

Parting the Curtain: The Virgin Heroine and the ‘Westoxified’ Villain in Contemporary Iranian Romance Novels

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of virginity in eight popular romance novels published in contemporary Iran and argues that virginity is not only a prerequisite for the heroine, but also the capital with which she can bargain in the novel’s patriarchal world. As a commodity, virginity is interconnected to the ideology of the state – which is often reproduced in the novels – leading to the construction of two distinct versions of femininity. While hegemonic femininity does virginity properly, pariah femininity is connected to the otherized non-virgin. Thus, the romance heroines are forced to grapple with the ingrained virgin / whore complex which permeates these novels and links them inextricably to the rhetoric of Westoxification by painting the West(oxified) non-virgin as a threat to the social order. This obsession with virginity reproduces a number of tropes, among which are forced marriage, child marriage, post-virginity dysphoria and abjection/romanticization of death. The women characters’ ability to perform virginity delineates their fates in the narrative, leading to the stigmatization and damnation of the Westoxified villain and the veneration and martyrdom of the virginal heroine in the battle of incongruous ideologies and discourses around women’s bodies in contemporary Iran.

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Introduction

As Farzaneh Milani accurately asserts, virginity has been “an absolute prerequisite for most heroines of classical Persian literature” (*Words, Not Swords* 34). In *One Thousand and One Nights* the king marries a virgin every night and, after sleeping with her, kills her in

the morning in order to prevent his new bride from repeating his first wife's infidelity. Similarly, in the Quranic Yusef and Zoleykha romance narrative, when the two marry after the death of Zoleykha's husband, we are told that she is still a virgin despite having been married for years (*Words, Not Swords* 193). While asserting the "mapping out [of] socio-cultural decadence on the female body" in her examination of Sadeq Chubak's 1966 novel *Sang-e Sabur (The Patient Stone)*, Claudia Yaghoobi points to "the high value placed on virginity both in the world of the novel and in Iranian society as a whole" ("Mapping Out" 220). When Shahrnush Parsipur wrote *Zanan Bedun-e Mardan (Women Men, 1989)*, the novel was attacked and unofficially banned for its progressive views about virginity, and landed the author in prison on two occasions (Talattof 43).

This literary and cultural obsession with virginity is not specific to Iran. According to Bouhdiba, virginity is an integral element of Arabo-Muslim society: "The Prophet himself advised Zayd to marry a virgin for preference. And indeed is not the *houri* of paradise an eternal virgin?" (186, my italics).[1] David Ghanim has described what he terms 'the virginity cult' in the Middle East as "an index of honour, modesty, and a mode of social existence for a female living" (1). Nor is this obsession specific to the Middle East. Maureen Fries mentions the virgin as one of the most popular archetypes of women in Medieval literature (79). In *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti discusses the serious and detrimental impact of this obsession with virginity and chastity for women in the United States (11). Jodi McAlister has written on the ongoing fascination with virginity in Western romance narratives and popular culture, focusing on the image of "the consummate virgin" as one who "has lost her virginity in the right way at the right time to the right person, and thus can be said to have 'done' virginity properly" (4).

This article demonstrates the pivotal function of the main characters' virginity in the development of the following popular Iranian romance novels written after the 1979 revolution:[2] Fattaneh Haj Seyyed Javadi's *Bamdad-e Khomar (The Morning After, 1995)*,[3] Nazi Safavi's *Dalan-e Behesht (The Hallway to Paradise, 1999)*; Roya Khosronajdi's *Harim-e Eshq (Love's Privacy, 1999)*; Parinush Saniee's *Sahm-e Man (The Book of Fate, 2001)*; Roya Khosronajdi's *Elaheh-ye Sharqi (The Eastern Goddess, 2003)*; Simin Shirdel's *Aram (2004)*; Maryam Riahi's *Hamkhuneh (Housemate, 2007)*; and Homa Puresfahani's *Qarar Nabud (It Wasn't Meant to Be, 2017)*. [4] I have focused on popular romance novels written by women after the 1979 revolution – a decision that is motivated by the fact that the majority of Iranian romance writers are women. Moreover, all the pre-revolutionary romance novelists were male, and they wrote under a different regime with its own overarching ideologies.

Despite the centrality of virginity to Iranian culture and literature, only a few scholars have engaged with it. Azal Ahmadi and Nafiseh Sharifi have addressed the issue from a medical and sociological perspective and Yaghoobi discusses it in her research on works by male authors such as Sadeq Chubak and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (*Temporary Marriage*), as well as the displaced desire in the Quranic Yusuf and Zoleykha story ("Zulaykhā's Displaced Desire"). This article contributes to the recent scholarly works on the female body politics in contemporary Iran (e.g., Yaghoobi, *Temporary Marriage*) by discussing virginity in relation to the performance of femininity and alignment with the patriarchal and political ideologies in popular romance narratives. By inserting the concept of the 'consummate virgin' into the context of Iran, this article also engages in a conversation with the virginity discourse in Western romances (e.g. McAlister).

I demonstrate that the heroine – who does virginity properly – is often contrasted with her opposite, a female villain who is sexually experienced and therefore considered to be corrupted. Although the villain may initially fascinate the hero, he soon becomes disillusioned with her corrupted and corrupting entity and leaves her for the virginal heroine. Then, I argue that as a prerequisite, virginity determines the outcomes a woman character will have in a contemporary Iranian romance novel. By doing virginity properly, the romance heroine is able to bargain in the patriarchal market of the novel. The symbolic value of virginity is such that the Madonna / whore complex is mirrored in the rhetoric of Westoxification / Westeradication, and both are expressed through the opposition of the heroine and the villain.

