



Sex with the Other: Anxieties and Representations of Gender in Europe during the Refugee Crisis

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v3i6.59>

Abstract

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks witnessed in Paris in November 2015, a radicalisation of the tensions in the matter of asylum seekers and integration has re-emerged. This same anxiety has risen with renewed force just a few weeks later, when newspapers reported that an unspecified number of men of Middle Eastern and North African appearance sexually assaulted a thousand women during the New Year's Eve festivity in Cologne, in what has been eventually described as a mass sex attack. This case has unfolded a new aspect of this particular tension. A general mood of hysteria with reference to a homogeneous and unified Islamic culture, considered incapable of respecting women, has suddenly risen again. Just like Muslim women have suffered for centuries from the male domination in their countries, it has been said, now it was the freedom of the European ones to appear at stake. In this context, the female body has been used as a battleground for claims of modernity, civilisation and power over the Middle Eastern menace in a variety of ways. The present essay provides an account of the use of gender stereotypes and dynamics in the context of recent migration to Europe. It shows how women's bodies are placed in post-colonial political and racial discourses, considering the media as pivotal actors in the construction of a vicious cycle in which the discourse on the female honour gives legitimacy to a growing closure in the dialogue about and with the other.

Keywords: Asylum seekers; integration; body; gender; media

Introduction

At the beginning of March 2016, some news spread over the Internet raised the lively concern of a good portion of the public opinion. Short after the launch of the online platform *Zanzu* (Zanzu, 2015), a project for sex education developed in Germany and available in 12 different languages, some newspapers cried out against what was seen as an obscene attempt to teach refugees how to have sex with German women. Promptly declared in line with recent Angela Merkel's migration policies contemplating a significant opening of the national border to Syrian refugees, the website has been criticised for the displaying of images showing mixed race couples during a sexual intercourse.

Lamentably, this is just one of the numerous cases of misrepresentation within the media apparatus about issues regarding the refugee question. In the aftermath of the incident of New Year's Eve celebration in Cologne, where "dozens of women" declared having been "sexually assaulted and mugged by groups of men largely of Arab and North African appearance" (Connolly, 2016), and very soon after the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris in November 2015, a radicalisation of the tensions in the matter of asylum seekers and integration was to be expected.

What did not strike the attention of the public opinion was, instead, the terms in which women, the victims in question, have been considered and addressed. As some politicians started screaming with renewed force their war cry against the new migration policies, a series of images and cartoons portraying a white female body in the very moment of being violated by a dark-skinned man have spread considerably on the Web and in newspapers (Die Welt, 2016). It is following this pattern that the *Zanzu* argument was raised, its aim misinterpreted, its images carefully selected and used for a definite propaganda. "Here is the manual that shows to refugees how to have sex with European women" (Steinmann, 2016) and "'How to have sex with European women': pornographic manual for migrants" (Liberio Quotidiano, 2016) are just a few of the headings that stood out in some Italian newspapers, the same picture displayed over and over again. A theme that recurs continuously: a white-skinned, blond woman copulating with a dark-skinned man, which eventually turns into Angela Merkel and a man wearing an Ottoman *tarbush*, in a Twitter post of the Italian cartoonist Alfio Krancic (Krancic, Tweet, March 8, 2016).

The feminine body is the protagonist of this unfortunate sequence of events, as it is of this paper. Continuously exhibited and advertised, unrelentingly exposed and denuded in magazines, commercials, and television shows, its image permeates our daily life and shapes the way we think about it. In times of social tensions and cultural conflicts, the discourse about the female body has been proved to be also extremely useful in serving definite political agendas (Kandiyoti, 1992; Parla, 2001; Zayzafoon, 2005). It has become a powerful symbolic tool representing the "mother nation" (Yuval-Davis, 1998, p.29), values and traditions of one's own country, and something that has to be preserved from external threats. Once it has been charged with these important meanings and values, it is used again as a mere and ruthless visual instrument, whose aim is to solicit the anger and anxieties of the masculine counterpart. On a further step, the body of the *European woman* is counterposed to the one of the veiled *Muslim woman*, in a play of contrasts that recalls concepts of modernity and tradition, liberation and subjugation, civilisation and barbarity respectively (Abu-Lughod, 2001).

The present study argues that the feminine body is involved in a hegemonic political discourse that shapes, transmits and normalise the very idea we have of it. It will not focalise on issues regarding feminism and gender specifically in the MENA region, because its aim is to show the impact that representations about woman has in conditioning the relationships between Europe and the Middle East. Through the discourse over the body, in fact, modern media are fomenting the idea of the existence of a *Western* and an *Oriental/Islamic culture*, which are perceived as "monoliths" opposing each other (Iftikhar Haider, 2004, p.15).

