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## Bleeding cuts, magical spells, sealed hymens: A study of the rite of *Tasfih* in Algeria

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BLEEDING CUTS, MAGICAL SPELLS, SEALED HYMENS: A STUDY OF THE  
RITE OF *TASFIH* IN ALGERIA

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Ahlam Laouar  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2020

## ABSTRACT

The Algerian society attributes great importance to female virginity and, as such, people go to great lengths in order to protect it. One of the methods used to protect female virginity is the practice of *Tasfih*. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the rite of *Tasfih* as practiced by Algerian women. This study includes discussions of how this practice came into existence and the ways in which it is done. It also examines the relationship between female sexuality and family honor.

Before interviewing women about the ritual, I explore the current literature on *Tasfih*, female sexuality, and family honor to find out where I can position my research while producing new knowledge. While the literature on female sexuality in the Arab world is abundant, very few sources focus on Algeria specifically. Scholarly work on women in Algeria focuses on exploring patriarchal mechanisms used to control women such as veiling practices, polygamy, the Family Code...etc. My research focuses on how women themselves are active participants in upholding cultural practices that contribute to their own suppression.

After reviewing the current literature, I use narrative inquiry to gather new data. I conducted 11 interviews, 10 Algerian women and one man, of different ages. Using thematic analysis, five themes emerged: a) a detailed description of how *Tasfih* is practiced and why women engage in it, b) the lack of participation from men in the practice, c) family and honor, and how they are related to the female body, d) mother-daughter relationship, and d) how the language used in the narratives denotes lack of self-agency.

The study concludes with a discussion of the thematic analysis by answering the research questions and pinpointing the limitations of the study. The analysis offers a description of how *Tasfih* is practiced, its primary purposes, and how it relates to female virginity and family honor. Although this study answers the research questions, it creates more space for future research on *Tasfih*.

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This Study by: Ahlam Laouar

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Algeria

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

DEDICATION

*To the women of Algeria: You are strong, you are independent, you are capable.*



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First and foremost, I would like to thank my family, who has always believed in me, supported and encouraged my quests.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It was in New York, December 2018 where I first came to think critically about the issue of virginity as conceived by Arabs. I was in the subway with another Algerian woman, Sidra, who comes from the south of Algeria (I used to live in the North). We were talking about life in the United States, sharing our observations and trying to understand and draw lines between the two societies, as we both were new to the country. One story leading to another, she mentioned that she was facing troubles with her menstrual cycle since the day she got here. She had been to several doctors but they could not provide a reason for her abnormal periods. She would have periods where she would menstruate heavily for months and it was affecting her academic performance.

During the same meeting, I learned about the rite of *Tasfih*, which she participated in as a child. *Tasfih* is a magical practice exercised by an old woman who is experienced in it. The woman throws a magical spell around a girl's thighs near her genitals while asking the girl to repeat a phrase after her and to perform some actions. In doing so, it is believed that the hymen becomes unbreachable. This practice is performed before the girl hits the age of puberty and it ensures preserving her virginity until marriage. After learning of this practice, I became curious to learn more. However, there is very little published on *Tasfih*. And that is how this study emerged. This project explores *Tasfih* in order to learn *what it is and what its purposes are*.

One thing Sidra said after I talked to her when she came back from her trip to Algeria in summer made me pause. She said: "I wanted to get rid of that spell when I

went back to Algeria in summer because I believe it was the reason for the turbulent flow of my period, but I was afraid my family would start thinking, ‘Why does she want to unlock herself now that she is in the U.S?’” The same ideas circled my mind: what about her family’s honor? her parents’ trust? What would society say about her? These questions called for a more comprehensive research on this societal phenomenon.

The current scholarship on women in Arab countries in relation to Islam is limited to speaking about women’s veil, their lack of freedom, female genital mutilation (FGM) and polygamy. What academia lacks is a discussion on how women themselves now participate in the patriarchal system’s control over their bodies, and therefore their sexuality. Ironically, because women were prohibited from enjoying their bodies and embracing their sexuality (any explicit discussion of sex is considered taboo) some women have internalized the prohibition of embracing one’s sexuality as a norm. Nowadays, women have become agents for the institution of patriarchy, whether with the intention of protecting their daughters against the brutality of society or to comply with the patriarchal mechanisms. The rite of “*Tasfih*” is a concrete example of a practice done by and for women which serves to uphold patriarchal views of female sexuality. Studying the ritual from this angle will clarify how Algerian women see themselves in light of their bodies and sexuality. *How then does Tasfih protect female virginity?*

In the chapter, “The Very Fine Membrane Called ‘Honor,’” Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi (2015) described the importance of the hymen to Arabs as “one of the most essential, if not *the* most essential, part of [a girl’s] body” (p. 51). Arabs would not grieve at the loss of an eye or an arm as much as they would for the loss of a hymen. As

such, a girl who fails at protecting and preserving her virginity before marriage is prone to beating, death, or divorce. The latter could be the worst as it is often accompanied by a scandal that threatens family honor. Premarital virginity that is imposed on girls only is a product of the patriarchal Arab society which links the honor of a family, and at times of a society, to female virginity. It is seen as a moral rule that is related to girls only. One wonders: *How do sexual standards contribute to perceptions of female virginity and result in embracing Tasfiḥ in Algeria and how are these standards performed in Tasfiḥ?*

A non-virgin girl is in the eyes of the Arab society unmarriageable, degenerate, void of virtue and chastity. Such beliefs are so difficult to eradicate because they are the product of what Mona Eltahawy (2015) called “toxic mix of culture and religion” (p. 126). No Quranic verse mentions Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and, yet, most Arab countries, which are Muslim-majority countries, practice it as a religious commandment. On the contrary, a number of passages from the Quran endorse female sexual pleasure. It is therefore cultural misconceptions and beliefs carried out by the patriarchal system that render practices like these seen as religious ones. Female sexuality, menstruation, the female body and genitalia are all considered taboo in the Arab societies although they were mentioned several times in Quran and in no immoral way. Although Muslims believe and follow the Quran, when it comes to women, most of them disregard it because they believe that once women are given the freedom to embrace and enjoy their sexuality, they will rebel, hence threaten men’s masculinity (Charrad, 2001).

Women in Algeria experience the same fate as that of their sisters in other Arab countries. Exposure to FGM is less in Algeria than in other Arab countries but the

suppression of female sexuality remains. Immersing myself in a Western culture while growing up in Algeria has had an impact on the way I perceived gender interactions in my society. Thanks to my critical theory background, I was able to observe and analyze individuals' behaviors in a different way than that of other people and most importantly question the credibility of the normative social order. After spending two years at university studying literary theory, I came to the conclusion that many Algerian women, including my mother and sisters, have internalized their inferiority to men and the oppression they are exposed to as a reality that cannot be changed. A reality which they believe stems from Quranic verses interpreted by male scholars.

As an Algerian, I grew up feeding on the belief that men are superior, women are inferior, and that I am weak and nonexistent without a man. I grew up learning that what a girl should aspire to is a good husband that would shelter her rather than a good education that would grant her a job, thus an individualistic life. I used to wonder why is it that although we girls fall on the bottom of the social hierarchy, we are seen as carriers of our families' honor. I remember that look on my mother and sisters' faces whenever we hear about a girl who was raped. That look that pities the poor girl's family whose honor is erased; that wretched girl who is now unmarriageable, whose life has come to an end. *Why is female virginity that important in my country?*

My body was never mine. I was never allowed to explore it. My "private parts" were to remain private forever. They were not mine to explore. I was not allowed to touch myself and was taught it is disgraceful to do so. I was told that it is only *bitches* who do that. My body was to belong to my husband who would have access to every inch

of it. To this day, I feel alienated from my body. I have always hated my vagina, believing that it is the ugliest part of my body. I am not alone in Algeria. We despise our genitalia, genitals are a source of shame, a part of the body not to be explored, except by your husband.

I never questioned why. I never asked my mother why it is forbidden and shameful to touch my privates. She made it clear through a stern gaze. For twenty-five years, I believed that my sexuality was something to be feared. I never knew why, nobody told me why. I learned eventually that nobody will answer that question and that if I wanted an answer, I should do my part. This project is a step towards exploring myself, my body, my society and towards answering decades of unanswered questions. Specifically, *why do mothers refuse to educate their daughters on their sexuality?*

My brothers were more privileged than me and my sisters since the day I was born. I never thought of it as a privilege, I always thought it was the normal way gender roles are perceived. But the older I grew and the worse my situation as a girl got, the more I started to think about the *why*. *Why* is it so? *Why* is it that my brothers can go out at night and I could not? *Why* is it that my brothers spend most of their days outside while I have to remain cloistered doing household chores? *Why* do I have to respect them while they do not? *Why* do I need protection? *Why* am I hated for not being a boy? These and many other questions were ones I knew no one would answer for me. So I sought to answer them myself.

My parents' preference of my brothers fueled anger in me. I could understand my father, but I had no justification for my mother's attitude. The *why* question kept coming



back stronger and more flammable every time, begging for an answer. It was comforting knowing that I was not alone. Knowing that my fate resembles that of many other girls around me calmed me some. Knowing that male superiority surpasses the private dwelling to reach the public space was relieving. It was not just me, it was all of us; women of Algeria. Realizing that has given me strength to move forward with my observations and analyses of our situation. I was knowledgeable enough to know that that is not how society should function. But knowledge for knowledge's sake is not enough. Giving voice to that knowledge and spreading it out to the public is my main concern. This project is the product of years of unvoiced, and forcibly suppressed reflections on the many gender injustices lived in the Algerian society. My story matters, the stories of women I interview matter, and your story matters for “Injustice practiced somewhere is a threat to justice practiced everywhere” (King, Jr.). *How does women's knowledge or lack thereof about their sexuality encourage practices like Tasfih?*

Delving into this study was challenging on different levels, above all, it resulted in me taking a very tough decision that I have never thought I would take. Contained in the following pages are some of the very sensitive topics that an Algerian Muslim girl rarely disclose. Research tackling the state of women in Arab Muslim countries are abundant, yet inadequate. I position my voice amongst those researchers with a hope for rectifying that inadequacy through bringing new aspects from lived experiences into the academic discussion. Chapter 2 presents a thorough review of the literature related to suppressing female sexuality, virginity, chastity and the rite of *Tasfih* as a way of preserving them. I explore the concept of female sexuality in the Arab world from an

Algerian perspective by offering an explanation of the concept of virginity as perceived by Arabs, but with a focus on Algeria. Then, I define the rite of *Tasfih* and discuss the history of its occurrence. Defining the ritual paves the way for a discussion on its role in protecting female virginity, women's bodies and therefore families' honor. Consequently, I situate my discussion of the ritual among the existing scholarly work to create space for original ideas to emerge. I end with a discussion of what this research adds to current scholarship.

Chapter 3 provides an explanation of the research methodology used to collect and analyze the data: narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. I define the concepts and justify my choice and why they were suitable for answering the research questions. Then I present my participants and explain my selection of that demographic group in particular. Lastly, I describe the data analysis process and how I tackled the emerging themes which helped in answering the research questions.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the narratives my participants provided. I begin with an explanation of how I sought to interpret women's lives with ethical care. I proceed with identifying the hardships and limitations I faced due to my being an insider to the culture but one who was exposed to Western influence. I also define the feminist lens through which I sought to analyze the narratives. I then present my analysis by identifying the various themes emerging from the data.

This project comes to a conclusion in chapter 5 which encompasses a discussion of the findings and answering the research questions presented in the introduction. Throughout this chapter, I discuss the personal and social limitations to this study and

thereby make room for suggestions for future research. Exploring the rite of *Tasfih* from every angle of life is intricate. This thesis does not seek to answer all of the inquiries around *Tasfih*, but rather sets the ground for future research by forming an introduction.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The rise of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) in the past decade has redefined the image of the Arab Muslim woman. Academia in particular was a main locus for discussions about the role of women in the uprisings. The whole world turned its attention to women's presence in the protests and was startled with their remarkable participation. *The Economist* reported "[women are] defying their stereotype as victims of oppressive patriarchies," and claimed, "Arab women have made their presence a defining feature of the Arab Spring" ("Women," 2011). The notable role women had during those uprisings contradicts conceptions many had about the lack of gender equality, especially women's political and economic equality, in the Arab world.

The social institutions and norms influencing the movement of women in Arab Muslim countries and the spaces they have access to include family, media, religion, law, and politics. In Algeria, one of the main effects of these social institutions is to cripple the social advancement of the Algerian woman. Women were prohibited from accessing the public sphere ostensibly to protect their dignity and honor. Women were long confined to the house as a way to save them the trouble of interacting with men, whose job is to rule the country. Because the public space is not safe for women as they might face sexual assaults, rape, and emotional violence, they believe that it is for this reason that God created them weak and constantly in need of protection; thus, they must forever be confined to the house as it is safer for them.

When an Algerian woman leaves the house, she exposes herself to myriad threats. Most importantly, she risks being raped because she is, in most cases, objectified and seen as an object for sexual pleasure. Once she walks out of the walls to the outside world, she becomes prey for male predators. As an Algerian who lived most of her life in that society and having had several discussions on this issue with friends and family, I know that in most cases, raped women are blamed and accused of arousing men. In the Algerian society, a raped girl is an abject creature whose existence as a *normal* human has come to an end. She is now unmarriageable, defiled and looked down upon. As such, she brings shame to her family because she failed to protect the one thing she is praised for having: her virginity.

The Algerian woman carries her family's honor in her body. When present in the public space, she is the walking embodiment of that honor. If her body is illicitly touched, she is prone to be accused of not being protective enough of it although her body scarcely belongs to her. As a result, women had to think of ways to protect themselves from rape. One method which was and still is used by Algerian women to protect their daughters and preserve their virginity is the practice of "*Tasfih*." This chapter reviews scholarly research in order to understand this rite of passage, and the powerful institutions that pave the way to its occurrence and then ensure its perpetuation. Due to a lack of texts on Algeria, I draw parallels between Algeria and other Arab Muslim countries in the region which share similar traditions, norms, and beliefs.

I begin with studying the significance of *Tasfih* as a rite of passage and its role in securing virginity. Second, I study family structure and how each member communicates

the idea of honor as related to the female body. Third, I examine the role that women's representation in the media has in constructing their perception of themselves. Then, I analyze the effects of colonialism and religious fundamentalism in shaping the Algerian woman of today. I proceed by exploring how the advance of Islam altered the status of women and what Islam's stand is on magical practices. Lastly, I examine the relationship between women's use of language and their sexuality and how that plays in their formation of self-agency.

#### *Tasfih as a Rite of Passage*

The development of an individual as they grow up is marked by a series of passages from one age to another and from one social position to another. This passing from one group to another is oftentimes followed by particular acts. According to van Gennep (1960) "every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between sacred and profane - actions and reactions to be regulated and guarded so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury" (p. 3). Women's movement in a society and their relationship with their bodies is therefore regulated as a way to safeguard society's balance and avoid discomfort. These regulations can take very extreme paths such as that of magic and surgical practices. An example of surgical practices which women were, and still are, exposed to in some regions of the world is female genital mutilation (FGM). The main purpose behind circumcising girls is to purify them and control their sexual desires (El Saadawi, 2015; Eltahawy, 2015). An uncircumcised girl is believed to be "out of control and unmarriageable" (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 118). Similarly, El Saadawi (2015) declared that most girls did not know what the practice was truly doing to them as they

believed that it was a simple procedure that preserves their health, and which was “conducive to cleanliness and ‘purity’” (p.69). A girl El Saadawi interviewed explained that she had no knowledge whatsoever about the operation and that all she knew was that all girls must undergo it “for purposes of cleanliness, and the preservation of a good reputation” (p. 71).