The Madonna / whore complex, a concept first described by Sigmund Freud, refers to civilization's psychic impotency as "where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love" (*Sexuality* 52). *Gharbzadegi* [Westoxification, also translated as occidentosis] is an ideological discourse espoused by the Iranian thinker Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who has described it as a disease of the West which afflicts Iranians who have no strong roots in their own culture (93): "I speak of 'occidentosis' as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside. The brain remains intact, but it is just a shell, like a cocoon left behind on a tree" (27). The diagnosis was first done by Fakhroddin Shadman in his 1948 book, *Taskhir-e Tamaddon-e Farangi* (Conquering Western Civilization). The Westoxified woman is both an object of desire and a source of sexual anxiety. As Minoo Moallem emphasizes, she became "the locus of sexual objectification, consumerism and imperialism" (327). Afsaneh Najmabadi demonstrates that throughout the twentieth century, Westoxification as a means of "social control" has been associated with "the preservation of 'modesty'" for women, and the discourse locates the site of all social ills in a woman's body ("Hazards" 65, 70). Similarly, Farzaneh Milani speaks of the common presumption that "the degeneracy of Iranian culture was brought about by this 'Westernized', 'half-naked', that is, unveiled and corrupt woman" (*Veils and Words* 129). In romance novels, I argue, the Westoxified villain has failed to do virginity correctly and thus is doomed to be punished and rejected by the novel's conclusion.

I will show that by problematizing the loss or lack of virginity whilst simultaneously moving towards a romantic union between hero and heroine, these novels often leave their heroines at an impasse of embodiment – where to have agency over one's body is a dangerous challenge with political implications. Bodily pleasures are associated with Westoxification (Al-e Ahmad 133). The challenge, as Najmabadi demonstrates, has existed since the early twentieth century when the two popular romantic genres were either "'clean' romantic tales (with no hint of sex) [or] sexual moral tales warning about urban corruption", with both narratives demanding tragedy (*Women with Mustaches* 156).[5] In fact, whilst a happy ending is one of the two basic prerequisites of romance novels in the West (Regis 21-22), in contemporary Iranian romance novels a tragic ending is not uncommon. Thus, I emphasize that due to such insistence on the dominant patriarchal and political ideologies negating women's bodies and bodily pleasures, heroines who die in the narrative to serve such ideologies can be called the martyrs of the battles over the female body.

As a consummate virgin, the heroine of *Housemate* solidifies her position in the patriarchal economy by trading her treasure of virginity with the right person and in the

right time and manner. By doing virginity properly, she distances herself from the discourse of Westoxification, which is associated with the otherized heroine of *The Morning After* and the stigmatized villains of *Aram* and *Love's Privacy* who only deserve the tragic fates of being second wives and temporary wives. Similarly, to remain marriageable at the proper price of a monogamous and permanent marriage contract, the heroines of *The Book of Fate*, *The Hallway to Paradise*, *The Eastern Goddess* and *It Wasn't Meant to Be* escape the stigma of Westoxification by embodying the counter-discourse of Westeradication, but this traps them within narrative tropes of forced marriage, child marriage, romanticized death and post-virginity dysphoria, respectively.

Virginity as Capital

In contemporary Islamic Iran, different socio-political ideologies reinforce the obsession with women's purity and modesty. In Islamic teaching, a woman is *fitna*, meaning a beautiful woman, but also a threat to the social order (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* 31). *Fitna* is "chaos provoked by sexual disorder" (31). In order to control the threat, virginity, as the most important aspect of the female body, is coupled with marriage. A woman must prove that the "very fine membrane called a hymen," to borrow El Saadawi's phrasing, is still intact on her wedding night or she risks different degrees of punishment, ranging from humiliation to death (38). To explain the importance of virginity, both Shahla Haeri and Fatima Mernissi have emphasized the provocative power of women and its effect on men in Islamic cultures (Haeri 71-72; Mernissi, "Virginity and Patriarchy" 186). One of the many problems with this obsession over female virginity is that it is a dialogue about women's bodies which objectifies, negates and excludes them, and is characterised by double standards and paradoxical discourses. In "The Ideology of Virginity," Berger and Wenger highlight that women may trade off their virginity "for valued goods and services in other stratificational realms, primarily the economy, but also the polity" (666). One example of this is *mehrieh* [dowry], the amount of which is dependent on a woman's virginity. Dowry refers to any money or property that is promised to a wife by her husband upon her marriage. In Iran, this is often a large sum of gold coins which is usually returned to the bride in the case of divorce or death. A virgin woman's first permanent marriage usually involves greater dowry (Haeri 6). If the marriage contract is cancelled during the engagement [*aqd*], the bride receives the full dowry if she is still a virgin, but only half of it if she is not. Thus, virginity becomes a form of capital with which women can bargain in a patriarchal market (Haeri 67).[6] In Iranian romance novels, dowry is also exchanged for the rights that women characters – like Iranian women in real life – do not have.

For example, in *The Morning After*, the heroine remits her dowry to get a divorce to free herself from an abusive marriage.[7] *The Morning After* is the story of Mahbubeh, a wealthy young woman who falls in love with Rahim, a penniless carpenter. Owing to the huge disparity in class and wealth, Mahbubeh's father tries to force his daughter to change her mind. But his plan is unsuccessful and he chooses to disown his daughter. The couple are married, but the marriage is a great failure; Mahbubeh returns to the father, gets a divorce, and ultimately becomes the second wife of a former suitor. Her virginity at the time of her first marriage is implied by her young age, and by references to the wedding

night as the consummation night [*shab-e zafaf*]. The morning after her wedding, the heroine also begins to refer to herself as Rahim's wife [*zan-e Rahim*] which suggests that she is no longer a *dokhtar* [meaning both virgin and daughter] (Haj Seyyed Javadi 183). While Mahbubeh's dowry is mentioned on several occasions at the time of her first marriage, it is not mentioned when she remarries, although her second husband is far wealthier than her first, suggesting that she has ceased to function as a marketable good in the patriarchal world of the novel. As a romance heroine who has sought bodily pleasure, Mahbubeh failed to perform her femininity and virginity properly. She is positioned outside the hegemonic construction of femininity, and ends up becoming a second wife to her ex-lover.

