

CULTURE: A MEANS TO CONTROL WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT:

Simone De Beauvoir (1949), a feminist activist, begins the second volume of her most celebrated work, "The Second Sex," with a powerful statement: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." This was part of Beauvoir's effort to disprove essentialism, which holds that because women are considered "feminine" by nature, all forms of sexual, economic, political, and social oppression are acceptable. The fact that they are rather constructed to be such through social and cultural indoctrination is ignored deliberately. The culture imposes norms and expectations on women, defining what is considered acceptable or deviant sexual behaviour. The cultural norms and discourses surrounding femininity and female sexuality serve to regulate and control women's sexual autonomy, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and patriarchal power dynamics. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of how culture shapes and regulates women's sexuality in various ways.

KEYWORDS: Women, Sexuality, Virginity, Pre-marital Sex, Culture

INTRODUCTION:

Everything in this whole world can be divided into what is called a nature-culture binary. The nature versus culture debate takes on particular significance when applied to the complex and multifaceted topic of sex and gender. It is a widely accepted fact that the biological physical distinctions between males and females are referred to as sex, while gender is the socio-cultural interpretation of the sex of a person. Discrimination based on a person's gender, which itself is a cultural construct, is pervasive. Sex is a basic human experience. Even though sexual pleasure is one of the most humanistic experiences that all human beings collectively share, culture tends to "sexualize" the pleasure instead of centralising it. Instead of her having a say in her sexuality, pleasure, and desires, it is her gender that dictates her position in society. She is reduced to a part of her body.

Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity is crucial to understanding how culture controls women's sexuality. According to Butler, gender is a social construct that is performed and reproduced via cultural practises rather than a biological identity. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that culture and social institutions play a crucial role in perpetuating women's subordinate positions, including their sexuality. She highlights how women's sexual agency is often limited by cultural expectations that

define them primarily in relation to men. The cultural myth of women as passive objects of male desire reinforces control over women's sexuality while also burdening them with the responsibility of maintaining societal morality. Similarly, Kate Millett's (1969) analysis of patriarchy and sexual politics highlights the role of culture in maintaining male dominance over women's sexuality. She argues that cultural institutions, such as family, religion, and the media, contribute to the social construction of sexuality and reinforce patriarchal norms. Millett critiques cultural representations that objectify and commodify women's bodies, reducing them to passive sexual objects. By perpetuating such representations, culture contributes to the control and subjugation of women's sexuality, limiting their autonomy and perpetuating gender inequalities.

The present paper aims to examine the complex relationship that exists between culture and women's sexuality. The questions of how culture is used as a tool to control the body and sexuality of women for various purposes, who decides which gender is to be given preference in all aspects of life over others, and why have been addressed? Are men naturally superior to women, or is such a narrative deliberately created to control women and everything related to them? Is it natural or man-made?

VIRGINITY LOSS AND MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH IT:

The hymen, a thin tissue that partially closes the opening of the vagina, is increasingly associated with the status of being a virgin. It is taken as a symbol of virginity. This traditional, unscientific way of thinking, which continues to dominate the modern mind, assumes that the hymen blocks the uterus (if that were true, then women are not supposed to bleed during their menstruation) and that it necessarily breaks during the very first time a woman experiences penetrative sex, which results in bleeding. So, the bleeding indicates that the woman was a virgin. Collins Dictionary defines virginity loss as having sex for the first time. However, there is no general agreement on what virginity loss means. It has been interpreted in multiple ways. Its meaning depends on its cultural context. It is perceived as a major turning point in one's sexual life.

