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Pleasure, Politics, and Patriarchy: Women's Intimacy in an Authoritarian Egypt

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**Pleasure, Politics, and Patriarchy: Women's Intimacy
in an Authoritarian Egypt**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the question: To what extent is Egypt's patriarchal household structure, especially in regards to its treatment of female sexual autonomy, a pillar of authoritarianism and therefore an obstacle to democracy? This paper takes a deep look into the intimate sexual lives of Egyptians and explores its implications for regime type in the country. Widespread practices such as virginity testing, hymen reconstruction, female genital mutilation, etc. along with phenomena such as sexual dysfunctions, community morality policing and other normalized behaviors demonstrate the different ways in which women's sexual autonomies are widely hindered. This is the result of historical and political conditions that stressed the maternal role of women in society, which underscored ties between virginity, moral family values, and national identity. The aim of this research is to use a combination of interviews, historical background, and socio-political analysis to identify the relationship between the personal and political when it comes to intimacy and democratization. Through theoretical frameworks and studies of practices in Egypt, we can see how authoritarian regimes use sex as a tool to maintain power and sustain systems of subjugation throughout the cornerstone of society- the household.

Dedication

This work and my college experience would not have been possible without the support of some people very close to my heart. Momma, for being my #1 cheerleader, role model, and reason for everything I do. Abbu, for making endless sacrifices that have allowed me to chase opportunities and get me to where I am today. Bhaiya and Fariya, for being my best friends and continually raising the standards for success and ambition. And Omar, for inspiring me to be the best version of myself and making me feel at home even from 5,602 miles away.

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INTRODUCTION

When we talk about democracy, common discourse includes discussions of free and fair elections, consent of the governed, peaceful transitions of power, civic engagement, and other politically important conditions that prevent a society from falling into the injustices and strife that authoritarianism brings. Egypt, in the beginning of the last decade, was at the very brink of this contention between political liberty and oppression. On January 25, 2011 tens of thousands of ambitious Egyptians tired of nearly three decades of Hosni Mubarak's rule gathered in Cairo with thousands more assembled in other cities across the country. This revolutionary demand for democracy sent ripples across the entire region as the world watched these masses of young men and women demand visibility in the eyes of their government. After several days of clashes and violence between protestors and Egyptian security forces, President Mubarak finally stepped down upon losing support from his military.

In 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi, which was the first election where there was more than one candidate on the ballot since 2005. It seemed like the region finally had a success in democratization, allowing young Egyptians to imagine a brighter future. Soon, however, they were forced to come face to face with a bleak reality. In 2013, Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew the newly elected leader and took power. Since then, Sisi has maintained leadership of the country and neutralized popular optimism for a more free and fair Egypt.

When it comes to discussions of Egypt and its path towards democracy, its tumultuous history of recent years has inundated academic exchanges. However, in this project I aim to pivot attention away from stories of the masses, and towards the dynamics within Egyptian households

and, more specifically, behind the doors of bedrooms. I hope to explore the question: To what extent is Egypt's patriarchal household structure, especially in its treatment of female sexual autonomy, a pillar of authoritarianism and therefore an obstacle to democracy? In the Egyptian context, this is strikingly interesting because the nuclear family constitutes the main unit of society from which individuals assume much of their identity and standing. This positioning is what lends itself to the creation of complex power dynamics, especially concerning gender. Women face unique challenges within these contexts because of the unequal pressures and standards put on them as a result of power structures placing patriarchs at the top of the hierarchy. Sex, as we will see, becomes constructed as the transfer point through which these structures are acted upon. This is manifested in a multitude of different sexual traditions, practices, and attitudes that deprive Egyptian women of their bodily autonomies, both within and outside of the bedroom.

Sex is a taboo across many places in the world and it is very much so in Egypt. Despite the secrecy and disapproval attached to intimacy, sexual attitudes and behaviors are closely tied to religion, culture, politics, economics, and other seemingly unrelated aspects of daily life. Sexuality as lived practice unveils important conditions in Egyptian society. With sex seen as a source of shame, it renders it as a powerful tool for subjugation at the hands of the government. One of the most important pillars of democracy is the protection of personal freedoms, and one such freedom is that of sexual rights. According to the World Health Organization, "sexual rights" are defined as:

"The freedom to access sexual and reproductive health services and to generate, share, and consume ideas and information about sexuality...to choose your own partner and to

be sexually active, or not, in consensual relations... to decide whether you want to have children, and when... to control your own body and the liberty to pursue a satisfying, safe, and pleasurable sexual life. And all this without coercion, discrimination, or violence.”

As it pertains to sexual rights, this is where Egyptian women suffer greatly compared to their male counterparts. Despite the fact that Egyptian women were the first in the Arab world to gain full political rights in 1956, they bear a significant physical and psychological burden in the post-revolution politics. So long as patriarchy in households continues to repress women’s sexual autonomy, democracy is unlikely to be achieved in the country. This is because, as my research shows, authoritarianism has a hold on the country through its masculinist projects, where autocrats and patriarchs sustain themselves by maintaining gendered power dynamics within the home.

In this project, I speak solely on heterosexual relations in Egypt. Attitudes towards and practices of homosexuality in the country are deeply important, and their complexity deserves a separate project dedicated to it. As part of this discussion, it is important to reiterate that men of the region are not inherently violent or oppressive, and any stereotypes suggesting so must be rejected. Due to a combination of colonial and political histories and international hegemonic masculinist apparatuses, power structures in Egypt have been perpetuated systemically to marginalize female bodies. Additionally, I hope not to equate freedom with sexual activity. As the definition from the WHO asserts, sexual rights should be measured by one’s bodily autonomy rather than one’s sexual prowess. In the same vein, I do not wish to follow the example of the West and its sexual revolution as there are a plethora of sexual rights issues

facing Western countries as well. Sexual rights need to be achieved not to implement Western ideals of sexuality, but rather to promote women's agency and gender equality. Women's issues caused by patriarchal power structures are issues that, unfortunately, many societies across the corners of the world face; Egypt is not in a unique position. However, with Egypt being the most populous country in the region along with its particular geopolitical significance and formidable influence across the Middle East and North Africa, it is a key study on how the personal becomes the political when it comes to female sexuality and the country's fight for democracy.

CHAPTER ONE

Intimacy Through the Centuries: Historical Background

The tradition of dismissing a woman's sexuality and intimate agency is not a new one. Neither is it tied to a certain geographical location. Egypt is a noteworthy case study of sexual intimacy because of its history, where issues like socio-economics, politics, religion, and culture meet at a crossroads. The traditions surrounding sexuality in the region have taken many forms and have shifted across time periods. Today's general sentiments of prudery and immorality surrounding sexuality were not always the case in the region's history. Various traditions and political histories contributed to the reality of discourses on sexuality and intimacy today, especially as they pertain to gendered dynamics of power and control. The history of intimacy in Egypt and the surrounding region highlight how sexuality and power relations have manifested themselves in the home, where women bear the biggest burden.

Pre-Islamic Era

During the pre-Islamic era, sexual consumerism and promiscuity dominated the region. Nature and all beings were often characterized by sexual imagery and eroticism was a theme in much of literature. Men practiced polygyny, prostitution was popular, and women were treated as sub-human. Female slaves were forced into prostitution by their owners and female subordination was praised deeply by the patriarchal society. Unsurprisingly, male sexual pleasure was always prioritized over that of a female. Marriage during this time period also came in four different forms.¹ Marriage by agreement occurred when there was an agreement between a man and his future wife's family. Marriage by *mahr* was a traditional practice in which a groom or his

¹ Masarwah, Nader. (2013). Marriage in PreIslamic Arabia as Reflected in Poetry and Prose: The Social and Humane Relations Between Husband and Wife. *Sociology Study*. 3. 847-857.

father paid the bride an obligatory sum of money that was hers to keep. Marriage by capture, or *ba'al*, was a common practice that often took place during war. Here, men would kidnap women from other tribes and place them in the slave market. From there, women would be sold into marriage or slavery. In marriages like this men had complete control over their wives, and the women had no right to divorce. The last common marital practice was marriage by inheritance. This was when a man would inherit his father's widows. Although in these cases the son had options on how to handle the women, such as arranging another marriage by purchase or dismissing them altogether, the women had little to no rights and were subject to obeying the orders of their inheritors. Judging from pre-Islamic Arabic sources, the people of the region viewed marriage as an important institution that brought security to the status of the family, but marital affairs were dominated largely by the patriarchs of the household.²

Islamic Caliphates

The introduction of Islam into the region made some improvements in terms of achieving rights for women. After most Arabs accepted Islam, it brought not only laws but ethical values that should dictate sexual behavior and relationships between men and women. Lawful sex was seen as an act of religious devotion, whereas pre-marital and extra-marital sexual intercourse was prohibited. Though men and women are treated differently in the Quran regarding their respective roles and responsibilities in society, women possessed inalienable agency under Islam, in contrast to life before the Islamic era. This included rights to education, divorce, holding property, inheritance and sexual fulfillment.³ Marriage was seen as a mutually beneficial contract

² Masarwah, Nader. (2013). Marriage in PreIslamic Arabia as Reflected in Poetry and Prose: The Social and Humane Relations Between Husband and Wife. *Sociology Study*. 3. 847-857.

³ Akande, Habeeb, and Abdassamad Clarke. *A Taste of Honey: Sexuality and Erotology in Islam*. Rabaah Publishers, 2015, 6.

between a man and a woman, where the woman had the right to choose her own husband. Before marrying, women were allowed to require her husband to agree to a prenuptial agreement that secured any Islamic rights that she wished from childcare, to her right to work, and even the right to be her husband's only wife- prohibiting her husband to partake in polygyny while she is married to him.⁴ The Quran propagated the principle of the equality of the sexes and emphasized the protection of women's rights, who were largely underprivileged in society at the time.

Despite the progress made in women's intimate rights with the introduction of Islam, this progress deteriorated during the four major Islamic caliphates. Under the Umayyad Caliphate, which was the second of them, war and conquest brought many internal problems. Namely, military victories brought large amounts of prisoners of war into the Muslim lands. Many women were enslaved and were forced to perform sexual acts for their masters. Male slaves, on the other hand, were often castrated to curb their perceived insatiable sexual desire. Women were restricted within the confines of their households, prevented from engaging in public affairs, visiting mosques, and barred from opportunities that would allow them to express themselves. This is not to say that all Muslim societies witnessed the same conditions. Many societies across different time periods saw egalitarianism in which women were highly honored. But of course the opposite is also true- in some epochs and societies, oppressive sentiments and behaviors against women prevailed.

We can see further changes in the treatment of women's intimate lives during the Abbasid Caliphate, which lasted from the eighth to the tenth centuries. During this period, the Muslim world became the hub for learning, as it was the center for scientific, philosophical and medicinal

⁴ Bakhtiar, Lalah. "How Islam Confirms Women's Rights." *How Islam Confirms Women's Rights* | IMOW Muslima, International Museum of Women, muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/how-islam-confirms-women%E2%80%99s-rights.

thought and activity. It was a time of lively religious debate, when several of the main schools of Islamic jurisprudence were established, and when independent religious interpretation flourished.

⁵ The arts also prospered, including many literary works that were highly sexual in nature. Many of these works were written by religious figures who did not see an incompatibility between religious piety and sex.

One of the earliest examples of Arabic erotic literature was written during this time by medieval writer Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib in his forty-three chapter book titled “Encyclopedia of Pleasure”. This text covered every sexual topic imaginable from homosexuality, to virginity, and even bestiality. The book indulges in intimate matters and women’s sex drives are underscored as al-Katib shares considerable counsel on how to best fulfill it.⁶ The societal oppression of women, however, was a continued tradition, and women’s roles in public became even more constricted. Many judicial works depicted women as sexual predators who incited uncontrollable temptation, encouraging the need to keep women in seclusion.⁷ Despite the flourishing of erotic literature and a general open-minded attitude towards sex in the arts, female sexuality was often disregarded and actively curtailed in the institutional frameworks of society.

The Ottoman Caliphate, which ruled the region between the 14th and early 20th centuries, was the last of the four major Islamic caliphates. During this period, slavery was slowly abolished after pressure from secular Western countries. This ended the practice of concubinage, which was the institution of polyamory where a woman lived with a man but held a lower status than that of his wife or wives. From literature during the time, it appears that

⁵ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷ Akande, Habeeb, and Abdassamad Clarke. *A Taste of Honey: Sexuality and Erotology in Islam*. Rabaah Publishers, 2015, 9.

same-sex relationships were tolerated under Ottoman rule, but sodomy was still regarded as a sexual deviance in conformity to its prohibition in Islamic law. Repression of sexuality was common, as well as extreme gender apartheid, which may have been the reason for some men to turn their attention to adolescent boys for the fulfilment of their sexual desires. Male prostitution and same-sex relations proliferated during this time within the Middle East and North Africa region to the point that it became the subject of debate for many erotologists.