According to Mimi Schippers, "*hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*" (94, original emphasis). On the other hand, pariah femininities, "are considered socially undesirable and contaminating to social life more generally" (95). They embody characteristics normally attributed to hegemonic masculinity, but when embodied by women, the characteristics become feminized and demonized (96). A woman's sexual experiences outside the 'right' marriage-script brands her with pariah femininity.

For example, in *Aram* (2004) by Simin Shirdel, the heroine embodies hegemonic femininity and the Westoxified villain embodies pariah femininity. *Aram* follows the marriage of the eponymous heroine to Farid, a man already engaged in a temporary marriage contract with the divorced Nasim. Aram learns of this temporary wife only after her own wedding to Farid, but decides to stay with her new husband. After many trials, Aram wins Farid's love, ultimately causing him to leave Nasim and remain faithful to her. The stigmatized Nasim pays the price for not performing femininity and virginity correctly by surrendering her dowry in order to obtain a divorce and custody of her son when her husband decides to migrate to the USA. Sexually experienced women like Nasim do not enjoy the same amount of dowry as virgin heroines do, meaning that they have less capital to bargain with. As a non-virgin, Nasim ends up in a temporary marriage contract, which is a socially stigmatised practice in Iran requiring a much lower dowry. Nasim, who has previously surrendered her virginity, becomes a second-hand commodity in the patriarchal market of the novel, and easily disposed of by the hero. On the other hand, Aram, as a consummate virgin and the embodiment of the novel's hegemonic femininity, has a much happier ending and is rewarded for staying with her unfaithful husband. However, as will be discussed shortly, she faces her own psychic issues. In order to maintain her sharp contrast with the sexually promiscuous Nasim, Aram has to remain a virgin even after more than a year of marriage. In order to distance herself from the whore-embodiment, she tries to embody her opposite, the Madonna. After they finally have intercourse, she escapes Farid, thinking he despises her for her bodily impurity. Aram escapes to the West – which the Westoxification discourse associates with women's corruption – and gives birth to their child there. Aram's escape to the West might thematize her unconscious desire for more liberty, but it also demonstrates the split in her subjectivity. Thus, the Madonna / whore complex is projected onto the socio-political ideologies of Westeradication / Westoxification.

Hamkhuneh (*Housemate*, 2007) by Maryam Riahi, however, offers a different perspective on the issue of virginity. The novel was written during a time of sexual revolution among the youth in Iran: a revolution that Pardis Mahdavi has characterised as a response to the State's obsession with the female body (3). The novel was also written at a time when the issue of temporary marriage [*sigheh*] was making headlines, as the government of President Ahmadinejad – who was in office during 2005-2013 – encouraged the practice. In the novel, the wealthy and religious Haj Reza asks his adopted daughter, Yalda, to marry his biological son in order to tempt him to remain in Iran and put off his planned migration to Europe. She is hesitant at first – that is, until Haj Reza offers her one third of his own wealth. His only condition is that Yalda remains a virgin throughout the six-month period of the temporary marriage contract between her and his son, Shahab.

The use of temporary marriage in this narrative is ironic because the primary purpose of temporary marriage is sexual gratification, and yet Haj Reza asks the opposite of Yalda. It is noteworthy that Haeri compares temporary marriage to prostitution (2), and Yaghoobi demonstrates that women in temporary marriage marriages are stigmatized. The practice is similarly stigmatised in contemporary Iranian romance novels; for example, in *Aram* and *Love's Privacy*. However, *Housemate* presents a notable exception. The narrative suggests a nonsexual temporary marriage – an infrequent practice adopted by some very religious families and designed to allow potential spouses to get to know each other without having sexual intimacy. If the relationship between Yalda and Shahab had been a sexual temporary marriage, the heroine would have experienced the same stigmatization as Nasim in *Aram*. However, in a nonsexual temporary marriage, the two parties do not usually live together as Yalda and Shahab are, as suggested in the title of the novel, *Housemate*. The fact that Haj Reza proposes one third of his wealth for the temporary marriage contradicts the amount of dowry in the temporary marriage practice, which is much lower than a permanent marriage contract.

I suggest that what makes the dowry in this temporary marriage so high is its strategic function in the narrative to preserve the heroine's virginity and maintain the patriarchal and political domination of the female body. As Maryam Riahi states in an interview, in *Housemate* she exploited the idea of temporary marriage as a disguise so that the hero and the heroine could live together (Alikhani 148). Thus, by benefitting from the government's support of the practice at that time, the author evades censorship and religious sensitivities. In the final pages of the novel – when the two are about to become physically intimate – it is quickly suggested that Yalda is now Shahab's permanent wife [*zan-e aqdi*], a surprising turn of events which stretches the imagination, since both parties in any marriage contract must be aware of its terms and conditions. The strategic use of non-sexual *sigheh* that transforms, at the last moment, into a permanent marriage allows the author to smuggle intimacy and desire into the narrative without challenging established views on the sanctity of virginity.