"Although most Americans define virginity loss as occurring the first time a woman or man engages in vaginal sex, many disagree as to whether virginity can be lost through other sexual practises, such as sex between same-sex partners, heterosexual oral or anal intercourse, and rape." (Berger and Wenger, 1973)

The hymen naturally varies a lot in look; the size, shape, and laxity of it vary from person to person. It might cover the entire vaginal opening; it can dissolve on its own; and it is flexible for some women. Some hymens are strong enough to handle vaginal intercourse without any damage; others might break a bit to make space for the penis. Vaginas are not barriers that are meant to be broken; they are not walls to be torn down, and they are not the barricades that are in the way. "The truth is that research has not told us with any particular specificity why it is that this discomfort happens or why it happens for some women (regardless of hymen type) and not others." (Blank, 2007). It has nothing to do with the status of being a virgin, as some women have their hymen naturally open. Hence, the hymen can't be examined to check the virginity status. Taking it as proof of being sexually active is unscientific. The Norwegian physician Marie Jeancet made this discovery in 1906 after examining a middle-aged sex worker and seeing that her genitalia indicated that she

was a virgin. Only two of the 36 pregnant teens studied in this other research had sexual contact. Recent scientific reports have shown that around 20% of women who are involved in sexual intercourse do not have any visible abnormalities of the hymen. These discoveries serve as indirect proof that virginity is a lie. Age-old heteronormative myths continue to persist today. It is believed that sex must be painful when performed for the first time, especially for women since their hymen is a barrier that must be ruptured. We were all raised with the idea that the hymen is a sign of virginity. Fundamentally, two anatomical myths created all the misconceptions about female virginity. Although they were discovered, they have made it challenging for women across the world for millennia. The hymen breaks and bleeds the first time a woman has vaginal intercourse, according to the first myth concerning the blood. A woman who had no blood was not a virgin. The second myth is connected to the first one since it is commonly held that during a woman's first sexual encounter, the hymen vanishes or undergoes significant change. So, it is generally accepted that virgins bleed and hymens are irretrievably gone. These anatomical myths have persisted for generations because they are important to culture. In practically every culture, religion, and political system, they have served as a potent tool for regulating the sexuality of women. Women are mistrusted, shamed, harmed, blamed, and even honoured if they do not bleed on their wedding night.

Because of this myth, recently, a 30-year-old brother abused, tortured, and killed his 12-year-old sister, who attained menarche, suspecting she had a physical relationship. The two-finger test, which involves inserting two fingers into the vagina of a rape survivor to determine whether the hymen is broken, has recently been declared unconstitutional in India. To obtain jobs, to save the reputation of their family, or to get married, they are forced to undergo virginity tests. To join the military in Indonesia, women must undergo extensive testing. A group of female demonstrators were made to take a virginity test after the 2011 Egyptian revolution by the military. Young ladies' hymens are being examined by doctors in Oslo so that parents may be sure their children are unharmed. Women choose to use different virginity surgeries like revirgination or buy fake hymens filled with artificial blood to ensure bleeding; sometimes they manipulate the situation by pouring fake blood on a sheet after sex, and so on. Girls abstain from certain activities like sports, tampon and menstrual cup use, and premarital sex to ensure that their hymen is intact.

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL VALUE OF WOMEN'S VIRGINITY:

Many studies sought to establish a close link between marriage transactions and the value of virginity. Women's virginity is seen as a commodity. Studies across societies show that men pay high prices for virgin brides. In societies where social practises like bride wealth, streedhan, and dowry are widely prevalent, the virginity of a woman is given utmost importance. It is literally like the groom and his family are not paying for the bride per se but for her "virginity". Cultural practises such as dowry can produce the same effect, but they work with a different logic. Parents who pay dowry to the groom for marriage prefer their daughter to remain a virgin and not get involved in premarital sex. The reason is marital alliances, which are used to maintain or improve their social status. Parents fear the premarital sexual involvement of their daughters with men of a lower social or economic background and getting impregnated, which will only

lead to degradation in their social as well as economic status. By controlling her sexuality, they also control her marriage choices.