Nearing the end of the Ottoman Empire brings us closer to the changing traditions on sexuality and intimacy in the modern day. As we can see, many older books discussed intimacy and sexuality openly and without reservations as the Arab-Muslim tradition of erotology thrived between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. From the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century the focus on this issue changed. The first such change was due to Western medical influences. Attitudes and discourses became heavily influenced by French, German, and Italian literature that emphasized Western medicine and scientific concepts.⁸ New texts on medicine seemed to deny the older ones that described the existences of a libido, sexual desire, and implications of intercourse. Thus, sex largely disappeared altogether from popular medical discourse. In European clinics sex was discussed reluctantly, using codes and euphemisms.⁹ Terminology, therefore, may have been lost in translation which left Arabic and Turkish texts unable to inform them on the matter.

Another reason for the shift in popular discourse on sexuality was the evolution of Europe's two-sex model during the time. This model emphasized the fundamental biological differences between man and woman, and because of that anxieties about sexual frigidity in the

⁸ Ze'evi, Dror. *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900*. University of California Press, 2006, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

West were spread into Islamic societies. For example, women's excessive sexual desire was thought to be caused by hormones and illnesses of the nervous system and a passionate attraction to men was shamed as sexual perversion.¹⁰ Thus, Europe's medicalization of sex effectively erased the intricacies of intimacy, such as emotion and desire, that were much more openly shared and indulged in in the region.

Many commentators make the assertion that prudery, which has become a common characteristic among many of today's Muslim societies such as Egypt, was brought by British colonizers to Muslim societies along with their traditional Victorian concepts of morality. Algerian sexologist and author of "The Arab Kama Sutra: Two thousand years of erotic literature in the East", Malik Chebel, commented:

"In the last two centuries, we have lost our way. We no longer know how to speak of our sensual enjoyment, our pleasures, our utopias, or our liberties. This is the result of the trauma of our collective defeats- [...] subjugation to the Ottomans, colonization, and botched decolonization. We are in an unfortunate phase of sexual regression, of outright prudishness. This has reached the point where the very fact of speaking of a man's or woman's nudity seems like an outrage. Sexuality is not something impure or dirty."¹¹

Although there was a boom in the Arab-Muslim tradition of erotology between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, erotology as a literary genre weakened considerably during the nineteenth century and ended altogether in the twentieth century.¹² Like Chebel, many cite the influence of Christian missionaries on Muslim ethical principles as one of the causes of the decline in

¹⁰ Akande, Habeeb, and Abdassamad Clarke. *A Taste of Honey: Sexuality and Erotology in Islam*. Rabaah Publishers, 2015, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

erotology. The Victorian Christian understanding of morality soon became ingrained into Muslim societies and the open discussion of sexual affairs largely became taboo¹³.

Legal Tradition

In Islamic societies, law emerged as a pillar of the sacred faith. Law is important to this discussion because during the time it not only restricted and repressed sexuality but also constituted desire. This can be seen in the history and prevalence of Sharia law. Sharia legal tradition was never fully codified and there is much ambiguity surrounding its exact rulings on many topics, as rulings were made upon jurist discussions about alleged crimes. Also, it is noteworthy that this legal system is not an egalitarian one because it would assume fundamental differences between categories of people treated differently by the law. One important distinction was between men and women. Other important differences included married and unmarried, adult and minor, and Muslim and non-Muslim, to name a few.¹⁴

There were also differentiations between crimes that were deemed regular and those that were seen as a transgression of God's limits. The latter included crimes and misdemeanors such as extra-marital sexual intercourse, false accusation of such, and drunkenness.¹⁵ These crimes were to be punished much more harshly and decisively. This distinction is still prevalent in Sharia law today. The law highlights several themes within these categories. One is *zina*, which is extra-martial sexual relations. For women, it bars them from sexual intercourse with anyone but their legal husband. However for men, it is defined as having intercourse outside any of his four legal wives and an unlimited number of female slaves.¹⁶ Men therefore are allowed the

¹³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴ Ze'evi, Dror. *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900*. University of California Press, 2006, 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

privilege of sex with many partners, and this principle is consistent with all Sharia sex laws and accounts for distinctions in punishment for males and females.

Though Sharia legal tradition has a history of ambiguity surrounding its exact rulings on many topics, it is important to detail the way that the holy Islamic text of the Quran treats issues of sexual intimacy because many government officials, as we will see, point to it as a basis for legislation. In the Quran, lawful sex is held in high regard and considered an act of religious devotion. Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, who is best known for his book titled “Sexuality in Islam” highlights the importance of lawful intimacy in Islam: “The exercise of sexuality was a prayer, a gift of oneself, an act of charity [...] To rediscover the meaning of sexuality is to rediscover the meaning of God, and conversely.”¹⁷ Stories of the Prophet Muhammed, otherwise known as hadith, detail him instructing his followers on the importance of sexual satisfaction between a married couple, especially for the woman. Hadith literature is filled with numerous examples of the Prophet encouraging pleasurable foreplay, mandating consent, and on an occasion permitting a sexually dissatisfied woman to get a divorce with her impotent husband. Stories emphasized the importance of treating women gently during intimate affairs and indulging in the pleasures of such activities rather than viewing sexual intercourse solely as a means for reproduction.

Religion and Legislation

Organized religion often thinly veneers pre-existing societal and political conditions. Despite Islam being a relatively sexually enlightened religion as noted previously, many policymakers rationalize restrictive laws on sexuality by citing conservative readings of the

¹⁷ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 12.

Quran. In Egypt, political Islamist groups as well as official Islamic institutions capitalize on the central role that religion plays in the society to work actively against sexual rights. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the 1920s in Egypt, and much of the reasoning of its foundation was to oppose Western influence, as the alleged sexual immorality it brought was cited as one of the main factors responsible for the country's downfall.¹⁸

The founders of the Muslim Brotherhood believed a solution to Western influence was to revive the nation's relationship to Sharia law. However, as Islamism was on the rise it was also viewed as a political threat to its opponents. Under President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the 1961 proclamation of Law 103 on the reorganization of Al-Azhar, the thousand-year mosque seminary was put under the control of the governing regime in order to counter the influence of Islamist opposition groups.¹⁹ In an attempt to enhance its Islamic ethos and to challenge the notion that Islamists were the sole representatives of Islam, the state actively placed Al-Azhar at the center of legislative processes. This is crucial because when it came to sexuality, the religious body almost always opted for a more orthodox and restrictive reading of Islamic texts.

The significance of Al-Azhar's position and its implications were underscored when Egypt participated in multilateral global events convened on issues relating to women's rights. For example, in 1994 Al-Azhar found itself in a sexuality debate when Cairo hosted the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development which provided a platform to discuss sexual and reproductive rights for both sexes.²⁰ Al-Azhar called for the boycott of this conference by fellow Muslim states and issued statements attacking the event for what it argued was a contradiction of Islamic values on women and the family. Al-Azhar, as well as political

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. "Sexuality Politics in Egypt." (2007), 57.

²⁰ Ibid., 59.

Islamists, reached a peak in their frustration when a policy document produced by the conference featured groundbreaking language on sexuality, specifically its statement on “the right to have a satisfying and safe sex life”.²¹ A similar situation emerged during the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, where Al-Azhar issued a statement ahead of the conference analyzing the dangers represented by the conference’s policy draft document. These occurrences demonstrate the normalization of Al-Azhar discourse to speak on an “international war” on the family and household led by the United Nations.²²

The Creation of the National Family

Traditions of sexuality and intimacy became much more complex issues when merged with political issues facing Egypt. Egyptian nationalism first manifested itself during the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the British occupation in 1882, domestic movements began to focus on ending European colonial rule. Egyptian nationalism emphasized the unity of all Egyptians regardless of ethnicity or religion, especially because the domestic practices of Egyptian families were so central to colonial claims that Egyptians could not govern themselves.²³ The Urabi movement of 1881-1882 can be seen as the consequence of pressures created in the process of transforming national identity during this time. This nationalist movement ran under the slogan “Egypt is for the Egyptians” and rallied the population under the principle of *al-din wa al-'ird wa al-watan*, which means “faith, honor, and homeland”.²⁴

Although the British were keen on underscoring the ethnic and religious stratifications of Egypt, the Egyptian elite increasingly emphasized the unity of the nation across ethnic and

²¹Ibid., 59.

²² Ibid., 60.

²³ Bier, Laura. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press, 2011, 31.

²⁴ Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Univ. of California Press, 2007, 24.

sectarian boundaries. This gave rise to the use of gendered language that described the bonds across the unconnected parts of the nation. As the founding fathers of the liberal-nationalist order, politicians of the Wafd Party very consciously authorized their claims to rule on the basis that they were members of *al-sha'b* (the people), legitimate sons of mother Egypt, and paternal guardians of the national family and its interests.²⁵ Moreover, during the nineteenth century, the emerging Ottoman-Egyptian state strived to gain more control over criminal justice by issuing new penal codes. This led the state to increasingly intervene in family affairs and prosecute crimes that had to do with honor; matters that had previously been addressed in Islamic courts or according to tribal-customary law.²⁶ Family honor thus underwent transformations as the household became under increasing state control.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Egyptian nationalists started to focus their attention on the “woman question” and the debate surrounding gender roles in the family and society. This debate included a collection of issues such as female education and employment, seclusion and veiling, marriage and divorce, and other topics. These discussions occurred in the context of the elite Ottoman-Egyptian households and simultaneously were products of British imperial influence and Westernization.²⁷ One such aftermath of colonialism in the country was the beginning of purity culture, which was closely weaved with women’s economic empowerment. For instance sex workers, who were legalized during the British occupation in Egypt, became symbols of social decay and exploitation inherited from Western colonial control. Not only did this demonize sex workers, but it also impacted the collective group of working women in urban

²⁵ Bier, Laura. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press, 2011, 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

spaces as their sexuality began to be seen as a threat.²⁸ Women were accused of immodest behavior and dressing promiscuously, which led to a shift in attitudes among men forbidding their wives from working outside of the home. Though nationalism called for unity of the country, apparent differences surrounding issues such as this one rose to the forefront in response to the “woman question”. It illuminated the rift between nationalist parties, as gender became the medium along which cultural reconciliations were being made.

One of the most controversial aspects of these debates surrounded marriage, and the role that romance, family involvement, and other factors played in it. In the late nineteenth century, arranged marriages followed patterns of forming political alliances between households or consolidating property within families.²⁹ However, attitudes toward arranged marriages gradually changed as the couple became the center of the family and there was a rise in rhetoric surrounding a new cult of domesticity. Various events during this time surrounding the issue of marriage highlighted the fissures that nationalists tried to heal. Issues of marriage revealed other topics that Egyptian society needed to reconcile and renegotiate, especially the basic societal structures and the power relations within them.

Similar national debate occurred on the topic of veiling. The face veil remained one of the last remnants of the old Ottoman order and increasingly became a marker of cultural disagreements. The elite class in Egypt began a trend of unveiling since women stopped veiling, younger girls never started, and veils became lighter over time.³⁰ Religious nationalists continued to support veiling as a sign of morality and modesty, as women became symbols of cultural piety.

²⁸ Khairat, Farah. “Egypt Needs a Sexual Revolution.” *Egyptian Streets*, 12 Dec. 2018, egyptianstreets.com/2018/12/12/egypt-needs-a-sexual-revolution/.

²⁹ Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Univ. of California Press, 2007, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

On the other hand, more secular nationalists viewed the veil as a cultural sign of backwardness. Clearly, the actions of women became extensions of the nation and indicators of Egypt's positioning in the world relative to other societies.

In hopes of mending ethnic and religious divisions in the country, many nationalists adopted a variety of family metaphors to describe people's relations to Egypt. As men became the "sons" and "brothers" of the nation, women simultaneously occupied an important symbolic place as the "mothers".³¹ Nationalists merged family rhetoric related to the nation with debates about the family. The "woman question" became the main fault line along which Egyptians defined and defended their national character. These collective, unconscious images of the familial order were strategic tools to unite people across lineages. As mothers, women had an important role of nurturing and protecting Egyptian society. While men were the defenders of the family and the nation, women were thought to embody family and national honor; women's shame became the family's shame, the nation's shame, and the man's shame.³²

These concepts of honor and shame reveal how women's sexuality became a matter of prime national interest. This was showcased during World War I, when British imperial troops used Egypt as a base for military operations in the region and established a defense of the Suez Canal against an expected Ottoman attack.³³ One of the tragic consequences of imperial war activity and political turmoil in the region was the destruction it caused to women's bodies, specifically the many rapes committed by foreign soldiers in villages. In addition to the political implications these abuses had during times of war, they also had significant personal

³¹ Nagel, Joane. "Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 242-269, 254.

³² Ibid.

³³ Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Univ. of California Press, 2007, 45.

consequences. The perceived dishonor it brought was not only to the woman, but also to her family and the wider national community. The rapes became a generational anguish whose focus was that the breaking of the hymen was a sign of manly defeat. Egyptian nationalists, therefore, used the village incidents to mobilize the public. Popular rhetoric described the rapes of scores of Egyptian women as “our women”, and the sorrow of individual families became the “weeping” of the collective grieving the dishonor of their women.³⁴

All countries have a national honor to defend, and Egypt was no different. From the 1880s onward nationalists had elevated the concept of family honor to the national platform, aiming to use this rhetoric to rally the population against imperial forces. These kinship idioms had further implications for women when the idea of family honor became tied to their role in the household and society, which allowed for nationalists to make honor, and therefore female purity, a communal affair. Discussions of national honor are important to this larger conversation because with honor comes its antithesis, humiliation and shame. Men’s and family honor is connected to women’s sexual respectability because honor is men’s to gain and women’s to lose. Evidently, honor is seen more as men’s responsibility and shame as women’s, which is an important distinction because honor is actively achieved whereas shame is passively defended³⁵.

