

VARIA

THE ETHICAL ISSUE OF THE HYMENOROPHY

A study on middle eastern sexual morality

The hymenorophy is the surgical repair of a damaged or broken hymen, and as such, the operation does not fall within the range of the normal surgical categories. From a physiological point of view, the operation is neither therapeutic nor preventive, but rather corrective, and falls, therefore, into the general category of plastic surgical repairs. But even here, we have to make an important distinction. Whereas from purely medical considerations there may be little discrimination between the plastic surgery of a damaged nose or any other part of the body and a damaged hymen, there are other considerations, which point to a substantial difference, largely on account of the cultural and moral functions of the various anatomical parts of the body. True, the appearance, the size and the form of the nose, for example, are important factors to the person concerned, but so far as Middle Eastern society is concerned, these criteria are of no great significance. In the field of plastic surgery, the lifting of breasts of women is nowadays a not uncommon practice, and no society would see any moral issue in the performance of such an operation. On the other hand, Middle Eastern society regards a broken or damaged hymen before marriage as a very grave matter, which in many instances has led and still leads to the most serious of all consequences, namely that of the murder of the girl by a male relative of her family.

The hymenorophy is performed almost exclusively for the purpose of cultural, social and moral rather than for medical considerations. This means that, fundamentally, the performance of the hymenorophy constitutes a non-medical issue, and consequently, the problems connected with this operation fall into the realms of cultural anthropology and the study of social and medical ethics.

From an anthropological point of view, neither gynaecologists nor anthropologists seem to have reached any final agreement as to the functional purpose of the hymen. It is interesting to note that this particular part of the female anatomy is confined to the human species. Not even the females of the highly developed anthropoids, which in many ways are so similar to men, share this tiny membrane, which for the social and moral life of mankind has become so vitally important.

The significance of the hymen among men has its roots in the social structure of certain primitive societies, which felt the need for a tangible means to determine the regulation of the sexual life. The girl, whose hymen is untouched is considered a virgin. The possession of an undamaged hymen, therefore, demonstrates a "state of being". After the rupture of the same, her "state of being" is fundamentally altered. In some societies, like the Middle East, the hymen is considered a "divine seal", which only the husband has the right to break. It has been pointed out sufficiently that this attitude is by no means universal. This is evident from the sexual ethic of the XXth century occidental world, where the disregard of the importance of the intact hymen may be among other things a reflection of the emergence of new norms with respect to sexual morality. But quite apart from the "new sexual morality" of the Occident, there is substantial evidence that other societies as well did not share the exaggerated concern for the untouched hymen. For example, Marco Polo reported about the Tibetans that a young man would under no circumstances marry a virgin. They informed him that a woman, who had had no sexual relations with other men, was of no value, and thus, virgins were offered to the travellers to acquire the sexual experience and maturity, which was necessary for marriage.¹

Throughout the Middle East, however, the physiological state of virginity is still considered as the most precious possession of the unmarried woman, and she, as well as her parents,

¹MARCO POLO (transl. Yule), 2nd ed. London, 1903, vol. II, pp. 35, 39.

will do anything to retain the impeccability of her hymen, and to protect it from any possible damage. The reasons for this supreme concern for female virginity are deeply imbedded in the socio-religious teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam towards sex in general and virginity in particular. True, among the Old Testament Jews, this matter received less attention than among Christian and Islamic moralists; and yet, while on the one hand, the Jews regarded the sexual life as such quite positively, we discover on the other hand already in the early narratives of the Old Testament certain attitudes towards sex, which eventually led to a widespread repression of the procreative instinct. Eve and Delilah tempted Adam and Samson, respectively, and Bathsheba was the cause for David's down-fall and Tamar for Amnon's. In the penitential Psalm (LI : 5), the psalmist sang: "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." It has been well documented that we must turn to the sources of Judaism to discover the origin of the dualistic ethic towards sex and virginity, which in later generations determined so much the attitudes towards sex and virginity in the Orient and Occident. In the writings of the New Testament, the dualistic attitude towards sex and virginity finds an even fuller expression. In fact, it is difficult to reconcile the New Testament doctrine of the superiority of virginity and chastity with the sacred character of marriage and sexual intercourse. It is in its teaching on virginity that the New Testament broke most radically with the past. The account of the Virgin Birth shows that the same Spirit, that could deliver Christ out of barren flesh, *ex utero clauso*, could also bring forth the Messiah from the dead. In the *Apocalypse*, the one hundred and forty-four thousand, who had His and His Father's name written on their foreheads, had not defiled themselves with women, for they were chaste (XLV : 4). St. Paul speaking about the unmarried woman advises her to be anxious about the affairs of the Lord and to be holy in body and in spirit (I Cor. VII). Any form of irregular sexual behaviour was severely criticized, and repeatedly the Apostle warned his readers not to use liberty for an occasion to the flesh. Fornicators, adulterers and whoremongers are strongly condemned. The anti-sexual ethic of the Apostolic Church is pointedly stated by St. Paul when he says: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (I Cor. VII : 1). For the unmarried woman, therefore, the hymen served as the visible seal of her state of holiness. The sexual ethic of the Early Church left a lasting impression upon the sexual attitudes of Christians in the Orient and the Occident. And whereas over the centuries certain sexual liberties for men found increasing toleration, the same could not be said with regard to women, who suffered severe punishment for any forms of irregular sexual activities.