Van Gennep (2013) pinpoints three phases for rites of passage, one of which is emphasized depending on the occasion. Applicable to this research, rites of transition are often emphasized during initiation ceremonies. Relatively, this transitional phase “develops an autonomy of its own and becomes a ‘liminal’ (threshold) period between two or more firmly established states” (Gluckman, 1962, p. 3). Moreover, this period is according to van Gennep (1960) ‘sacred’ for he conceived the social life to be constantly passing between sacred and profane worlds. *Tasfih* is therefore an initiation ceremony as it emphasizes the transition of the girl from the ‘profane’ world that would propel her towards vice, immorality and dishonor, to the ‘sacred’ world that render her virtuous and chaste.

According to the narratives El Saadawi (2015) provided in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, uncircumcised girls are prone to be talked about and that their behavior will be demonized. A girl recounted that her grandmother had told her that “the continued existence of this small piece of flesh in its place would have made me unclean and impure, and would have caused the man whom I would marry to be repelled by me” (p. 71). Ironically, it is only through the removal of that piece of flesh that a girl can become

whole. Honor of the family and the shame girls might bring to their families is thus linked to the female body.

W. S. F. Pickering (1974) attempted to trace the persistence of rites of passage starting with the three phases they undergo which van Gennep (1960) identified: separation, transition, and incorporation (p.72). Pickering suggested that rites of passage persist for two main reasons: they are connected to the social settings in which they take place (which involve family), and the importance those societies give to religion (p. 78). Pickering (1974) provided a list of suggestions to delineate a set of purposes for rites of passage. Suitable for this research, I draw attention to two of his findings; “Rites of passage are essentially rites of change in which actors assume new roles in society” (Pickering, 1974, p. 72). Exposing young girls to the rite of *Tasfiḥ* propels them into taking up a new role in life; that of a virtuous young girl who is excluded from the outer world and from any contact with the opposite sex and who is now entitled to protecting her family’s honor. Accordingly, Pickering argued, rites of passage are often time related to social changes which are themselves followed by emotional changes. The latter can give birth to internal tensions such as feelings of guilt, inadequacy or fear of the unknown. Exposure to *Tasfiḥ* at a very young age can result in the girl experiencing these emotional changes. Although most girls do not remember the day the practice took place, once they grow up and become aware of it, they begin to develop a sense of guilt for being born girls, sexual incompleteness as they feel disconnected from their bodies and the fear of the unknown, i.e., their wedding night.



*Tasfih* shares similar foundations with FGM as they both aim at controlling female sexuality. On *Tasfih*, Marie-Hélène Gervais (2014) explained: “Le but est de protéger et de contrôler la sexualité des jeunes filles jusqu’à leur mariage” [Its objective is to protect and control young girls’ sexuality until their marriage] (p. 64). Similarly, El Saadawi (2015) wrote on FGM: “Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls’ external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized” (p. 67). Unlike FGM which ensures depriving the girl of her sexual pleasure permanently, *Tasfih* does not affect the girl’s sexual potentials: “Il ne consisterait pas non plus à ‘supprimer la capacité sexuelle de la jeune fille’” [It does not consist of eliminating the sexual capacity of a girl] (as cited in Ben Dridi, 2004, p. 91). Rites of passage allow the passing from one space to another. In the case of this study; the rite allows the girl to cross the physical threshold from the private space to the public one, and the symbolic threshold from girl to woman.

### Performing Virginité

When trying to locate the very origins of the emergence of *Tasfih*, one main theme kept recurring; that of preserving female virginity. Scholarly work on the importance of female virginity in Arab countries is abundant (Abu-Lughod, 2016; El Saadawi, 2015; Eltahawy, 2015; Gilmore, 1987). Although most research focuses on the Middle East, the similarities in the social structure of Arab countries render them relevant to this project. Lama Abu-Odeh’s (2010) article “Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies” raises a new theory on virginity that I find relevant to this research. Abu-Odeh argued that the purpose of imposing limitations on women’s

movement in public is “not only the preservation of actual virginity but the production of the *public effect of virginity* (p. 917-918). She explained that the hymen as a physical object attached to the female body needs to be “evidenced and publicized... through an elaborate performance for the benefit of the social audience” (p. 918). Because female virginity is no longer a private affair, society as a whole becomes responsible in judging who is virgin and who is not. Such a pressure transforms the role of the hymen from a biological one; embodied in the vagina, to a bodily role, expressed to society through the whole body. Virginity as performance is vehemently present in women’s daily practices and interactions within a certain cultural framework. This requires further investigation as it contributes to answering one of the main concerns of this project; how do sexual standards contribute to perceptions of female virginity?

Abu-Odeh (2010) established two modes of virginity as performance: performing biological virginity (embodied in a hymen) and performing social virginity (or bodily virginity, how a girl performs her virginity, and chastity to the onlooker. Performing biological virginity ends the day of marriage, where the hymen gets breached. The girl, who is now a wife, is faced with a “social demand for performance of bodily and social virginity” (p. 919). In other words, through maintaining a chaste and virtuous social interaction in public, i.e., performing chastity and virtue through her body, a woman succeeds in demonstrating the ideal female model shaped and desired by society. Failure to embody the socially expected virginity performance is seen as dishonorable and can bring shame to a woman’s family.

Problematizing women's entrance into the public sphere stems from the fact that their presence in it is unsafe for them. Caroline Rohloff (2012) in her study of the representation and reality of Algerian women argued that mostly, it is a woman's dress and her behavior that influence society's perception of her. Hence, a woman is sexually objectified for two reasons: one is the onlookers and second is because of how she is presenting herself to them (p. 33). In her analysis of the film *Viva L'aldjérie* [Long Live Algeria] (2004) Rohloff (2012) learned that the predominant view of women is that they are highly sexual and that their sexuality should be controlled, or else, men will take advantage of it (p. 33). As such, *Tasfih* grants a girl that safe entrance into the public as she is now protected against forced or voluntary sexual contact in public. Moreover, by locking<sup>1</sup> their daughters, mothers rid themselves of the concerns they face about their daughters' interaction with men in public and the shame that might accompany that.

#### Families, Honor and Shame

Honor and shame are two closely linked concepts which have a considerable impact on peoples' perception of others in the Algerian society. David D. Gilmore (1987) wrote that honor "is the reward for successful power maneuvers in which a man's relationship to other men *through women* is the fundamental axis of evaluation" (p. 4). Halvor Moxnes (1993) defined honor as the "public recognition of one's social standing" (p. 20) and is often inherited from one's family. This social standing implies that a man should live up to the social expectations conferred on him. Therefore, as Moxnes (1993)

<sup>1</sup> I use the verb "to lock" to speak of the act of practicing *Tasfih* on a girl. A girl who is "locked" is one who is under *Tasfih*, thus her hymen is unbreachable; locked.

argued, it is common to see that the communication between people in Mediterranean societies is often identified with a sense of competition. Each individual is attentive and always ready to defend their honor and that of their family whether verbally, physically, or symbolically (Moxnes, 1993).

Public discourse on honor and shame is often dictated and defined by men as they are the rulers of the public space. Therefore, the public discourse on shame and honor lacks women's perspective because they are mostly only present in the private space. Moxnes (1993) and Peristiany (1966) explained that men defend their masculinity in public by protecting the chastity of the women they protect. Moxnes (1993) wrote: "In order to maintain his honor a man had to be able to defend the chastity of women under his dominance and protection. If they lost their chastity it implied shame for the family as a whole" (p. 21). Similarly, Peristiany (1966) asserted that any man who fails to protect the individuals in his household is regarded as a dishonored man, thus a man should always work hard to defend himself and the ones in his house (p. 11). In the same vein, Angelika Ergaver (2015) found that in patriarchal societies, it is the role of men to fight for the honor of their families through protecting the women in their houses (p. 122). In their pursuit to avoid falling for dishonor, men end up over-controlling women in their families to the extent of committing crimes, such is the case with honor killings. As a result, women are considered as a source of shame once they deviate from men's orders.

A woman who refuses to adhere to the roles and places assigned for her is deemed dishonored and as a result brings shame to the men protecting her. According to Peristiany (1966), failure to adhere to the norms, deviating from them, or defying them

results in one's loss of their honor. Nawal El Saadawi (2015), an Egyptian feminist and activist, stated in her notable work *The Hidden Face of Eve* that "there is a distorted concept of honor in our Arab society" (p. 64). Similarly, David D. Gilmore (1987) pointed at this when he said that what makes the understanding of honor in the Mediterranean area differ from that in other societies is "the relationship to sexuality and gender distinctions" (p. 3). Thus, shame and honor are strongly tied to one's gender; if the person committing the dishonoring act was male, society will scarcely accuse them. However, if they were female, society will not have mercy on them.

People around the Mediterranean measure honor by female chastity. In other words, honor is measured by how chaste a woman is in expressing her sexuality; the more chaste she is, the more honorable the men in her life are seen. El Saadawi (2015) argued that "sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation" (p. 64). Through a series of narratives by women and girls in Egypt, El Saadawi described how an Arab man's honor remains secure as long as the women under his protection succeed in keeping their hymens intact. Men receive honor but women are responsible for keeping it. El Saadawi (2015) also argued that a man "can be a womanizer of the worst caliber and yet be considered an honorable man as long as his women-folk are able to protect their genital organs" (p. 64). Honor is thus more strictly related to women's behavior rather than that of men. Notably, the development of a girl happens inside the house only because she is not allowed into the public. Therefore, all family members contribute in dictating her duties and in setting up the rules to which

she must abide. Men, on the other hand, are raised to be possessive of women; the only woman they learn to love (if at all) is their sister.

The nature of the Arab family is mostly patriarchal; it enforces some limitations on members (mothers and daughters) and bestows privileges on others (fathers and sons). The patriarch in a family scarcely trusts his dependents; he sees them as incapable beings. He distances himself from the rest of the family as a way to display power or, as Suad Joseph (1999) described it, he embodies a “cold connectivity” towards his dependents (pp. 10-11). Soraya Altorki (1999) discussed the same idea and added that mothers at times enact a threat to the patriarch when they show affection and care for their children and as a result help the latter construct a strong identity that does not serve the patriarch’s agenda (as cited in Joseph, 1999).

Mothers are given more respect if they succeed in socializing their children to adhere to the existing gender norms. Any disrespect displayed by the children towards the mother is considered a threat to the father “whose social power within and outside the household depended on compliance of his womenfolk” (Hatem, 1999, p. 193). Hatem described the daughters’ small rebellions inside the family as having “spillover and spin-off effects on other sexual and/or marital rules associated with the family’s honor” (p.193). In other words, they can be threatening to the mother’s control which is also then a threat to the father. Hence, the patriarch of the family can be emasculated due to a failure in keeping his female dependents compliant.

All the discussions above somehow disregarded the brother-sister relationship and its role in creating and perpetuating patriarchy. Brothers and sisters both play significant

roles in socializing males and females to their assigned sexual roles. Suad Joseph (1999) in the introduction to the chapter titled “Brother-Sister Relationships” argued that “this lacuna comes in part from the relative lack of studies problematizing the internal dynamics of Arab family life” (p. 116). In taking a microdynamics of power approach to study the family and each member’s roles in it, one can accomplish better results than those shown at the macrodynamics level.

Pierre Bourdieu (1962), after spending many years in Algeria immersed in the country’s practices and values, concluded that “the family is the alpha and omega of the whole system: the primary group and structural model for any possible grouping, it is the indissoluble atom of society which assigns and assures to each of its members his place, his function, his very reason for existence and, to a certain degree, his existence itself” (p. 97). Given the time of his writing, Bourdieu’s use of the pronoun “his” to refer to every single member of a family be it male or female, is understandable. It is important to consider that ‘his’ in this case refers to both men and women; men as the heads of the family and women as the protected ones. Bourdieu also argued that the stable coherence of family in Algeria ensures the overflow of common interests (which I assume serve the hegemonic groups) “whose permanence and security must be assured above all else, even if necessary, to the detriment of individual aspirations and interests” (Bourdieu, 1962, p. 97). Dalia Abudi (2010) added to Bourdieu’s observations that the family expects “loyalty and conformity from its members, who are expected to subordinate their personal desires and interests to those of the family” (pp. 27-28). However, in the Arab

Muslim family context, it is only women who are expected to be submissive and to give up on their desires and goals.

In speaking of families in Algeria, the best author to turn to is the notable Algerian author Assia Djébar. In various autobiographical works she depicted the different relationships between family members, especially the one between men and women. Jane Hiddleston (2004) noted: Djébar's language is marked by an "opposition between the sexes" (p. 92). Gender roles in the Algerian society and culture were perfectly described by Djébar (1999) in her work *Ces voix*:

[Je viens] d'un monde et d'une culture profondément marqués par une traditionnelle ségrégation sexuelle (les femmes au-dedans, séparées des hommes au-dehors, le <public> masculin opposé à l'intime et au familial, le discours monotone des lieux d'hommes, différent de la polyphonie féminine -murmures et chuchotements ou au contraire vociférations en société féminine . . .), [je viens] donc de cette fatale, de cette mutilante dichotomie.

[I come] from a world and a culture profoundly marked by traditional sexual segregation (women inside, separated from the men who are outside, the masculine public sphere opposed to the intimate, family sphere, the monotonous speech of men's spaces different from feminine polyphony -murmurs and whispers or, on the contrary, outcries in female society . . .) [I come] thus from this fatal, mutilating dichotomy (p. 72).

She stresses on the rigid gender roles that prevail the Algerian society, the segregation between men and women in public and how they are repressive of women. Djébar's description in this passage showed how boundaries constrain women inside the walls and how femininity and intimacy are linked to the interior space only. As if in an attempt to say that women cannot be women/feminine outside the house and that their roles in society are limited to embodying femininity within the house.



### Media and the Representation of the Ideal Muslim Woman

This section reviews the role of media from the Arab world in constructing the image of the “good” Muslim woman that every girl should aspire to. Arab media’s portrayal of Muslim women, Amal Al-Malki argued, differs from that of Western media in a positive way (“Women in Arab Media,” 2011). While Western media give negative representations of Muslim Arab women, Arab media portray them positively, however in limited numbers. Contrastingly, Rash Allam (2008) argued that “The usage of women’s bodies as sexual commodities or as a vehicle of sexual arousal was found to be the main negative image used in the Arab media, followed by an image of women who are in some way immoral” (p. 3). Amel Al-Ariqi (2009) found that studies that tackle the portrayal of women in Arab media have concluded that 78.68% of women’s depiction were negative (p. 7).