The status of being a virgin is connected to the social status and prestige of the family. Loss of virginity and premarital sex are seen as disrespecting a community and staining the prestige of the girl's family. Fearing the consequences of not being virgins, sometimes women repress their sexual desires; they are not allowed to openly express their fantasies, and ultimately, they become alienated from their own bodies. Her sexuality starts dictating the future course of her life. They reflect on what advantages daughters' virginity preservation could provide. They use the dowry to get a son-in-law from a higher social and economic order so that he can contribute to the process of accumulation of wealth and also to ensure that their future generation is economically sound. Sexuality then has an exchange value. By selling the virginity of a woman's virginity, her family members benefit. However, in either case, e.g., receiving bride wealth or giving dowry, women's sexuality is seen in the same light. Cultural practises may vary, but the value placed on women's virginity remains static. As societies evolve, radical shifts can be observed in the attitudes of people towards sexual activities. With the emergence of the institution of private property, the notion of "virginity" gradually started gaining importance. As rightly observed by L. H. Morgan (1877), because of the rise of ideas such as the ownership of property and the line of inheritance, the status of "social father" took a back seat and the status of "biological father" became prominent. Hence, the term virginity gains a new connotation with the evolution of societies from a subsistence economy to a substantial economy.

However, it is not a universal phenomenon, and the reverse can also happen. In some societies, women are forced to get involved in premarital sexual activities to avoid expenses related to the bride's wealth. Xiao Zhou's work on the concept of the "mother's lock" that is prevalent in China best illustrates this phenomenon. This refers to the practise whereby, to encourage her son to have sex with his girlfriend, a mother locks the young couple inside the bedroom (Zhou, 1989). In China, marriage expenses generally fall on the groom and his family. But the amount of wealth that is to be spent on the marriage solely depends on the fact that whether the bride is a virgin or not, the virginity of a man is not considered at all. A simple, non-glamorous wedding is arranged, and the expanses are shared among the bride and groom's family if the bride is not a virgin. Hence, the groom's family makes sure that the woman loses her virginity to their son to cut the marriage expenses. They deliberately use the loss of virginity to achieve an economic end. The sexuality of the women is use to gain bargaining power.

A survey conducted by Sprecher and Regan (1966) on college students over a period of 1990–1995 to explore their point of view on their sexual status—whether they are virgins—discovers many interesting facts. Women had more positive attitudes towards and were less guilty about their virgin status. In the case of men, they were more embarrassed and unhappy about being virgins. Hence, from childhood, girls are socialised in a certain way. It is injected into their minds by their family, neighbours, and elderly people that they are supposed to be shy, submissive, and soft-spoken. They are repeatedly advised and warned to maintain certain distances from their male counterparts, to avoid talking to them, and not to get physical. If

they fail to follow such prescriptions, then they are labelled "bad girls". The term bad girl itself is a value-laden concept. So, society provides moral incentives to be a "woman".

The ritual of "digital defloration" in ancient Jewish society provides another example of the value placed on women's virginity. Many anthropological studies have described such a practise as a kind of virginity test that every woman must go through before entering wedlock. The term digital defloration refers to a practise where a person inserts his or her cloth-wrapped finger into a woman's vagina to rupture the hymen. And then show the blood-stained cloth to the entire group present there. By doing this, the virginity of a woman is verified to her groom without him being sexually involved in it. It is also perceived as an alternative in the case of child brides since their bodies are unsuitable for intercourse. This ritual is performed by either the groom himself on the wedding night or by the woman's father, grandmother, priest, or a professional person. Women never felt bad or embarrassed about this phenomenon since they were made to believe that it was natural. They were manipulated to such an extent that they never even imagined questioning, if not opposing, it. However, no such virginity test existed in Jewish society for male members.