In many respects Islam encouraged the prevailing dualistic sexual ethic in the Byzantine world, though some very important ethical alterations occurred with the spread of Islam. The rights and privileges of men were further elevated, while the rights of women decreased proportionately. Still, the hymen retained its status value. According to the Quran, one of the characteristics of paradise is that it is the "place" of virgins, "the maidens for companion" (Sura LXXVIII : 33), "the fair ones close-guarded in pavilions" (Sura LV : 72), "those of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before them" (Sura LV : 56). Moreover, the Quran as well as all Islamic Schools of Law stipulate that women must restrain their eyes and keep themselves from immodest actions, and that they display neither their charms nor their ornaments, except to their husbands. In short, the principle object of the Quranic sexual ethic is to secure an increasing chastity and moral purity among women. As one modern Islamic moralist says: "A Moslem woman is at liberty to go out of her house, if necessary, after she has obtained permission from her husband or guardian. Only she has to take good care to dress herself properly, so as to cover her person from head to foot, and to walk in the street with restrained eyes."² It is no overstatement, if we say that in comparison to the sexual ethic prevalent in the Byzantine world, Islamic society showed an even increased concern for the significance of the hymen.

While it is not the purpose of this study to enumerate and describe the methods, which were used by the various civilizations to protect the hymen from defloration or damage, we must point out, however, that the concern for virginity and its accompanying protective inventions were by no means limited to Middle Eastern Society. From ancient days onwards, possessiveness, envy, and sexual appetite have led to some of the most absurd deliberations to protect the female genitalia from flagrant violations by "unauthorized men". One of the earliest references about the application of a kind of chastity-belt comes to us from the pen of Homer. In the *Odyssey* (VIII : 267—361), we read how Aphrodite (Venus) deceives Hephaestus, her husband, and offers herself to Ares, his brother. So as to take revenge on Aphrodite, Hephaestus fabricates a device, which prevents her to deceive him again. The Greeks, however, in whose mind this kind of chastity or Venus-belt originated, never actually applied this tor-

² GALWASH, AHMAD, A. *The Religion of Islam*. Cairo, 1956, p. 149.

turous invention to their own wives. This was left to the mediaeval bourgeoisie. During the XVth and XVIth centuries, we find the chastity-belt used first in Florentine society, though very soon this custom of applying protective devices to virgins and wives spread throughout Central Europe. The mediaeval belts consisted normally of two metal frames, one buckled on the waist, the other one fastened to the former covering the vagina. The small openings in the second frame permitted the execution of the nonsexual functions. At the waist, a small lock was attached to the belt. The key to this lock was always held by the husband. As time went by, the simple iron chastity-belt was constantly improved, both in terms of its aesthetics as well as its safety. And yet, at the same time, ingenious women discovered various means to rid themselves of their shackles. Many stories were told about the "second key", which enabled the unfaithful wife to pursue the desire of her passions.³

While mediaeval Europeans employed the chastity belt, other peoples devised even more gruesome means to protect their women from amorous escapades. In the Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya, the so-called Sudanese circumcision was and still is more or less widely practised, though since 1946 legislation has been passed in the Sudan prohibiting this type of radical female circumcision. The intention of the Sudanese circumcision, which includes the removal of the clitoris, the labia minora and the labia majora, is to obstruct intercourse by forming a complete barrier. Up to the age of seven, it is assumed that intercourse is unlikely; from then onwards, it is likely, and, therefore, it must be prevented under all circumstances. Certain herbs are applied locally to the genitalia, and others are administered orally, known as *khat*. Then the *dāyah* (midwife) using a crude knife completely removes each labium in turn. The clitoris is excised next and finally the two raw edges are sutured together with gut obtained from the intestines of sheep. More herbs are applied and the girl is made to sit on the ashes of a raked out fire, then the legs are bound firmly together above and below the knees and ankles. The girl is kept in bed on a diet of camel's milk for three days, after that she can hop about on sticks until the seventh day, when the bandages are removed. After healing, the wound shows a clear scar about a quarter of an inch wide, extending almost to the fourchette. Complete occlusion of the introitus is prevented by the insertion of a small sliver of wood, commonly a match stick. Consequently, a bridge of tissue is formed leaving an opening which just admits the tip of the little finger. Thus, virginity is ensured by the physical obstruction to intercourse. Before marriage, the obstruction is removed by a single incision widening the vaginal opening as much as the future husband finds it necessary.⁴ This practice, known as infibulation,⁵ is recorded by several travellers to Egypt and the Sudan. W. G. BROWNE (1792), who investigated this custom among the Sudanese, offers the following description. "It often happens that another operation accompanies that of excision, which is not, like the latter, practised in Egypt, viz. producing an artificial impediment to the vagina with a view to prevent coition. This happens most frequently in the case of slaves, whose value would be diminished by impregnation, or even by the necessary result of coition, though unaccompanied by conception. But it is also adopted towards girls who are free; the impulse being too strong to be counteracted by any less firm impediment. This operation, like the former (female circumcision), is performed at all ages from eight to sixteen, but commonly from eleven to twelve, nor are they who undergo it always virgins. In some the parts are more easily formed to cohere than in others. There are cases, in which the barrier becomes so firm, that the embrace cannot be received but by the previous application of a sharp instrument."⁶