In the show “Abdou Sans Tabou” [Abdou without Taboo] on Beur TV, an Algerian private channel, each week, the host Abdou aims at breaking a taboo that is prevalent in Algerian society. In an episode on the Algerian woman (2016), Abdou examined what he calls “the complex of the woman in the Algerian society.” When crimes against women happen when they are killed, raped or kidnapped, incidents as such go unnoticed. Abdou argued, “The death of women is normalized” and he added, “When a woman suffers, it is completely normal. It does not even occupy a minute media scene” (Abdou sans tabou, 2016). He offered a series of examples and statistics throughout the episode that further reinforced his claims of the worthlessness of women in the Algerian society. Most importantly, he emphasized the media blackout of incidents that concern

women, especially the national channels. He also argued against the communication style between men and women on social media which lacks respect from the part of men.

It should be pointed out that up until today, the majority of media productions that tackle the issues of women are hosted and/or produced by men. They are created from a male perspective and lack a woman's point of view. In her analysis of the film *The Battle of Algiers*, which narrates the battle that marked the beginning of the War of Liberation, Daniele Djamila Amrane Minne (2007) noted that women are only present for fifteen minutes in the film's 121 minute. Amrane Minne (2007) argued that "at times, the significance of their [women's] role in the war of national liberation is overlooked altogether" throughout the film (p. 342). Nadia Marzouki (2010) added that although media are increasingly addressing women's issues in Algeria, they often do that "in the form of a sensationalist and polemical discussion that does not necessarily help women's empowerment" (p. 49). In other words, media coverage of stories related to women addresses issues that do not help elevate the status of women in Algeria. Marzouki also stated that the representation of women in media is quite positive but their influence on public perception of gender is limited. That is, women are present in media, but their presence is ineffective because the patriarchal society still believes that women are weak and unable to think correctly. This inadequacy in media representation of women, reports on incidents against women, and hindering them from acquiring the agency needed to represent themselves, serves in maintaining the outdated model of the "good" woman.

## Algerian Women between Two Jailers: Colonialism and Fundamentalism

### Colonialism

The assumption about the causes that led women to start the practice of *Tasfiḥ* is that French soldiers during colonialism used to rape women as a means to weaken men's resistance. In a letter exchanged between French officials, an officer reported, "We burnt down a village in the Khremis...the most hideous thing is that the women were actually killed after being dishonoured" (as cited in Salhi, 2010, p. 114). This was the fate of the majority of Algerian women despite the huge number of others who preferred to fight. Regardless of their destiny, in all cases, they were not talked about after the war.

The participation of Algerian women in the war of liberation from 1954 to 1962 has gone unnoticed, undocumented, and then forgotten. Adrienne Leonhardt (2013) provided a chronological historical analysis of women's roles during the war to show how, despite the crucial role (nurses, combatants, cooks, spies, fundraisers...etc.) they played in granting Algeria its independence, they remained marginalized in the new Free State (Leonhardt, 2013, p.7). Leonhardt argued that the ideal gender roles disseminated by both the French colonizer and Algerian men were meant to construct a certain image of women's social and political roles that attended to their own interests during the war, while granting women very few benefits (p. 7). David C. Gordon (1968) in his book *Women of Algeria* explained that women in fighting against their colonizers, "had paid for their right to equality by the suffering they had undergone by the side of their menfolk" (p. 61). He also discussed some of the reforms which were meant to acknowledge women's contributions in the war and how the latter can give them the right

to participate in the creation of the new Free State. In addition to an aim at destroying the “negative mentality” that implies women are inferior to men. Gordon inserted a significant speech made by the president of Algeria Ahmed Ben Bella upon the dawn of independence:

The Algerian women, who played an important role in the revolution must play the same role in the construction of our country. We oppose those who, in the name of religion, wish to leave our women outside of this construction. We respect Moslem traditions, but we want a revolutionary Islam and not the Islam left to us by colonial domination.

An attempt has been made to place the Algerian woman behind the screen to prevent her from doing her duty -to participate in the life of Algeria. Women should be mobilized like men to build a happy future for the country. It is not the wearing of a veil that makes us respect the woman, but the pure sentiments that we have in our hearts (as cited in Gordon, 1968, p. 62).

Reality; however, remains far from what is enfolded in such political speeches. Gordon (1968) added, quoting Jules Roy who “felt like a stranger in the new Algiers with its crowds of sad young Moslems with no women” (as cited in Gordon, p. 63). The official political promises were not kept. As a result, traditional customs predominated again, women were pushed back to the private sphere, and work was given for men first because they were heads of the family.

Dominique Dissanti (1964) wrote in an African newspaper that women were equal during the war but “peace has forgotten them.” Similarly, Denis Vasse (1964) argued that although the emancipation of the Algerian woman is inevitable, it will not be easy as “it implies putting into question the entire society.” (as cited in Gordon, 1968, p. 64). Not only that but also an economic independence that would help the Algerian woman secure a solid position in society, thus moving forward to the political scene. Meriem Belmihoub explained: “The problem of women is to procure work. It is to the

degree that she can be assured economic independence by giving her work that one can assure her liberation” (as cited in Gordon, 1968, p. 65). Some feminist associations, most notably l'Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes UNFA (the National Union of Algerian Women), faced some political backlash which stated that women must remain within the Islamic framework, and that the European lifestyle is incompatible with Muslim traditions and cultures (Gordon, 1968, p. 68). Accordingly, Fadéla M'Rabet who was the director of the “women’s hour” on Radio Algiers, explained that the Algerian woman, although legally and politically granted equality, is still inferior to men and is treated as an object.

Colonialism plays a significant role in shaping gender roles in the Algerian society. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (2008) added, in his discussion of sexuality in Islam, the impact colonialism had in asserting women’s roles as guardians. According to Bouhdiba, the colonizer’s “violation of the collective personality, this seizure of the environment, of institutions and even of language, were to reinforce still more the tendency to closedness and sclerosis” (p. 231). The colonized Arab Muslim society sought to utilize passive defense mechanisms around territories deemed important; home, women, family. The objective was to limit the colonizer’s influence and to safeguard family values. Bouhdiba concluded that “Arab women were now promoted to the historical and unexpected role of guardians of tradition and of the collective identity; women had thus found a new function (p. 232).

### Religious Fundamentalism

What exacerbated the state of women after three decades from independence was the rise of religious fundamentalism. Mahfoud Bennoune, who advocated for Algerian women's liberation (deriving his sympathy from memories of his imprisonment by the French which made him think of the state of most Algerian women), defined fundamentalism as "the use of Islam to promote a political project that is highly retrograde and extremely conservative" (Bennoune, 2002, p. 76). As fundamentalists gained strength in the late eighties and early nineties, Bennoune continued, women were exposed to various forms of aggression and intimidation if they left the house as a means to pressure them back where they *belong*. He added: "Publications, books, articles, newspapers, radio programs, and sermons in mosques were all attacking the emancipation of women" (Bennoune, 2002, p. 79). Rosemary Radford Ruether (2002) added that all religious fundamentalist movements, whether Christian or Muslim, have one main objective; establishing harsh patriarchal control over women, rejection of women's equality, independence and agency, in addition to depriving them of the right to control their own sexuality and fertility.

Although the spatial division based on gender in Algeria, although has witnessed positive changes since independence from France in 1962, is still in favor of men. Socially, women in Algeria in the past three decades were seen as "intruders into masculine space, disturbing the equilibrium of a regulated, single-sex, urban milieu" (Slyomovics, 1995, p. 10). In her article "'Hassiba Ben Bouali, if you could see our Algeria': Women and public space in Algeria", Slyomovics (1995) explored the obstacles

and the compromises women had to make in order to navigate through the public space and move freely during the Black Decade<sup>2</sup>. I am interested here in Slyomovics' investigation of the role that the rise of religious extremists had in shaping women's status and how is it similar to that of the woman of today.

Slyomovics (1995) argued that institutional violence committed by the state has been confronted by religious fundamentalist groups who aimed at overthrowing the regime. She wrote: "Emerging armed factions (jama'at al-musallaha) such as the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) and the Mouvement Islamique Armé (MIA) have specifically targeted women" (p. 11). Women have also been targeted simply because they are women: working women, unveiled women, as well as politically and socially active women (Slyomovics, 1995, p. 11). This explains part of the living conditions women had to endure about thirty years ago. It also explains part of the existing mentality that genders spaces in Algeria today. Indeed, public versus private is no longer an issue for debate in Algeria today because women are present in the public in large numbers. However, they remain unsafe in those spaces. From my personal experiences and those shared by my female friends, I firmly argue that we, women of Algeria, are not safe in public and that any accusations that tell otherwise are made by the same people who threaten our safety. First, society confers on women the "privilege" of representing their families and carrying the latter's honor. Second, it allows men to launch verbal as well as

<sup>2</sup> The Black Decade refers to the period between 1991 and 2001 where Algeria witnessed a bloody civil war. The civil war was fought between the Algerian government and several religious rebel groups.

physical violent attacks on women. As a result, men's behaviour threatens that representation.

### *Algerian Women, Islam, and Tasfih*

The emergence of *Tasfih* as a rite of protection of girls' virginity and their families' honor raises the question of who has the authority to declare that female virginity needs protection, and from where they derive that right. The aforementioned literature answered part of the question; it is men who dictate to women their roles in society. Finding out the source of men's authoritarian rule requires a deeper understanding of the image of women as constructed by the two predetermined sources of Islam: Qur'an and *Sunnah*<sup>3</sup>, and the patriarchal interpretations of those two sources. Discourse on women in Islam remains critical because it can appear to be attacking of religious values. Framing a discussion on *Tasfih* in relation to Islam is therefore distinct from other discussions in that it touches on the very foundation of society: religion.

Qur'an and *Sunnah* are the foundation for ongoing interpretations and debates that seek to maintain social order and justice. Interpretations are the open space where patriarchy crafts regulations for women by taking meanings out of their original context and applying them to current situations. As a result, they triggered in women a need for further investigations on how God intended a woman to be. Myriad Muslim feminists walked down that alley and argued that the denial of women's rights in Arab Muslim

<sup>3</sup> For Muslims, *Sunnah* means "the way of the prophet". The *Sunnah* includes the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Muslims believe that the Prophet's life is a good example to follow in their lives.



societies emanates from the political and economic interests of the masculine hegemonic group and not from the commands of religion.

Degrading the woman to an object, identifying her through her body, and jailing her under the pretext of protection do not seem to be Islamic features if one is using the Qur'an and *Sunnah* as sources. By claiming, emphasizing and postulating that Islam is patriarchal in its essence, men prevent women from questioning the oppressive sexual differentiation that exists. This idea was deconstructed and defied by Asma Barlas (2002) in the chapter "The Qur'an, Sex/Gender, and Sexuality: Sameness, Difference, Equality." The argument that she made, and which is of significance when speaking of *Tasfihi*, is that Islam does not solely tie women (and not men) to sex as if to make them endure all the stigma and burden deriving from sex. Not that Islam stigmatizes sex at all, as she stated that it "does not stigmatize sex itself. Rather, it treats sex as natural and desirable for women and men, albeit within the context of a moral sexual praxis that remains within the limits prescribed by God" (p. 130). The whole idea of shying away from speaking about sex in a given Algerian setting does not stem from the two sources of Islamic law but rather from a socially constructed religion: "while the Qur'an's emphasis on chastity reveals some anxieties about sex, it does not treat sex itself as dangerous or dirty. Rather, the Qur'an views sex as fulfilling and wholesome in itself, that is, outside of its procreative role" (Barlas, 2002, p. 152). Therefore, what Qur'an does is merely setting a framework for the fulfilment of sexual pleasure.

According to the public perception, chastity and virginity are synonymous and are limited to women only. However, Barlas (2002) argued, "In the Qur'an, chastity implies

not virginity, asceticism, or renunciation, but a sexual praxis that remains within the moral limits prescribed by God” (p. 153). Barlas also refuted the patriarchal claim that it is only women who are meant to be chaste according to Islamic regulations by arguing that the Qur’an “extends its notion of chastity -associated with ‘the feminine’-to men as well” (p. 152-153). Therefore, if *Tasfiḥ* emerged to preserve female chastity because chastity is believed to be an Islamic commandment, one wonders why it is not extended to men as well.

#### The Status of Women before Islam

Patriarchal Islamic practices as such make women hate themselves, their bodies, and push away the sexual desires they feel. The restrictions patriarchies impose on women, disguised in religious regulations, make the latter see Islam as oppressive of women and praising of men. Being aware of the true essence of Islam outside the patriarchal influence can be a first step towards a better Arab Muslim woman, one who is satisfied with herself, her body and her creator. For this reason, a look at the status of women in pre-Islamic Arabia and the role Islam had in altering their status is indeed significant.

In this regard, Haifa A. Jawad (1998) offered an account on the status of women before Islam and discussed the various areas in which Islam has improved women’s lives. Pre-Islamic societies in the Arabian Peninsula, Jawad concluded, have treated women in ways worse than those in other regions. Women were considered as a heavy burden on their families who regarded giving birth to a girl to be very shameful and dishonoring, and at times buried them alive to avoid that societal shame. Women were humiliated, sold

or exchanged as goods, and kept in bondage. Most importantly, they were seen as sex objects and as a source of entertainment (Jawad). David C. Gordon (1968) added that women had no independent status and no rights and that Islam's "intent was to encourage a true partnership between the sexes" (p. 9). Similarly, Faryal Abbas Abdullah Sulaimani (1986) and Gustave Le Bon (1969) stated that women before Islam were considered as non-entities whose position in society was somewhere between that of men and that of animals, with roles of servants or captives (as cited in Sulaimani, 1986, p. 17).

#### The Status of Women under Islam

With the arrival of Islam, the position of women has undergone radical changes. Most importantly, their birthright was restored as Islam prohibited female infanticide. Women were then brought to the same human level as men as stated in the Qur'an "Allah created you from a single soul, and from the same soul created his mate" (Al-Nisa 4:1) and in another chapter "O mankind, we created you all from a male and female, and made you into races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God fearing of you" (Al-Hujurat 49:13). Similarly, H. A. Jawad (1998), Syed Mohammed Ali (2004) and Nicholas Awde (1999) provide a set of Qur'anic verses which make clear the equality God has bestowed upon men and women.

The Qur'an's approach towards sexuality was accurately described by Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (2008) as an "infinite majesty. It is life conveyed, existence multiplied, creation perpetuated" (p. 14). Because the sexual function was sacred, it was given special attention in the Qur'an. It needs to be set into a framework in order to be used in the right way. Hence, the Qur'an in itself does not prohibit its practice but merely

sets regulations for that practice. What Muslim Arab societies believe nowadays, due to their alienation from Qur'an, is that men have more right to sexual desire than women. As a result, society created ways that limit, and sometimes eliminate, women's sexual desires.

The role that Islam has given women and the sexual regulations attached to it, he added, have conferred on mothers special functions as shelter providers and protectors for the collective identity. Bouhdiba (2008) extended his explanation from inside the house to society when he argued that "The social has been able to use both the sacral and the sexual to ensure its own survival" (p. 230) In other words, the sacred and the sexual have surpassed their own domain to touch on issues related to society and serve in maintaining its stability. Ironically, Bouhdiba's arguments overlooked the stress that comes with this new function and the punishments women would face if they failed in it. Discussed previously, women are the honor carriers and the shame bringers in their families.