The novel highlights the sexual revolution which was occurring in the country at this time: Iranian women interested in exploring their sexualities were essentially prevented from doing so by the patriarchal ideologies. However, beyond that, the novel also imparts ideological messages on a political level: to save the country from the threat of *fitna* – chaos derived from female sexuality – coming from the West, the state-sponsored Shia Islam proposes temporary marriage, which regulates sexuality through religiously approved practices, and maintains the country's social order.[8] Prior to the temporary

marriage proposed by Haj Reza, Shahab had been about to marry the villain, Mitra, and migrate to the West with her (Riahi 152). Unlike Yalda, who embodies *nejabat* [decency and modesty] by remaining a consummate virgin, Mitra is sexually unrestrained and Westoxified. The first time Yalda meets Mitra, she throws up – a symptom often used in Iranian literature and film to imply a woman’s pregnancy – and later Mitra’s father pushes Shahab to hastily marry Mitra (145, 153, 299). Shahab’s friend says, “Everyday, she [Mitra] is in a relationship with someone else. Shahab hates all these. He is so good and pure and deserves a good, pure girl like you” (Riahi 153).[9] Thus, like Aram and Nasim, Yalda and Mitra are counter-positioned as the embodiments of hegemonic and pariah femininities, where the former is associated with the dominant patriarchal and political ideologies around Westeradication and the latter with the discourse of Westoxification. Unlike Mitra, Yalda does her virginity correctly and is rewarded with one third of Haj Reza’s wealth and the novel’s happy ending. It is the heroine’s virginity and Westeradication [*gharbzedai*] that overcomes the threat of the West and keeps the economic wealth of the country within itself.

Westeradication, as Najmabadi argues, is the Islamic regime’s antidote to Westoxification, designed to combat the social ills of the West inflicting the Iranian society. The term relates the woman question to the political battles by negotiating modesty and modernity (“Hazards” 51). To denounce the Westoxified woman, the new Islamic state proposed a “modern-yet-modest” ideal of womanhood (66): “Within such an outlook women as mothers and wives are seen to bear a heavy responsibility for the moral health and therefore the political fate of the country” (67). In *Housemate*, although it might seem that the heroine’s virginity – her capital – shapes the romantic dynamics of the novel, behind the scenes it is actually the patriarchal religious authority, embodied in Haj Reza, that manipulates the youth to maintain its order through Westeradication. The consummate virgin, as the embodiment of hegemonic femininity, only serves his interests.

Virginity also functions as the symbolic capital with which the romance heroines can guarantee their success in the marriage market by casting the women characters on either side of the Madonna / whore and Westeradication / Westoxification binaries. As was the case with Nasim in *Aram*, Nilufar’s Westoxification in *Love’s Privacy* is measured through the subjective interpretation of her heavy makeup, tight clothes, and blonde hair by the heroine, who is her opposite. The novel details Kianush’s love for the Westoxified Nilufar, whose sexual agency and promiscuity is implied through her unrestrained behaviour. Although the novel’s hero Kianush insists on marrying her, Nilufar repeatedly postpones the wedding and finally proposes a temporary marriage contract instead – suggesting her promiscuity. When Kianush discovers that she has sexually betrayed him, he is traumatized and hospitalized for a mental breakdown. Everywhere, he imagines that he sees leeches, a symbol of the villain’s materialist and corrupted nature: leeches suck blood just as she has sucked the life out of him. The leech is also the metaphor that Al-e Ahmad uses in his Westoxification discourse to describe the West’s occupation in the East (127). Nilufar is thus dehumanized for being a sexually experienced unmarried woman (a crime against the patriarchy) as well as for her Westoxification (a crime against Iran’s Islamic state). Unlike the Westoxified Nilufar who resists marriage in order to maintain her liberty, Nika breaks her earlier engagement because she does not want to migrate to the West with her fiancé. Thus, the narrative counter-positions Nilufar and Nika and the Madonna / whore complex is mapped onto the Westeradication / Westoxification dichotomy.

Khosronajdi's more recent novel *Elaheh-ye Sharqi* (*The Eastern Goddess*, 2003) is equally unable to happily resolve the impasse which arises from the combination of the Madonna / whore complex and the Westeradication / Westoxification dichotomy. The novel narrates the love story of a young Iranian woman, Kimia, and a French man, Robin. After a broken engagement, Kimia migrates to France to continue her studies, where a mutual love grows between her and Robin. In *The Eastern Goddess*, the hero cannot have a meaningful romantic relationship with his beloved because he respects her like a sacred goddess, as the title implies. The spiritual light in which Robin views Kimia forces her into a performance of one side of the Madonna / whore complex, which effectively prevents their sexual and romantic union. The only possible resolution is death. Robin dies in an accident, and Kimia also perishes when hearing of his death causes her to suffer a heart attack. As a result of the political implications that their transnational love could have, particularly when the hero is an outsider, the novel cannot end happily. Women represent *vatan* [homeland] and the purity of both women and homeland are subject to male protection as their *namus* [honour] (Najmabadi, "The Erotic Vatan" 450). In other words, "sexual and national honour intimately [construct] each other" (440). In post-revolutionary Iran, this homeland is inscribed by the dominant Islamic ideology. A Muslim romance heroine cannot marry a Western Christian hero because such a marriage to the West threatens Islam's hegemony over the nation through the Westoxification of the beloved and mothers of the nation, symbolized in the notion of *vatan*. Thus, Kimia's death affirms the rhetoric of Westeradication by preventing the contamination of Iran's Islamic state.[10]

Despite the coupling of marriage and virginity, it is still important that the loss of virginity happens properly, with the right person and in the right time and manner; otherwise, the woman character is cast as the villain – as with Nilufar in *Love's Privacy* whose punishment has already been discussed. Virgin divorcees, however, still have the chance to become heroines. The heroines of *The Hallway to Paradise* and *The Eastern Goddess* remarry, attracting second husbands from a higher social class. In *The Hallway to Paradise*, the consummate virgin remarries her original fiancé. In *The Eastern Goddess*, she marries a husband who is socially and economically superior to her previous fiancé. By contrast, the non-virgin divorcee of *Aram* becomes a temporary wife – suggesting her lowered and stigmatized status in the society. Virgin divorcees still have the valuable capital necessary for patriarchal marriage contracts: virginity or its physical signifier, the intact hymen. This fetishization of virginity in these romance novels reveals its symbolic value as a narrative trope and its allegorical significance as a Westeradicating tool.