The mediaeval chastity-belt has outlived its usefulness, and in several countries efforts are under way to outlaw the African custom of infibulation. In the meantime, the practice of the hymenorrhaphy has increased with the availability of plastic surgical services in the cities and larger towns of the Middle East. Whereas in the villages of Upper and Lower Egypt the *dāyah* or midwife still functions as the principal agent in matters pertaining to sexual morality and hygiene, in the towns and in the cities her functions are nowadays largely performed by the gynaecologist and the obstetrician.

Of all vaginal protective measures, the hymenorrhaphy poses a particular moral problem. In the case of the chastity-belt, merely the illegitimate possessor of the key is faced with a moral issue. The practice of infibulation, which is purely protective, is so strictly controlled by the family and the *dāyah* that, in actuality, it poses no moral problem, except for the very serious issue of premeditated mutilation of the woman. The respective surgical procedures, i.e. the suturing of the edges of the labia, and later the cutting of the labia by the *dāyah*,

³ MORUS, *Eine Weltgeschichte der Sexualität*. Hamburg, 1956, p. 134.

⁴ KARIM, M. and AMMAR, R. *Female Circumcision and Sexual Desire*. Cairo, 1965, p. 5.

⁵ According to the historian Xanthus, the eunuchata virgo was invented by the Lydians. Cf. BURTON, R. F. *Supplemental Nights*, Vol. I, pp. 50-51.

⁶ BROWNE, W. G. *Travels in Africa*. London, 1799, p. 349.

are so painful that no woman would undergo this process unless explicitly demanded by her husband. However, it is a more complicated matter with respect to the hymenorophy. Also this operation is very delicate, but in most instances the purpose of its performance is deceptive rather than protective, and very often both the physician as well as the members of the family of the young woman engage knowingly in a fraud. Of course, there are exceptions. Several cases are known, in which a girl has accidentally damaged her hymen by riding a bicycle, by horseback-riding or through any other kind of sport. In those instances, a physician is normally called to certify that the hymen was merely superficially ruptured or damaged due to an accident. If the damage is severe, the physician is requested to perform the hymenorophy. In any case, however, the certificate by the physician stating the accidental cause of the rupture will prevent any possible serious consequences at the time of the young woman's marriage. Throughout Egypt, though with the exception of the western-oriented, highly emancipated circles of society, the consequences of a damaged hymen are still very serious to the young woman. In special circumstances, the girl may be evicted or permitted to leave the family and the village. In most cases, however, the damage to the hymen, which is interpreted as a damage committed against the honour of the family, is avenged by a male member of the family. Instead of being buried in the village-cemetery, the body of the young woman, which is further mutilated, is secretly buried in the desert. M. N. (18), who had murdered his sister (15), confessed before the court, that "he had merely performed his duty for the sake of the honour of his family". K. M. (32), who killed his twelve year old niece by cutting off her head, stated that "he was under the impression that she had been raped, and, therefore, he had to take revenge on her for the sake of the honour of the village". A. S. (21), who killed his sister (17), confessed the deed and stated that "he had just done what every other brother would have done to his sister under the same circumstances".⁷

It is interesting to note that parallel to the availability of hymenorophical services we discover a decrease of the number of murders, which are committed "for the sake of liquidating the shame of the family". The following chart provides the total number of murders as well as the number of murders "for the sake of liquidating the shame of the Family".⁸

Year	Total number of murders in the U.A.R.	Murders for the sake of liquidating the shame of the family in the U.A.R.
1956	2405	146
1957	2592	222
1958	2834	130
1959	2587	93
1960	2262	73
1961	2132	65
1962	2543	69
1963	1240	57
1964	1204	88
1965	1273	67
1966	1161	74

Within the past ten years there are not only more physicians who are willing to perform the operation, but also the fees for the operation have decreased. Because of the tightly guarded secrecy pertaining to every aspect of the hymenorophy, it is impossible to obtain any data as to the number of operations performed or the amount of money charged by the physicians. In some instances, it is said that up to LE 200.000 have been paid for the operation. On the other hand, cases are known where the physicians have performed the operation free of charge to save the young woman's life.