With colonialism using women as a battle ground against Algerian soldiers whether by raping, beating or kidnapping them, and with religious fundamentalists aiming at taking the country back to ignorance times by focusing on women only; the latter stood perplexed in the midst of this backlash. As a result, the Algerian woman sought to find ways to secure her way out; ones that can save her dignity and honor. Because the country is not applying the true Islam but rather a socially constructed version of it, women are not praised but rather degraded. Because of the violent incidents caused by the colonizer and later on by the religious fundamentalists; that degraded

image of women persisted to exist. *Tasfih*, I argue, emerged as a way embraced by mothers to protect their daughters from rape, thus saving the family's honor.

#### Islam and the Concept of Magic

The review of the literature revolving around *Tasfih* so far does not reveal how Islam views the practice. It also does not reveal what is the practice and how people know it is effective. A closer investigation of its relationship with magic may reveal whether it is condemned by Islam or not. Ibtissem Ben Dridi (2004) explained that the words accompanying the enactment of the practice are purely 'magic'. Barkahoum Ferhati (2007) also stated that the ritual happens by repeating 'magical' phrases and other tools (p. 2). Moussa, Masmoudi, and Barboucha, (2009) also clarified in their research that one of the questions that arise is the magical dimensions of the practice and how it violates religious norms (p. 96).

The most relevant sites for religious discussions on *Tasfih* are videos of people who are knowledgeable enough about the position of magic in Islam. It is worth noting that in every context in Arabic, the word *Tasfih* is preceded by the word "magic"; i.e., the magic of *Tasfih* instead of *Tasfih* or the ritual of *Tasfih*. Most videos are conducted by religion scholars who are mostly men. In a video titled "The Magic of *Tasfih* on Girls", Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Faouzan (2017) condemned the use of *Tasfih* to stop girls from having premarital sex. He said: "No doubt, even if the intention behind it was good, it calls for the help of devils and magicians" and contended that "magic is disbelief in God" (Al-Faouzan, 2017). In another video, Sheikh Nasser Ibrahim Ramih (2013) argued that "People in Libya, Morocco and Algeria do not know that *Tasfih* is a type of magic" In the

same context, Sheikh Hassan Al-Madani (2017) added that this kind of magic is very dangerous and harmful to the girl.

While trying to trace back the origins of its occurrence in Algeria, the assumption was that it emerged during the colonial years. Other sources, however, revealed that *Tasfih* “was practiced during Ignorance times but unfortunately persisted until today” (Al-Madani, 2017). People during that period, Al-Madani added, “used to practice it on girls out of fear of rape during incursions” (Al-Madani, 2017). Khalifa Alraqi (2017) supported Al-Madani’s claim when he stated that the history of *Tasfih* goes back to the pre-Islamic ages, that is Ignorance times, where there were incursions and civil wars amongst tribes. People feared for their women, so they locked them out of fear of rape.

Al-Madani (2017) is one of the few scholars to explain how the practice happens in relation to magic. He stated that when the practice is done, a Jinn<sup>4</sup> is called to come and guard the girl’s uterus. This Jinn stays with the girl as long as she’s *locked* and may cause her late marriage because the Jinn often falls in love with her and makes sure to be the only one who possesses her (“The Magic of *Tasfih*”). Failure to unlock the girl the night of her marriage is caused by the fact that the Jinni possessing her is in love with her, thus refuses to leave her body.

The contradiction at stake here is Muslims’ use of magic, although they are aware it is forbidden in Islam. Abdul-Azeez Ibn Baaz (2006) in his book *The Ruling on Magic and Fortune-telling* provided sets of evidence from the Sunnah and Qur’an which prove

<sup>4</sup> Jinnis are supernatural creatures that can appear in the form of a human or animal and are able to possess humans.

its forbiddance. Magic, fortune-telling, and sorcery all involve communication with Jinnis and claim to know the unknown. People who get involved in such acts worship Jinnis besides God and “claim the knowledge of the Unseen, and this is a clear act of disbelief” (Ibn Baaz, 2006, p. 4). Ibn Baaz (2006) also added that the one who believes in magicians, sorcerers, or fortune tellers is “exactly like them” (p. 4). Jennifer L. Borger added that “In the Qur’an, *sihr* [magic] is the equivalent of *kufir* [disbelief in God], or infidelity” (p. 5). Magic in the Islamic context has demonic origins and therefore is prohibited.

Numerous other religion scholars spoke of *Tasfih* on social media and called for ending it. What I found interesting, however, is that none of them has actually pointed at the social pressure that prompted women into using this ritual to protect their girls. All they argue against is that these women are falling for disbelief in God by practicing *Tasfih*. Going through the literature, one can notice the gap between social and religious understandings of the ritual and how the two run parallel without intersecting. Although scholars writing about the social causes behind the practice do emphasize its negation of religious values, religious figures do not speak of the social elements interfering in its occurrence. Hence, this gap between the religious and social discussions on *Tasfih* requires further attention.

### Language and Sexuality

Due to economic and socio-political restrictions, the only source for girls to learn about sex is their mothers. However, mothers follow a different approach to sex education: they prohibit their daughters from inquiring about it. These prohibitions result

in repressing sexual feelings, thoughts, and desires. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, these repressed feelings and desires are not only hidden and denied but also “desired as a source of pleasure *because* they are hidden and denied” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 117). In prohibiting certain acts from their daughters, mothers are also triggering that desire in them to explore the prohibited acts, thus, transgressing the boundaries.

Prohibitions and repressions generate feelings of desire in people; the desire to transgress and discover the unknown, i.e. the prohibited. By tabooing and prohibiting the act of sex and sex talk, individuals repress their sexual desires and the thoughts they have on sex. They deny and hide them. Eventually, they end up desiring them because they are hidden and denied. Girls whose curiosity about sex is not satisfied, seek to transgress and explore the realm of sex in non-normative ways. That is, in ways that do not comply with the social order.

Parents unconsciously participate in a handful of ways in teaching their children to desire the prohibited. In giving direct commands and orders to their children, parents do not only teach them what they must do but also unintentionally teach them the forbidden. For example, when the mother tells her daughter that she must only have sex when she gets married, she is also telling her (without actually telling her) that there is sex outside of marriage framework and that it is prohibited (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). In so doing, the daughter feels a desire to explore that realm of prohibition. In this regard, Cameron and Kulick (2003) stressed, basing their argument on Billing’s study, that “the way adults teach children about prohibited behaviour in the very act of prohibiting it



suggest a link to research on language socialization that documents how particular fears and desires are conveyed and acquired through recurring linguistic routines” (p.119). Therefore, language used in everyday life creates prohibitions and repressions and ultimately makes that which is feared, desirable.

In the Arab-Islamic context, the toxic mix of culture and religion aggravates language socialization. In a country like Algeria, where matters of religion are cannot be discussed, although the individual recognizes the false nature of the prohibitions communicated to them, they are incapable of denial because it is always a religious matter before it is anything else. Consequently, most people avoid questioning the validity of those prohibitions--the act of sex and sex talk--believing that they stem from Islam. In his study of Islam and sexuality, Bouhdiba (1985) argued that “matters of the flesh in general and sexuality in particular are not just compatible with Islam but essential elements of faith” (as cited in El Feki, 2013, p. 12). The whole concept of sexuality is taboo in Arabo-Islamic societies and cannot be easily eradicated because it has been culturally and falsely mixed with religion. El Feki (2013) explained: “Even within the marriage bed, sex is something to do, not to discuss” (p. 5). In limiting sex to unspoken pleasure and reproduction only, society loses the true essence of it.

To go back to repudiation and disavowal, it can be argued that denial of one’s desires develops a lack of expression, and when there’s lack of expression, there is a lack of self-agency. To put it differently, prohibitions such as sex talk are communicated to us through a language that mutes women, we deny those prohibitions because we believe they are religious commands. Although those prohibitions arouse desires inside us, we

refuse to express them, we even refuse to acknowledge them. This absence of expression is an indication of our lack of agency.

This chapter offered a review of the literature revolving around female sexuality in Algeria in general and *Tasfih* in particular. The scholarly work published thus far tackles the ritual from religious and historical angles only. My research more particularly explores the ritual from social and gendered lenses. The following chapter outlines the methodology employed to answer the following questions:

1. What is *Tasfih* and what are its purposes?
2. How did the rite of *Tasfih* occur and how does it protect female virginity?
3. How do sexual standards contribute to perceptions of female virginity in Algeria? How are these standards performed in *Tasfih*?
4. How does women's knowledge or lack thereof about their sexuality encourage practices such as *Tasfih*?

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This thesis investigates the rite of *Tasfih* as practiced by Algerian women and explores what the ritual communicates about female chastity in Algerian culture. I investigate the different ways this ritual is practiced and how women talk about their experiences participating in the ritual. Given the limited published work on the topic, I was inspired to collect women's definitions, descriptions, and stories of their experiences with *Tasfih*. Given this aim, I use a qualitative research method in collecting and analyzing the data. Specifically, I employ a narrative inquiry approach in collecting and analyzing stories about the ritual.

This project uses in-depth interviewing for data collection, as well as my reflexive account of the research process. In this chapter, I define narrative inquiry and offer an account of my data collection process. Next, I justify my choice of in-depth interviewing, and personal observations as sources for story collection. Then, I explain the challenges that occurred while using the narrative approach. Lastly, I provide explanations on how I resolve those challenges.

*Tasfih* is an experience that girls go through at a young age in Algeria. Studying this ritual requires listening to girls' stories of their lived experiences with *Tasfih*. For this reason, I find the qualitative research approach suitable for the project. Qualitative inquiry is a research method used to understand people's behaviors and interactions. Qualitative researchers Glesne and Peshkin (1992) defined qualitative research as comprehending and then interpreting how people construct the world around them in a

social milieu (p. 6). Research that follows a qualitative approach embraces a set of interview questions that are less structured, thus, allows the participants to develop their own agenda. It also produces rich observational and textual data (Elliot, 2005, p16).

There are numerous interpretive research orientations that fall under the generic term of qualitative inquiry. In order to establish a better understanding of how people perceive themselves, their lived experiences, and how they behave socially, qualitative researchers adopt various methods to collect their data. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) explained; “The researcher has several methods for collecting empirical materials, ranging from the interview to direct observation, to the analysis of artifacts, documents, and cultural records, to the use of visual materials or personal experience” (p. 14). For this research, I use the narrative approach as a method for collecting and analyzing the data.

#### Narrative Inquiry

Creswell and Poth (2016) explained that narrative as a method “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (p. 168). Stories are fundamental because they offer rich accounts on human experiences. As long as people interact with one another, their communication is often interspersed with personal stories. As such, these stories serve in constructing one’s identity. As Steph Lawler (2008) noted, “it is through such stories that we produce identities” (p. 239). In the same vein, Tracy (2013) explained that the way people tell their stories shows how they interpret their identities (p. 29).

Every research method has features that distinguish it from others and set its boundaries. The focus of narrative studies, D. Jean Clandinin (2016) explained, “is not only valorizing individual’s experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted” (p. 18). As a narrative inquirer, I seek to learn how Algerian women’s lived experiences intersect with and are shaped by the social institutions.

Creswell and Poth (2016) added that the source of data for narrative inquiry is not limited to interviews only but can also be collected from observations, documents, photographs...etc. I found this approach very suitable for my research due to the lack of resources available on the topic and the limitations imposed on my attempt at conducting interviews. As a result, data for this project was also collected through participant observation. Kathleen M. Dewalt and Billie R. Dewalt (2011) defined participant observation as the “method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (p. 1). They emphasized on the necessity of keeping fieldnotes as a method to register participant observations. Moreover, personal observations added more valuable information to the research and revealed some significant facts about my participants.

### Participants

Before I delved into the data collection process, it is important to mention that I completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Northern Iowa.

After getting approval, I travelled to my home country of Algeria to conduct face-to-face interviews. My aim was to use a written recruiting form for a certain demographic group and an oral recruitment for others. The main group I was targeting was women over the age of fifty because of their familiarity and lived experience with the ritual. Because *Tasfih* is not documented, I realized that everything I needed to know about it should be carved in the elderly's memory, so I turned to history narrated by older women. Madison (2012) argued that "what the narrator remembers and values and how he or she expresses memory and value takes precedence over validity" (p. 35). In other words, the personal interpretation of events is more important than the certainty that might unfold them.

Recruiting older women was challenging because they lack formal education, so I had to use an oral recruitment. For the participants aged below fifty, I used a written recruitment form. The age range of the participants was 23 to 85 years old. Participants (N=11) met the following criteria: They were women who have practiced *Tasfih* on a girl, have been exposed to *Tasfih*, or have heard stories about someone who has been exposed to it. Although most of the participants were women, later during data collection, I came across a man of religion who was willing to participate and to help me with what he knows.

All participants are acquaintances of my family or mine. The reason for this selection of participants is that the subject studied involves inquiries about intimate and sexual experiences which not everybody feels comfortable revealing. Therefore, I had to begin with family members and extend my recruitment to distant acquaintances. Due to time restrictions, I have limited my sampling to one region only: Mila, Algeria. This city

is situated in the north east of Algeria and it has an Arab Muslim majority. This region in particular is very diverse and rich with traditions and rituals and its residents are very knowledgeable about the ritual. This was an advantage for me as I, myself, grew up there and my family is one of the oldest residents of the region. As a result, reaching out to distant relatives and contacts was not very hard.

I met participants over the age of fifty in their living rooms or in their backyards. Younger participants preferred to meet at their workplace or on the phone. Due to educational barriers and/or discomfort with written signatures, consent was orally obtained. For all participants, I sought to make sure I know them in person because I was not sure approaching people as an outsider to discuss the ritual was going to be fruitful. Approaching women as an insider, that is, as a member of the same community, granted me access to more valuable information. I sought to contact relatives first, and they themselves put me in contact with others.

I used in-depth interviewing as a primary tool for data collection. My choice was influenced by my lifelong belief in the power of human verbal interaction and communication. Tracy (2013) stated, "Interviews elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents' perspective" (p.132). Therefore, collecting the data from the people who are historically related to the subject studied gave me the privilege of obtaining original and unprecedented stories. Because interviews are conversation based, maintaining a good relationship with the interviewee becomes challenging as Tracy maintained; "the interviewer has an obligation to treat the respondent and the resulting data with ethical care" (132). As a result, the importance of interviews goes

beyond obtaining the desired data but to also focus on how the interviews were conducted.

Conducting interviews for any research requires abiding by a set of ethical guidelines. In order for the researcher to produce rigorous and interesting qualitative work, they are also expected to conduct the study with ethical care. Because this study is concerned with exploring women's lived experiences, I follow feminist ethical codes. Brabeck M. and Brabeck K. (2009) explained "Feminist researchers are obligated not only to adhere to ethical guidelines for research...but also to ask, How does the research contribute to enhancing the conditions of women, and all oppressed people?" (p. 39). Ethical feminist researchers are expected to implement their feminist knowledge in trying to rectify the misrepresentation of marginalized people. From this standpoint, I sought to pay careful attention to how I approached the subject matter in what complies with feminist ethics "to inform ethical thought and action" (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2009, p. 40).

For this project, interviews were a significant tool in collecting data because, as Tracy (2013) framed it, they allow the participants to share their opinions and experiences freely but most importantly, they mirror the interviewees' understanding of the world. Therefore, having conversations on *Tasfih* with women who are involved in it does not only provide me with information on the ritual but also, how do these women perceive their sexuality in light of the practice. Because information on female sexuality in Algeria is lacking, let alone ones related to *Tasfih*, interviews make a powerful tool for accessing the desired information.