As we will see, nationalist ideologies become the basis and justification for national actions, which can be observed in modern day hardline expectations of virginity and sexual innocence. Thus, family honor and national honor became inseparably linked and continue to have a close relationship. As a result of the interplay between masculine microcultures and nationalist ideologies, discourses have been built on shame as much as honor, which unequally

³⁴ Ibid., 49.

³⁵ Nagel, Joane. “Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 242-269, 256.

affects women who bear the greatest burden of representing the values of her nuclear family and greater Egyptian “family” at large. Thus, the glorification of national honor would make family honor all the more challenging to deconstruct.

CHAPTER TWO

Maintaining Innocence: The Normalization of Women's Sexual Restraint

As women's roles in Egypt evolved over time and women eventually became characterized as the "mothers" of the nation, their positioning within their homes changed alongside it. The duty of a woman to nurture the country and be the reproducers of society causes serious implications for not only a woman's standing within her home and community, but also in the domain of the bedroom. As a result of popular sentiments arising within nationalist movements in Egypt, the household became the fundamental unit of the state and the index of honor came to be measured by women's sexual conduct.

Women's purity defined the dignity and virtuousness of Egyptian society, beginning with the modern obsession with the virgin woman. As a man's role in society was defined as protecting national honor, a woman's sexual activity became the medium for patriarchal monitoring and regulation. Thus, practices and traditions emerged in Egyptian society that normalized the surveillance of the country's women, specifically her history of intimacy. These daily practices and public performances are evidence that a woman's body is not her property alone, but rather an object of shared ownership. Harmful practices have become mainstream as a way to safeguard female innocence, all justified as a means to protect collective honor and dignity.

Virginity Testing

Marriage is a largely mandatory institution in Egyptian society, which makes it a useful tool to perpetuate patriarchy within the household. Nada, a 23-year-old graduate student who

lives in one of the informal settlements in Cairo, told me about her own struggles with getting married in an interview. “My brother is pushed [to get married] in a nice way, a cute way,” she shared with me, “but for me, it’s more of yelling, and emotional manipulation.” Because of the family’s involvement in marital affairs, the institution of marriage constructs premarital virginity as an important measure for a woman’s value as a potential wife. When asked about the expectations for sexual intimacy before marriage she quickly noted “No previous experiences. There is no room for this”. Nada shared that for her family, marriage is heavily linked with familial status which is where much of this pressure is rooted. Besides qualifications like education and profession, the sexual histories of the bride play an important role. “For a man, it is not desirable if he is divorced, but it is OK. But for women, she can’t be divorced or even a widow. This is because ‘she knows’. She is not innocent”. Khaled, a 26-year-old electrical engineering student living in Maadi, shared similar sentiments because he is also currently in the market for a wife. When I asked about the acceptability of marrying a divorced woman, he jokingly responded “If you have the ability to buy a new iPhone, why would you go to buy a used iPhone? Egyptians like new things”.

These demands for female innocence contribute to the popularization of different practices and traditions to monitor women’s bodies. One such practice is the widespread tradition of virginity testing. Although an Egyptian court ruled that it was illegal for virginity tests to be conducted on female detainees in military-controlled prisons, such exams have become ingrained into social practice elsewhere in the country. The use of virginity testing relies on the dominant cultural and political order in which the intact hymen, and hymeneal blood, are signifiers of a woman’s social purity and femininity. Voluntary medicalized virginity testing, as opposed to its

use in political torture, is widespread in Egypt especially in working class communities. This social exam carries heavy significance for a woman because it gives authority to her community to read her body for physical traces of her sexual history and make declarations about her social status. An unspoken indicator of a woman's success in Egypt is her prospects for marriage, and it is widely thought of as unacceptable for a man to marry a sexually experienced bride. Her virginity becomes a valuable tool to keep her in line to ensure that she has the qualities it takes to get married.

A way that virginity testing has become commonplace among premarital preparations for the bride-to-be can be seen in the seeking of a "virgin certification". This is a physician-signed testimonial to ensure that the virgin bride is indeed sexually untouched. These premarital examinations are widespread across the larger Arab region, mainly for the woman to be checked for sexually transmitted infections and for some inherited disorders due to the high rate of consanguineous marriages.³⁶ In ethnographic fieldwork conducted by anthropologist L.L. Wynn, five Egyptian gynecologists whom she interviewed reported having been asked by the groom or bride's family to verify the intactness of the prospective bride's hymen at some point in their careers.³⁷

Studies from across the region show that these examinations are widely supported by newlyweds and many couples go even further with this practice, asking for the bride to be certified as intact before the *dukhla baladi*, which translates to "local entrance" and refers to consummation on the wedding night. Although virginity testing is considered un-Islamic by many for violating *satr al-ird*, or the covering of one's genitals, premarital examinations are

³⁶ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 118.

³⁷ Wynn, L. L., & Hassanein, S. (2017). Hymenoplasty, virginity testing, and the simulacrum of female respectability. *Signs*, 42(4), 893-917. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690918>, 899.

mandated in many Arab countries. The doctor's examination and statement can even have legal weight in these contexts especially when a marriage contract specifies a woman's sexual status, which in turn may have consequences for the *mahr*, or bride-price, paid.³⁸

In Egyptian society, much like many other parts of the world, the hymen is seen as a signifier of sexual activity and an intact one is viewed as a biological indicator of a woman's virginity. However, there are many misconceptions about the hymen and how it is affected by sexual intercourse. Many women do not have hymens and for a large number, the hymen does not bleed during her first penetrative sexual activity. Misinformation surrounding female anatomy has critical implications for women in Egypt who belong to households that view the hymen as a biological indicator of her sexual activity prior to marriage. This is underscored by the significance of the *dukhla baladi* to newly wed couples and their families. During this custom, which is actually more common in poorer neighborhoods in Cairo than rural areas of the country, a midwife, or *daya*, pierces the bride's hymen with her finger or a razor wrapped in a white cloth, with the groom looking on and the mothers in attendance.³⁹ If the *laf al-sharaf*, or "sheet of honor", is bloodstained then the families traditionally show off the sheet to their loved ones to showcase that the family had maintained their reputation and honorably delivered a virgin wife to the groom.

Many view the practice as a kind of family-sanctioned sexual assault, that is even more traumatic for those whose hymens don't bleed upon the *daya's* inspection. Some women, however, use this public observation of their virginity to their advantage. For any woman who has had their personal history put into question, the *dukhla baladi* is a way to exonerate

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 114.

themselves and achieve some personal freedom, so long as she is ready to prove her virginity publicly. Thus, the sexual encounter between the bride and the groom in the defloration ritual is crucial as not only a test of virginity but also a medium for negotiating and redefining power relations between the newly wed partners.

The public spectacle of the consummation also affects the husband in certain cases. Nada shared a common tradition of the wife's family consulting with the bride the morning after her wedding night. Part of this discussion is to see if the man was able to perform correctly during sex. If not, this provides the grounds for the woman to pursue *khula*, or "no-fault" divorce, which is an Islamic procedure in which the wife can get a lawful divorce without the permission of her husband. This was a part of a law that came into effect in 2000.⁴⁰ Though this legislation was a liberalization effort and milestone for the country's divorce laws, the legal system regarding divorce holds significant disparities between men and women. If a woman files for *khula*, she must waive her financial rights. Because of this and other provisions, it is very difficult for a woman to be granted *khula* in the country.

Virginity testing has also reached domains outside the wedding night bed. In 2016, a member of Egypt's parliament named Elhamy Agina called on the Minister of Higher Education to issue a mandate that required women to submit virginity test documentation before being allowed to attend university. He suggested that governments could tell university hospitals to conduct the virginity tests and then the university could alert the students' parents of the results. Agina asserted that those disagreeing with his statement probably feared that their own daughters have engaged in premarital sexual conduct themselves. This is not the first time he has made

⁴⁰ Sterns, Olivia. "Let's Talk about Sex, Divorce' in Egypt." *CNN*, Cable News Network, edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/11/11/egypt.divorce/.

public outcries against women's sexual agency. In the past, he has also defended female genital mutilation by saying men are already having problems in bed: "If we stop circumcision [of women], we will need strong men and we don't have this type of men."⁴¹

When faced by popular condemnation from NGOs, politicians, and women's rights advocates Agina was pressured into making an apology statement. He stated "I apologize for the misunderstanding of my words. Egyptian girls are my mother, my sister and my daughter."⁴² Here, we see the maintenance of the usage of family metaphors to discuss the role of Egyptian women and the ties that they have to the country at large. His words showcase the common attitude that in order to safeguard the patriarchs of society, women's sexuality and autonomy need to be curbed. Despite this happening as recently as 2016, we can see that the rhetoric and sentiments that view women as the vessels of honor and virtue of the nationalist movements in Egypt during the 1980s still endure today.

Hymen Reconstruction

When innocence is lost by engaging in sexual conduct, many Egyptian women seek to restore their virginity, or rather the appearance of it, in order to save their reputation and future marriage prospects. This is commonly done in a practice called hymenoplasty, which is a procedure to repair a broken hymen. In Egypt, it is difficult to get a grasp on the exact numbers of how often this procedure is performed, but it definitely has a degree of prominence in Egyptian society. Hymen repair is done mostly in clinics or private houses. The most common way that this practice is performed is by creating a stitch across the vaginal opening, which offers

⁴¹ Sirgany, Sarah. "Outcry in Egypt after Lawmaker Proposes 'Virginity Tests' for University Entry." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 7 Oct. 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/10/07/africa/egypt-virginity-test-university/index.html.

⁴² *Ibid.*

a fair imitation of resistance and bleeding during intercourse.⁴³ The procedure costs about EGP 500, which is the equivalent to roughly \$32. More refined interventions of this are more costly, ranging from EGP 700- 2,000 which is roughly equivalent to the income of a lower-middle class family.⁴⁴ Hymen reconstruction surgery is most frequently opted into by women or their families who fear that the hymen will not perform in the way it is supposed to during the *dukhla baladi*. With the help from practitioners who stitch the tissue, women's sexual histories are rendered illegible to viewers.

Public debates surrounding hymenoplasty in Egypt date back to over a decade. In Wynn's ethnographic fieldwork, several of the doctors interviewed argued that if they were asked to perform hymenoplasty, they had the right to know a woman's sexual history in order to decide whether she had lost her virginity through morally legitimate means, which would justify the procedure.⁴⁵ If the woman's imperfect hymen was viewed as the result of morally illegitimate reasons, the doctors could refuse to help her unless they were convinced that she had properly "repented".⁴⁶ This, to many medical professionals that were interviewed, was necessary to ensure that the same sexual "mistakes" were not likely to occur again before marriage. Despite the practice being forbidden in Islam, several of the highest religious authorities in the country have issued interpretations of Islamic law saying that hymen reconstruction should be permitted for people who were survivors of sexual violence and also for women who have engaged in premarital sex and repented.⁴⁷

⁴³ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Wynn, L. L., & Hassanein, S. (2017). Hymenoplasty, virginity testing, and the simulacrum of female respectability. *Signs*, 42(4), 893-917. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690918>, 899.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 902.

Even with the condemnation of the Egyptian Medical Association and general stigmatization from society, there is no legislation that officially bans hymen reconstruction in Egypt. Egyptian physicians have become ambivalent to this procedure because while it is religiously and socially condemned, there is a significant demand by women who face considerable social stigma for premarital sex and seek methods to obscure such histories from future spouses. The continued practice of hymenoplasty positions a woman's sexual history under the close eye of the family and community as an indicator of honor that glorifies the familial reputation. The insistence on blood and witnesses, and problematically equating a woman's status as virgin with the state of her hymen, underscores the theme of the social visibility of a woman's sexual status.

Female Genital Mutilation

More than just inspecting a woman's sexual history, sometimes Egyptian society takes matters so far as using preemptive measures to ensure that young women stay on the right path in their intimate endeavors. One common tradition, which dates back to ancient Africa, is female cutting which is now commonly known as female genital mutilation (FGM). Though the origins of the practice remain obscure and FGM is practiced in many other societies, Egypt has a significant connection to this tradition. According to a finding in 1994, at least 90 percent of ever-married Egyptian women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine have undergone this procedure.⁴⁸ In 2008, an Egyptian national health survey found a drop in the prevalence of genital cutting, claiming that about 74 percent of girls ages fifteen to seventeen experienced it.⁴⁹ In what Egyptians sometimes call *tahara*, which means "purification", the skin surrounding the

⁴⁸ Eltahawy, Mona. *Headscarves and Hymens; Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Orion Publishing Group, 2016, 110

⁴⁹ Ibid.

clitoris is removed, normally along with the clitoris itself, and often the tiny flaps of flesh around it as well.

