**Dr. Mladen Dolar: Sworn virgins**

The phenomenon of sworn virgins has attracted quite a lot of public attention, stretching from the ethnological literature to gender studies and to popular culture. The phenomenon is spread in the remote regions of the Balkans, mostly in northern Albania, Kosovo and parts of Montenegro. Sworn virgins are women who take an oath of virginity and henceforth assume a male identity, wearing men’s clothes, taking men’s names, doing men’s jobs, smoking, drinking, handling guns, accepted in men’s society (although mostly without the right of vote in community gatherings). Although it is generally known in the communities that they are women they are treated as men. Ethnological testimonies go back to the mid-nineteenth century (Milorad Medaković in 1855, von Hahn in 1867), with the supposition that the practice had been around at least since the beginning of the 19th century and probably much earlier. It has been going on up to present times when the practice is dying out, but there is still a number of them around. Apart from a considerable amount of scholarly literature the phenomenon has captured public imagination, there has been a number of newspaper articles, TV documentaries and recently the film *Vergine guirata* (by Laura Bispuri, winning a prize at the Tribeca film festival this year).

The reasons for this practice can be put into several categories. First of all, women take on a male identity when there is no male heir or no man to run the household. There may be no male offspring, brothers may die, or, as it is frequently the case in Albania, male members of the family go into hiding or move away for reasons of blood feud. In such situations women are called upon to assume male roles, but they can only do so by taking a virginity oath, and although they are under pressure to do so they nevertheless have to take this decision themselves. There is the economic pressure to run the household, which can only be done by a male head of the family, and also the concern that the family property may be fragmented and fall into other hands. The second category is presented by women who take this path because they want to break their engagement, not wanting to marry the man that the family has chosen for them. They can only do so by taking the virginity oath and then living as a man, otherwise the fiancé’s family would take such an act as a cause for blood feud. There are also some rare testimonies that women may take this course out of their own choice, feeling as men already at an early age and wanting to lead a more independent life which can only be possible by assuming a male identity. The virginity oath is in some cases temporary until the male child grows up or until the blood feud is settled and men can return, but in the vast majority of cases sworn virgins stick to their male roles for the rest of their lives. All these reasons behind such a choice are inherent to very traditional and very conservative communities living mostly in remote parts. The practice is spread in these areas regardless of nationalities (Albanian, Serbian etc.) and religions (Muslim, orthodox and catholic). There are testimonies about such practices in other traditional societies (Arab, native American etc.) and also indications about a long history possibly going back to Mesopotamia, although the contexts may widely differ.

This phenomenon is taken as the starting point for the present production, which would take it as a material for reflection and present possible ramifications of this problem. The first aspect concerns the question of choice. The contemporary liberal society swears by the freedom of choice as one of its most cherished assets. Free choice subtends the consumerist ideology, where the vast choice of commodities is considered as a token of progress, affluence and liberty. This is extended into the more fundamental domain of choosing one’s way of life, vocation, world-view, religion, personal style, identity, ultimately the sexual identity, not only the freedom of sexual orientation and various sexual practices, but ultimately also the freedom to assume a gender identity regardless of the biological sex. The freedom of choice reigns supreme even in one’s most intimate life, to the point that it is considered as synonymous with modernity. The sworn virgins in remote traditional societies, now on the way to disappearance, present a counterpoint to this generally assumed and venerated freedom of choice. They live under harsh constraints, their choices are very limited and come with a stiff price. In the majority of cases they take the oath of virginity under family pressure and a wider social and economic pressure, but they take the decision themselves as a personal pledge and then proudly and courageously live the consequences. There seem to be no real testimonies about breaking such oaths. After such a choice they conspicuously and ostentatiously take on men’s appearance, behavior and way of life, they take pride in their toughness. They have to constantly prove that they are as good as or better than men in conducting men’s business. In spite of a very different context this stance is not without parallels with the hurdles that many women still typically face in modern societies when entering into areas traditionally reserved for men (politics, business etc.), so despite our modern, postmodern, liberal condition the patriarchal constraints nevertheless come to the fore. They are never clearly spelled out as in the traditional societies and tend to be silently overlooked, but they very much exist and shape our condition with an invisible hand.