Interviews lasted between 25 to 40 minutes for each participant. I began the conversations with a brief account on how I first came to learn about the ritual, how I was totally unfamiliar with it and how I am curious to know more about it. I avoided mentioning my field of study and the main reason for choosing to investigate the ritual out of fear that the participants would not be generous in their narrations. Then, I asked the participants to describe the whole process of *Tasfih* in detail according to what they have lived or witnessed. The interviews were non-directive. That is, I did not stick to the questions I have previously set up but let their answers decide on the next questions I asked. As such, the interviews were casual conversations. All interviews were audio recorded after having had the participants' permission. Six of the interviews were conducted face to face while the other four were done on the phone because the women did not know me very well and were uncomfortable with meeting. By using casual conversational interviews as a strategy, I was able to gain better access to women's personal experiences with *Tasfih*. They provided accounts that explained the reasons behind their involvement in the ritual.

#### Data Analysis

The concept of analysis entails processing and then transforming the qualitative data collected into more meaningful and understandable data (Flick, 2007, p. 1). In qualitative research, data analysis can emerge in different ways: narrative, ethnographic, phenomenological, and constant comparative analysis, etc. (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth, & Scott, 1993). For this project, I used the thematic analysis as an approach to analyze the data collected. Thematic analysis as defined by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), "is the

process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" (p. 3352) and is used in various research methodologies. My choice of this analysis method was influenced by the fact that thematic analysis requires "looking over data in order to identify recurrent, salient and self-evident points, issues, words, terms, events, language, discourse, images, and allusions" to classify the emerging meanings from the data (Stokes, 2011, p.125). Organizing the data thematically allows the researcher to explore crucial aspects of the phenomena studied (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 490). Thematic analysis allowed me to explore the elemental ideas, structures, and discourses that form the data's semantic content (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

As Tracy pointed out, if one has transcribed the interviews, has been reading and re-reading the data and field notes, coding, and reading about qualitative research, then the data analysis process has already started. My data analysis process started with transcribing the interviews, typing and organizing the observations and field notes, and then moving to labeling or coding. After conducting all the interviews planned, I moved to the translation and transcription phase. Braun V. and Clarke V. (2013) offer a six-step guideline to proceed with thematic analysis. The first step involves listening, translating and transcribing the interviews. My fluency in Arabic (the language spoken by the participants) and English (the language of this research) gave me the advantage of being both the researcher and translator. Thus, I combined listening, transcribing and translating in one stage. After I got the interview transcripts, I listened to them again while comparing them to the transcripts to make sure they are compatible, and to immerse myself with the data and to begin brainstorming for the coding phase. As I read the

transcripts several times, I wrote the recurring topics discussed by the interviewees in a notebook. This has helped me move forward to the second step which is coding.

Johnny Saldana (2009) defines codes as “words or short phrases that capture a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for [...] language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Coding is therefore the most important phase in qualitative data analysis because this is where researchers “build detailed descriptions, apply codes, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspectives in the literature” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 400). Coding is the process of making sense of the data collected through labeling its parts and categorizing them into themes. After reading each line of the transcripts, I color coded the repeated topics by highlighting them on the document. My selection of the important topics was influenced by their ability to answer the research questions. This process included decomposing the datasets into conceptual components and then compiling the codes for the next step of analysis.

Following the coding stage, I organized and labeled the codes into concepts that answered a specific research question under larger categories. Once the codes were put into categories, I named each category based on its significance or relation to other codes. I further reviewed the codes categories in order to detect important patterns that are more general. General patterns were looked at as potential themes. After that, I examined the labels of each category again and used them to form the final themes. For example, the thread that represents the weakness of the girl, the wall which represents the strength of

the man, the girls tapping on the wall, blood and incense were all grouped under the theme “Use of metaphors and imagery.”

In the next chapter I offer an analysis of the data collected. I begin with providing an explanation of the analysis framework. That is, how I navigated through the restrictions, limitations, and advantages I encountered during analysis. Particularly, I describe how I sought to consider the context in which stories were told, the authority of interpretation I possessed over the participants and how I sought to deliver an interpretation that allows the reader to look at the world through the participants’ eyes. Then, I explain the feminist approach I utilized in the analysis with the aim of providing a clearer understanding of the data from a feminist standpoint lens. Lastly, I propose various interpretations of the interviews within the cultural context they were told in.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

#### Interpreting Women's Lives

##### The Power of Context

People engage in the telling and retelling of their life stories on a regular basis in their attempt at making sense out of their lives. The extent to which those stories are personal or political is influenced by the context in which they are told. Stories are formed the moment they are told; they are not sitting in our heads waiting to be told. As Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood (2017) explained: "They do not exist until, in the processes of our telling, we come to construct a particular story (or version of a story), and we do this for a variety of reasons, which in turn inform those stories." (p.18) The context in which a story is told, either informs or restricts its telling. Furthermore, when telling or interpreting a story, the individual's narration is also influenced by the stories of the present. However, as Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood, argued, some stories are more dominant than others and their telling informs and/or limits the narration of different ones.

In the present time, anyone who fits into the hegemonic group's category can have their stories heard. Hence, it is axiomatic that men's stories are more likely to receive attention than do women's stories. When the gap between told and untold, or heard and unheard exacerbates and begins to overshadow reality, the need for a more comprehensive approach to narrative inquiry becomes necessary. For this purpose, feminist researchers emphasized on taking context into consideration when listening to

the stories women tell: “addressing context involves understanding the meaning of a life in its narrator’s frame of reference” (Maynes & Garner, 1989, p.19). For this reason, it is crucial to consider the internal and external aspects in women’s lives that influence their narratives. Overlooking the context from which a story is told runs the risk of misinterpreting it.

Being an insider to the culture I am researching was a powerful asset in this study. My familiarity with the culture and manners of the region where my participants lived gave me access to perspectives I would not have gained as an outsider. More importantly, my being a cultural insider helped me notice when my own context influences the way I form and interpret the narratives. Specifically, as an Algerian woman who has lived in the West for the past two years, I worked to listen and interpret Algerian women's stories from the perspective in which I was raised rather than from a lens of Western influence.

Although I was an insider to the culture, my Western education has somehow alienated me from my people. Their perception of me changes the moment I say I am pursuing my education in the United States. Me confessing to women that I have learned the Westerner’s ways, decenters me from their confidentiality circle and places me in that of an outsider. I then had to learn how to switch between the insider/outsider roles in my attempt at preserving the meaning and authenticity of their accounts. Above all, I sought to look at the world through their eyes; form their stories and interpret them in what complies with the context they were told in.

### Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Feminist qualitative research takes various theoretical approaches to analysis, although they all start from a shared point: problematizing women's diverse situations and the institutions that shape those situations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Feminist research defies the institutions and social structures that marginalize women and centers the latter at the heart of the research process. Amongst the feminist approaches to theory, I find the standpoint epistemology suitable for this study for two reasons: 1) It challenges people to understand societies based on the experiences of marginalized women and 2) it requires building original knowledge from women's experiences (Brooks).

Brooks (2007) defined feminist standpoint as "a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from, women's experiences" (p. 60). It is necessary to acknowledge that women's lives are part and parcel of feminist theory. Feminist scholarship has long been absorbed in a quest for recovering and reinterpreting women's lives. Therefore, women's personal narratives are a fundamental instrument in feminist research inquiry. As Brooks (2007) explained: "building knowledge from women's actual, or concrete, life experiences is acutely important... if we hope to repair the historical trend of women's misrepresentation and exclusion from the dominant knowledge canons" (p.56). Yet, it is important to keep in mind that this approach does not entail that all women share one position or a singular perspective but demands considering the implications of women's diverse locations (DeVault, 1990).

The feminist standpoint epistemology lens requires the use of women's concrete experiences. That is, the set of activities women undertake on a daily basis. Brooks argued:

By making women's concrete experiences the "point of entry" for research and scholarship and exposing the rich array of new knowledge contained within women's experiences, feminist standpoint scholars begin to fill in the gaps on the subject of women in many disciplines (p.58).

Feminist standpoint does not only uncover the injustices women experience but also unearths the corrupt structure of society in all aspects of life. In doing so, it also creates possibilities for mending the divides and achieving equality. The knowledge gained from women's experiences can ultimately be used to enact social change, primarily by improving women's conditions (Brooks).

Throughout the following analysis, I use a feminist standpoint epistemology in interpreting women's narratives. Particularly, I aim at constructing new knowledge starting from Algerian women's narrated experiences and underlining their concrete experiences. Additionally, I present those narratives in a form whereby readers can develop a better understanding of how Algerian society functions. It is only when one acknowledges the existing disparities defining people's lives that one can come to a better understanding of others' behaviors. Yet, other questions arise: *what other factors affect the way stories are shaped?*

The question of authority between the researcher and the narrator is another concern that needs evaluation before analysis begins. The focus of the text (which is formed by the data the participants provided) can be determined by the intentions both the narrator and the interpreter have, as they both enter the dialogue with different



agendas (Maynes & Garner, 1989). Interpreting stories of people in a culture for an audience of a totally different culture is very challenging. The fear of misinterpreting or distorting what the narrator *meant* to say was prevalent throughout my journey as a feminist qualitative researcher. However, this issue of power and privilege, although dominated my thinking, was not limiting because my feminist learnings have taught me to be sensitive and careful towards the narrator's intended meanings.

### Analysis

#### What is *Tasfih*

*Tasfih* is a magical practice and within Algerian culture there are several different methods of carrying out the ritual. Although the methods and tools used differ, its purpose remains to protect girls' virginity from rape. Imam Youcef, who was the only man I was able to interview, shared some valuable information with me:

*Tasfih* is some sort of magic which is also called "the magic of protection." It dates back to the early ages, or Ignorance Times where there were so many invasions and civil wars between tribes. People thus feared for their daughters and locked them because they were afraid the invaders would rape them. Although there is no source to back this up but I believe that it was not the creation of women only. I believe that men were the ones who ordered the women to lock their daughters during wars. Even after Islam came and people were ordered to stop using magic in their everyday life, some tribes kept using it and that's how it persisted to exist until today.

The two main methods of completing the ritual used a handloom or a piece of glass. What distinguishes the two from one another is that the handloom does not affect the girl's skin while the one using the piece of glass results in permanent scars on the body. Women in the past used to weave rugs and blankets in their houses. It was very common to find a handloom set up in every house, especially in villages where women

did not have other things to occupy themselves with. Once the wood logs that constitute the handloom are set up, the woman asks the girl to walk through the handloom in circles seven times, before they start weaving the rug. While completing each circle, the woman asks the girl to repeat a sentence. Aunt Rahima who is 84 years old explained the process:

If my memory doesn't fail me, this is how we did it: we call the nubile girl while we are setting the handloom and ask her to walk around it seven times. In each circle she repeats the sentence "I'm a wall and people's son is a thread." Some women make her eat a piece of date after each circle, while others don't. They need to keep the materials used in setting the handloom and hide them safely until the girl's wedding night; anything that is left, like threads and weaving combs and preserve them until that day. This is how we used to lock the girl.

For the other method, women use a small piece of glass to cut seven tiny slashes above the girl's knee. Then, they wipe the blood coming out of the wounds with a piece of date or raisin and feed it to the girl, seven times. After each time the girl eats the raisin or date, she is asked to repeat a sentence. Aunt Rahima proceeds:

Some people use another method that utilizes a piece of glass. They cut seven small slashes on the girl's right thigh. While the blood is dripping, the woman wipes it with a piece of date and feeds it to the girl and asks her to repeat the sentence "I'm a wall and people's son is a thread." She does that seven times. Seven slashes, seven pieces of date wiping the blood and eating them. We need to make sure those cuts remain visible, so we put coffee powder on them, or any other thing that can ensure us they remain visible. It is important to keep that same piece of glass and hide it for the unlocking process. In cases where it is lost, we can bring another one but it has to be of the same color used that day. The day of the girl's wedding, we do the same but reverse the direction of the cuts. Seven times, seven dates, and she repeats the sentence seven times "I am a thread and people's son is a wall."

To understand the magical dimensions of *Tasfih*, it is important to provide some context about the number "seven". While every culture around the globe holds some numbers to be symbolic or significant in their everyday life, in Muslim communities, the number seven is given a religious importance. To begin with, according to the Quran,

Allah has created seven heavens, and created humans in seven stages. It is also mentioned in the Quran that hell has seven gates. Crucial to this study is Prophet Mouhammed's (peace be upon him) hadeeth: "Whoever eats seven dates of al-Aaliyah in the morning will not be harmed that day by poison or witchcraft" (Al-Bukhari, 5445). Although the real relevance of the number seven to the magic of *Tasfih* is not evident thus far, learning about the significance of the number in Quran offers some additional links. Wiping the blood with seven pieces of dates and eating them during exercising a magical practice suggests the supernatural denotation of *Tasfih*.

During the locking process, when the girl does what she is told to do, a Jinn is called to reside on her uterus and protect it against any man who approaches her. In explaining the role of the Jinn, Sadia's daughter Selwa shared what she had heard from other women:

It's like the Jinn takes the shape of a piece of flesh and closes that opening, it makes the aperture disappear somehow. It's like when the husband tries to do it, he cannot find the aperture. It makes the situation between them so bad; I mean it's not easy, it's the night they both were waiting for for so long and then it turns into a tragedy.

Similarly, Dalal recounted how her grandmother locked her and her cousins all together.

Of course, Dalal did not know what that was until later in her life. She shared a significant memory about a sentence her grandmother said:

I didn't understand my grandmother's words, except when she whispered to my cousin telling her to leave now, and that she's now protected, her beautiful body is now guarded by a nice Jinn who's going to protect her against cunning men.

These significant details about *Tasfih* reinforce its magical and supernatural nature.

Although I could not obtain every detail about how it is done, the data I gathered was sufficient enough to get a clearer understanding of its mystical dimensions.

Women lock their daughters before they hit puberty, and only unlock them the day of their wedding. That is when they make sure the girl will only sleep with one man: her husband. Aunt Rahima continued:

We only unlock her the day of her wedding. We make her shower, then wear a blouse only, nothing under. Then we burn the tools we hid the day we locked her and make the vapor go up in between her legs. During that; she repeats the sentence seven times: "I'm a thread and people's son is a wall."

The procedures of the practice are very rich with symbolism. During the locking process, the girl declares herself a wall and any man who approaches her to be a thread. The wall can symbolize strength, solidity and firmness. The thread on the other hand can symbolize resilience, weakness and fragility. During the locking process, the girl embodies the strength of the wall and bestows the fragility of the thread upon the man who dares to approach her. A girl under *Tasfih* is now a wall that cannot be breached. The wall signifies the hymen which cannot be penetrated by the penis, which is now as weak as a thread, as long as the girl is locked.

Despite the difference in the methods and the tools used, the sentences recited by the girl remain the same. During the unlocking process, she surrenders to the husband by giving up the wall's sturdiness to the man and putting on the thread's fragility. During the reversal process, the phrase is reversed as well. The girl becomes a thread and the guy becomes a wall. In her first night with her husband; the only man she will ever sleep with, she surrenders to him by announcing herself to embody the thread and her husband

to embody the wall. His penis becomes strong like a wall, and her hymen becomes weak as a thread; fragile and easy to break.