The state-enforced virginity test in Turkey that was struck down only in 2002 had its roots in cultural norms. To assess if a woman is still "a girl," as Turkish doctors refer to a virgin, the test requires physically inspecting a lady's hymen for tears. Although legally, the consent of the concerned woman was required for the test, it was discovered that doctors were unaware of this provision. However, a woman rarely refused to undergo the test because of family pressure and her reputation, since it was assumed that if a woman was not ready for the test, then she must be a non-virgin. In Turkey, it was believed that a non-virgin woman was not eligible for marriage or certain jobs, hurting the core values and collective sentiment of the society. If she does not bleed on her wedding night, then she has to undergo a series of medical tests to prove her chastity. The test was banned after many cases of young girls committing suicide came to light. Even a case of a father conducting a virginity test on his school-going daughter's dead body has been reported.

If we take the cases of both consensual and non-consensual sex, it is always the sexuality of a woman that is given utmost importance and considered valuable. For instance, prostitution is when both a man and a woman are willingly involved in a sexual act, and both contribute sexually to the act. However, a man does not lose prestige and status for his involvement in prostitution. It is the woman who is looked down upon, held accountable, and alienated from society. She is stigmatised and fails to lead a normal life, whereas no such changes can be observed in the life of an involved man. Likewise, in non-consensual sex like rape, it is assumed that the woman is at fault and only her body gets polluted. Her life becomes meaningless, and no matter what she has achieved in life, society no longer accepts her. Unlike men, most women tend to add an emotional component to sexual relationships. They do sex to get love, whereas men love to get sex. Women consider relationship characteristics such as love for a partner as a relevant concern more frequently than men do, which implies that if a loving relationship were absent, women would be more inclined than men to refrain from having sex. Usually, women prefer not to have sex in the absence of an emotional bond with a person and a committed relationship. They even choose to remain virgins their entire lives if they fail to find

the right person. The meaning and purpose of the sexual act tend to change depending on whether it is for men. Men tend to see sexual intercourse as a pleasure-seeking activity. But it is wrong on the part of the woman to assign such a definition to intercourse. She is allowed to get intimate only for two purposes. The first is the maintenance of the family line through reproduction, and another purpose is to fulfil the physical needs of either her intimate partner or male counterpart. Culture controls the sexuality of a woman by providing guidelines on how often and for what purpose she must involve herself in sexual activity if she is allowed to derive pleasure and express her desires openly. She holds a subordinate position, acts as a passive seeker in this matter, and consequently becomes a sexual slave. So, it can be argued that one way to measure the autonomy and freedom of a woman is by knowing how much control she has over her own body and sexuality.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

The basic postulates of sexual economics suggest that heterosexual relationships work just like a marketplace. Sex is something that a woman has, and a man continuously tries to acquire it by offering other resources in exchange. Being married or getting into a relationship with a man means that the man is successful in his attempt to acquire sex. He assumed that he had a monopoly over her body and sexuality. She is treated as a useless, less desirable mate and becomes completely dependent on her partner. Her only marketable item is gone. Hence, women generally have more negotiating power than men before marriage. A woman's power lies in her virginity. A recent study published by a dating app shows that more than 81% of Indian women prefer to remain unmarried and live alone rather than compromise their dreams, needs, and freedom.

"Shame" is already reserved for women. Whatever she does, she always receives negative feedback. They are punished in several ways for violating gender stereotypes, for claiming public places, and for demanding their fundamental and human rights. In the name of preserving culture, the moral policing of women has been carried out systematically. It is only the responsibility of a woman to maintain the social fabric. With the advancement of time, men are allowed to modify and modernise themselves, but this option is not available for women. It is never about teaching the men to behave and to respect, but always about giving the women the advice to cover up and to keep silent.

Women's lives will not get simpler and easier by merely debunking these myths. More fundamental than knowledge of the hymen is understanding where the sexual oppression of women originates. It has its origins in various cultures and religions that attempt to regulate women's instincts and highlight the power dynamics and exchanges related to sex and sexuality within a given society. How sexual relationships, desires, and activities are influenced reflects broader systems of power, such as gender, race, class, etc.

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