Young girls are subject to this practice generally from when they are nine to twelve years old, rarely with their consent or even any warning. Surprisingly, FGM is not typically conducted by a *daya*, who historically has been right-hand person for women's health in Egypt. Instead, three-quarters of girls under the age of seventeen in Egypt have been circumcised by a doctor or nurse.⁵⁰ This is largely because of the impact of anti-FGM campaigns that emphasized the health risks of the procedure, so parents have turned to consider physicians as the proper practitioners for their daughters. Despite medical professionals' roles in this, there are no health benefits for girls and women from FGM.

In actuality, FGM can cause severe bleeding and problems with the urinary tract, which eventually can produce cysts, infections, infertility, and complications during childbirth. According to a 2008 study conducted at the King Abdulaziz University Hospital in Jeddah, FGM does not reduce sexual desire, but it does make the women less likely to experience arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and satisfaction during sexual activity.⁵¹ Nada shared her own experiences about FGM with me, revealing that she recently discovered her mom made her undergo the procedure when she was around four or five years old by a doctor at a medical clinic. "I experienced [FGM] but I had no idea what this was", she told me. When confronting her mom about the issue, she noted that her mom was in disbelief to see that her daughter even cared so much about the procedure. "You're pure", her mom responded. Nada noted that her mom decided to do this to her and her sister "for religious reasons, 100%" though the Quran makes no

⁵⁰ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 104.

⁵¹ Eltahawy, Mona. *Headscarves and Hymens; Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Orion Publishing Group, 2016, 106.

mention of this practice. She ultimately explained how this childhood event affects her today: “Why am I not attracted to anyone?” she says as she walked me through her current emotional dilemmas, “[Is it] because of my traumas and issues?”

In 2008, doctors and nurses in Egypt were banned from performing genital mutilation after a twelve-year-old girl died from an anesthetic overdose while undergoing the procedure in a private clinic. The ban imposed punishments ranging from three months to two years in prison and fines were up to 5,000 Egyptian pounds which is the equivalent to \$315.⁵² Despite this, the practice is alive and well in the streets of Egypt. Since its ban in 2008 there have only been two cases brought to court for the performance of FGM, and only when the girls victim to it died during the procedure.⁵³ One of such cases involved a thirteen-year-old girl named Soheir El-Batea who died in 2013 after a doctor in a private clinic performed FGM on her at the request of her family. In 2014, her father and the doctor who performed the procedure stood trial for her death. However, both were acquitted. The BBC produced a television segment to coincide with El-Batea’s case in which they interviewed a *daya* who stated that despite the ban, she had a waiting list of parents who wanted her to perform the procedure on their daughters.⁵⁴ With very few trials hearing cases for FGM, the practice is still widespread across the country.

Despite legal efforts to slow the rates of FGM, homegrown attitudes towards the practice are not as wavering since many believe that female genital cutting is a private matter- one that should not be handled by the state. Although there are legal repercussions for doing so, many

⁵² Ibid., 129.

⁵³ Farouk, Menna A. “Egypt’s Cabinet Toughens Law Banning Female Genital Mutilation.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 Jan. 2021, www.reuters.com/article/egypt-women-law/egypts-cabinet-toughens-law-banning-female-genital-mutilation-idUSL8N2JW26Z.

⁵⁴ Eltahawy, Mona. *Headscarves and Hymens; Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Orion Publishing Group, 2016, 129.

medical physicians are happy to conduct the procedure if they are able to make money by doing it off the record. The law allows for FGM on the grounds of “medical necessity” which offers practitioners some slack if they choose to submit to a family’s requests. In their worst case scenario, families can locate a *daya* in a remote village to complete the job. Thus, calls to reverse the ban on FGM come from Islamists and some doctors who proclaim that the procedure is more likely to turn fatal since many families take their daughters to traditional cutters.⁵⁵

The medicalization of the procedure has significant implications because its barbarity has been cloaked by the “respectability” that comes with medical practice. Because of this, Egypt is different from all other African countries that practice female genital cutting. This is reflected in the fact that 77 percent of the procedures are conducted in a medical environment or by trained medical personnel.⁵⁶ The rate of medicalization has increased from 55 percent to 77 percent in just over 20 years.⁵⁷ According to a report written by the Orchid Project, a London-based NGO that works to end FGM, Egypt is a special case in the study of the African practice because of the country’s government’s role in condoning it until 2008.⁵⁸ No other FGM practicing country in Africa has experienced the promotion of their government to practice it. In 2005, the National Council for Women, an official advisory body chaired by Egypt’s First Lady Suzanne Mubarak at the time, decided to seek Al-Azhar’s opinion on a new bill to criminalize FGM. Al-Azhar, which we know to have a significant influence on Egypt’s law making processes, responded that although there was no consensus on the obligation of FGM, it was considered a desirable procedure with desirable results.⁵⁹ Because Egypt’s anti-FGC laws arose from international

⁵⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. “Sexuality Politics in Egypt.” (2007), 62.

pressure, it augments local feelings of tradition and culture in opposition to what is frequently perceived as neo-colonialism in the country in the form of anti-FGM campaigns.

Since 2008, there have been some efforts by the country to address this humanitarian health crisis amongst Egypt's young girls, and there has been a noticeable dent in the practice of FGM. While in 2008 nearly all women and a significant majority of young girls between the ages of fifteen and seventeen have been cut, the figures are much lower in certain populations such as wealthier communities and those living in urban areas.⁶⁰ According to a national survey, over a third of ever-married women under fifty believe that FGM must be stopped.⁶¹ Disapproval rates are even higher among younger, educated, urban women. Although this is still an alarming number of women who approve of the procedure, it is still an improvement from similar measures from the 1990s.

As recently as January 2021, Egypt's legislative bodies have made strides in the policies targeting FGM in the country. On January 20, Egypt's cabinet imposed an increase in the maximum jail sentence for those conducting the procedure to up to 20 years in prison.⁶² The bill also banned doctors and other medical staff involved in FGM from practicing their profession for up to five years. The individuals requesting the procedure will also face imprisonment under this new government crackdown. Despite these new efforts to curb the traumatizing and dangerous practice, it is uncertain whether there will be a real impact on local attitudes towards the necessity of female genital cutting or if there will be an actual increase in law enforcement.

⁶⁰ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 111.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Farouk, Menna A. "Egypt's Cabinet Toughens Law Banning Female Genital Mutilation." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 Jan. 2021, www.reuters.com/article/egypt-women-law/egypts-cabinet-toughens-law-banning-female-genital-mutilation-idUSL8N2JW26Z.

Similar toughening efforts were made in 2016, yet no one has been successfully prosecuted under the law and women's rights groups claim that the ban was not sufficiently enforced.⁶³

Virginity and Power

Many people's strong attachment to the harmful practice is based in their urge to prevent women from mimicking men in their insatiable sexual desires. It is commonly believed that a woman's clitoris would drive her to engage in sexual conduct before marriage, which would instantly tarnish her ability to get married. The connection between FGM and female chastity is supported by a recent national survey, which found that more than a third of men and women believed that the procedure prevented illicit sexual relations.⁶⁴ Sentiments like this matter because the prevention of illicit relations falls solely as the responsibility of women, as the woman is seen as the vessel of righteousness and dignity in the country. The medium by which these traits of honor are measured is through the observation of the socio-physical creation of the hymen which is such an important event that a woman's sexual life becomes a communal spectacle rather than a private affair. Therefore, due to their anatomy, women in these Egyptian households are pressured to maintain an untouched hymen as a way to maintain her innocence.

Men's bodies, on the other hand, cannot signify virginity. This is because they do not have a biological anatomy that society believes to measure sexual activity, but also because Egyptian culture does not actively seek, stress, or demand male virginity. This crucial differentiation is significant because it produces a public effect of virginity.⁶⁵ Just as women are viewed as the reproducers of the nation, as we can recall from rhetoric originating in nationalist movements, men traditionally have the role of the protector. Thus virginity is also the duty of a

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 108.

⁶⁵ Abu-Odeh, Lama. "Crimes of Honor and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies." (2011).

man to guard, supervise and defend from threats. The delineated roles between men and women in the household has permeated into the bedroom, laying the basis for power dynamics between the two, which is especially manifested in the wedding night. The social construction of connecting power to sexual chastity is gendered, and established cultural values condition women, but not men, to stringent and highly controlled social existence of sexual innocence.⁶⁶

In these normalized practices we have seen that, in many instances, it is the women of the household, whether it be mothers or grandmothers, who subject their young girls to these traumatic experiences. The conceptualization of Deniz Kandiyoti, a Turkish author and academic on gender relations and developmental politics in the Middle East, on “the patriarchal bargain” is key here. In patriarchal societies, she argues, “individual women may adopt the system’s ideology, conform to it, and even impose it on other women, in order to be worthy of the protection from the man’s side of the bargain.”⁶⁷ Women’s resistance or adherence to this bargain is influenced by what is at stake for them in the given circumstances. The ways in which both men and women monitor women’s premarital intimate histories is the manifestation of this bargain. When things women can potentially lose and gain include future marital prospects, respectability, family honor, household reputation, and other critical aspects to a successful domestic life, many Egyptian women submit themselves to this tradeoff. In a sense, maintaining the system is a way of succeeding within it. Evidently many Egyptian women have become willing actors of the patriarchy within their households. This positioning allows for the

⁶⁶ Ghanim D. (2015) Rewarding Virginity. In: *The Virginity Trap in the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137507082_12, 138.

⁶⁷ Kozma, Liat. "Negotiating Virginity: Narratives of Defloration from late nineteenth-century Egypt." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 24 no. 1, 2004, p. 55-65. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/181211.

normalization of the public gaze on young women's bodies and cultivates the power relations that sustain systems of control.

These power dynamics manifest themselves in practices such as virginity testing, hymen reconstruction, and female genital mutilation. To be an Egyptian unmarried woman is to participate in practices and public performances that construct oneself as a virgin. One woman who spoke to American-Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy told her, "When I first had sex, it was as if my mother, my father, my grandparents, the entire neighborhood, God, and all the angels were there watching."⁶⁸ These onerous conditions have significant potential consequences. One of course, is life-threatening, as these procedures are often dangerous and fatal. However, on a less lethal note, failures in displaying virginity have substantial impacts on a woman's future prospects, as it threatens her ability to be delivered as an untouched bride during marriage. These harmful practices and normalized traditions assert one thing in common: sexual pleasure is shameful for women but an acceptable natural desire for men. Ultimately, a woman's value is concentrated in the maintenance of her purity and the normalization of society's gaze on her body has significantly deteriorated the notion of female sexual autonomy in the country.

⁶⁸ Eltahawy, Mona. *Headscarves and Hymens; Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Orion Publishing Group, 2016, 113.

CHAPTER THREE

Hierarchies of Desire

With practices that train you to think sex is shameful and impure, and when emotional and physical trauma becomes attached to intimacy, it is difficult to imagine how a woman can enjoy sex or express what they like in the bedroom. Most sexual activity is framed within the institution of marriage, which is commonly seen as a compulsory act that women must complete in their lives to be considered successful. The societal expectation for the virgin bride has many implications for women's intimacy in the bedroom. As it turns out, an untouched bride is not only expected on the night of consummation, but rather the performance of innocence is anticipated far after the first night.

Although Egyptians, not unlike most people across the world, statistically show great interest in sex and intimacy, Egyptian women bear the heaviest burden in suppressing their desire and molding themselves into the vision of what a respectable woman looks like and acts like. As we will see, expectations surrounding sexual intimacy has led to the manifestation of sexual dysfunctions in many Egyptian women across the country. Moreover, the pressures of marriage incite many young Egyptians to engage in secretive sexual relations in which the women face the most dismal consequences. Despite attempts for secrecy, these sexual relations are hypervisible under the close eye of their community.

Intimacy and “Purity Culture”

In Egypt's male dominated household structure and society that place men at the top of the hierarchy of receiving pleasure, there is barely a nod to women's desires. In fact, there is very little information about the regularity of healthy, pleasurable intimate relations in Egypt.

Filmmaker Amr Bayoumi, the Egyptian director behind the film “Sex Talk”, shares this observation. During the preparation of his films that speak directly on taboo details about Egyptians’ physical relationships, Bayoumi discovered that “there isn’t anything focusing on normal sexual relationships in Egypt. You find material on prostitution or child abuse, but nothing about normal sexual behavior.”⁶⁹ Even in the marital bed, intimacy is a difficult issue that threatens many Egyptian couples. Much of the issues in the bedroom can be attributed to commonly held expectations revolving intimacy. The root of many of these expectations come from socialized attitudes about how men and women should act in society, and these attitudes are perpetuated in the bedroom.

In a recent study on attitudes toward gender roles among Egyptian adolescents, the findings showed that both girls and boys in Egypt have very distinct views on the specific duties of men and women in society. The survey collected information on the sample teenagers’ education, work duties, daily activities, and asked those who were 16 years old and older questions surrounding gender roles in the context of marriage. Results showed that when asked about preferences for their future spouses, girls mostly preferred a man with a strong character, of a good nature, wealthy or with a good job, and who would treat them well.⁷⁰ Boys, on the other hand, favored someone from a good family, who is well mannered, religious, and virtuous.

⁷¹ The discrepancy between boys’ and girls’ preferences for their future spouses signal their compliance with the traditional delegated roles that men are the providers of the home whereas women are the nurturers. Here, we can see how Egyptian youth are socialized to partake in a

⁶⁹ Neild, Barry. “Sex Lives of Married Egyptians Laid Bare.” CNN, Cable News Network, 15 Dec. 2010, www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/12/15/egypt.sex.film/index.html.

