Rape and the Loss of Agency

Two curiously similar reactions to violence against Muslim women appeared in the summer of 2004, although they originated in markedly different contexts. In Europe the late Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, released Submission, a film written and narrated by Somali born Dutch parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Submission narrates the stories of four Muslim women’s encounters with different acts of violence. At nearly the same time Saudi Arabian society was shocked by the film of an actual rape of a young Muslim woman. The crime was filmed by the “director’s” mobile camera-phone to publicly dishonour the victim and it circulated via the Kingdom’s mobile phone network.1 Submission evokes the impression that its primary aim in commenting on acts of violence against Muslim women is to expose the “evil” character of a religious culture that perpetuates and condones these acts, and to, thereby, imply that western culture and values are superior. In Saudi Arabia the societal response to the “reality” rape film was not, as one might expect, to provoke self-reflexivity and criticize that part of itself which produced the crime, but rather to launch a counterattack on the imported “other,” the camera phone. This piece of technology was largely accused as being the culprit for infiltrating the traditionally sealed personal spheres and exposing its women to public viewing, thereby bypassing the watchful eyes of the guardians of morality. In response to the shocking crime, the Saudi government reinforced a ban on the sales of camera phones, arguing in a sense that the “evil” that needed to be combated was the imported technology.

Though originating from different situations and seemingly pursuing different ends, both “western” and “eastern” commentary on crimes of violence against Muslim women employed strikingly similar strategies, motifs, and symbols. Grounded in a standard modern rhetoric on rape and crimes of sexual assault against women which views women as victims without any agency, the two fail to address the “criminality” of the crimes. Both look at the “other” as the primary force behind acts of violence and do not search within themselves for culpability or for agency from within the perpetrators. These responses to acts of violence therefore beg the question: To what extent is the discourse on rape part of the problem of violence against women?

Mobilizing cyberspace

Two Saudi and heavily Wahhabi toned websites, “shaytan link,” posted on Islamweb (al-Shabakah al-Islamiyyah), and Hamlat al-milyun ddi al-radhila (“The Campaign of the One Million against Vice”), posted on the youth targeting Nabd al-Wafa’ (Heartbeat of Loyalty), have expressly adopted the cause of “the protection of Saudi society.” More to the point, they warn about how the camera phone, which they argue intrudes into the private sphere of the female domain, is used as a means to seduce and corrupt young women. The message of both websites resonates with the standard rhetoric on one which also resided in Submission. The first depicts the would-be rape victim as a girl who is well protected in her oyster shell. Perceiving her shelter as a prison and beset with boredom, she becomes susceptible to the “whisperings” of her mobile callees, suitably called “shaytan-link” (“devil-link”), about a “world out there” without fully realizing its danger. She is lured by his promises into a man’s den where he gorgeously crushes her shell.2 In this way, the would-be victims are stereotyped as innocent beings who naively succumb to the guiles and promises of love and agree to leave their protective shells to meet the very demons who will violate their virtue.

On its campaign against “vice” page, Nabd al-Wafa’ presents the picture of the culprit, the camera phone, and displays a recording of an excited exchange between young males talking about their latest exploits which include sending and receiving photos of stealthily photographed women, and sexually explicit clips. The web-page offers tapes of a sermon recorded by Wahhabi Shaykh al-Munajjid against this vice (which can be obtained for one riyal through the site), banners expounding virtue, an online chat-group that exchanges moral lessons, and a variety of spam messages that anti-mobile zealots may send out in order to clog the inboxes of mobiles spreading the message that condemns the free exchange of words and images between men and women.3 The messages refer to a fatwa (available on the same website) which states that men or women who have “foreign” (i.e., unrelated) persons of the opposite sex listed on their mobile address book and communicate with them are committing a haram (forbidden) act (since their “virtual” clandestine meeting may end in illicit sexual encounters).

Virtual public and private space

Cyberspace, as represented by these websites, is both public and private. It provides “virtual” Mahlah (secluded space), where men and women can meet in encounters which are otherwise forbidden. Yet, the same space is also considered by Wahhabi religious leaders as “public” space. The implication being that this space must be surveyed and guarded so that virtuous Muslims, male or female, are not tempted to break the laws of hayya’ (modesty) through their virtual travelling on the global communication networks. Innocent guileless Muslim women should not be left free to move/travel in cyberspace without a mahram (male consort). Those who travel unattended, even virtually, are asking for trouble and must have a licentious intent. The victim of sexual assault is thereby complicit in the crime against her. Similarly, the voice that narrates the story of the raped girl in Submission contains the suggestion that she is the not completely unwilling victim of her rapist’s sexual advances.

In public debates the two lifestyles, “Middle Eastern” and “Western,” are presented as binary opposites of virtue and vice. The possibility that crimes of sexual assault could originate from one’s own society or culture is, thereby, safely excluded.

