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Defined by Both Absence and Presence: Virginity as a Marker of Girlhood

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Dr. Miranda Green-Bartteet

Research Essay

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Defined by Both Absence and Presence:

Virginity as a Marker of Girlhood

Beading ceremonies, age markers, clothing and more, most cultures around the world utilize some signifier (or a collection of them) to represent a girl's transition into womanhood. In much of Western culture, the biggest signifier on the topic is the question of whether or not an individual has engaged in sexual intercourse. The concept of virginity is one that leaves a lot of room for ambiguity. What kind of sexual activity is required for one to 'lose their virginity'? If it is merely penetrative sex, how does this construct still apply to queer individuals? Where do men fall in the virginity discourse? It is worth noting at this point that while I do not personally subscribe to the construct of virginity, the acknowledgement of it as a construction by which most of the world functions is crucial to the analysis and criticism of the constraints it creates for women and girls. The way virginity discourse effects women and girls is multifaceted and extends far beyond the attempt to control women's sexual behaviour. Through reference to scholars from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, this essay will explore the cultural obsession of using virginity as a marker of girlhood or womanhood, and the effect that this has on women and girls.

Historically, virginity has been used as a marker of purity and morality, but neither of these virtues were necessarily strictly about the girl in question. From the second they are born girls sexuality is regulated, "girls' socialization includes practices that are geared to keeping their sexuality dormant" (Sa'ar 8). A sexually active girl has been seen as a liability and a

disappointment to their family. A virgin daughter was proof of her father's effective authority and teaching (Bachai). Proof of a girl's virginity has been required for marriage, employment and social aid (Bachai). In cultures around the world women were once expected to publicly display evidence of having bled on their wedding night (Sa'ar, 7). While it is less widespread, some of these traditions still remain today. From an ideological perspective, it is patrilineal societies that have historically had a larger concern and social value placed upon virginity (Leclerc-Madlala, 18). Talk of virginity has changed over time, but its effects on the lives of women and girls has remained profound.

Grounding the discussion of virginity within a heteronormative context, it is typically believed to be penetrative sex that lends cause to, what many cultures suggest is, a change in identity. All sexual activities that are not penetrative, are rarely taken into account in virginity discourse. The emphasis of virginity is henceforth placed on women and girls, with a particular emphasis on the hymen. Not only is this conventional understanding of masculinity misogynistic, but it is also homophobic. In 2016, an article was published by Medical Daily discussing the topic of virginity. The article, entitled "Virginity Isn't a Real Thing" acknowledged the societal focus on the hymen, but denounced its medical significance saying "A woman's hymen can break without sexual penetration during an intense workout, for example, or while riding a horse. So a woman without a hymen can still be a virgin" (Bachai). Despite this, women around the world "are forced to undergo virginity testing for reasons, including requests from parents or potential partners to establish marriage eligibility or from employers for employment eligibility. Victims of rape are forced to go through the tests to ascertain whether or not rape 'occurred'" (Down to Earth). Vaginal tests are done under the belief that the appearance of female genitalia can reveal how much sexual intercourse a girl or woman has had. These tests can include

inspecting the hymen for evidence of tearing, examining the size of its opening, or inserting fingers into the vaginal opening. On this topic, Dr. Amy Burge is quoted saying “virginity is a paradoxical condition ... defined by both absence and presence [and] counts only when it is thought lost” (quoted in Santos, 26). It is this quote that I drew upon to title this essay, as its imagery truly captured the essence of my struggles with my own sexuality, a key motivator in my research on this subject.

In the case of sexual assault victims specifically, vaginal testing can be particularly traumatic. Vaginal testing on rape survivors is evidence of a societal distrust of women who have disclosed sexual assault. As Ring puts it, “the focus on the hymen meant that the woman’s credibility was bound up with medical validation” (4). It proves that women are believed to be unreliable in their accounts of their own sexual experiences, and that a professional is required to authenticate any such disclosure. Vaginal testing of sexual assault victims “has been shown to be often based on outdated stereotypes about women, including the twin myths that a woman’s previous sexual activity makes her more likely to consent to sexual intercourse and less worthy of belief” (Ring, 3). It is not only the societal distrust of victims that causes issues, the invasive nature of these tests “can cause additional pain and mimic the original act of sexual violence, leading to re-experience, re-traumatization and re-victimization” for survivors of sexual violence (Down to Earth). Studies conducted on the topic of vaginal testing on sexual assault victims have indicated physical and psychological harm on the part of both patients and medical professionals involved. One such study concluded that “in depth interviews of medical professionals who performed virginity testing in Iran revealed that the virginity test resulted in the psychological distress of the examinee” (Olsen). Medical professionals in both Iran and

Turkey disclosed seeing patients writhing in pain, screaming or crying and said that some of their patients had died by suicide following the procedure (Olsen).