⁷⁰ Mensch, Barbara S., et al. “Gender-Role Attitudes among Egyptian Adolescents.” *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2003, pp. 8–18. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3181148.

⁷¹ Ibid.

kind of purity culture from a relatively young age. The prominence of the gender roles from such an early point suggest why it is so challenging for the Egyptian family to renegotiate gender and power relations between men and women farther into adulthood.

Characteristics that deem a woman desirable in the eyes of young and older men alike such as her religiosity, virtuousness, and good manners indicate the performance of virginity that is important to a woman's reputation. Here, her virginity is not necessarily the condition of her genitalia, though it does not exclude that, but rather the way in which she publicly performs daily practices that construct her as pure and innocent. Conversely, a male Egyptian sustains his manhood by demonstrating his ability to protect and provide resources for his family and community members.

Trouble in the Bedroom

It is interesting to see how these gender roles and the expectations of women's submissiveness and men's dominance in society manifests in the bedroom. Submission and dominance here do not refer to the category under the BDSM sexual preference, but rather the personal agency that one holds over his or her own desire and sexual life. According to the country's Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, almost 40 percent of marriages in Egypt end in divorce. Dr. Heba Kotb, who is the leading sexologist in Cairo, attributes 80 percent of divorce to sexual problems.⁷² This, however, does not seem to be a worry for many Egyptians. After the airing of an Egyptian talk-show episode on the rising divorce rates among newly weds on account of sexual problems, newspapers were inundated with people expressing

⁷² Neild, Barry. "Sex Lives of Married Egyptians Laid Bare." CNN, Cable News Network, 15 Dec. 2010, www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/12/15/egypt.sex.film/index.html.

outrage on the “affront”⁷³ to Egyptian values and dignity, as if healthy sexual relations were the antithesis to Egypt’s moral character.

These sexual problems can be attributed to a general disconnect in sexual desires and misinformation surrounding intimate stimulation. This is underscored by the prevalence of sexual dysfunction among Egyptians, which is disproportionately suffered by the country’s women. In a research study that collected data on sexual dysfunction in Lower Egypt that looked at 936 women, nearly 70 percent of women had one or more sexual problems.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the study showed that the most common sexual problem among participants was a decrease or loss of sexual desire which was found in nearly half of the participants, followed by orgasmic problems which 43 percent of the women experienced.⁷⁵ On the other hand, from their perspective, 90 percent of women viewed that men did not show any sexual problems. This is not surprising considering the trauma and general discomfort that women are socialized to feel towards sexual intimacy. Despite the prevalence of female sexual dysfunction, however, 23 percent of women studied who experienced sexual problems were not distressed by these issues. Many Egyptian women do not prioritize themselves in relations within the home because they accept the role of their husbands as the head of the household and their own roles as his subservient.⁷⁶

Apart from the findings of the research in this study, findings on the sexual lives of Egyptian women are scarce. Questions are hardly asked, and most research looks solely into the

⁷³ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. “Sexuality Politics in Egypt.” (2007), 69.

⁷⁴ Elnashar, A M et al. “Female sexual dysfunction in Lower Egypt.” *BJOG : an international journal of obstetrics and gynaecology* vol. 114,2 (2007): 201-6. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0528.2006.01106.x

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bashier, Neveen. “Knowing the Ropes: Autonomy in the Everyday Life of Egyptian Married Women.” American University in Cairo, 2010.

experiences of married women. One survey of over 350 majority-female gynecologists from half-a-dozen Arab countries, including Egypt, found that almost 90 percent of them rarely asked patients about sexual dysfunction, although half thought screening was important.⁷⁷ The most extensive study of women's sexuality in the region comes from Morocco in a 2000 study of more than 700 married and single women.⁷⁸ Of the women who were sexually active, more than a quarter reported that they had some sort of sexual dysfunction. Two-thirds thought women were not entitled to the same sexual freedom as men.⁷⁹ Although Morocco is several countries away from Egypt, it sheds some light on the attitudes towards intimacy in the North African region.

Premarital Intimacy

Again, most research conducted on the sexual lives of Egyptian women only examines those who are married, because it is seen as the only framework through which sexual conduct is valid. Indeed, 90 percent of Egyptians consider marriage to be a desirable and natural state.⁸⁰ Despite the taboo nature of premarital sexual relations, Egyptians express an exceedingly high interest in sex. According to Google Trends, Cairo is the number one city searching for sex in the search engine, and Egypt ranks as the number two country in the world searching for sex.⁸¹ With this obvious active exploration of sex online, it is inevitable that premarital sexual relations are prevalent despite it being socially forbidden. Though it is difficult to determine the exact magnitude of these relations, there are some studies that shed light on this. In one 2004 study of

⁷⁷ Auwad, Wael A, and Sarah K Hagi. "Female sexual dysfunction: what Arab gynecologists think and know." *International urogynecology journal* vol. 23,7 (2012): 919-27. doi:10.1007/s00192-012-1701-7

⁷⁸ Kadri, Nadia & Alami, K. & Berrada, S.. (2010). Sexuality in Morocco: Women sexologist's point of view. *Sexologies*. 19. 20-23. 10.1016/j.sexol.2009.03.005.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Khairat, Farah. "Egypt Needs a Sexual Revolution." *Egyptian Streets*, 12 Dec. 2018, egyptianstreets.com/2018/12/12/egypt-needs-a-sexual-revolution/.

⁸¹ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. "Sexuality Politics in Egypt." (2007), 75.

marriage and family formation patterns in Egypt, young men and women were asked if they knew someone close to them who had been involved in a sexual relationship. Approximately 13 percent of single young males responded affirmatively, compared to 3.4 percent of single females.⁸² The data increased to 22 percent when the same question was asked to engaged young males, but remained the same for engaged young females.⁸³

Although there are considerable amounts of sexual conduct before marriage, there is definitely a double standard on who gets to initiate it. In one account, a young man described how he tried to encourage his girlfriend towards furthering intimate acts as a “test” of her values: “I just have to stop at a point when I am sure she will refuse to sleep with me- that means she is a good girl”.⁸⁴ The young Egyptians that I interviewed shared similar stories of their experiences. Yousef, a 25-year-old graduate from the German University of Cairo, shared a comparable sentiment about “ignorant” men: “Even though [these men] will have sex and fool around with other women, if his wife is not a virgin, then [marriage] won’t happen”. Although he said this specifically about men from conservative rural areas, he spoke about a few of his friends who would never marry a woman with a sexual history despite having intimate experiences with numerous women themselves. An American University in Cairo graduate student named Farida shared similar stories of double standards. “Women don’t talk openly about their sexual acts but men here like to brag about [them]. They like to brag about what they do, how many girls they hooked up with, [etc.]” She added on saying that her male friends praise each other for their sexual endeavors, but if a girl in the group did the same, she would be labeled as a “slut or prostitute,” and told that “no one will date her or marry her”.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 77.

In spite of the pressure from societal expectations, Egyptian youth pursue non-sexual dating relationships with high frequency. Approximately 70 percent of single male respondents and 59 percent of single female respondents reported that dating relationships were very common in a 2004 study.⁸⁵ When asked about the disadvantages for men of being involved in a relationship, approximately a third of all young men surveyed perceived there being no disadvantages. When the women were asked the same question, approximately 53.5 percent said there were no disadvantages for men, but just 6.5 percent saw that there were no disadvantages for women.⁸⁶ Both young men and women in the study identified the main disadvantages of relationships as being the harm caused to the reputation of the young women involved, the damage to her future marriage prospects, and the possibility of the relationship to evolve into a sexual one which would consequently cause further damage to her reputation and future prospects for marriage.⁸⁷

The gender that bears the largest burden and Egyptian society to engage in romantic relationships is clear. In fact, 57 percent of men and 61 percent of women felt that a relationship would be detrimental to a woman's relationship, but only 10 percent and 6.5 percent respectively felt the same for men.⁸⁸ The findings of this study are supported by the personal accounts of young Egyptian women. Farida shared with me that she feels that she has "two faces, or two identities" because publicly she maintains the traditional persona of a virgin, but privately she knows she enjoys partaking in intimate acts with different partners. She faces significant distress

⁸⁵ El Tawila, S., & Khadr, Z. *Patterns of marriage and family formation among youth in Egypt*. Cairo: National Population Council, 2004, 63.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. "Sexuality Politics in Egypt." (2007), 78.

⁸⁸ El Tawila, S., & Khadr, Z. *Patterns of marriage and family formation among youth in Egypt*. Cairo: National Population Council, 2004, 63.

from this, noting “It causes psychological stress and pressure. I feel like I have contradicting views. It causes personal problems for me”. These answers expose the realities of intimate conduct amongst youth in Egypt, and how young women face much more pressure to abstain from it than their male counterparts.

The prominence and attitudes towards premarital intimacy is further nuanced when looking at the phenomenon of *urfi* marriages. The term *urfi* means “customary”, and these kinds of marriages originated when Egyptian widows attempted to retain their deceased husbands’ government pensions upon remarriage.⁸⁹ Since legally these women would lose their pensions if they remarried, they married without officially registering the marriage with government authorities and thus continued to receive the pension. However, in the present day the definition of *urfi* marriage has become synonymous with the phenomenon of secret marriages between young people who wish to engage in morally sanctioned sexual activity but lack either the financial resources or the social support of their families to marry. It involves a couple writing down on a piece of paper that they are married and is signed by two witnesses, usually friends of the couple, but it is otherwise kept a secret from their families and peers.⁹⁰ The signed marriage contract legally protects the couple’s intimate activity, and allows them to rent an apartment or hotel room together because doing so requires proof of marriage. However, *urfi* marriages grant few rights to the wife other than the right to file for divorce, which only can occur if she can prove that there was a marriage to begin with. The marriage is also not registered with the government.

⁸⁹ Wynn LL. 'Like a Virgin': Hymenoplasty and Secret Marriage in Egypt. *Med Anthropol*. 2016 Nov-Dec;35(6):547-559. doi: 10.1080/01459740.2016.1143822. Epub 2016 Jan 26. PMID: 26814025.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

As previously noted, premarital sex is relatively common in Egypt despite the taboos associated with it. *Urfi* marriages, which are most popular among university students, are seen by many young Egyptians as a solution to sexual desire because it provides a cloak of religious acceptability. Its popularity signals a problem facing Egypt with nuclear marriages, which is the rising age of marriage. A 2004 finding revealed that 37 percent of males and 18 percent of females are over the age of 30 when they marry.⁹¹ In addition, the number of unmarried women rose from 2.8 million in 1986 to 3.7 million in 1996.⁹² The intense concern regarding the rise in unmarried people in the country is directly connected to the fear of sexual frustration experienced by these people. This is lucidly expressed in the 2002/2003 Report of the National Council for Services and Social Development, which states that the setbacks in the age of marriage in Egypt result in a deviation which “threaten[s] the security and stability of society”.⁹³ Here lies a large part of this problem, because delayed marriage circumvents patriarchal authority, which is troubling to the family and, by extension, the state as well. This “threat” manifests itself in the popularity of these informal marriage agreements.

The main reasons why young people resort to *urfi* marriages are because of the high cost of marriage, parental obstacles, and the fact that sexual intimacy before marriage is culturally and religiously forbidden. Though most young people admitted their doubts regarding the religious legitimacy of *urfi* marriages, they nonetheless believed that some kind of framework for engaging in a sexual relationship was better than none at all.⁹⁴ Thus, numbers of Egyptian youth resort to these secret marriages to sate their sexual appetites while still maintaining some sort of

⁹¹ Bahgat, Hossam and W. Afifi. “Sexuality Politics in Egypt.” (2007), 82.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 80.

regard to the rules set forth by society. In this way, *urfi* marriages are significant because they make the socially strict institution of marriage a more flexible one and challenge deeply engrained societal norms that give patriarchs the authority to oversee sexual relations.

These secret marriages, however, are not experienced in the same way for both individuals in the couple. For many women, *urfi* marriages have a dual set of consequences, especially for their future marriage prospects. On one hand, in many cases the man in the secret arrangement refuses to publicly marry the woman if she is intimate with him. In one ethnographic study, an Egyptian woman who entered into an *urfi* marriage claimed:

“No matter how hard a man tries to seduce you, and no matter what promises he makes, no man will marry you after he has had sex with you, [...] because many men believe that a woman who has had sex outside of a socially-sanctioned marriage is a woman driven by her sexual desires and therefore not ‘respectable’ enough to marry”.⁹⁵

On the other hand, if the marriage is not resolved in time for a socially and legally registered union and ends in divorce, it creates a major dilemma for the woman. If she wishes to remarry publicly, she is expected to be a virgin, and cannot admit that she is not because she was previously married in defiance of her parents’ and society’s knowledge. These circumstances lead to many of the hymen reconstruction surgeries and consequences during virginity tests that were mentioned in the previous chapter.

The double-edged nature of the consequences that Egyptian women face with *urfi* marriages exposes the masculinist nature of marriage as an institution. It is yet another way in which the sexualities of women are monitored in a way that serves as a basis for shame and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.

dishonor. The perceived threat of *urfi* marriages to the stability of Egyptian society enforces a strict code of ethics disproportionately on the women of its society. This stability and security has to be consistently defended by a woman's sexual conduct and if she fails to do so, then her prospects for a successful and happy future are tainted.