#### *How Tasfih is practiced*

Some of the women I interviewed mentioned that the ritual gained more popularity during French colonialism from 1830 to 1962. Rape became a weapon used by French soldiers to weaken men's resistance. When Algerian men gathered and fled to the mountains to form resistance groups, the colonizer seized that opportunity by breaking through their houses and raping their women. According to Fadila's account, *Tasfih* has occurred as a rite of protection of girls' virginity, not from falling in vice but rather from rape incidents. Fadila, a 45-year old woman narrated:

During colonialism, my grandfather and his family used to live in a remote village in the mountains, very far from the city. Families in the past used to live all together, it was thus very common to find a dozen young girls in a single dwelling. When French soldiers used to break through houses, young girls were thus prone to being raped by them. My grandfather had to buy a house in the city where there are more people.

During French colonialism, French soldiers used to break through our houses and rape women and girls under the sight of their fathers and brothers. We had to protect ourselves and our daughters.

Both Imam Youcef and Fadila pointed out the main cause for the emergence of *Tasfih* and linked it to invasions and wars that took place centuries ago. At first, the practice was meant to protect girls from rape by colonizers, centuries later, the reason behind practicing it changed. Nowadays, Algeria is a free country and no civil wars nor terrorist attacks are happening, however, women still lock their daughters for other reasons. Leila reported what her grandmother had told her: "... but nowadays, she says that they still do it because of the vice and sin spreading in the country, people are more

distanced from their religion and principles, rape is more spread these days than in the past.” Women who still practice *Tasfih* on their daughters claimed that the public is not a safe place for a girl. However, what is worth noting is the fact that the participants were not worried about their daughters as much as they were about what people would say about them and their families. Fadila explained, “A girl’s honor lies in her femininity, in her virginity. When she loses her virginity, what is left for her?” Similarly, Leila added:

They do this because they place so much importance on the girl’s virginity. They were scared it would be damaged and then people would talk about their daughter and then about the whole family. It’s like if something happens to a girl, even if it’s an accident, people would say she is not an honored girl, she is damaged goods.

These beliefs that associate female virginity with family honor are widespread in the Algerian society, as Fadila and Leila’s accounts demonstrate. Muslim women’s involvement in magical practices like *Tasfih*, which go against Islam, is an evidence of how much society values female virginity and how people can go great lengths to protect it.

#### Men’s Role in *Tasfih*

Hearing about the procedure of *Tasfih* as practiced on young girls by women, one wonders where the man is throughout the practice. Leila, a 27-year old woman who is also under *Tasfih*, stated, “She [her grandmother] told me that one of the conditions for the process is that no man should be present in the house at that moment.” In the same context, when I asked Saliha what was her father’s standpoint from *Tasfih*, her mother jumped into the conversation saying, “Why would men care about such things? These are women’s affairs, it’s none of their business.” Similarly, when answering the same

question, Sabrina replied, “My father has nothing to do with these things, I don’t even think he knows that my mom agreed to *lock* me. Just so that her son lives in peace.”

The absence of men from the setting of the practice is noteworthy. While each participant was narrating her experience with *Tasfih*, I noticed that the only time they mention men is when they talk about the locked girl’s husband. It is therefore necessary to investigate the reasoning behind this. As the previous testimonies showed, most participants claimed that *Tasfih* is a women’s affair in which men do not interfere and have no idea it even exists. If *Tasfih* is meant to preserve girls’ virginity until marriage, and if a non-virgin girl is deemed unmarriageable, doesn’t this mean that men are not completely absent? It is then this ideal image of the virgin girl, who every man prefers to have, that imposes on women the need to save their daughters’ virginity.

There are several instances where the husband realizes that his wife was not virgin and decides to divorce her, without even giving her the benefit of the doubt. Saliha recounted a story of a girl whose mother forgot to unlock her before her first night with her husband, “There is this girl who when her husband failed to even approach her on their first night, he took her back to her family and told them she was sick. He blamed her for his failure.” In other stories, the man was depicted as a superhero, as a savior who decided to protect the non-virgin girl from scandal. In the eyes of women, a man who refuses to expose the girl for not being virgin, is an honorable man. Saliha continued:

There are cases where people cover up on a non-virgin girl. I know a story about someone who did not bleed when they did it. And because her husband was so nice, he refused to tell anybody and accepted her the way she is. But eventually, his mother and other relatives knew about that, but they were so ashamed to reveal it, so they remained silent on that.

In Algerian society, the lack of individualism for girls obliges them to seek married life as the ultimate goal in their lives. Girls lack the freedom and rights which boys have. At a very young age, girls are programmed to aspire for marital life as a way to get that freedom. Although less common, there still are girls who do not go to college and prefer to stay home and wait for a suitor; the man who would save them from household chores. In this regard, I find Sabrina's account on why she wants to unlock herself very intriguing. She said:

I was talking with my friend about *Tasfih* the other day and she advised me to do my best to get rid of it. She believes it can turn into an "admiring jinn" who would stop suitors from coming and thus delay my marriage chances.

Sabrina is pursuing a college degree, yet, she wants to unlock herself not because she refuses to be associated with magic but because she is afraid she will not get married.

The reason I mentioned Sabrina's perspective is to say that one's educational level does not necessarily determine their way of seeing and existing in the world. The social positions women occupy provide an epistemic source for knowledge, not only regarding women's status as marginalized, but also how is the status of oppressor given to certain groups. In this respect, Sandra Harding (1993) stated: "Starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (p. 56). When one tries to look at the world through women's eyes, they can pinpoint the sources of power and how the latter is distributed unequally.



### Family, Honor and the Female Body

The concept of honor in relation to the female body in the Arab world has been studied in depth. However, research exploring how women protect their bodies to ensure they remain pure and avoid soiling their families' honor are scarce. A woman's honor in Algeria in particular is closely linked to her pre-marital status as a virgin. Any incident that jeopardizes the girl's virginity is deemed to be her fault. Women who fail to uphold this social expectation encounter severe backlash from society. Consequently, that expectation imposes on them a necessity to do the impossible in order to avoid the repercussions that come with losing virginity. When I asked Saliha about why a girl's virginity is so important, she said: "The girl, if she loses her virginity, she loses everything, mostly she loses her honor. Her virginity is her 'share capital', if she loses it, she loses all her life."

Saliha is a teacher of Arabic and Islamic studies in middle school. She is well educated and considered as an accredited source of knowledge. However, her approach towards this subject raises concerns about how deeply those false beliefs are ingrained in people's minds, and how hard it is going to be to try to eliminate them. Along the same lines Zoubida, an 85-year old woman who lives in the suburbs and who has six daughters, added that "that's all the girl has, if she loses it, she loses her life. I can't imagine what would happen if one of my daughters loses it." Zoubida was born and raised during the French occupation of Algeria more than seventy years ago, where very few girls had the right for education. She did not have the opportunity to go to school nor acquire education of any type. In spite of their different upbringings, Zoubida and Saliha both

share similar perspectives on the fundamental role a girl's virginity has in shaping her social status.

Men on the other hand are not expected to meet any social status related to their bodies. The patriarchal structure of the Algerian society permits them to act freely, with no social restraints or sexual expectations. When I asked Saliha why male virginity is not as valued as female virginity, she answered:

For the man, whatever he does, he remains a man. People forget his flaws throughout time. The girl however remains in people's thinking forever and she brings shame to her family. No one will hold a man accountable for his flaws, unlike the girl who can be killed if she loses her virginity.

When answering the same question, Zoubida spoke with grief and distress. The sadness in her voice is clear as she explains that she does not want that fate for her daughters and that she sympathizes with girls with such endings:

People tend to forget a man's deeds but never a woman's. If something happens to her, it doesn't matter who did it or how it happened, all that matters is that it happened to her. Now she is bad. Whoever does that to her will be forgotten but her situation is to be forever remembered. Her honor is tied to that place. I mean, if she loses it, she loses her honor and her family's honor. People are not merciful, my daughter! Men are very insensitive towards us.

I was curious to know Zoubida's daughters' standpoint from this, so I asked her permission to let me interview one of them. Although they were all above twenty, she abruptly turned me down saying that she had told me everything I needed to know about *Tasfih*.

Understanding the concept of honor as perceived by Algerians necessitates a deeper comprehension of family structure in the country. Most discussions about the centrality of family in the formation of one's identity emphasized on its interrelatedness

to other social institutions. In Arab societies, the family is at the heart of socio-economic enterprise where individuals inherit their social status through their families, just like they do their religion, language and political affiliations. These facts reinforce the complexity of family ties in Arab societies; amongst its members and among the family and society. In this regard, I asked my participants to share their perceptions about the significance of family in their lives, the following are some of the responses:

“Family for me is who you are. If you don’t have a family, you are nobody.”  
(Saliha)

“I know a girl who didn’t have a family, her mother couldn’t keep her because she wasn’t married when she gave birth to her. She was raised by a relative of mine. People still give her the stares you know! Like...they look down on her and scorn her. I hear that nobody wants to marry her because they fear she is like her mother.” (Fadila)

“I don’t feel anything towards my family you know? In fact, I think I hate having a family and I don’t want to have one of my own because I saw no good coming out of it” (Samia)

“People in my family are discriminatory, they allow my brothers to do whatever they want even if it doesn’t comply with our norms but when it comes to girls, you can’t do anything because the norms and beliefs don’t allow you!” (Rania)

It is within the institution of the family that socialization around sex and gender begins. From a young age, women are taught that they must restrain their behavior and act in very particular ways if they are to uphold their family’s honor. Socialization for Algerian males is very different. Society expects men to uphold family honor by upholding the honor of girls and women in their families. The Algerian man oppressively limits the freedom of women in his household and controls their life by deciding on where they go, who they befriend or what they wear.

Traditional gender roles and expectations are ingrained into Algerian culture. The traditional upbringing of children dictates domestic roles on girls and public ones on boys. This segregation results in giving more rights and less constraints to boys, and more duties and less freedom to girls. Most importantly, it gives more options for boys to explore their sexuality. For this concern, I asked my participants about what they think about this segregation. Habiba, a 43-year old science teacher shared:

I think the best way to do that is to spread awareness about sexual relationships amongst girls specifically. Boys talk, boys will always find ways to learn. Besides, there's no pressure imposed on them, so they will always feel that they can do whatever they want without facing repercussions. But girls, because of all the social pressure placed on them, especially ones related to their bodies... I mean, that they need to remain virgin, to cover up, and to display purity and chastity... all of these aspects limit their knowledge.

Teenagers in Algeria do not have a source to learn about sex or their bodies and sexuality. They either learn about that from their friends or from the internet. However, it was not until the past decade that the internet was being more accessible. Yet, in rural areas, the internet is still unattainable. Habiba continued:

They [girls] don't have access to resources such as the internet because in rural areas, very few houses have internet. Boys can go to what we call "cyber cafes", connect to the internet and learn about sex, while the girl is jailed inside the house. The only place she goes to is her school. She can't learn about sex there. The girl knows very little about sex and will always be curious to know more but she doesn't have resources for that. It makes it easy for a guy to seduce her, and make her believe it's a normal thing to do. He ends up raping her and sometimes impregnating her while she doesn't even know what it was.

This remains a sad fact about the reality of most girls who are raised in underprivileged regions. Their mothers themselves did not go to school and by default do not value education. They transmit their socialization to their daughters thus, help in maintaining

the flow of the social order. Assia Djébar (1999) wrote: “The matriarchs swaddle their little girls in their own insidious anguish, before they even reach puberty” (p. 145).

### Mother Daughter Relationship

Because mothers are considered the primary caretakers in the family, their interaction with their children is substantial to the formation of the child’s personality and identity. The lifelong bond constructed between mothers and daughters the moment the girl is born is of significance to all women. However, in some cases, this bond can be fragile and would instead result in devastating tensions between female members in a family. These tensions give birth to rivalry between the patriarchal mother who surrendered to gender socialization and the rebellious daughter who now knows and refuses to adhere. Therefore, the cold connectivity which some of the participants have towards their mothers is born out of adverse interaction between family members in general, and between mothers and daughters in particular. One of the most important duties mothers have towards their daughters in Algeria is to monitor their virginity and help them remain chaste until marriage. A mother is praised if she succeeds in raising a daughter who does not demonstrate any sexual behavior.

In a patriarchal society, it is common for women to turn against each other in an effort to please men. In their attempt to please the patriarch, be it a father, a brother, or even a stranger, the woman turns against another woman, the sister against her sister and worst of all, a mother against her daughter. I asked Nacira, a 45-year-old woman who has three daughters and two sons, about what would her reaction be if one of her daughters loses her virginity, she confessed:

I will blame my daughter if she loses it. I will blame her for not being careful enough and not being capable of protecting it. I will despise her and lock her in the house until some forgiving guy agrees to marry her.

Nacira is just one sample of a larger number of women who would actually treat their daughters this way. In her effort to discipline her daughter, the mother monitors the daughter's movement constantly. She has a say in what her daughter wears, where she goes and who she is with. Rania's testimonies portray the situation better:

My mom disciplines me in a different way than she does with my brothers. She interferes in every aspect of my life. My brothers are free all the time. But me? I have to adhere to and respect her decisions all the time.

Daughters feel trapped and develop a feeling of resentment towards their mothers. In most cases, this results in triggering feelings of ingratitude and raises questions such as the ones Sabrina posited. Sabrina is a 23-year old girl who is under the magic of *Tasfih*. She wondered, "why didn't my mother ever tell me about the real purpose of the ritual even as I grew older?" ... "why didn't she ever educate me on matters related to my body?" Unfortunately, Sabrina's relationship with her mother reflects that of the majority of Algerian girls, including myself. Similarly, Sidra who is currently pursuing her education in the United States and is still under *Tasfih* added:

I was in high school. One of my friends was locked as well but the difference is that her mom talks to her about it, my mom doesn't. My mom would never talk about anything when it comes to these things.

Along the same lines, Samia, who is 45 years old, well-educated and who works as a teacher of physics, revealed her cold feelings towards her mother. She told me about her failing marriage which she blamed on the elder women in the family who, according to her, forgot that Samia was locked and only remembered the day of her wedding. Samia

had already made her hair, wore makeup and put on her white dress when her aunts abruptly broke into her room and asked her to take her clothes off. Her mother had completely forgotten whether her daughter was locked or not, but her aunts decided they would reverse the spell anyway, in order to remove any doubt. Samia was astonished and cried her eyes out that night; the night which every girl dreams of was turned into a calamity in the life of Samia. Her aunts asked her to take her white dress off, take a shower and wash her hair. While her husband and his family were on their way to Samia's house to drive her to her new home, Samia was being undressed to go through the unlocking process. Samia did not even know what *Tasfih* was until later on in her life. When I asked her about how her mother was associated with the whole story, she said:

She is irresponsible when it comes to these things... I mean things related to me. I don't know how to explain this but, I have never felt her love and tenderness until this day. I kind of blame her for the failure of my marriage. I've never had a normal relationship with my husband. We were cold towards each other and I think it was because *Tasfih* was never fully removed... as I said my aunts did it hastily, so I believe they didn't do it correctly.

This cold connectivity between Samia and her mother is hitherto living in Samia.