There are few physicians, who would admit to having performed the operation, because of the moral issue of intentional deception. In some instances, surgeons pretend to have to

⁷ For further case-studies, cf. YOUSSEF EL-MASRY, *Die Tragödie der Frau im Arabischen Orient*. München, 1963, pp 62-67.

⁸ From the files of the Bureau of criminal investigation in the U.A.R.

remove an abscess in the vagina or the uterus. Thus, the pretence of the operation is purely therapeutic, in the course of which, however, the damaged hymen should be restored. In any case, a certificate can always be obtained explaining the alleged circumstances of the rupture of the hymen. In this context it must be pointed out that even to the skilled gynaecologist it is not always easy to determine whether a hymen is damaged or not, and certainly, neither the groom nor the members of the family are always capable of assuring themselves of the state of the hymen. Therefore, Middle Eastern society has provided a "safe method" to determine the virginal state of the bride. The test of virginity is the bride's ability to "produce blood" at the moment of defloration. A ruptured hymen almost always bleeds, however, the necessary blood stains on the white bed-sheet or the drawers can also be otherwise produced.

In spite of the many professional medical services, which are nowadays available in the cities of the Middle East, there are still many Egyptian women, interestingly enough representing all social classes, who, in matters pertaining to their sexual life, prefer to confide in a competent *dâyah* rather than in a medical practitioner. For many years, Egyptian midwives have employed various practices to help their customers in deceiving the groom of the deflowered state of the bride. Thus, for example, the *dâyah* may carefully insert into the vagina a small tube of very delicate skin, normally of the maw of chicken, which is filled with chicken-blood diluted with water. At the moment the penis penetrates the vagina, the tube bursts and the blood provides the necessary proof of the alleged virginity of the bride. Another method, which is also widely used by midwives, provides for the administration of sufficient hashish or alcohol to the groom on the evening of the wedding so as to deaden his sense of perception. Then, just prior to the supposed defloration by the groom, the *dâyah* would make a small cut in the labia with a razor. The blood stains thus secured are shown to the family and the wedding party.

The ethical problem pertaining to the hymenorophy and the various practices as performed by the *dâyah* is due to the involvement of two conflicting values. The hymenorophy is clearly a deceptive practice in so far as physiologically the state of virginity is restored, whereas, in fact, the person no longer is a virgin. Deception is a form of cheating, and as such is an immoral act. On the other hand, by saying the truth the very life of a woman may be endangered. Obviously, in view of this moral dilemma, it is impossible to establish hard and fast rules as to what to do and not to do.

To say the truth is essential to any personal thou-to-thee relationship. In fact, there is inescapably a subversive result even in the occasional lie or deception. With respect to Middle Eastern society, however, the question arises in a very large number of cases to what an extent the pre-marital relationship of the two sexes corresponds to the thou-to-thee relationship, a relationship, which supposes the full equality of rights and privileges of both partners.

In the case of the hymenorophy, the truth is withheld either for the sake of the future marital life of the young woman, i.e. so as to qualify her for matrimony, or to save her life from the destructive designs of her family or village. Thus, in the light of the Middle Eastern cultural context, the following statements may provide a reasonable guide-line with respect to the performance of the hymenorophy. In circumstances, which indicate a clear and present danger to the very life of the woman, the hymenorophy, being a lesser evil, is justified. In this case, the hymenorophy constitutes a rightful means of self-defence. The intention is to save the life of the woman rather than to pretend or to deceive. On the other hand, in those circumstances, in which the marital purpose of the couple is at stake, the hymenorophy cannot be so easily justified, in so far as the fulfillment of the marital purpose depends upon a relationship based upon trust and honesty, especially with regard to the sexual life. And whereas in the Occident the pre-marital experiences of the respective partners may be of little and sometimes even of no importance to the couple, in the Middle East this is certainly not the case. On the contrary, any pre-marital sexual experiences of the bride almost always preclude her eligibility for matrimony. In such instances, therefore, in which the bride has been previously deflowered, competent and mature counsel ought to be sought. In fact, unless the couple is able to see in marriage more than the mere fulfillment of their sexual drives, the basic issues pertaining to the practice of the hymenorophy cannot be solved. The groom must be willing and must be able to see in his bride a person rather than an object. The abolition of the practice of the hymenorophy as well as the various practices as performed by the *dâyah* must begin with a radical change of attitude towards the overevaluation of virginity as a prerequisite for marriage.

OTTO MEINARDUS
Cairo