Morality Police

The monitoring of a woman's sexuality extends farther than her nuclear family. The masculinist projects of Egypt manifests itself in other figures as well outside of her immediate kin. The most notable figure of this is the doorman, commonly known as the *bawab*. The *bawab* or *bawaba*, who can be a man or woman, is a common figure in Egypt whose job is to watch the entrance of a house or building where one works and to perform errands and tasks for residents. Some of these tasks include cleaning hallway floors, overlooking building maintenance, tending to tenants' complaints, and performing other duties. These individuals, who are most frequently men, can be seen stationed in the lobbies or corridors of the building wearing thick robes and large turbans as they greet those who come in and look casually at passersby. They are one of Cairo's most long lasting institutions, and have mutually beneficial relationships with tenants who request favors in exchange for generous tips.

Though their job responsibilities cover common maintenance and administrative work for their tenants, *bawabeen* have a much more significant role in Egyptian society. In our interview, Farida declared "The main role of the *bawab* is to stalk people". Due to their positioning outside homes day and night across the country, *bawabeen* know the ins and outs of the people who they oversee on a daily basis. Through their day to day interactions, these men and women know the most intimate details of the lives of those that they serve. If they are not paid adequately by their

tenants, many *bawabeen* can inflict a great deal of misery from the personal information that they hold about their community members.

Many Egyptians, especially young ones, feel threatened by their breadth of knowledge and feel especially judged because their actions are under such a close watch. When asked about experiences with the *bawab*, Yousef told me “The *bawabeen* form a union where they spread talk about people living in their building”, and continued to explain how these doormen often spread rumors and even complain to landlords, even though many male doormen themselves look inappropriately at female passersby. This contentious presence holds even heavier implications when it comes to issues of sexual intimacy between consenting couples, particularly when it comes to the female involved. These moral judgments hold heavy weight, especially in a society where family honor and reputation have such significant value.

Thus, Egyptian women are under a specifically close watch by these doormen. In one candid open letter to her *bawab* submitted to Cairo Scene Magazine, a woman detailed the ways in which she was subject to disapproving glares when she was caught performing shameful acts—dressing in revealing night-out attire, coming home past midnight, walking alone with a male, etc.⁹⁶ She notes that she would never dare bring home a date under his watchful gaze and admits that this is something she suspects her male counterparts would not have to worry about. And she is correct. In another account from a man living in Egypt, he noticed that his *bawab* shared a joyous reaction to him inviting his girlfriend over in his excited exclamations about his *mozza*, which is common Egyptian slang for “attractive girl”.⁹⁷ His girlfriend, on the other hand, dreaded walking past the observant *bawab*, understanding that he would view her as a “whore” and ruin

⁹⁶ “Dear Bawab...” *Cairo Scene*, 2014, www.cairoscene.com/LifeStyle/Dear-Bawa.

⁹⁷ Dinham, Tom. “The Doormen Policing Egypt's Morals.” BBC News, BBC, 27 Oct. 2012, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20098376.

their reputation within the building. Soon, the couple was faced by a harsh reality. When the *bawab* was unsatisfied with the amount of money that he was being paid by the man, he spread word in the neighborhood about the couple and their promiscuity. This intimate leverage over financial compensation is not uncommon amongst the *bawabeen* in Cairo.

The *bawab* phenomenon is not only an unspoken rule that carries significance throughout the streets of Cairo, but it actually has legal underpinnings. In Article 18 of Law 136 from 1981 it states, “If premises are used in ways which cause discomfort to other people, other tenants with view in the apartment, or if it is contrary to public morals, for this area especially it needs to be a final verdict from an Egyptian court”.⁹⁸ Omar Halloum, a lawyer from one of the largest law firms in Egypt, says that this means tenants can turn their personal decisions into an issue of indecency before the court system.⁹⁹ This, inevitably, gives significant leeway for personal judgements. Even outside of the court system, many *bawabeen* and other community members feel the need to take justice into their own hands. On one day during March 2021, a 34-year old unmarried female doctor fell to her death from her sixth-floor Cairo apartment reportedly during a dispute with her *bawab*, landlord, and neighbor after inviting a male colleague to her home.¹⁰⁰ Local media reports allege that the woman was pushed from her balcony by these men who broke into her apartment and assaulted her. The three individuals involved in her death have been arrested and are currently under investigation.

⁹⁸ Eid, Menna. “Egypt’s Obsession With Their Neighbors.” SoundCloud, 2018, soundcloud.com/ehkyyamasr/egypts-obsession-with-their-neighbors?utm_source=soundcloud&utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=facebook&fbclid=IwAR3Nt5wi2AVeoQSIdBEGHRYcP_hwZGhbB4AIC59kuOqbk_fpt-2ImrQk-Oc.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Pleasance, Chris. “Egyptian Doctor Beaten and Thrown to Death from Balcony in Cairo ‘for Inviting Man to Her Flat.’” *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 23 Mar. 2021, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9392721/Egyptian-doctor-beaten-thrown-death-inviting-man-flat.html.

Situations like this highlight the tension and in many cases, violence, associated with premarital relations in Egyptian society. Women, whose duty it is to defend the moral dignity of her family, fall under a particular hardship when it comes to their own sexual autonomies because they are constantly faced by an underlying threat of neighborhood watchdogs being able to weaponize their personal information against them. Their sexual histories are made hypervisible to not only their immediate families, but also the patriarchs of their communities such as the *bawabeen*. Although many of these neighborhood figures are women, they still represent the masculinist moral police of the country, which speaks to the earlier concept of the “patriarchal bargain” in which women submit to power structures in order to gain a degree of security for themselves. The Egyptian state’s control on the status of female bodies is manifested through different community figures, which further shows how her body is less of her own, and more of a communal property that is subject to collective supervision.

Policing Bodies Today

The weaponization of women’s sexual autonomy and desires is not a behavior that is only positioned in Egypt’s past. Even today, especially with the rise of globalization and the internet age, women fall into unique circumstances where they find themselves at the crossroads of society’s expectations for their moral decency. In July 2020, scandal broke out throughout Egyptian society as two young women, who were very popular figures on social media, were convicted on charges of “violating family values” by Egyptian courts.¹⁰¹ This came after the girls built a significant following from posting lighthearted videos of them singing, dancing, and

¹⁰¹ Walsh, Declan. “Egypt Sentences Women to 2 Years in Prison for TikTok Videos.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 28 July 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/world/middleeast/egypt-women-tiktok-prison.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article.

clowning around like others their age. These women- 20-year-old Haneen Hossam and 22-year-old Mawada al-Adham- were sentenced to two years in prison, alongside the three men who allegedly helped them post online videos and received the same sentence. The women were also fined nearly \$19,000.¹⁰² Hossam was charged specifically after posting a video online telling her 1.3 million followers that girls could work with her for money. Prosecutors accused Hossam, who usually wears a headscarf in her videos, of encouraging young women to sell sex online and attacking public morals.¹⁰³ The convictions were the first verdicts from a series of a dozen arrests made since April of 2020 of young Egyptian women who are prominent on TikTok, a popular app used to share short videos to worldwide audiences.

In January 2021, an Egyptian appeals court acquitted the two young women over the videos that they published on their social media. Despite the apparent victory, this legal battle showcases Egyptian society's moral code when it comes to women's autonomous bodily expression. Prosecutions like these often are initiated when activist lawyers, who present themselves as mediators of public morality and prosecutors of Egyptian nationalism, file criminal cases that accuse women of offenses like "inciting debauchery".¹⁰⁴ Here, we can see how policing women's sexual conduct is justified through the claimed protection of Egypt's national character. This is further underscored by other recent incidents that have made national news. In January of this year, Egyptian security forces arrested a pastry chef who supplied cupcakes with penis decorations for a private birthday party at a sporting club in an affluent neighborhood in Cairo. Though the order was completed in accordance to requests made by

¹⁰² France-Presse, Agence. "Egyptian Court Acquits Women Jailed for 'Inciting Debauchery' on TikTok." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 12 Jan. 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/12/egyptian-court-acquits-women-jailed-for-inciting-debauchery-on-tiktok.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

patrons of the club, the female chef was arrested in her home after the partygoers shared photos of the cupcakes with members of the sporting club and on social media. The country's largest state-owned newspaper, Al-Ahram, described the desserts as "indecent and immoral shapes".¹⁰⁵ After questioning by prosecutors, the baker was released on bail for the equivalent of \$320.

This incident did not come long after the arrests of the two young girls on TikTok. The baker was also interrogated by the same misdemeanor court that tried the Egyptian actress Rania Youssef in 2019 for charges of "contempt of Islam and infringing Egyptian family values"¹⁰⁶ after she commented on her own physique during a television program. In a similar legal battle, the renowned belly dancer Sama El Masry was jailed for three years and fined the equivalent of \$19,106 for again, violating family values and "immorality" in June of 2020.¹⁰⁷ At the center of this issue is not the prohibition of sexuality in the public sphere, but rather the restriction of sexuality that is outside the control of patriarchs in society. In these legal battles and confrontation with societal expectations, there is a common theme of upholding what the system describes as "family values" and national character.

A 2008 survey by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights revealed that 80 percent of Egyptian women said that they had experienced sexual assault, and more than 60 percent of men admitted to harassing women.¹⁰⁸ Yet, it is the sexual conduct of women that is under the closest surveillance by the state and society. Within the past year, Egypt has experienced its own #MeToo movement, after the female-led Instagram account named Assault Police brought public

¹⁰⁵ Michaelson, Ruth. "Egyptian Chef Arrested after Making Cupcakes with Penis Decorations." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 19 Jan. 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/19/egyptian-chef-arrested-after-making-cupcakes-with-penis-decorations.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Eltahawy, Mona. *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016, 15.

attention to the horrific details of the Fairmont case in July of last year. The case is named after the luxurious Cairo hotel where the high-profile gang rape by young men of elite backgrounds occurred. The main sexual molester has since been arrested and the government also passed a data law to protect the privacy of the victims.¹⁰⁹ Though moments of social activism like this produce some optimism for reform, many Egyptians continue to feel dismayed because even in cases like this accountability for men's dangerous sexual crimes is centered around discourses of "immorality" rather than a commitment to protecting women's safety. These collective, unconscious images of the familial order do significant harm to the woman's ability to control her body.

The two young Egyptian women I interviewed came from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, but each expressed the view that sexual intimacy is a very important part of relationships- one that offered security and trust. Despite viewing intimacy as a display of mutual care, both women struggled with feelings of anxiety, pressure, and shame associated with sexual acts. Phenomena such as widespread sexual dysfunction amongst women, unequal consequences for *urfi* marriages, and unwarranted treatment from society's watch dogs promote a sense of purity culture in which the intimate desires of women are undervalued while that of men are prioritized. The active policing of women's sexual conduct is an established institution of the masculinist projects of a patriarchal society, which is both a symptom and a cause of Egypt's authoritarian state. Though these masculinist projects manifest themselves in

¹⁰⁹ Saleh, Heba. "Sexual Violence in the Arab World: Egypt Case Shows the Struggle for Women's Rights." *Financial Times*, Financial Times, 14 Feb. 2021, www.ft.com/content/d8d0f901-4cb8-4b8e-b3ee-e8f88d2c2df5?accessToken=zWAAAXiesDuIkdpY0PkBTLhLjtOz7uj4jSwT9Q.MEYCIQDf7-aIKpVMIOFQ2Aed516QDCHFfuVJmwdHMoUOHH0VKwIhAP3gwNHyeypI9GJVz3mCjRdgF5j1OOVfoUYC3MjA9S7W&sharetype=gift%3Ftoken.

both men and women, they consistently sustain a paternalistic gender regime within the country.

As we will see, this has serious implications for achieving democratization in Egypt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Politicizing the Bedroom

Under the strict supervision of community standards for intimacy, Egyptians face significant pressure within their homes when acting on their own desires. This pressure is remarkably worse for women when men base their masculinity on their ability to monitor a woman's purity and dignity. This issue is not only restricted to the bedroom. There is a sense that controlling female behavior has become a second-best for many Egyptian males who feel dispossessed of control over their own lives. At the root of this disconnect are deeply ingrained economic and political factors, as these social and familial dynamics have come to echo Egypt's long standing military regime grounded in relationships and power structures of force and obedience. This can be seen in direct, physical encounters with the military during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, but also in much more implicit media that are entrenched in the dynamics of the family and community networks in the country.

Sex and Revolution

The revolution in 2011 signaled a significant departure from usual life in Cairo. In a society that had long prioritized older men, where they dominated both the spheres of the family and affairs of the state, the uprising was a movement where young people were largely in charge. Thousands of young Egyptians gathered to guard barricades, check IDs, hand out tear gas protective gear, and so much more to rally around their political cause against authoritarianism. Though the political unrest was characterized by protesters' anger regarding poverty and oppression at the hands of the government, there were other factors that impacted the members of Egyptian society during this monumental point in history. One such factor was sex. Although

evidently a widespread taboo, sex played a crucial role in the characterization and reputation of the revolution and was a medium along which credibility was defined. This was evident in the political battleground of Tahrir Square as well as in dynamics Egyptians faced in their homes.