In 2018, UN Human Rights, UN Women and the World Health Organization began a movement to end virginity testing around the world (Down to Earth). The effects of virginity however, go far beyond the physical and psychological traumas associated with testing. Today, virginity in Western cultures has gained a sense of youthful desirability. The process of hymenoplasty (or, the surgical reconstruction of the hymen) has become increasingly popular in countries in the Global North (Valenti, 73). The pressures placed upon women by the virginity discourse do not end after they have passed that ‘milestone’ in their life. Rather, the emphasis shifts from loss of virginity to an attempt to get it back. Some women wish to have their hymen reconstructed to recreate a sense of youthful purity in their relationships and thus allow their partner to cause them to ‘lose their virginity’ again (Valenti, 74). These women are not virgins in the traditional sense, as they have engaged in sexual intercourse, but if the focus remains as it has historically on a woman’s hymen, theoretically these women do qualify as virgins in some sense. Women and girls of all ages are forced to navigate the expectations and constraints that chasteness puts upon them.

In the case of sexual violence survivors, the suggestion that forced penetrative sex makes them no longer virgins (and thus no longer girls) is victimizing in itself. The intersection of rape and virginity is one that further complicates this discussion. For example, “many people believe rape and sexual assault aren’t sex — it’s only sex if both partners have consent. So if someone was forced or pressured the first time they had vaginal sex, oral sex, or anal sex, they may not see that as “losing their virginity”” (Planned Parenthood). Insisting that due to loss of virginity, female rape survivors have inherently entered womanhood does not align with other expectations

surrounding the social requirements placed on women. Not only does it remove a woman's agency in self-identification, but it also implies that these women or girls who have forcibly 'lost their virginity' are expected to attain a certain level of responsibility and success, regardless of other circumstances. This discourse systematically marginalizes female victims of sexual assault as it suggests that trauma should lead to maturity.

Virginity discourse goes beyond the suggestion that women and girls should only have sex in certain contexts. In fact, "the virginity code demands that unmarried women should not only remain virgins in body (that is, avoid heterosexual intercourse), but also that their hearts should remain innocent of any romantic attachment and their minds ignorant of information regarding sex" (Sa'ar, 7). With such a long lasting history using virginity as an identity marker, removing it as an idea altogether is not what this essay strives to suggest. Rather, changing the way virginity is discussed and understood is key. The Swedish word for hymen translates as "virginity membrane" which serves to reinforce the idea of a breakable membrane within Swedish culture (Miles, 294). It is linguistic structures such as this one that help to maintain structural imbalances within society. Likewise, there does not exist an English antonym for the word 'virgin'. One who is not a virgin is labeled simply as 'non-virgin'. This lexical gap leads to an othering of women who are no longer virgins and a loss of identity following their first sexual encounter. Changing the language people use to discuss virginity and sexual topics could create positive associations for individuals at all points of virgin-sexually active spectrum. Many people utilize the term 'virgin' to explain their possible lack of experience in the sexual realm. This term should remain free for individuals to use and self-identify with, but it should remain merely a self-label.

Moral panics surrounding female sexuality have manifested in the discussion of virginity. The supposed risks involved with female sexual liberation have been vocalized by parents, doctors, religious and cultural leaders, and politicians. While many reasons have been given throughout about why women should stay virgins, “it is significant that the growth of public interest in virginity is most visibly occurring in countries that are grappling with the management of high rates of HIV and AIDS-related morbidity and death” (Leclerc-Madlala, 18). While some may argue that this interest is merely to help prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, there is a larger issue involved. The focus of female virginity in these contexts places responsibility on women and girls to not spread or contract sexually transmitted illnesses, without placing the same pressure on men and boys. HIV and AIDS propaganda that fixates on virginity is a guise used to regulate and police girls’ and women’s sexuality.

Girls and women are systemically disadvantaged by the emphasis cultures around the world place on the concept of virginity. Without medical evidence to even confirm its value, girls are expected to ensure the maintenance of a fragile vaginal membrane, or risk being doubted in sexual assault disclosure, be unable to access social supports, or even be denied employment. They are forced to undergo painful and invasive testing to prove that their hymen remains intact. The sole responsibility of preventing and reversing an AIDS epidemic is placed on the shoulders of young girls who are exploring their identities. The weight that the virginity construct places on girls and women is so much that women are attempting to regain it after it is ‘lost’. Young females who have engaged in sexual intercourse are expected to have reached a level of success and maturity to be honoured with the label ‘woman’. Older females who have not engaged in penetrative intercourse are infantilized. Virginity as a construct places

unnecessary pressure on girls and women and works as a way to manage and police their sexual experiences.

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