How to Embody the Consummate Virgin

In order to ensure that virginity is preserved until marriage, child marriage, forced marriage, post-virginity dysphoria and abjection/romanticization of death are used as narrative tropes in Iranian romance novels. With social change over time, romance narratives adjust to varying market expectations: some tropes lose popularity and are replaced with others. What has remained unchanged is the importance of doing virginity properly.

Tropes of Child Marriage and Forced Marriage in Earlier Romances

The heroines of contemporary Iranian romance novels published before the beginning of the twenty-first century were almost all indicated as being eighteen or younger at the time of their marriage –thus making them child brides.[11] With the average age of young women upon their first marriage on the rise (Gholipour & Farzanegan 108), post-2000 romance heroines are getting older, too. However, this is not generally a critique of child marriage as a patriarchal practice in itself, but rather a reflection of sociocultural changes happening in contemporary Iran.

The Hallway to Paradise, published in 1999, uncovers the pitfalls of child marriage. However, the narrative blames the heroine's personal immaturity – not the fact that she is a child bride – for the pitfalls including the heroine's sufferings.[12] *The Hallway to Paradise* is the love story of Mahnaz and Mohammad, who are betrothed at an early age when the heroine is sixteen. The couple divorce before the wedding party, only to reunite many years later. The novel demonstrates that the obsession with women's sexual inexperience has certain consequences, namely, that they are likely to lack the intellectual maturity required to maintain a meaningful marriage. Mohammad proposes to Mahnaz because his family insists on his marrying young – he is barely twenty years old – in order to save him from the fate of his older brother, Mahdi, who fell in love with an “unsuitable” woman who, in their opinion, had lived “too openly” – a phrase that suggests her sexual unrestrainedness (25). In a sense, Mahnaz becomes a child-bride to ensure she does femininity and virginity properly.

As a social construct, virginity has both physical and symbolic layers. When Mahnaz gets a divorce, she feels that although she is a virgin in body – as she did not have sex during her betrothal [*aqd*] period – she is not a virgin in soul (Safavi 437). Her anxiety arises from the patriarchal pressure placed on Iranian women to remain virgins during the betrothal period; a liminal period in which the boundaries between single life and marriage are blurred. According to Arnold Van Gennep, this period is a woman's *rite de passage* to wifehood (11). In the patriarchal world of the novel, the obsession with virginity further complicates this liminality. Although both Mahnaz and Mohammad are entrapped in the betrothal period, it is Mahnaz who must tackle the obsession with preserving virginity.

The Hallway to Paradise was published more than two decades ago, and the narrative's use of child marriage as a device is far less common in more recent Iranian romance novels. Closely related to the trope of child marriage is forcing very young romance heroines into marriages to make sure they remain consummate virgins; though forced marriage, as a popular narrative trope of older romances, is often depicted more critically in comparison to child marriage. In Parinush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*, forced marriage is advised by the patriarchal culture to prevent Masumeh – the heroine – from bringing [sexual] dishonour to her family. The book narrates Masumeh's life-long love for Saeid, as she is married off to Hamid. As represented in her name – which means ‘innocent’ in Arabic – Masumeh is the embodiment of purity in the novel, however, she is victimized by toxic discourses, like honour [*aberu*], masculinist zeal [*gheyrat*], and chastity [*nejabat*], that consider her body as a *fitna*-like source of corruption and disorder. She is thus expected to embody the hegemonic construction of femininity.

The narrative, however, problematizes the popular Madonna / whore dichotomy by giving voice to the adulterous Parvin. Parvin is the young wife of Masumeh's elderly neighbour, and ends up in an extramarital affair with one of Masumeh's brothers, Ahmad. The novel also makes it clear that Parvin truly loves Ahmad, by depicting her loyalty to him, even when he becomes a drug-addicted vagrant (Saniee 280). Parvin, who embodies pariah femininity in the novel, is nevertheless the woman (and human) who shows genuine sympathy towards Masumeh. The heroine repeatedly compares her own forced marriage to Parvin's – for example, when she wants to attempt a suicide (108) and when she likens her extramarital love for Saeed to Parvin's adulterous affair with Ahmad (116). Thus, the narrative magnifies Masumeh's repressed desires through its sympathetic portrayal of Parvin. By associating its consummate virgin with the whore-representative, the novel destabilizes the religious purity of Masumeh's asexualized Madonna-like status in the narrative. In other words, although the patriarchal world of *The Book of Fate* couples virginity and marriage for both Masumeh and Parvin, the narrative technique and the practice are both critiqued by the warnings implied in the narrative's blurring of the Madonna / whore complex. Losing virginity in 'forced' marriage is *not* doing virginity correctly.

Post-Virginity Dysphoria in It Wasn't Meant to Be and Aram

With the rise of the legal age of marriage in Iran, the high-school heroines of earlier romance novels have grown up, in more recent novels, to become university students who are comparatively modern and mature. They wear more fashionable clothes, circulate more freely, drive their own cars, study, work, and sometimes even migrate. Yet modernization has not affected the significance of doing virginity properly. The importance of pre-marital purity persists, and sexual experience, for women at least, must still take place within the confines of marriage.

Written by a young psychology graduate, Homa Puresfahani, the romance novel *It Wasn't Meant to Be* features one of these more modern romance heroines. Tarsa wants to go abroad for her studies, but her father tells her she cannot do so until she marries. Marriage is her father's solution to preserving her from Westoxification. Once again, the heroine's body becomes a patriarchal commodity to be controlled and traded by men, and the West is strongly associated with [sexual] corruption. However, she is not married off by explicit force, nor married early as a child. Tarsa marries the wealthy and handsome Artan, but the two secretly agree to get a divorce before her migration, without her father's knowledge. Tarsa intervenes in the patriarchy's control over her body, and instead pursues her own ambitions. This might suggest a degree of autonomy, but the narrative cannot reconcile its anxieties over her virginity. She ultimately falls in love with Artan and they have a sexual relationship, which causes her to suffer from what I call *post-virginity dysphoria*. This dysphoria reveals the fetishization of virginity in the patriarchal world of the novel, as a result of which the heroine becomes traumatically depressed and undergoes psychological therapies to heal from her loss of virginity.[13] Loss of virginity is equated with the loss of an integral part of her identity. No more the consummate virgin, she then becomes even more determined to migrate after her 'original sin' of sexual experience, since it represents a spatial escape from the pressures of the patriarchy and the ideological paradoxes that make the experience of womanhood fraught in contemporary Iran.

