual demands (Mernissi 1987: 26-31).

The main strategy of the gender segregation is "hijab" ("purdah" in the East), which has a visual, spatial, abstract and ethical dimension (Mernissi 1991: 93) including veiling. Hijab reflects the dichotomy of the spheres of life: there is the public sphere of men, called umma and organized by religion, and there is the sphere of women that includes the family and sexuality. Umma is characterized by equality, union, love, brotherhood, and confi-

dence among the male members. On the contrary, family is characterized by gender segregation, hierarchy, and the authority principle (Mernissi 1987: 156).

"The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman" writes Mernissi (1982: 183). She points to the double moral standards of men: "they want access to women for brief sexual encounters before marriage, but once they decide to marry, they launch into search of a virgin. Men try to destroy the honour of other men by means of their young women" (1982: 185). Thus, the hymen becomes the "hijab" of virginity.

Erotic discourse

While the traditional discourse is the discourse of the control of the body, the erotic discourse is the fictive discourse of pleasure and enjoyment. In the traditional and orthodox discourses power and authority are inscribed on the body by violence; in the erotic discourse this happens in the name of pleasure. The erotic discourse about the body is a "here and now" discourse where pleasure is the organizing principle of the world, of beings and their relations. It is emanated from and situated in female desire. Sabbah argues that the erotic discourse is religious because it is an attempt by the sheiks, imams and qadis-the religious authorities (Ibn Kemal Pasha, Sheikh Nefzawi for example) vested with the responsibility for guiding and channeling the acts of the believer (1984: 23).

Whereas women and men are God's slaves in the orthodox discourse, they become slaves of pleasure in erotic discourse. In the reality of erotic discourse, social order is reduced to genitals. In its omnisexual world, men are divided into two classes: the useful ones, the omnisexual men who are able to give caresses and orgasms endlessly; and the useless ones, those who have difficulties in succeeding in this kind of tournament (Sabbah 1984: 48). Social hierarchy loses all importance, and the size of penis becomes a man's status indicator which is an instrument of woman's needs. Virginity is an impossible condition for omnisexual woman. Thus, the erotic discourse written by men is articulated by means of women.

Actually, the erotic discourse of Muslims is similar to western pornography: it represents mechanic, anonymous, unemotional sexuality where the desire of man is projected onto the woman who becomes phallic. In the erotic discourse, woman is just a body without any psychic and social qualities. Like man, woman is also determined by her genitals: an ideal vulva is narrow, heated and dry (Sabbah 1984: 26).

Sabbah, defines the man of erotic discourse in terms of "penis envy": longing for the penis that the omnisexual woman wants (1984: 45). The phallus and its needs are not the point of departure for the organization of the universe, but the female desire for the penis. (An example in point is the writings in the Finnish sex magazines which have a similar structure. Nare 1986). But the penis that men have is not necessarily the one that the omnisexual woman desires, and that leads to the fear of castration: the fear of not having a penis able to satisfy the omnisexual woman. Castration fear in the Freudian discourse is a homosexual fear, a matter between two men, father and son. In the omnisexual sphere, the fear of castration is a heterosexual fear-man's fear of being rejected by woman for having a defective penis, not able to beget the female orgasm (Sabbah 1984: 45).

In the Muslim paradise, man does not have to be envious of other penises. Only there can a Muslim man rest in peace before the presence of beautiful women without having to fear them. God has created eternal virgins, the houris to be consumed by male believers in paradise. Houris are beautiful servants who provide for the sexual needs of men without any demands of their own. Houris are defined in physical terms; she has no spiritual dimension, no will of her own. According to Sabbah, houris are not human because she is deprived of her freedom of choice and of development (1984: 96). That is why she asks: "Is the houri, the paradisaical woman, the ideal, example and model of femininity, different from the male body in paradise, as a page on which to write messages? Does the houri, passivity in the extreme, signify only herself or is she in fact the mirror image of male passivity?" (Sabbah 1984: 90).

Although access to Paradise is guaranteed to earthly women directly as believers and indirectly as wives of men believers (Sabbah 1984: 93), Paradise is equipped solely for the happiness of men. In the sacred reality, the sexual act is not an act between two equal beings but man's sexual satisfaction is the aim. Women are nothing but interchangeable fetishes whose function is to permit men to achieve an orgasmic release as mechanical as possible in order to free him for the fundamental relationship- that with God.

Thus, unlike the asexual paradise of Christians, there is no celibacy in the Muslim paradise. The Muslim paradise, "janna", is the place of sexual pleasure: daily routines are eating, resting and making love; there is no work in "Janna". Paradise is the total and absolute satisfaction of desire (Bouhdiba 1983: 88). Man does not have the fear of impotence because he is now omnisexual: "Man's sexual potency is multiplied. One makes love as on earth but each climax is extended and extended and lasts for twenty four years- the erection is eternal". (Bouhdiba 1983: 75-76). Thus, the ima-

gery world of Paradise compensates the earthly realities. While in the erotic discourse it is the vagina which has infinite orgasm potentiality, in Paradise it is the phallus which is omniorgastic.

In conclusion, erotic discourse is a kind of counter discourse to orthodox power discourse. By reversing the actual relationship between the two genders, erotic discourse carnevalizes this relationship and maintains the male power of traditional discourse. Erotic discourse reneges on the norms of orthodox discourse, but it does not describe the consequences. In traditional discourse, social control and fear of shame keep women from behaving like the omnisexual women of the erotic discourse. Therefore, as a projected fiction, erotic discourse strengthens the repression of the female body.

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