In order to elucidate how representations of gender become the battleground where these ideological entities set up their contention in the more subtle, yet effective way, this essay will firstly explore the relation that exists between nation/nationalism and woman in a variety of political discourses. It will then discuss the recent phenomenon of migration to Europe as it is nowadays the most strikingly representative context where pretensions related to gender and identity are violently triggered.

Birth of the Nation

In her analyses of the politics of reproduction among Palestinians in the Galilee, Rhoda Kanaaneh invests motherhood with a strong political significance. “Through reproduction Palestinians today navigate the vast, diverse, and interrelated terrains of nationalism” (2002, p.251). In a situation of struggle and territorial dislocation such as the Palestinian conflict, in fact, being able to give birth to a considerable amount of children meant to “beat Israelis”, both demographically and in terms of human force (Yuval-Davis, 1989, p.96).

In the framework of the anthropological research about the meaning of national identity, citizenship, and cultural boundaries, feminist scholars and those members of the academia whose work has focused on Gender Studies have provided a significant contribution. Yuval-Davis has stressed the primacy of the woman over official state apparatuses as the biological, cultural, and symbolical producer of the nation (1998, p.23), and has highlighted the “burden of representation” that this entails, both in Europe and in the Middle East (1998, p.29). Being, in fact, the depositary of food practices and traditions, as well as the one in charge of socialising the young (Kandiyoti, 1992), the woman has often been connected to ideals of citizenry, identity and honour (Parla, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 1998).

However, Connell has recognised “the existence of a world gender order”, where “very large-scale institutions such as state and corporations”, as well as “international relations, international trade and global markets”, are dominated by definite political discourses ascribed to masculine power hegemonies (Connell, 2002, p.xxi). In this context, institutions such as family, religion, and the school are also playing a relevant role as “ideological state apparatuses”, as demonstrated by Althusser (2008, p.22), who nevertheless does not fully grasp their gendered nature.

Basing on these premises, it seems that we have come to an ambiguous state of things, where two opposed realities face one another: on the one hand, symbolic representations of national identities are female-gendered; on the other hand, the structural, functional, and political basis of the same are male-gendered. The aim of this study is to reveal these precise hegemonic structures, both in Europe and in the MENA region, as well as in that intersectional frame of cultures which is the diaspora experience.

Silent Dominions

A sick woman is laying on a bed, her face is tired, her eyes almost closed. Beside her, two respectable male figures wearing Western clothes are looking to each other. A caption bears the script: “Prepare for her this medicine and she will be cured, God willing!” On a piece of paper, one of the two men is writing: “A respectable National Parliament... A fully responsible Ministry” (Zayzafoon, 2005, pp.109-110).

A different image displays a man and a woman facing each other, their figures separated by the logo of a famous fashion brand. The man, on the right-hand side, is wearing a fine jacket and a shirt, his head is bent to the newspaper he is reading. On the opposite side, the woman, wearing nothing but a pair of high heels, is ironing his trousers, her sensual face turned towards him (D La Repubblica, 2016). The illustrations introduced above portray two different, yet close realities. The first is a cartoon published in the satirical newspaper *Al Shabaab* during the Tunisian nationalist movement. Even if the picture was published in 1936, the metaphors that it conveys are still actual and illuminating: the Tunisian nation - a woman - is portrayed as a weak and extremely passive figure who needs to be assisted by two wise and respectable male characters. The adequate cure, in this context, is not a medicine, but the

prescription suggests the young woman to trust in the National Parliament - in this case, a strictly male institution.

The second picture is an advertisement broadcasted in Ancona, Italy, in 2014. Although the historical periods and geographical places are far from each other, these visual hints are part of a homogeneous ideological thread that depicts women as submissive figures relegated to the domain of the private: the bedroom in one illustration, the domestic duties in the other. On the one hand, the woman represents everything that has to be cured, saved and protected by external aggressions; on the other hand, she embodies sexuality and the erotic - still under male supervision.

Underestimating representations of gender and body conveyed through media apparatuses such as these, both in their old and modern style, means failing to grasp the power of the circulation of “gender meanings” (Connell, 2005, p.xiii). Woman’s sexuality, in particular, has proved to be crucial as “contested site of cultural and social politics” (Khater, 2006, p.86), and something that has to be controlled in order to prevent it from undermining the social order (Abu-Lughod, 1999). Modesty, honour and, to some extent, chastity, are here part and parcel of a complex code aimed at restraining “improper and disorderly behaviour that threatens the sociomoral order” (El Guindi, 1999, p.31), so that the “dominant relations of production”, to use again Althusser’s words, can be perpetuated (McDonough and Harrison, 2013, p.12). In her primary role of producer of the collectivity, in fact, the woman carries the burden of biologic and cultural continuity, as well as the power of continuously negotiating the social boundaries (Kandiyoti, 1992).