Romance readers and writers commonly note that *It Wasn't Meant to Be* is a re-writing of the same formula of *Housemate*, despite the fact that there is more than a decade's gap between these two novels. Despite the sexual revolution happening in the country during the intervening decade and that the author of *It Wasn't Meant to Be* is one of these modern, educated young Iranian women, the fact that the latter author uses the same narrative trope of marriage-on-paper but still cannot resolve its anxieties about virginity reveals that the obsession is still popular with romance readers. In her sociological research on female bodies and sexuality in Iran, Nafiseh Sharifi mentions that many of her interviewees who belong to the younger generation of women born in the 1980s "define virginity as the 'price' they must pay to secure marriage possibilities and retain familial support" (72). The country still strongly adheres to the myth of virginity and, as the interviewees of Sharifi's research also noted, there remains an immense social stigma around the loss of virginity outside marriage (72). In such a social and ideological climate, the first sexual experience must continue to be traumatic for romance heroines. Romance narratives that do not pivot on this traumatic experience often postpone the sexual union so that it takes place in a speculative future after the novel's ending, as in *Housemate*, or else sanctify it by casting the heroine in the role of motherhood, as is the case in *Aram*. Such tendencies suggest that although child marriage and forced marriage are becoming increasingly less popular, the obsession with virginity remains a central concern in this genre and the loss of virginity becomes synonymous with procreation and an allegory for the construction of the Islamic state in Iran.

Post-virginity dysphoria is also observed in *Aram* in which the eponymous heroine becomes traumatized after she loses her virginity to her husband, Farid. While they are married fairly early in the novel, Farid and Aram do not have any sexual relations until three quarters of the way through the novel, when they finally consummate their marriage:

Aram laid down on her bed and wrapped her blanket around herself and fell asleep in a few minutes. Between her dreams and reality, she saw Farid caressing her hair. Aram was hearing Farid's breaths. No! This was not a dream. Aram listened to the sound of rain and left herself in the hands of fate (Shirdel 292).

Aram's passivity – thematized as a sense of nostalgia and determinism in the sex scene – recalls the terminology used to discuss sex in the Persian language: while men *do* the act [*kardan*], women passively *give* something [*dadan*]. When a woman loses her virginity, she loses her *dokhtari*: literally meaning girlhood, but also signifying virginity. Equating virginity with *dokhtari* is like equating a tissue with a personal identity. This is also apparent in the connotations of the two words *dokhtar* [girl] and *zan* [woman] in Persian. While *dokhtar* refers to both a daughter and a virginal young woman, *zan* refers to a wife and a [non-virgin] woman. The hymen, or 'the curtain' as it is called in Persian, has the power to metamorphose the female body from girlhood to womanhood. When Aram loses her virginity, she loses part of that which distinguishes her from her opposite: the Westoxified and pariah feminine, Nasim. When she finally loses her virginity, Aram feels alienated and "worthless"; she imagines that other people's eyes are "filled with pity" and describes herself as "like a criminal" (Shirdel 294). Aram's alienation reveals how after penetration, she perceives herself as a used commodity, a degraded object.

Aram's frigidity and the unease she experiences after committing the 'sin' of losing her virginity – post-virginity dysphoria – are both manifestations of her internalization of the Madonna / whore complex. Freud argues that the taboo of virginity leads to frigidity in women ("Taboo" 201-203). Referring to Freud's discussion of the taboo of virginity, Mernissi concludes that patriarchy creates a split between sexuality and affection: "Men make the wife they 'respect' frigid, and choose for their pleasure women of the 'lower orders'" ("Virginity and Patriarchy" 186). In *Aram*, the object of Farid's sexual desire is Nasim – a divorced single mother with minimal capital in a patriarchal culture – whilst his object of respect is the frigid and virginal Aram. Aram's frigidity is a consequence of these paradoxical sexual dynamics – also foregrounded symbolically in their names. The name Nasim means 'breeze' in Persian, and implies her fickleness and impermanence. This is counterposed with Aram's name, which means peace and stability. On the other hand, while the name Aram also connotes inactivity and boringness, Nasim brings a pleasant sense to mind.

Now that she is not a virgin anymore, Aram is traumatised and considers herself, on some level, to be a whore. This association between sex and sinfulness is mentioned by Mona Eltahawy in her discussion of the significance of virginity in the Middle East:

The Arab world raises its girls to remain forever mental and emotional virgins. How, after years of having it drilled into you that sex is dirty, that sex is a sin . . . are you suddenly to enjoy sex, let alone to express what you want?
(120)

Although Eltahawy is addressing her question to Arab society, the most likely answer – that they can't – goes some way to explaining why Iranian romance heroines show disinterest in sex, and in the case of Aram and Tarsa, even suffer depression after their first sexual encounters with their husbands. To persuade her to have sex with him, Aram's husband tells her that he wants a child. With her pregnancy, the consummate virgin enters motherhood. It is only through having a child that Aram settles with her dysphoria and forgives herself for losing her virginity. Now she can continue embodying hegemonic femininity and, upon her return to her husband in Iran, she is re-aligned with the rhetoric of Westeradication. On the other hand, Nasim migrates to the West, where the pariah feminine supposedly belongs. Thus again, the Westeradication / Westoxification discourse is projected onto the narrative's Madonna / whore complex and the Westoxified non-virginal villain is held responsible for all manner of social ills.