Samia's love-deprived upbringing has affected her relationship with others as she stated:

We have a saying I think you know it; it goes like this: 'those who don't possess a feeling, cannot give it to others'... I was not loved by my mother. She has always preferred my brothers over me, even though I performed better in school and I got a good job, and even helped the family financially more than any of my brothers. I couldn't love my brothers or sisters. I was dying to get married and leave the family house but... even when I got married, I couldn't love my husband.

Samia's love-deprived relationship with her mother has in a way affected her other relations, especially that with her ex-husband. Samia revealed that she never learned how

to love or show affection towards others, the thing that resulted in her failure to build a solid relationship with her ex-husband.

Mothers will go to great lengths to protect the honor of their family, and in doing so, may negatively affect their relationship with their daughters. Sabrina's story portrays this long-lasting tension between mother and daughter. The day of his wedding, Sabrina's brother failed to fulfill his sexual duties with his wife as Sabrina narrated:

The bride's mom confessed that she *locked* her daughter and that she lost the tools she used for that (it was a padlock I think). So she could not reverse the spell of *Tasfih* without that padlock. The solution to *unlock* the bride was to *lock* another girl. That girl was me.

In some Algerian communities, the bride's mother and the groom's mother wait outside the newlywed couple's bedroom for the "good news"; that the groom has successfully breached the bride's hymen. However, there needs to be proof of that; the blood on the white bedsheet. In the case of Sabrina's brother, he failed to penetrate his wife's hymen. The bride's mother confessed eventually that she had locked her daughter and lost the tools needed to unlock her. Panic has befallen the house that night and after several inquiries, the women have learned that in order to unlock the bride, they need to lock a nubile girl in the same house. Sabrina happened to be that girl. Her mother has used her as a scapegoat to save her son's reputation. Sabrina, who was about seven years old that day, does not seem to have forgiven her mother. Her repugnance towards her mother was very apparent from the tone she used and her constant use of the phrase "may God forgive her." Sabrina recounted: "My sisters didn't know that mom locked me, they felt so bad and attacked her when they heard that she did. They are afraid it might turn into cancer; God forbid."



Mothers in Algeria are more concerned with disciplining their daughters than their sons. This variation in raising children results in giving more freedom to boys and restricting that of girls. When the daughter starts noticing how her mother treats her brothers differently, she develops feelings of anger towards her mother. Samia, Sabrina and Rania were all locked by their mothers and have had severe consequences of *Tasfih* accompanying them and affecting their relationships with others. They all find themselves distanced from their mothers and unable to communicate with them, specifically in sexual relationships matters.

This mother-daughter tension expressed by the participants emerges primarily when the mother fails in socializing her daughter into the persisting gender roles. Mervat F. Hatem (1999) clarified: “mothers receive societal approval and respect when they successfully socialize their children into existing gender roles. Failure in this task exposed mothers to censure from the patriarch and their social and familial networks” (p.193). Because society propels mothers to raise their daughters to remain pure, chaste virgins, failure to live up to that role creates a tension between the two. As a result, mothers sought to practice *Tasfih* on their daughters in order to guarantee they remain virgins, and therefore get societal praise.

#### Language and Self-Agency

Another significant theme that repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews was the language the participants used to describe events. Particularly, they refrain from using the word “sex” and other terminology around that discourse. All the women and girls I interviewed have demonstrated a certain uneasiness when speaking of the intimate

relationship between a married couple or between themselves and their partners. Regardless of their educational level and the milieu surrounding them, they have all displayed discomfort when I asked questions directly related to sex. Mostly, they either lowered their gaze, released a sigh or remained silent for some time before answering. When people did share information, I have noticed how they refrain from using exact words to describe “sex”, “penetration”, “erection”, “vagina” and many other words used in speaking about intercourse. This careful selection of vocabulary is an indication of how distanced the language used to address sex is.

The participants constantly referred to the act of having sex and female and male sexual organs by the third person pronoun “it” or called them the “thing”. Saliha, a 47-year old woman who is well educated and knowledgeable, when recounting a story of a relative of hers and how she and her husband failed to have sex, avoided using the word “sex”:

On her first night with her husband, the poor girl could not do *anything*. Each time her husband approaches her, he feels weak and passes out. He couldn't ummm... (Saliha looked away and avoided eye contact with me) They stayed like that for so long, without telling anyone that they actually never did *anything*.

Fadila, a 45 years old woman, agreed to meet with me in her house for the interview.

However, the day of the interview, she did not let me in her house because her husband was there and she was afraid he might overhear us. Instead, we sat in the veranda of her house. The interview with Fadila and Sadia also revealed how they held themselves back from articulating the moments in their narration that are related to sex:

It's true that reversing the spell with another magical spell unlocks the girl, I mean she will be able to *fulfill her marriage needs*, but some of that spell keeps accompanying the girl later in her life... *the first night will pass, they will do it in*

*natural conditions* but later on in her life, the girl will face a lot of psychological problems because of the magic (Aunt Rahima).

The Jinni, I was told, sits on the place where the.... You know (Sadia pointed at her privates with a quick look) and prevents any man from approaching that place (Sadia).

Aunt Rahima, who is almost 85 years old, did her best to explain how she herself used to lock the girls in her family. However, when I asked her how she knew it was affective and what were the consequences of not removing *Tasfih*, she answered with abstinence:

We know it works because we hear stories from women who forget to unlock their daughters. If they don't remove it, the couple can't do anything. The man can't ummm.... you know... he fails to ummm.... you know... (aunt Rahima lowers her gaze and stares at her privates in an attempt to replace the phrase "he can't have erection" with a physical gesture)

Enfolded in the aforementioned passages from my participants' accounts is this remoteness they displayed towards sex. Not only from the act of having sex but also the language used to discuss it. Among the many reasons causing this distance, I analyze two which are of importance to this study. First, people are brought up being taught that it is prohibited to talk about sex. Second, the act of having sex in itself is tabooed in the Algerian society. Through investigating the origins of these causes, I also seek to pinpoint the implicit consequences they give rise to.

Growing up in Algeria, one is taught to steer clear from any sex-related subject whether with deed or word. In Algeria, the word "thing" becomes synonymous with the word "sex." The language the participants used mirrors the power that the social constraints have over people and how the latter are socialized into fearing sex talk. Living in the country for over twenty-five years, I came to conclude that there is a collective uneasiness towards sexuality in general. This taboo surrounding discussions on sex is

detrimental on many levels. Most importantly, it affects the marital life of couples which in turn impacts the children's upbringing into suppressing their own sexuality.

These social constraints around sex talk have limited my access to the data I was hoping to gather. Because talking about sex is tabooed and considered unreligious, I could not ask the participants any direct questions related to that. Even when describing situations where the husband failed to penetrate his wife's hymen, it was only through their use of symbolism, metaphors and physical gestures that the participants were able to convey their ideas. The few statements I could obtain made me realize that it is only by overcoming this taboo that women will come to peace with their bodies and sexuality. It is only through talking about it that they will accept their bodies and begin to explore them. Ultimately, they will be able to develop agency and cease to rely on men.

Speaking and articulating one's mind plays a significant role in developing their self-agency. When the person constantly refrains from using the first-person singular "I" and instead uses the first-person plural "we", they get absorbed in a self-denying mood. Moreover, the scarcity of self-expression in the participants' confessional discourse helps in maintaining anonymity. Simply put, this combination of a distant language, alienation from the self and a lack of self-expression helps in depriving women from agency and dissociates them from any truths surrounding the discourse. Aunt Rahima, for example, kept using the pronoun "we" when she was recounting how *she* used to lock girls. Most participants used the pronoun "we" instead of "I" when talking about how each of them, individually, practiced *Tasfi'h*. If any of the participants used the "I", she would risk uncovering the ambiguity surrounding her confessional account on engaging in a magical

practice that goes against their religion. According to Katherine Gracki (1996) “the singularity represented by the “I” transgressed the traditional anonymity surrounding any confessional discourse” (p. 835). Hence, the participants avoid using the pronoun “I” out of fear that they will be exposed.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

In this project, I used qualitative research as a method to investigate the rite of *Tasfih* as practiced by Algerian women. I used in-depth interviews and participant observation to gather the data and conducted a thematic analysis from a feminist standpoint lense for data analysis. This research is particularly important because it explores female sexuality and Algerian women's perception about their bodies through their involvement in *Tasfih*. This chapter contains a discussion of substantial findings from data analysis in relation to the literature on *Tasfih*, female sexuality, and family honor in Algeria. It also includes discussions that help in answering the research questions:

1. What is *Tasfih* and what are its purposes?
2. How did the rite of *Tasfih* occur and how does it protect female virginity?
3. How do sexual standards contribute to perceptions of female virginity in Algeria? How are these standards performed in *Tasfih*?
4. How does women's knowledge or lack thereof about their sexuality encourage practices such as *Tasfih*?

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations and setting the ground for possible future research.

Some key factors emerging throughout data analysis contribute in drawing the overall picture for understanding the rite of *Tasfih*: a) a detailed description of how the ritual is done and its desired results, b) a set of reasons that led women to practice it in the

first place, c) its relation to family honor as linked to the female body and d) the language used by women to describe *Tasfihi* indicates their lack of agency. All of these factors help in constituting a larger framework for a better comprehension of the rite of *Tasfihi* in Algeria.

### The Emergence of *Tasfihi* and its Purposes

The main purpose of conducting this research was to define the rite *Tasfihi* and try to learn the reasons behind practicing it. My other objective was to present it to the English-speaking academic community considering the scarce published work on it. *Tasfihi* is a magical ritual practiced on young girls before they hit the age of puberty. It is practiced by women on girls. It can be done in different ways, using different tools. The analysis offered a description of two methods based on narratives by women who practiced it in the past. Although the methods and tools differ, as the data analysis revealed, its purpose remains one: to protect girls' virginity until marriage. Protecting girls' virginity as it turned out, is not limited to rape incidents only but also to consensual pre-marital sexual relationships. The ultimate goal is to preserve the hymen and keep it intact until marriage.

The practice is reversed the night of the girl's wedding, that is when her mother is ensured that her daughter will only have sex with the husband. As this study indicated, the main reason for initiating the practice is to preserve the hymen until marriage. However, the analysis also uncovered another purpose for engaging in *Tasfihi*, to protect family honor. Based on the literature that links family honor and female virginity, failure to possess an intact hymen the night of the wedding jeopardizes family honor. Research

on family in Algeria has shown that girls in the family are considered carriers of family honor. Their bodies, their apparel, and their performing of chastity and virginity are all factors that determine the honor of their families. Failure to sustain one of those ruins the girl's family reputation. The data analysis reinforced these claims by highlighting the women's own experiences, as they were lived and perceived by them.

The dilemma the mothers I interviewed experienced when locking their daughters is worthy of further analysis. The literature around how Arab communities embrace and praise female virginity and family honor provided an overview of the context in which women live. The emergence of honor killings (mostly done by men in the family) as a punishment for girls who lose their virginity (no matter how) generated fear amongst mothers. The latter's fear for their daughters made them seek refuge in magical practices like *Tasfiḥ* to protect their daughters' virginity from voluntary and involuntary premarital sexual relationships, thus, avoiding dishonoring the family. Before delving into discussing mothers' dilemma and their decision to lock their daughters as revealed by their narratives, I first discuss the way participants understand society and family in Algeria.

Societal dynamics both shape the relationship between family members and are affected by them. The bond that links society to family is so substantial and hard to break. Because "the family is society in miniature" (Fernea, 1985, p. 47), members in a family are expected to comply with the social order. Although the participants hold different views about what a family means to them, they all link internal family affairs to societal ones. In other words, their answers to what a family means to them are strongly



influenced by their views on society at large. This is evidence of the interrelatedness of family and society in all aspects of life.

Research on Arab societies and families indicated that the family is the first instrument of socialization which people are exposed to. Family teaches individuals the customs and traditions they need in order to maintain the cultural heritage and the stability of the current social order. The data analysis suggested that it is female members in particular who are more prone to be regulated by the power of family. The authority the family has over its members can hinder a daughters' quest for autonomy and self-realization. The girls' attempts at breaking away from the patriarchal chains in the family was a dominant theme in the interviews. Consequently, their rebellion creates conflicts within the family; particularly, between daughters and their mothers.

Scholarly work on the life of girls in Arab societies unveiled part of the pressure girls undergo since the day they are born. My participants have supported this claim further when they expressed the suffocation they feel inside their dwellings on a daily basis. Indeed, when an Arab child is born, the factor that is considered most important is their gender. Samia, Rania and Sabrina were able to voice their suffering when they were given the opportunity. Aunt Rahima, Fadila, and Sadia however, were unable to do so because of their lack of education which resulted in their lack of proper knowledge, thus, the chance to develop self-agency. From the day she is born, the Arab girl symbolically wears the family's robe of honor which she is not permitted to soil. Each participant had her own story to tell about suffering because she is a female. Any incident that results in a damage in the hymen, whether with or without consent, is always the girl's fault. Mothers

sought to find ways to protect their girls' virginity, thus, their families' honor. *Tasfih*, was therefore given birth as a practice to preserve the hymen for that one man.

All the literature that linked *Tasfih* to magic and Islam offered evidence on how *Tasfih* is pure magic and how Islam forbids magic. Islam, being the most practiced religion in Algeria, prohibits individuals from engaging in magical practices under any circumstances. In line with this research, the participants who used to practice *Tasfih* in the past indicated that they did not know it was non-religious. After every statement, Aunt Rahima insisted that she did what her ancestors used to do without knowing that it was forbidden by Islam. A woman like aunt Rahima who was born and raised during colonial years, did not have formal education, nor access to credible sources of knowledge.

In recent years, however, and as education became more accessible to women, resources for knowledge acquisition were also being more accessible. Some women reported that they stopped practicing *Tasfih* the moment they learned it was magic. Others however, proceeded with the practice despite knowing they were engaging in the most prohibited act in Islam. These women, in the words of the participants, see protecting their daughters' virginity and family's honor as worthy of committing acts forbidden by their faith. From a mother's perspective, the punishment for getting involved in magical practices is less severe than having their daughters killed in the situation they lose their virginity. In regard to this situation, some of the participants tried to justify their deed by explaining the complexity of the situation they were put in. The mothers who engaged in this practice reported the discomfort and uneasiness they

felt that day. In an effort to understand these mothers, it is crucial to look at their situation through their eyes, not ours. They faced a double-edged sword: either they do not lock their daughters and risk rape, shame and death or they protect their daughters' virginity and their families' honor by engaging in forbidden magical practices.

According to the scholarly work on the emergence of *Tasfih* and based on the participants' understanding of it, in Algeria, the rite was first practiced during colonial years to protect the girls from rapist colonizers. However, *Tasfih* persisted even after Algeria gained its independence. According to the participants, mothers still lock their daughters because of vice and immorality spread in the country nowadays. To explain further, in the Algerian society, girls and boys are expected to maintain virtuous relationships in their interactions by avoiding flirting, physical contact and other advances that allude to a sexual relationship. Nowadays, due to the lack of sex education, individuals feed their curiosity in a manner that threatens the ethics of the country. People are no longer upholding the morals and ethics they are supposed to maintain. As a result, immorality has become very common especially amongst high school and college students. But, getting involved in magical practices should not be the only solution for mothers to protect their daughters' virginity.