As a consequence, male-gendered institutions have established systems of norms controlling marriage, fertility, and reproduction. Laws regulating citizenship in the Arab Emirates (Dresch, 2005), the prohibition until recent times of mixed marriages in South Africa (Kandiyoti, 1992), and forced sterilisations perpetrated on Ethiopian women in Israel (Yardai, 2012), are just a few examples of how the female body is subject to a repressive regulation against what is seen as a national threat: the foreigner. If, in this context, “the national is often the means by which exclusion takes place” (El Tayeb, 2011, p.xx), what happens when a country opens its borders to refugees?

Shifting Representations

The morning of January 5, 2016, Europe woke up in turmoil. The word “attack” was printed again in the newspapers, just two months after the Paris terrorist action in November 2015. This time, however, no ISIS combatant claimed his responsibility, no weapon has been used. The news reported an unspecified number of men- “between 500 and 1,000” of “Middle Eastern and North African appearance” (Connolly, 2016) - sexually assaulted an equal number of women during the New Year’s Eve festivity in Cologne (Richards, 2016). This episode has been eventually described as “a mass sex attack”, an event “of unseen proportions” (Internazionale, 2016). Soon after, newspapers reported similar crimes in other European countries, from Norway to Switzerland, suggesting the existence of a previous organisation for such event to be held at the same moment, as a new strategy of terrorism (Wyke and Akbar, 2016).

This case has reopened a most lively debate about the refugee question, whether to receive or not new migrants coming from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, and Angela Merkel’s new migration policies. Newspapers and magazines have reported the political controversies of European and American politicians, as well as the opinion of psychologists and intellectuals. While slogans such as “Rape-fugees not welcome” marched on top of bans and posters in street gatherings and manifestations (Shammas, 2016), other slogans figured on columns and journalistic commentaries providing information about the “Arabic culture”. “People in the West are discovering, with anxiety and fear, that sex in the Muslim world is sick, and that the disease is spreading to their own lands” was the closing phrase of the Algerian writer

Kamel Daoud, in a piece published in *The New York Times* which was called “The Sexual Misery of the Arab World” (2016).

What has emerged is a general mood of hysteria and anxiety with reference to a homogeneous and unified Islamic culture, considered incapable of respecting women and continuously trying to subjugate them. Just like Muslim women have suffered for centuries from the male domination in their countries, it has been said, now it was the freedom of the European ones to appear at stake. As a consequence, a particular discourse counterposing these two female characters has emerged.

On one side, what Flaubert used to call the “Oriental woman” (Said, 2003, p.7) - a lascivious and lustful creature relegated to the domain of the *harem*, and incarnating the licentiousness and at the same time the weakness of a world that had to be “penetrated”, conquered and civilized for its own sake (Zayzafoon, 2005, p.4) - has disappeared. An entirely different representation of the Muslim woman has come forward presenting a repressed and passive figure, her face and body completely covered by a veil symbolising her condemn to a life of domestic seclusion.

On the other side, the Western woman is elevated as the ensign of modernity, civilisation, and freedom. Her agency and independence, which have been compared by an Italian journalist to the possibility of going to the theatre and having a drink at the bar (Battista, 2016), is raised as symbol of the empowerment gained over the years; her self-confidence is the boast of magazines covers, advertisements and fashion shows, where her often almost uncovered body has become the emblem of emancipation. That same white body has been displayed on top of boards and banners, naked and violated by the “dark-skinned man”, just next to an image where a black hand reaches the German chancellor between her legs, in some demonstration parades (Lalami, 2016). That same white body, covered with a stole resembling the European Union flag, has been grabbed and undressed by the same dark hands, in the cover of a Polish newspaper bearing the script: “The Islamic rape of Europe” (Tomlinson, 2016).

Some days after this media turmoil, the German police withdrew the information spread in the first public statements, announcing that 60 percent of the aggressions were not sexual attacks, and highlighting one case of rape. Moreover, the prosecutor Ulrich Bremer has revealed the identity of the perpetrators, which were said to be 25 Algerian men, 21 Moroccan, three Tunisian, three German, two Syrian and one Iraqi (Flade, 2006). In the same instance, Bremer has asserted that the majority of the prosecuted belonged to the category of “refugees” (Jean, 2016). This statement intensified the general misunderstanding of the situation, showing at the same time the prevalent tendency through which “various generations of a particular ethnicity are grouped together, while similarities between populations of different backgrounds are neglected” (El Tayeb, 2011, p.xxi).

The British Association Ethical Journalism Network has denounced the way newspapers have reported information concerning migration issues and the refugee question, and has accused journalists to be “following an agenda dominated by loose language and talk of invasion and swarms” (EJN, 2015). When deciding to narrate stories like this, and omitting or giving less space to events such as the sexual assaults committed by German men in the same city just four weeks after, some media are choosing to foment a precise debate both in the public opinion and in the political arena.