Abjection / Romanticization of Death in in *The Eastern Goddess* and *Love's Privacy*

To resolve the obsessions around virginity in contemporary Iranian romance novels, death sometimes becomes the narrative's *deus ex machina*: a last resort that physically removes one or both of the lovers in order to resolve its convoluted amalgamation of the Madonna / whore complex, discourses of Westeradication / Westoxification, and the essential conflict between the spiritual and the sensual. To be specific, doing virginity correctly impacts the representation of death in the romance novel.

The death of Nilufar, the sexually promiscuous villain of *Love's Privacy*, is a result of her failure to fulfill the patriarchal and political expectations around virginity and women's sexuality. The description of her death is filled with horror – her dead body becomes abject:

Nika felt like throwing up. She moved forward with fear and anxiety and stood next to the trolley. A hand removed the white sheet. In front of her shocked eyes was the face of Nilufar. Her face was covered with blood. Her skull was broken badly. There was nothing left of her beautiful nose. Her eyes were completely out of her eye sockets. But her lips ...[looked] as if [she was] smiling. She looked at the hand that removed the cover. It was Kianush's hand. He was standing next to the trolley, gradually losing his power, and fell on his knees. He held Nilufar's hands and laid his head at her voiceless corpse and started crying out loud. Nika saw him crying with a very broken heart. It was raining cats and dogs, whipping on Kianush's body. The raindrops made the sheet wet and the blood on Nilufar's face flowed. That scary mocking smile became more and more visible (Khosronajdi, *Love's Privacy* 463-464).

The ending of this romance novel is clearly unsettling with descriptions such as a “scary mocking smile” on the villain's corpse covered by blood, a broken skull and a shattered nose, and the heroine almost throwing up in panic. While discussing the character of Gohar as a temporary wife in Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient Stone*, Yaghoobi reveals how she is murdered and eradicated in order to control the threats of her sexuality to the male psyche (*Temporary Marriage* 175). Similar to the eradication of Gohar's body, the villainous Nilufar's body in *Love's Privacy* must be eradicated to control her sexual threats to the Islamic state and patriarchal society in Iran.

Kristeva understands abjection as that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4), and argues that “the corpse . . . is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (4). Nilufar's uncanny status in the patriarchal world of the novel – as the ‘whore’ of the Madonna / whore dichotomy and the embodiment of pariah femininity who is both desirable and debased – leads her to the utmost abjection. Westoxified and thus non-virginal, Nilufar is cast out and dies so that the source of defilement is eliminated and the hero and the patriarchal and political ideologies of society are no longer disturbed by her threat.

Scholars have viewed the female body as both the source and victim of horror (Creed; Kristeva; Magistrale). By using elements of horror, the narrative paradoxically reveals the Westoxified woman's attraction. Horror is a genre “that contains a monster of some type and ... often [though not always] has the effect of scaring the reader” (Fonseca & Pulliam 3) and depicts “what is paradoxically both desired and feared, dramatizing that which is normally unthinkable, unnameable, indefinable, and repressed” (Wisker 8). The hero both desires and fears this female embodiment of *fitna* that Nilufar represents, and so the narrative positions her as both the victim and the monstrous source of horror: she traumatizes his psychic balance and then transforms into the horrific corpse. Although the hero apparently forgets her and falls in love with the virtuous Nika, Nilufar remains the fatal attraction, the haunting *femme fatale*, even in the final pages of the novel.

In sharp contrast to the horror element with which the death of the pariah Nilufar is represented, the death of the consummate virgin in *The Eastern Goddess* is melodramatically described with a combination of romantic lines of poetry and prose. The heroine, Kimia, is driving her car, listening to a cassette which plays a song that promises the reunion of the lover and the beloved (*The Eastern Goddess* 403-404). Kimia is mournfully murmuring the lines of the poem in memory of her late beloved, Robin, when she has a car accident. The narrative continues in her semi-conscious mind, while the lines between the real world and her disordered thoughts become blurred. The narrative promises the lovers' reunion in another world or afterlife, a stark contrast to the demise of Nilufar (406). In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Richard von Krafft-Ebing writes that romantic idealising love that "wraps the beloved object in the halo of perfection . . . is of a Platonic character,[14] and turns rather to forms of poetry and history" (11). The surrealism of the poetical ending signals the pressure the heroine feels to meet the asexualized projections pushed upon her by Robin's Platonic love.

As the title – *Elaheh-ye Sharqi* means *The Eastern Goddess* – suggests, the heroine is cast as a goddess-like embodiment of hegemonic femininity. In a discussion between her and Eline, a Western woman in the novel, Eline argues that what makes Kimia so valuable is her purity, especially her sexual purity (189). The hero, the French Robin, worships her like the (inaccessible asexual) Madonna. Thinking that he might pollute her purity, Robin says, "I should go, my goddess, I should go, I should sacrifice myself for my goddess" (*The Eastern Goddess* 246). This intersection between romance and the dominant ideology that emphasizes spirituality means that romance heroines might reach redemption by negating bodily pleasures. So, while Aram and Tarsa suffer from post-virginity dysphoria, Kimia is romantically sacrificed in order to avoid sexual intimacy and, beyond that, ideological contamination.

I argue that Kimia's death is celebrated as a radical act of bodily abnegation – a martyrdom for the spiritual / sensual battle.[15] In her article on conceptualizing masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Shahin Gerami describes the martyr [*shahid*] masculine type as "a young, unmarried (virgin, innocent) man, fearless and strong" (267). Highlighting martyrdom as a male experience, Partovi traces the concept in Islamic thinking which posits physical death as liberation from the worldly evils (*Popular Iranian Cinema* 97-98). The female martyr of love fights for the dominant patriarchal and political ideologies, achieving fulfilment by sacrificing her worldly dimensions for the divine: martyrdom becomes the ultimate expression of love. Such conceptualization of love recalls *odhri* love, in which the lover "glorified pure love, worshipped his beloved, and believed in a lover's self-denial and suffering" (Yaghoobi, *Subjectivity in Attar* 97). According to Denis de Rougemont, the lover in the *odhri* love is "he who loves, who abstains from all that is forbidden, who holds his love secret, and who dies of his secret, he dies a martyr" (106). In *The Eastern Goddess*, the heroine is sacrificed, turning into a martyr of love before any physical intimacy can take place. In other words, in the battle of incongruous ideologies and discourses, the heroine becomes a martyr to spiritual love, while the villain ends as an abject corpse.