#### Sexual Standards and Female Virginity

The analysis of the data offered a rich description of two methods to practicing *Tasfih*. Both methods share some aspects, such as prohibiting male presence in the house while locking the girl, and keeping men unaware of the existence of *Tasfih*. This absence of the man from the scene reinforces the gender segregation already prevalent in Algeria.

Scholarly work on gender roles in Algeria focuses on the role men and women played during colonial years. Even the most recent research still ties gender roles back to the war. While women's contribution to liberating the country should not be forgotten, the fact remains that acknowledging their achievements should not be limited to those of the past half century. As we live in the present time, the women of today and their situation matter as well. As I conduct research on Algerian women, I am only uncovering their socio-political situation partially. The data I gathered from a small region in the country revealed some new dimensions to looking at gender roles, particularly, ones related to sexualities.

There is a classic sexual double standard permeating Algerian society. While society places fundamental importance on female virginity, it does not do so on male virginity. In fact, society rewards men if they demonstrate sexual interest of any kind and stigmatizes women for engaging in similar behaviors. What studies investigating this angle concluded can be summarized in El Saadawi's (2015) statement: "sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation" (p. 64). Saliha had expressed that people tend to forget a man's immoral deeds but never those of a woman. Fadila also shared similar insights when she said that she would impose stricter parenting on her two daughters and not on her son believing that society is more merciful on men. I also witnessed cases where the public sheds more light on a girl when sexual relationships outside the wedlock are exposed, forgetting about the guy immediately. The mothers I interviewed all cherish their daughters' virginity. They do

not perceive that of their sons in the same fashion. In fact, they displayed a sense of pride and appreciation when mentioning their sons. This interrelatedness of women's bodies and family honor has become a social reality; that is, a reality which is socially constructed rather than biologically inherited or even religiously dictated.

As the literature review demonstrated, "a man can be a womanizer of the worst caliber and yet be considered an honorable man as long as his women-folk are able to protect their genital organs" (El Saadawi, 2015, p. 64). Therefore, a woman who fails to protect her genital organs against rape or consensual pre-marital sex dishonors the men in her family by default. In Algeria, as is the case with any Arab patriarchal society, the public enforces premarital virginity on girls and ensures that their honor and that of their families is strongly tied to that very fine membrane. If the participants meet at a shared point at any moment throughout the interviews, it is at their emphasis on their or their daughters' virginity before marriage. I have learned from them that their beliefs do not all emanate from the same source. Some of them believe that female virginity is an Islamic command, that is, God has ordered girls to remain virgins until marriage. However, as discussed in the literature review, there is a mix between the concept of chastity and virginity as mentioned in the Qur'an. I am not suggesting here that virginity is not required for girls by Islam but rather that it is required for both men and women. Another group of women believe that for a girl to remain virgin until marriage is the *norm* and that they need to respect it. These women never question how those norms originated, and who constructed them. Interestingly, although the source for their beliefs differs, they all end up linking female virginity to family honor.

According to the participants, religiously and normatively, if a girl loses her virginity, she is deviating from the norm and is diverging from religiosity. The causes for virginity loss cease to matter. What matters most is that the girl is non-virgin, she is a divergent who imposes a threat to the social order. Most importantly, she imposes a threat to family reputation because “family reputation depends on the virginity of daughters and sisters, the fidelity of wives, and the continence of widowed and divorced daughters or sisters” (Charrad, 2001, p. 63). This link between female virginity and family reputation did not seem to arouse curiosity in the participants. Although some of them, the educated ones specifically, have expressed their objection to it, they did not do much about it. These participants shared the concern that family honor should not be linked to female virginity, but they also explained that, within their capacity, “talking amongst each other” is the only thing they can do.

#### The Impact of Women’s Knowledge about Sexuality on the Emergence of *Tasfiḥ*

The analysis of the data gathered showed that there is a sharp distinction between literate and illiterate women in how they come to formulate their knowledge. Elder women, due to the time they grew up in, were not allowed education. Their knowledge is gained from their everyday interactions. Their knowledge was not developed nor constructed through individual effort and personal quests. These women acquired their knowledge from their communication with the men in their families. Because men were their only liaison with the outer world, they perceived them as more powerful, more knowledgeable and above all, more worthy of obedience. These are the same women who vehemently believe in female virginity being a religious command and/or a *norm* to be

respected. These are the same women who initiated the rite of *Tasfih* to protect their daughters' virginity. Their critical situation and the conditions under which they lived, in addition to the questionable point of contact they had with the outside world, have all served in shaping their personal beliefs. Now they seek to pass on their convictions to their daughters and granddaughters who are growing up in totally different circumstances.

Daughters, the literate ones, were born in the Free State; independent Algeria. They had more rights and better circumstances than the ones their mothers and grandmothers had. They were allowed education and access to public spaces. This group of women had their own way of learning. Apart from what they were taught in schools, they also sought to self-educate themselves. Some of the participants, who refuse to believe in the hymen as the most significant part in a girl's body *and* life, revealed that what they have learned about their sexuality was not from their mothers nor from schools but rather from their female friends and from the internet. These women refuse to blindly assimilate what they are taught but rather question everything. They reject internalizing the concept of virginity the way it is perceived in their society.

The stories the participants shared when they let loose their secrets and confessions concerning their understanding of virginity, made me think about it differently. Based on what I came out with from the interviews, I realized that Algerians mix the concepts of a chaste girl and a virgin girl. They use both concepts interchangeably. This misunderstanding of the two concepts is one of the things that Barlas (2002) sought to accentuate in her *unreading* of the patriarchal interpretations of

the Qur'an. The generalization that a girl who displays chastity in her behavior is certainly virgin and vice versa is believed to stem from the Qur'an. Between what Barlas (2002) explained and what some of my participants demonstrated in this concern, I find that women of today no longer take the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an unthinkingly, unlike the elders who assimilate it unquestionably.

Chastity and virginity are not very unrelated. In fact, the literature and the data analysis help in drawing parallels between the two. When women talk about girls embodying chaste behavior in the public, the concept of "performing virginity" (Abu-Odeh, 2010) comes into play. Beyond having an intact hymen, girls are also expected to demonstrate chaste behaviors. An intact hymen on the day of her marriage proves a girl has properly performed chastity. Prior to her marriage life, she is expected to materialize the role of the invisible hymen and display it to the public through her day to day behavior. In this way, the physicality of the hymen needs to be "signified, through an elaborate performance for the benefit of the social audience" (Abu-Odeh, p. 918). In other words, a woman needs to publicly display her possession of an intact hymen through performing chastity and modesty. Within the framework of *Tasfiha*, although the girl's hymen is supposedly protected by the Jinn, she still needs to perform her virginity in public because nobody, except the female members in the family, knows that she is locked --her hymen will always stay in place until marriage.

The data analysis showed that Algerian women lack sexual education. Their limited knowledge on the concept of chastity and virginity, and their belief that they do not apply to men serve in reinforcing the sexual gender gap. The literature on female



virginity addressed how society helps construct people's understanding of it. The narratives on the other hand went deeper and revealed women's participation in constructing and perpetuating that knowledge. This research added new knowledge to the existing literature by revealing how women's lack of knowledge about virginity – whether as mentioned in religion or in public discourse- contributes in perpetuating the social construct of virginity. To put it differently, women are active participants in upholding the glorification of female virginity in Algeria. The reason for their participation in it traces back to the distorted and limited knowledge they gather about female virginity. As discussed previously, women's lack of resources makes men in their family their only source of knowledge. The result is an incomplete and misinformed knowledge that reinforces women's previous beliefs that are then passed on to the next generation without question. The ultimate result of this lack of knowledge is the emergence and persistence of rituals such as *Tasfih*.

As expressed throughout data collection and analysis, the absence of sex knowledge amongst Algerian women makes it hard for them to navigate through the public space without being lured into committing immoral deeds. This lack of knowledge around their bodies and sexual relationships makes girls easy prey for men. A girl whose sexual desires were suppressed throughout her life, is more inclined to want to discover the prohibited. Based on the research on the subject, that which is prohibited is always desired. The participants' insistence on prohibiting anything related to sex and sex-talk was shown in the language they used to speak about sex. Suppression in return invokes a desire in girls to discover the forbidden. What I am trying to delineate here is the

possibility of finding another way to protect girls' virginity; by allowing them to develop autonomy.

One of the essential aspects this research revealed is the participants' lack of self-agency which was depicted through the language they used. The connection between one's choice of words and their autonomy cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, studies suggested that the language individual's use in their everyday interactions also shapes their sexuality. In other words, girls learn about their sexuality, the do's and don'ts, from the language their mothers use to communicate with them. In light of this project, the language my participants used when narrating their stories evidenced their lack of autonomy. Their careful selection of the pronouns and their shunning away from using specific words to describe sex-related accounts suggested their lack of self-agency.

Another aspect this project unveiled is the shaky bridge between mothers and their daughters and the possibility of rebuilding that bridge by employing different methods. Practices like *Tasfih* will persist to exist if the mechanisms used to raise the children do not change. The power for altering the way children are socialized rests in mothers. Mothers hold great power for shifting the socialization of their children into another direction. Research has shown that, because mothers are the primary caretakers in the family, their interaction with their children decides the shape the latter's identity formation takes. If mothers are more aware of the damage this socialization is doing to their children, to daughters specifically, there will be a possibility for diverging from the current social order towards forming a better one.

Instead of locking a girl at a very young age and risking her mental and physical health, mothers should seek to satisfy their daughters' curiosity on sexual matters. It is understandable that the current generation was raised by mothers who were unfortunately ignorant to the injustices they lived under. It is therefore difficult for those mothers to unlearn what they perceive as correct and absolute. The analysis of the data suggested that the mothers who are in their forties are more lenient and less strict with their daughters. Although they do not attempt to educate them, they nonetheless do not stop them from exploring. This in fact sets the grounds for hope in the coming generations. My mother never talked to me about sex-related things. Sidra's mother never told her what *Tasfi* was. Rania and Sabrina's mothers never told them why they locked them, it sufficed they said it was for their own good. Interestingly, our mothers did not hamper our quest for knowledge. Our mothers stood aside while we set out on our search for resources to feed our desires. Between the stories mothers of the past told and the ones mothers of today narrated lie untold ones of how this shift happened.

### Conclusion

Writing on this subject was a daunting task. Asking my female participants to open up and share their stories with me was difficult. The complex social structure of the Algerian society has conferred on us women myriads of restrictions that have no logical nor religious foundations. While my primary concern when I started with this project was to learn more about *Tasfi*, the interviews have eventually revealed more than that. Although this research has answered several questions, it nonetheless posed so many others, setting the ground for possible future research.

A couple of days ago, I was talking to Sidra to update her about my research results. When I informed her of some of the results of my research, she was surprised at the amount of facts of which she was unaware. She kept nodding in agreement to everything with amazement as if she was longing to discuss that with me but failed to articulate it. She again brought up the point of her mother's reticence when it comes to *Tasfiḥ*. When I first interviewed Sidra, she was hesitant as to what she is at liberty to discuss with me. I myself was not equipped enough with the assets needed for the interview at that time. After months of immersion in this research, I felt more at ease to talk to her about *Tasfiḥ* again. She reemphasized how everything she had learned about the practice to this day was through her conversations with her female friends, and that only happened when she was in her early twenties. The phenomenon of *Tasfiḥ* is one that requires closer examination not only due to the lacking research on it but also its close tie with the concept of female virginity.

I, myself, am not locked, or so I was told. My mother never talked about it until I asked her about the practice when I embarked on this research. She said that we do not practice it in our family, none of my sisters nor relatives have. When I asked my mother about it, it was not to seek information about the ritual but rather to have her open up to me, about intimate *things*, like other mothers do with their daughters. I went to her with the hope that she would finally think that I am old enough to have those conversations with her. I, who have learned from her to be ungenerous with words when it comes to *these topics*, have used the same poor diction to derive information from her. I was so timid, reserved, and uncomfortable. I wanted the words to come out but they refused,

because it was my mother. My patriarchal, socialized mother who has always favored her sons over her daughters. I was afraid that by speaking about *that* topic, she would think ill of me, so I spoke with caution. I faked my repugnance towards sex and towards male's erection when we got to those points; not that we spent a long time talking about them but we just mentioned them, with disgust and repulsion.

This research has helped me get over my alienation with my body. It has brought me closer to my sexuality and has given me the confidence to talk about it freely. This project was the window through which I explored some aspects of my existence as a female in a female-hating world. My initial aim when I first decided to walk down this alley was to learn more about *Tasfiḥ* and present it to the English-speaking academic community. The ultimate result however was me getting over negative feelings towards sex and setting up a new objective, helping other Algerian girls and women connect to their sexuality.

My quest for liberating myself from the socialization under which I grew up renders me exposed and vulnerable. No words can describe my inner conflicts better than those of the iconic Algerian author Assia Djebar (1992) when she wrote:

I felt as if... as if I was exposing myself doubly. First, because as an Algerian, but one living -or so it seemed- as a Westerner, I was somewhat exposed already. Second, because writing about my innermost self felt like exposing myself further (p. 169).

The day I left my home to come to the United States, I laid myself bare to the onlookers. As I pursue a Westerner education, I become all the more alienated from my homeland with its nurturing, caring and rich traditions. The more Western education I acquire, the more I grew estranged from my community back home. The moment I felt I was going

astray, I decided to set out on a journey to explore more of my culture. Writing about Algerian women and stripping myself naked to the reader was the rope with which I pulled myself back to my roots.

My writing of this thesis has become a mission of mending and healing of the so many ruptures between self and other. Through collecting women's stories and merging them with my own, I sought to bring myself closer to women of Algeria. By setting out in this research, I have made a step forward towards healing from the internalized individual war. Writing has become my healing instrument the day I realized that it is only through words that I can overcome my internal conflicts and those I have against the world. Writing is for now the only tool we, women of Algeria, have in hand to fight. First by unearthing the injustices we live in and then by turning them against each other.

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT / CONSENT MATERIAL

Hello,

My name is Ahlam Laouar, you can call me Lamis, a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa studying Women's and Gender Studies. My research interest is in how the Algerian society views women's virginity, so I'm trying to research the ways that society employs in order to protect it. I am focusing on the rite of *Tasfih*. The result of my research will help me realize the causes and therefore find out ways to help women be more aware of their bodies' worth.

1. Please, bear in mind that you will not receive any monetary or any other kind of reward to participate in this research.
2. The interview will take 30 minutes approximately.
3. You will not undergo any kind of risk and you have the right to withdraw at any time.
4. All the information you will provide will be kept in strict confidence. I will not ask for your name or any other kind of identifiers.
5. You need to know that your answers will be recorded in order for me to be able to transcribe them later, and I assure you that I will delete them right after.
6. Now, do I have your absolute oral consent to participate in this study?

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you first come across the ritual of *Tasfih*? How is it practiced? Can you describe the process please?
2. When Did you decide to “lock” your daughters? How does your family and relatives feel about it?
3. How do you know it works? Can you describe a story that you know or heard of about the rite’s effectiveness?
4. Why is “locking” your daughters important for you and for her?
5. What is the significance of family in your life?
6. Why do you think your daughter’s virginity is important?
7. What happens if your daughter is not virgin?
8. Do you know of any rituals like *Tasfih*?