Few newspapers, in fact, have broadcasted the 134 people bodily harmed, the 30 robbed, the 22 sexually women assaulted and the girl raped by a group of 190 men which have been declared to be “a cross-section of the general public” (Sinclair, 2016), during the carnival celebration in Cologne. Also the video showing a drunk German boy harassing a journalist during a report in the same instance has been vastly ignored (The Incredible World, YouTube Video, February 5, 2016).

What instead has raised the concern of a good part of the media has been the launch of *Zanzu*, a project for sexual health patronised by the Flemish Expertise Centre for Sexual Health (Sensoa) and the

German Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA). This online platform has been tailored to the needs of a multicultural society, as demonstrated by its availability in 12 languages: among them, Arabic and Turkish, but also French and Dutch are present. It tackles themes such as “rights and laws”, but also “homosexuality” and “same-sex marriage” (Zanzu, 2015); for this reason, some explicatory pictures show couples of the same sex, but also mixed-race couples.

Although the project was created in 2015, the *Zanzu* media case has emerged just in March 2016, creating a debate of considerable proportion. On one hand, some journalists have thought that the availability of languages such as Arabic, Farsi and Turkish could have been a convincing pretext to affirm that the website had been designed exclusively for refugees (20Minutes, 2016), and as a consequence of the assaults in Cologne (Charter, 2016). In this context, *Zanzu* has been presented as a tool that the German government had created in order to teach refugees that “honour-based violence and sexual violence are forbidden by law” (Steinmann, 2016).

On the other hand, the question has been manipulated by some politicians, such as the Italian Leader of the Lega Nord party and Member of Parliament Matteo Salvini, who has commented: “These are technical tests for a planned invasion” (Matteo Salvini, Facebook post, March 8, 2016).

Conclusion

In his work “Sexuality and honour amongst Lebanese emigrants”, Khater examines the social turmoil resulting from the mass migration of Lebanese women to the United States during the Thirties (Khater, 2006). According to the local newspapers, these workers represented a dishonour for both the Lebanese and the American society, for whom the economic independence of women was made equal to sexual freedom and a “filthy behaviour” (Khater, 2006, p.89).

The case study proposed in this essay can be considered a sort of photographic negative of the experience recounted by Khater. The recent refugee crisis has been in fact a context in which the discourse over women’s honour has been raised again, and with increased force. In particular, the arrival of a consistent mass of young male refugees, representing the 45 percent of the whole migrant population against a small 20 percent composed by women (UNHCR, 2016), has exacerbated this particular tension. If “cultural identity”, as Harrow has suggested, “emerges from ‘contestation’, from setting oneself against another” (Zayzafoon, 2005, p.183), this crisis has turned on a series of fears and anxieties that are connected with the very essence of the European hegemonic stability. In a Europe “obsessed with porous borders, uncontrollable migration, falling birth-rates, the terrorist threat, economic decline, neoliberal impotence and political disarray” (Bocchetti, 2016), the sexual assaults experienced in Cologne have been seen as the ultimate and most subtle threat coming from a foreign and feared world.

This essay has tried to examine the means in which gender has been used in the attempt of reacting to this threat. Following De Lauretis’ assumption that “gender is a ‘representation’ or a ‘construction’ that is produced and reproduced by various discourses” (Zayzafoon, 2005, p.66), the female body has been produced and vastly broadcasted in the attempt of spread a representation of the European woman that could express the Western superiority over the Islamic culture.

Such an endeavour of using the woman’s body as a battleground for claims of modernity, civilisation and power over the Middle Eastern menace also shows some ambiguities. The way in which the female European body has been displayed and used for the aims of these ideological purposes is pervaded by a diffuse and profound eroticism, as we have clearly seen from the examples that have been illustrated in the aftermath of the Cologne attacks. The image of the woman that is here conveyed, in fact, is not able to instil in the European female citizens a sense of national pride and self-esteem; on the

contrary, it continuously reminds them that a threat to their sexual, personal, and collective honour is always present and capable of dehumanizing them.

In this discourse, the erotic, fundamental resource for the woman as producer of the nation, has been distorted and used against her: “on the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority” (Lorde, 1984, p.88); on the other hand, it has been used as a pretext to control women and “protect” them from external menaces.

As in Khater’s example “sexuality was very instrumental in shaping the power struggles and relations along the lines of gender, class, and ethnicity” (Khater, 2006, p.93), also here ethnic and racial conflicts are configuring “a fruitful context for producing masculinities oriented towards domination and violence” (Connell, 2005, p.xxii). This dynamic has created a vicious cycle in which the discourse on the female body and honour gives legitimacy to a growing closure in the dialogue about and with the other. As a consequence, “stereotypical views on male and female migrants can lead to discriminatory policies and misleading accounts of migration” (Carling, 2005, p.3), which again entails the control over the woman.

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