In the days of the uprisings in January and February 2011, some of the opponents of the revolution warned on television that those who were participating in the sit-ins were having “full sexual relations, there, in the square”¹¹⁰ under the tents. Ever since, sex has been a focus of obsession for counter-revolution sentiments. The protestors tried to deny these claims by warning female demonstrators during the day not to smoke in public and to avoid wearing tight clothes. During the night, many would pass by and sleep in between the tents to ensure that there was no sexual activity occurring amongst those participating in the sit-ins.¹¹¹ All of this was done to preserve the reputation of the revolution because, to many of their enemies, the revolution was a manifestation of sexual deviation and a “shovel for the demolition of [Egypt’s] authentic values and traditions”.¹¹²

Despite the accusations from opposing parties, however, the revolution as a whole was relatively conservative when it came to sex. With the exception of a few voices, most revolutionaries upheld the importance of chastity, confirming that they aimed to build a new political community but did not intend to threaten the moral values of society, especially those

¹¹⁰ الجنس في زمن الثورة! ” عربي بوست - ArabicPost.net, arabicpost.net/archive/2015/08/12/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9/?fbclid=IwAR2QFRysKZT7D7uFImstryj6VCFQ2HHaEbvMYLm-HbPf920IciobborfdXoA.

¹¹¹ Ahmed, Ghadeer. “The ‘January Revolution’ and the Attempts to Nationalize Bodies.” Al Araby, 27 Jan 2017.

¹¹² الجنس في زمن الثورة! ” عربي بوست - ArabicPost.net, arabicpost.net/archive/2015/08/12/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9/?fbclid=IwAR2QFRysKZT7D7uFImstryj6VCFQ2HHaEbvMYLm-HbPf920IciobborfdXoA.

related to sex and its taboos. The perspective that viewed the world through righteousness and morality prevailed as pressure built to preserve the Egyptian identity, which has been the core of Egypt's politics and society since post-colonization.

Due to dominant societal sentiments that equated sex with dishonor, sex became a useful tool for the masculinist state to weaponize against female bodies during the revolution. Virginity testing, as mentioned in previous chapters, is a practice performed by many to confirm premarital abstinence. However, during 2011 virginity testing became a medium for the government to exercise political control. In the wake of the uprisings, Egyptian government forces arrested a group of pro-democracy female protesters. After several hours of torture and interrogation, the women who were identified as unmarried were forcibly subjected to virginity tests authorized by the Egyptian military.¹¹³ Officials argued that the tests were to prove that these women, who were among those staying in tents in Tahrir Square, were not virgins in case they later brought charges against the army for sexual assault.¹¹⁴ Major General Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, who is now the country's president, approved of the virginity testing conducted against female protestors. This political violation is yet another way in which the invasive reading of a woman's sexual histories is used as an indicator of her credibility and virtuousness.

In July 2011 Samira Ibrahim, who was among the 18 women tortured and assaulted, took the government to court with the help of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and several other NGOs.¹¹⁵ The court exonerated the army physician who had conducted the virginity tests, while the army argued that civilian courts had no jurisdiction over the army. Ibrahim did

¹¹³ Wynn, L. L., & Hassanein, S. (2017). Hymenoplasty, virginity testing, and the simulacrum of female respectability. *Signs*, 42(4), 893-917. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690918>, 893.

¹¹⁴ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 119.

¹¹⁵ Wynn, L. L., & Hassanein, S. (2017). Hymenoplasty, virginity testing, and the simulacrum of female respectability. *Signs*, 42(4), 893-917. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690918>, 897.

however win a legal battle in an administrative court, where her lawyers challenged the practice of virginity tests against female detainees. The court ruled that:

“The armed forces may not, in order to protect its members from claiming a possible rape by detainees, resort to acts that violate the Constitution and law which in turn violate privacies and put honors/reputations in jeopardy when they should be protected, as [virginity testing] involved deliberate humiliation and insult”.¹¹⁶

With this decision, forced virginity tests by the military were deemed illegal. The administrative court’s decision was, however, not binding and the military continues to avoid taking full responsibility for its violent actions against women. Still, the wording of the decision was the strongest condemnation to date to be issued by a court against the armed forces. Even legal challenges like this one, though, are rooted in society’s demand for female virginity which is a value that has yet to be fundamentally challenged or altered.

The ways in which personal freedoms were negotiated during the revolution also permeated the domain of the home. The uprisings, which consisted of millions of young men and women struggling days and nights to defy political authority had an interesting effect on relations with parental authority within the household. For many women, the events following 2011 prompted a shift in their own beliefs and acceptance of conditions in their lives that they traditionally viewed as unchangeable. Several accounts from that period indicate that many young women began to question things about their lives, from propaganda on their televisions to the societal protocols that were continuously placed on them.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Anmuth, Sophie. “Egyptian Women: Depression or Oppression?” OpenDemocracy, 26 Sept. 2016, www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/egyptian-women-depression-or-oppression/.

The spirit of the revolution even made its way to the bedroom to an extent. Dr. Heba Kotb, the Cairo-based sex therapist who is one of the most popular sexologists in the Arab world, noted that she has seen a significant change in the women meeting with her over recent years. Previously, it was mainly husbands bringing their wives in for consultations. After the uprisings, however, she found that the situation reversed. In an interview, she said, “Women are more courageous now to accuse their husbands of not being good [in bed]. It is the spirit of the revolution- I have to reject, I have to refuse, I have to say no [I am not the one to blame]”.¹¹⁸ Though not all women have been affected by the sentiments of the uprisings, these accounts still suggest that with the country facing a political upheaval, women have begun to challenge oppressive behaviors in their own personal lives.

Politics and Patriarchs

Though the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 had a role in sparking resistance within the dynamics of the household, it is difficult to completely alter power relations when they are so deeply ingrained in the state and society. Practices and phenomena like virginity testing, widespread sexual dysfunction, hymen reconstruction, etc. do not occur in a vacuum. These are the symptoms of a society that is socialized and politicized to exert control over women’s bodies. Given the normalized roles of women being the maintainers of “innocence” and men being assigned the duty of the “protectors” of the nation, harmful gender roles are prescribed and perpetuated throughout the most important unit of Egyptian society- the family. In fact, the importance of the nuclear family and the significance of gender roles are embedded within the fundamental political foundation of the country.

¹¹⁸ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 51.

The first modern codified form of a national constitution in Egypt was written in 1923. At first, it provided for monarchical dominance with the king as head of state, but the document underwent several amendments and reiterations across decades. In 1971, when President Anwar Sadat took office, he moved towards a more democratic constitution that allowed for more freedoms, adopted a parliamentary system, and made Sharia law a source of legislation. Chapter I of the constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, which the country was renamed to, is dedicated to outlining the “Social and Moral Constituents” of the nation. Article 9 of this section states:

“The family is the basis of the society founded on religion, morality and patriotism. The State is keen to preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family- with all the values and traditions represented by it- while affirming and promoting this character in the interplay of relations within the Egyptian society.”¹¹⁹

Here, we see the definition of the family as the foundation of Egyptian society that is based in piety and morality. The “character” of Egypt is underscored here as symbolizing these traits. The constitution goes even further in expressing the moral duty of the nation in Article 10 which reads:

“The State shall guarantee the protection of motherhood and childhood, look after children and youth and provide the suitable conditions for the development of their talents.”¹²⁰

Evidently, female adults and children are placed on an equal level in terms of needing the protection from the state. Additionally, “motherhood” is given distinct recognition as something

¹¹⁹ Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 22 September 1971, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5368.html>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

requiring special preservation. The constitution continues to outline gender roles in Article 11 which declares:

“The State shall guarantee coordination between woman's duties towards her family and her work in the society, considering her equal to man in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres without detriment to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia).”¹²¹

Interestingly, here equality is laid out between Egyptian men and women across different societal domains but is cited conditionally with a woman’s commitment towards her family. And finally, Article 12 of this section of the constitution states:

“Society shall be committed to safeguarding and protecting morals, promoting the genuine Egyptian traditions and abiding by the high standards of religious education, moral and national values, the historical heritage of the people, scientific facts, socialist conduct and public manners within the limits of the law. The State is committed to abiding by these principles and promoting them.”¹²²

As can be seen in these excerpts, the constitution of Egypt uses intentional rhetoric to affirm traditional family values, manners, and morality as a way to characterize the status of the nation. Under “Social and Moral Constituents” there are prominent citations of the duty of women to the family and to the national character, but hardly a nod to men’s responsibility to do the same. The “state” is given the masculinist commitment to safeguarding the protection of women, who are identified as vulnerable and in need of security. These gendered discourses within the foundational political document of Egypt reveal how men and women are positioned in society. There is a clear distinction between the social assignments of each and their

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

involvement in sustaining Egypt's character as righteous and dignified, which falls on the shoulders of the country's women to nurture and the country's men to monitor.

Political Institutions Reimagined

In addition to constitutional principles that are set forth in Egyptian society, the government has created a social and political life that breeds conditions that repress women's sexual autonomy. Under the authoritarian regime of President Sisi, power is concentrated in few hands- an unchallenged leader and a bureaucratically dominant military. Political participation and civic engagement therefore is thoroughly obstructed as the country suffers from non-competitive elections, crackdowns on political dissent, and censorship across media. The state attempts to control nearly every tool that people would try to use to promote collective interests, from unions, to political parties and voluntary associations. In fact, it is illegal to hold a group meeting if it is not first registered by the country's Ministry of Information.¹²³ Those who consciously resist the state or engage in strategies that challenge national objectives must fear retaliation from government actors. Given Egypt's history of authoritarian leaders, elites have had sole influence and representation in the country's decision making. This political exclusion from the formal political arena has prompted the creation of alternative, informal political networks and institutions. The family and household becomes one such institution.

Diane Singerman conducted several years of fieldwork researching Egypt's *sha'b*, or common people. Singerman treats the family and familial networks as political institutions since it is through them that the popular classes satisfy many of their vital political and economic needs. Her research highlights how informal political institutions like the household preserve the

¹²³ Singerman, Diane. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton University Press, 1995. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13vdhnh, 3.

political and cultural autonomy that the bureaucracy denies them. Singerman found that the life of *sha'bi* communities is dominated by a “familial ethos” which she defines as a worldview centered on the family and the need to protect its wealth, reputation, and status.¹²⁴ This familial ethos, she notes, affects all aspects of life within the community: career choices, migration overseas, education, and financial habits. Though she does not write specifically on sexuality and intimacy, the widespread traditions and practices that monitor women’s sexual histories are further evidence of how the micro-political institution of the home operates as a result of authoritarian oppression from the state. Just as the military regime relies on power dynamics rooted in obedience and force, the microcosm of the home mirrors the same relations as a means to securing the family’s status and security. These private dynamics delineate the same gender roles to ensure superiority- women must be the nurturers and men are the protectors.

The political weight of the popular classes, which constitute most of the nation, has been historically neutralized through repression, growing apathy, and socialization into accepting elite domination. The power dynamics within the private sphere of the home reflect this. In a study that was aimed at constructing a conceptual framework of married Egyptian women’s perceptions of autonomy, one of the prevalent frameworks identified was “subordination by consent”¹²⁵ in which the woman willingly submits to the husband in accordance with her preset ideas on the role of the male as the head of the household. Under this framework, women abide by the traditional societal expectations that guide them to accept the authority of the husband. The interviews of this study illuminated the perceptions of many married Egyptian women accepting men as superior decision makers and better judges. Despite this, not all women under

¹²⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹²⁵ Bashier, Neveen. “Knowing the Ropes: Autonomy in the Everyday Life of Egyptian Married Women.” American University in Cairo, 2010, 55.

this frame perceived themselves to be completely suppressed. In most cases, the wife attended to her husband because she viewed this as her “main role as a woman.”¹²⁶

Marriage, as we have seen, is a deeply held normative preference in Egypt that influences and is influenced by many varying factors of Egyptian life. Through marriage, one generation transfers assets and resources to the next and a couple gains a degree of autonomy in building a new household. Since marriage and reproducing the family is such a critical affair in Egypt, systems of power form around it. Evidently, parallels can be seen in the way wives submit to patriarchal heads of the household and the way Egyptian citizens submit to patriarchal heads of state. Through marriage and family networks, the *sha'bi* communities in Egypt create a sense of authenticity by embodying ideals of national identity through the maintenance of the “familial ethos.”¹²⁷ By maintaining the state’s conceptualization of Egypt’s character, popular classes reproduce the military regime’s promotion of morality and obedience.