Conclusion

Virginity is the capital with enormous economic and symbolic value with which women characters can bargain in the patriarchal market of contemporary Iranian romance novels. Virginity determines whether a woman character will be depicted as the heroine or as the villain, owing to the fact that these narratives suffer from a noticeable Madonna / whore complex. Doing virginity correctly – as a pivotal factor in contemporary Iranian romance novels – elevates the woman character to the level of the consummate virgin who embodies hegemonic femininity. Her opposite is the non-virginal Westoxified villain who embodies pariah femininity. The consummate virgin prioritizes spirituality and adheres to state-sponsored Islamic morality which has a stabilising effect on the patriarchy, or neutralises the effect of Westoxification. Thus, while virginity is defined literally in terms of the intactness of the hymen, as a social construct virginity has also been inscribed by the dominant ideology of Westoxification / Westeradication: women who are neither virgins nor mother/wives are depicted as Westoxified and are shown to be a threat to the social order of the ideology-laden homeland. Thus, the question of virginity reflects the broader political discourses around sexuality. This amalgamation of femininity, virginity and the dominant patriarchal and political ideologies leads to the repetition of certain tropes in contemporary Iranian romance narratives, among which are child marriage, forced marriage, post-virginity dysphoria and the abjection / romanticization of death. With a rising marriage age in Iran, child marriage and forced marriage are becoming less popular romantic solutions to imagined ideological incongruences and are being increasingly replaced with alternate tropes like marriage-on-paper and tragic endings. Alternatively, when a heroine's first sexual experience is actually portrayed in the narrative, rather than merely hinted at by a promised happy ending, the heroine may suffer from post-virginity dysphoria because she is unable to reconcile her sexual desire with her desire to remain a virgin. This dysphoria reveals how the loss of virginity is equated with the loss of an important part of the romance heroine's identity. In this sense, virginity is the defining feature of contemporary Iranian romance heroines and directs the plots of the novels in which they appear down certain specific paths.

[1] A *huri* [also *hourī*] is a beautiful alluring virgin woman in paradise.

[2] The term 'popular' in Persian – *ammeh pasand* [mass-appeal] – is ambivalent. It might refer to sales figures or to an aesthetic quality defined by the taste of the readers. To resolve this problem, I have tried to find a middle ground. For my purposes, a book is considered popular if it is continuously reprinted since initial publication. I also rely on a general recognition of the book as 'not canonical' within the Iranian literary field.

[3] Although Nasrin Sameni and Fahimeh Rahimi were publishing popular romance novels during the 1980s, this article focuses on 'popular' novels in which virginity has been referred to.

[4] While this article has focused on the dominant attitudes towards virginity in popular romance novels, it is important to bear in mind that there are more heterogenous depictions of virginity in less popular romance narratives. For instance, *For Leila (Beh Khater-e Leila, 2016)* – a psychological romance novel by Ghazal Purnesaee – takes as its heroine a temporary-wife / sex worker who falls in love with the religious hero. This

positioning of the sex worker, not as the villain – as in *Aram* – but as the (anti-)heroine, problematizes the othering of the sexually experienced woman. However, it is also telling that this novel has thus far failed to be reprinted; a sign that it may have disappointed reader's expectations of the genre by straying from acceptable plots and tropes.

[5] Tragic endings also features in classic Persian love narratives as fate often conspires against the union of the romantic lovers (Partovi, "Constituting Love in Persianate Cinemas" 194-195).

[6] See also Collins.

[7] Since men have the prerogative to divorce (or not divorce) in Iranian laws, women often have to give away their dower if the man does not consent to go ahead with the divorce.

[8] Sunni Islam forbids the practice of temporary marriage (Haeri 62).

[9] All quotations from the romance novels are my own translations.

[10] It is to be noted that such obsession with virgin heroines is not limited to romance novels written by female writers. For example, the eponymous character in *Yalda* (2002) by Morteza Moadabpour has already gained some sexual experience before she encounters the hero, Siavash. Yalda's punishment for losing her virginity before marriage is contracting AIDS, and she returns to the USA – where she got the disease – heartbroken and alone (Moadabpour 435-436). This can be read as a warning against the kind of freedom and equality that, according to the Islamic state, the West promises women. The USA, as the proclaimed enemy of Islamic Republic of Iran, is recognized as the source of corruption and disease and the loss of virginity spreads these social ills in Iran.

[11] The legal structure of Iran does not recognize this as child marriage because there is no legal marriageable age in Iran (Afary 345, 368).

[12] In "Girls for Sale: The Politics of Child Marriage in Iran," Maryam Zehtabi Sabeti Moqaddam highlights that in Iranian literature, although references to child marriage abound, they rarely concern the child brides themselves or their feelings at the time of marriage. Instead, child marriages form a backdrop against which socio-political issues and cultural practices are criticised.

[13] A more religious manifestation of this anxiety has been discussed by Yaghoobi in her analysis of the Quranic romance of Zoleykha and Yusuf's where the heroine's purity is restored through the magical restoration of her virginity ("Zulaykhā's Displaced Desire" 71).

[14] By Platonic, he means a love that abstains sexual pleasures.

[15] For similar discussion in Western culture, see Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher's *Virginity Revisited*. In the introduction, MacLachlan refers to the body of the virgin martyr in Christian narratives as "the site for a political contest" (4).

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