The dominant narrative dealing with crimes of violence against Muslim women in both the Europe and the Middle East employs strikingly similar strategies, motifs, and symbols, especially when it comes to the issue of rape. Such similarities beg the question: To what extent is the discourse on rape part of the problem of acts of violence against women?
Loss of agency

Searching through the fatwas and ištaharat (consultations)-sections of the above website a coherent and standardized discourse on rape and violence against women emerges. The Islamic cyber-discourse which denounces crimes of violence against women by putting the main blame, not on the actual perpetrator, but on the technological instrument used to broadcast it, has curious points of contact and similarity with its western counterpart, as represented by Submission. Both are characterized by the shift of agency away from the male assaulter and by its substitution through other forces. On Nabd al-Wafa’ the demonized camera phone is itself both the medium of disclosing the assault and the evil force behind it. And while the voice-over by the now notorious Hirshi Ali in Submission tells of the tragic abuse of (certain) women by (certain) men, the message is conveyed that rape and sexual assault “happen” through some abstract agency called “evil.” If the culprit is in one case a religion, here, Islam, or, in the other, a technological gadget, here, a mobile phone, in neither case are the actual perpetrators of the act called to responsibility and condemned outright. Even seemingly good-willed attempts to understand and to explain such violence seek answers only in the women. They find fault with their way of dressing, their voice, their intrusion into public space. All insinuate, thereby, that the victims were “asking for it.”

The standard discourse on rape treats sexual acts of violence almost exclusively as a gender issue. In the cyber debates surrounding the Saudi Arabia case, men are more condemned for giving in to the friolleries of a carefree “western lifestyle” and forgetting the sharia than for instigating acts of violence. One posting on Nabd al-Wafa’ shows a video clip that reminds a youth of death and depicts graphic scenes of “his” burial interspersed with flashbacks of a wasted life spent in typical “western-style” playing billiards and socializing with friends. The lyrics that accompany the images ask him to repent from a life of waste before death visits him. In the final scene, reminiscent of Submission, though with different intent, the young man, now dressed in tradition- al Saudi dress, repentantly stands on a prayer carpet raising his hands in supplication.

The male’s vice thus construed consists in having succumbed to the temptations of a western lifestyle whose permissiveness and frivolity implicitly identify it as the life of the sinful “other” which invites rape and sexual assault. In public debates the two lifestyles, “Middle Eastern” and “Western,” are presented as binary opposites of virtue and vice. The possibility that crimes of sexual assault could originate from one’s own society or culture is, thereby, safely excluded. Sexual violence is effec- tively confined and exiled, that is, placed beyond a cultural divide. And, as if that is not far and safe enough, another barrier is erected, the bar- rier of old age. Older married men, well established in the society, are presented as being well beyond committing such crimes. The problem, then, is presented as one of decadent youth culture.

Finally, the very character of the assault, that is, its criminality, is hardly ever dealt with. The fact that there is a crime committed, no matter what, and that the perpetrators could be held responsible for it as they would be for crimes of theft or murder does not seem to enter into the account. None of the religious voices consulted on these websites search in the men for motives for a calculated act of aggression. Even though the men who committed the above rape were punished by law and received jail sentences, the discourse remains centred around the corruptive forces of western technology. The men are guilty of having forgotten Allah, or not having protected themselves sufficiently against temptation by marrying. The guilt is not located within the agent of the crime, just as in the narrative rhetoric of Submission it is displaced. Curiously, the discourse on rape focuses on the women and remains fixedated on them.

Opaque transparency

The traditional Islamic juristic understanding which defines rape as a crime of assault and banditry, i.e. one that “relies on terror and the helplessness of its victim to achieve its illegal objective,” is completely absent from the contemporary discourse on rape. Muslim jurists have almost all recognized certain forms of sexual assault as “crimes of ter- ror” or “forms of terrorism,” some even arguing that the crime of rape “deserves the worst possible penalty” holding that “those who use threat of harm or terrorize their victims in order to commit rape are bandits as well;” thus unequivocally defining crimes of sexual assault as perpetrated by male agent(s) that reflect on his/their character. Modern Islamic discourse addresses crimes of rape and sexual assault almost exclusively on a “moral” level. Its distinctive moralizing tone suggests that matters could be resolved if only lessons are learnt. It advises young men to seek the virtuous life in marriage, to resist the temptations of western lifestyle, and to turn to their faith; while girls must learn to act in ways that do not expose them to assault; they must don the veil, walk and talk modestly, and preferably, stay at home. If they deviate from the proper code of behaviour then, they are warned, they finally will have to pay the price. The moral battle against import- ed vice can be won only if youth abide by “virtuous life” guidelines. The western discourse of Submission is also driven by moralizing idealism: Islam is “bad” for women and therefore, violence against them could disappear, if Muslim women (men as well?) were to only forsake their dark faith and take a western enlightened stance.

This modern discourse does not allow any real insights to the growing prevalence of such gen- dered violence. How should that be possible, when they are not even looked upon as crimes of intent with full agency ascribed to those who perpetrate them? Whether issuing from “Western” or “Islamic” sources, it is lacking in depth, or in any real concern. It is as if this way of dealing with violent acts of undressing and assault is mainly motivated by the need to re-cover as quickly as possible, instead of truly opening the matter in a self-reflexive manner.

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Notes
1. For a more detailed analysis of this film and the cultural debate it triggered see Moors, “Submission,” ISIM Review, no. 15 (Spring 2005).