This is how the boundaries between the public and private spheres become blurred in the authoritarian Egyptian regime. Political power dynamics of the masculinist state permeate into the home where relations based in submission and policing are reproduced. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship between autocrats and patriarchs- the superiority of both facilitate the sustenance of each other. Egypt’s societal and political structure can be characterized as a patriarchy and in an important distinction, also paternalism. Elizabeth Thompson, who conducted a study on gender, citizenship, and the civic order in mandate Syria and Lebanon, defines paternalism as “a system of power defined by the ability to control the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁷ Singerman, Diane. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton University Press, 1995. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13vdhnh, 14.

distribution of benefits, not by the recognition of rights to benefits.”¹²⁸ This is different from patriarchy, which connotes the structural subordination of women to men. Put differently, the system of paternalism is one where a mediating elite arises between the state and a mass of citizens by winning privileged access to resources from the state, and by using that access to control the unprivileged majority.¹²⁹ It defines authority as that of the father, and power is passed down from one male to the next. Thus, male authority continuously flows from the formal sphere of politics to the informal politics of the household. The paternalistic gender regime that persists in Egypt becomes tangible by the familial symbols and gendered imagery of Egyptian nationalism. It is through this justification that women are policed for their sexual histories. The politics of the family and the politics of the Egyptian nation become consciously constitutive of each other.

The manifestations of patriarchy and paternalism manifests in various societal and political actors. In the public realm, these concentrations of power can be seen in the head of state and military. In the private sphere of the household and close community, authority is embodied by fathers, husbands, *bawabeen* and more. Each plays a role in policing and defending the maintenance of the institution of their home. These behaviors are not only limited to the male actors within Egyptian communities, however. As previously mentioned regarding Deniz Kandiyoti’s conceptualization of the “patriarchal bargain”, women can be seen performing as surrogate actors of masculinist projects, such as monitoring other women’s intimate activities. For example, many *bawabeen* are women, and many Egyptian mothers and grandmothers are steadfast in their commitment to having invasive procedures, such as virginity testing and genital

¹²⁸ Bier, Laura. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press, 2011, 30.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

cutting, conducted on their young daughters. This is the product of deep internalization of the patriarchal society in which ideals of sexual purity and innocence put on women are not only tolerated, but accepted and defended intentionally. Through the submission to gendered rituals and principles, authoritarian behaviors are perpetuated in private and public spheres alike.

Theoretical Frameworks

The interconnected nature between authoritarian regime type and household dynamics is not a condition specific to Egypt alone. Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian social psychologist who was a provocative thinker of the 20th century, explored at length the sociological reasons behind why sexuality is suppressed by society and by the individual. Reich began his career as a psychoanalyst in Vienna where, much like what he might have observed in Egypt, he witnessed many signs of sexual unhappiness- sex outside of marriage widely condemned, little privacy for intimacy, women whose sexual desires were ignored, and stark double standards regarding virginity.¹³⁰ In his scholarship, Reich finds that the hallmark of any dictatorship is sexual suppression, which is why the authoritarian state takes great interest in the family. An authoritarian system requires submissive subjects, and Reich argued that the most effective factory for them was the patriarchal family in which power relations between the head of state and his people are mirrored in the dynamics between the head of the household and his dependents. “The authoritarian state has a representative in every family, the father; in this way he becomes the state’s most valuable tool”,¹³¹ Reich notes. This is important because the father’s authoritarian position reflects his political role- he reproduces submissiveness to authority in his

¹³⁰ El-Feki, Shereen. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*. Vintage Publishing, 2014, 22.

¹³¹ Reich, Wilhelm. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism: Translated from the German Manuscript*. Orgone Inst. Press, 1946, 22.

children, especially his sons. Here, we can see the prior concept of paternalism at work as male authority is passed down.

Reich argues that the most efficient way in which the head of the family can maintain subservience and order in his home is by policing sexual urges. Various institutions work collectively to constrain sexual autonomy- religious bodies condemning nonprocreational sex, the emphasis on marriage, schools that preach abstinence, etc. The result of this, Reich concludes, is the paralysis of resistance and a general inhibition of curiosity and critical thinking. Therefore, “the goal of sexual suppression is to produce an individual who is adjusted to the authoritarian order and who will submit to it in spite of all misery and degradation.”¹³² Ultimately, the family is not just the foundation for the authoritarianism that benefits the state, but is the essential undemocratic internal structure of the state apparatus itself.

Though Reich was writing on societal repression in Europe, his insight sheds light on the causes for treatment of women’s sexual autonomy in modern Egypt. The familial makeup of the household that positions male desires as superior actively conditions women to internalize their inferiority. Marriage and the traditions associated with it perpetuate sexual morality in ways that repress women’s autonomy, and the systemic inhibition of curiosity that challenges sexual norms normalizes these issues to the point where women accept and even strengthen these harmful behaviors. Successful resistance requires empowerment, so by ensuring minimal controversy the country’s powerful military regime seeks to secure its sustenance. Since women are conditioned to accept submission within their homes, Egypt’s authoritarian regime successfully maintains its power and presence across the basic units of its society.

¹³² Ibid.,16.

French philosopher Michel Foucault is another thinker who contributes to discussions of the relationships between power, the body, and sexuality. Rather than focusing on the centralized sources of societal power such as the economy or the state as Reich does, Foucault's analysis underscores micro-level power relations. Foucault argues that modern power operates throughout the social body and is best grasped in the everyday practices which sustain and reproduce power relations. This emphasis on everyday practices provides a basis for analyzing the politics of gendered power relations at the most intimate levels of experience such as the institutions of marriage, motherhood, compulsory heterosexuality, private relations between the sexes, and in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies.

In the 1976 four-volume study of sexuality in the Western world, Foucault's "The History of Sexuality" identifies the body and sexuality as the direct locus of social control. One of his central claims is that sexuality as we know it is a construct. He asserts that the relationship between power and sexuality is misrepresented when sexuality is considered as a disorderly, natural force that power simply opposes or constrains.¹³³ In contrast, the phenomenon of sexuality should be understood as a construct that serves as a dense transfer point for relations of power. Foucault makes a distinction between a natural sex and gender, which is culturally constructed as a means for power apparatuses to complete their objectives. As such, modern regimes of power operate to produce citizens as subjects who are both the objects and vehicles of power. Sex, therefore, becomes a medium for power dynamics across men and women, young people and old people, an administration and constituency, and more.¹³⁴ Foucault notes that

¹³³ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Random House, 1978, 103.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

relations of sex give rise to a “deployment of alliance” in every society, which is “a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions”.¹³⁵ This deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules that defines the permitted and the forbidden. According to Foucault, one of its principal objectives is to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them.

In “The History of Sexuality” Foucault focuses on the Western world during the 17th to the mid-20th centuries, but his writings shed valuable light on the social construction of sex in present day. As a result of European colonization, nationalist movements in Egypt focused on the importance of the association of the family as the beacon for political success. Thus began the politically conscious development of the household and nuclear family as the locus of power relations and status. As Foucault explains, the prestige of the family is proliferated and innovated through a deployment of alliances upon which sex is negotiated, through institutions such as marriage, motherhood, heterosexuality, etc. Historical and social forces construct the woman’s body as virgin, and work actively to maintain this status of virginity. Thus, Egyptian families are formed around rules of allowance and prohibition which ultimately disproportionately affect women.

With the family’s assignment of virginity as the supreme state, women often take pride and honor in being a virgin when they meet their husbands, and they feel a sense of power related to their virginity.¹³⁶ This societal dictate goes so far as Egyptian women needing to reflect virginity in spheres outside of the bedroom, from managing the way they dress, how they speak to others, their extracurricular activities, and other social actions that effectively display values of

¹³⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹³⁶ Ghanim, David. Rewarding Virginity. In: *The Virginity Trap in the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137507082_12, 2015, 137.

chastity and respectability. Therefore, dominant cultural constructions succeed in establishing a correlation between sexual purity and power. In this relationship, sex becomes the medium for power and therefore a source of empowerment for those subjected to the paternalistic system. The social construction of linking power to sexual chastity is deeply gendered, as can be seen, because these norms are largely confined exclusively to women.

The interplay between power relations in Egyptian society has significant implications for political governance in the country. Certainly, democracies do not perform perfectly on issues relating to sexuality and female bodily autonomy. There are many democratic societies around the world where serious progress is required on these issues. However, in a country where the continuous repression of half of its population's autonomy has become an internalized norm in society, practices and attitudes related to sexuality and female bodily autonomy produce a significant barrier to democracy. This is not only because of the taboo nature surrounding female sexuality, but because the act of intimacy itself is a transfer point through which authoritarian regimes negotiate and exert control over the population. By encouraging authoritarian behaviors amongst the population, particularly through patriarchal actors, Egypt's long standing military regime establishes ideological strongholds within the home. If there is a lack of consent of the governed within the household, it is difficult to imagine there being a greater consent amongst all Egyptians for their representative form of government. Thus, patriarchy and authoritarianism in Egypt have a mutually beneficial relationship perpetuated through patriarchal actors that actively sustain each other, which creates a major obstacle to the country's prospects for democratization.

CONCLUSION

It is no secret that Egypt has had a remarkable experience with its struggle for democracy. The events of January 25, 2011 and the months after it left the whole world watching as one of the most formidable and influential nations in the region faced unprecedented political fights against a longstanding autocrat. Though the dream for a freer Egypt has yet to be fully realized, the country and its citizens showcase the nuanced relationships of how political governance can permeate through the walls of the home. The household is the microcosm of the nation, and the social and familial dynamics within the home have come to mirror that of the military regime, relying on structures of force and obedience. Evident by the case of Egypt, the inner workings of the household are tightly wound with the success of authoritarian regimes.

Egyptian women bear the greatest burden in the face of these hierarchies of power. These power structures have robbed many women of the ability to control their own lives, especially when it comes to their sexualities. Girls and women are obliged to become cultural vectors where their bodies are the media through which society is etched, which can be seen by the multitude of harmful practices that have become commonplace. The institution of marriage is the framework that legitimizes most of these offenses against female bodily autonomy, whether they be virginity testing, hymen reconstruction, genital cutting, or sexual dysfunction, just to name a few. Thus marriage, which is a socially compulsory act that is widely held as the pinnacle of a woman's success, perpetuates the patriarchy and allows for a public gaze on what should be an individual's private sexual history. Not only do these indignities inflict a great deal of psychological harm, but significant numbers of women suffer physically from the trials and

tribulations put on them sexually by the members of their closest communities, supposedly for the sake of protecting family values of purity and innocence.

Women have struggled for recognition as fully empowered citizens for decades, striving for personal autonomy to express their opinions and become part of the political process and public debate. The basis of this continuous fight is to seek dignity, whose most fundamental meaning implies that the state must respect the integrity, safety, and autonomy of the body. From early nationalist movements, the politics of the family very consciously grew to constitute the politics of the Egyptian nation, which emphasized that nationhood was built upon ties of kinship. Problematically, these intimate bonds demand honor just as much as they police shame. Consequently, the continuous maltreatment of women by patriarchal actors in the home minimizes their autonomy within and beyond the bedroom. These discussions of intimacy are crucial because of their implications for democratization in the country. In a society where the constitutional and cultural cornerstone in the family is so undemocratic in its treatment towards their women's autonomies, it is difficult to imagine how the wider freedoms of all Egyptians can be protected from the state.

Though sexual repression is the root of many tensions in the lives of young Egyptians, it was not ultimately what brought them into the streets during the revolution. Anger at injustices, poverty, corruption, and other failures are what drove these uprisings. The events of January 2011 were a striking display of what is possible when multitudes of impassioned Egyptians unite to threaten the deep-rooted power of the political elite. Despite these efforts, the political climate and persistence of authoritarianism in Egypt today reveals that there is more work to be done. For a truly successful and sustainable movement, mass demonstrations not only need to address

the symptoms of oppressive regimes which can be seen in poverty, corruption, voter suppression, etc. but also challenge the symptom of the conventional patriarchal family.

The revolution of 2011 was careful not to threaten the “traditions” and “morals” of Egyptian society. But for true democratic change, Egyptians must acknowledge cultures surrounding intimacy as a conscious construction by autocratic regimes to enforce submission to their power. Surely, a sexual revolution by itself is not enough to overcome the challenges of such complex, intersecting issues. However, given the way in which sexuality is closely involved with the intricacies of everyday personal and public life such as domestic violence, employment, and socio-economic empowerment, it is crucial to maintain that the protection of personal freedoms and equality cannot be achieved without a sexual revolution. As such, what is necessary is a revolution that demands change in action, and just as importantly, change in thought.

Sexual intimacy, though often cloaked by feelings of secrecy and unease, reveal important aspects of life and evidently, the state of politics and society. My research shows that various political forces actively seeking to maintain political power have created the space for repressive social practices centered in homes that serve their interests. The deliberate spread of misinformation and skewed attitudes towards intimacy maintain a power imbalance whereby women are perpetually marginalized. As part of an effort for democratization, Egyptians must not only resist the unthreatened power of the state and its leading strongmen, but must also dismantle the ideological traditions and societal expectations that they bring along- especially relating to sexual intimacy.

Therefore, transformation from authoritarianism to consent of the governed will require changing laws along with empowering Egyptians to challenge attitudes towards virginity, morality, and ultimately, national identity. Though these social conditions are consciously buttressed by Egypt's powerful political elite, part of the solution to overcome oppression is to seek social liberation from the ground up, as the key social battlefield centers on the household. As the disconnect between authoritarian governance and societal aspirations for autonomy grows, there is a real chance for change. Dismantling the pillars of authoritarianism and bringing the values of democracy to the home, including the unwavering protection of personal freedoms, will be crucial for the next generations of Egyptians in their fight against political autocrats. And a central part of this revolution is understanding that change begins, and ends, in the bedroom.

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