When the oath of virginity is taken as a consequence of breaking an engagement or a pre-arranged marriage, this presents a different case since the woman consciously chooses to defy the prescribed social choices made for her and follow an independent life, but she can only do so by precluding any possibility of a future marriage (and sexual life) – in a parallel to monastery which was the imposed choice in such cases a few centuries ago in many European societies. But the vow of chastity is not enough, for there are no social slots available for such women (quite apart from the humiliation of the fiancé’s family which entails blood feud). So the choice of male identity is the only socially viable solution for them, also to escape social anathema. The case involves a conscious choice, a defiance, in full awareness of the consequences and with no relapse, there is no second choice after such a decision. Some authors in gender studies have considered the phenomenon of sworn virgins assuming male identity and put them in counterpoint to such choices being made in modern societies (transvestites, transsexuals etc.). The framework is radically different, but the parallel puts to the fore the hidden constraints that shape our choices of sexual identity, not only because of hidden patriarchal clauses and the pressures of conservative morality, but also because the celebrated sexual freedom always comes with a price, it is subtended by constraints that are difficult to spell out (everything is allowed, one is free to follow one’s inner inclinations and preferences, yet this doesn’t simply amount to freedom). The sworn virgins can be set up as a mirror where an exceptional practice in some very patriarchal and conservative small communities highlights the constraints that we are prey to in our very modern liberal societies based on the freedom of choice.

One can mention in passing that the film *Sworn Virgin* (*Vergine giurata*), premiered in March 2015, traces the trajectory of a woman, a sworn virgin in male apparel in Albanian backwaters, from the highly constrained no-choice pre-modern community to the modern framework of liberal choices that she faces in Italy. The film presents and implies some similar reflections.

Another line of reflection based on this material concerns virginity. Since the very ancient times and in very different traditional societies virginity had a special status. The vow to chastity was highly valuated and venerated, it presented a path of purity and purification which leads from the bodily pleasures and concerns to spiritual elevation. It offered an ascetic trajectory from body to spirit, from the profane to the sacred. The assumption was that the spiritual heights could only be attained by paying the price of renunciation, abstaining from bodily lust and enjoyment, giving up the (supposedly) highest form of enjoyment, the sexual one, in a sort of trade-off that would yield spiritual surplus. To be sure, sworn virgins in the Balkans have no air of spirituality about them, they indulge in all male sins (most conspicuously in smoking and drinking), except for sex which is absolutely off-limits, a breech would be punished by ban and death. In tradition the vow of chastity regularly entailed or signified an exclusion from the social, from the usual social concerns of survival, pleasures and off-spring. It involved a seclusion, a realm beyond worldly concerns, a placement outside of social circulation and exchange. Monasteries presented the codified version, but it could take other forms. The sworn virgins in the Balkans present an inversion of this, since the virginity oath offered a path of inclusion, the full inclusion of a woman into the men’s world that rules and runs these societies.

Virginity, the vow of chastity, had a privileged relation to the sacred. The oldest social prohibitions take the form of the prohibition to touch. *Noli tangere*. Certain objects, areas, people are untouchable, they install a dividing line in the social space and in the midst of the array of people and things, creating a realm beyond the turmoil of the struggle for survival, earning one’s living, beyond economy in general. They don’t enter into the economic production, exchange and circulation. This is the defining trait of the sacred (cf. Johannes Huizinga, *Homo ludens*). They are beyond worldly use and therefore considered the most valuable, incommensurate in terms of use and exchange value. This has been the minimal defining property of the traditional societies, and the defining trait of modernity is precisely to have done away with such division. As Marx famously put it in a slogan-like manner: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned.” The realm of the sacred ‘beyond use and exchange’ was fully integrated into the economy of the profane. All the spiritual entities beyond the bodily and beyond economy have entered the world of commodities and commodification. Spiritual values are translatable into market values, the commodity form conditions our access to the world. In modernity nothing is untouchable, we moderns can touch everything – or can we? Can this be simply celebrated as our emancipation from the transcendent and the assertion of our autonomy? Isn’t it rather that with the alleged freedom to touch it has become increasingly difficult to touch anything? Nothing is sacred any longer, yet we cannot reach out and touch; with the dismantling of the prohibition and with doing away with the dividing line it seems that we have lost our ability to touch.

The consequence of this modern shift for the sexual mores was the general spread of sexual freedom which entailed ‘the loss of virginity’. Virginity is no longer seen as an asset or a treasure, a sign of woman’s honor and reputation, but rather as a nuisance. Some attempts to make it look glamorous and sexy in the wholly secular society (such as the notorious Silver Ring Thing, founded in 1995) rather seem to offer another exotic possibility among the variety of choices of sexual identities. Similarly people who may decide to remain chaste by their own choice, not on religious, moral or physical grounds, rather seem to present a peculiar kind of sexual perversion. Conversely people who indulge in sexual freedom and promiscuity may remain virgin, in some sense, given the impossibility to touch, to reach for the other, in this commodified world.

Sworn virgins of the Balkans can serve also in this respect as a strange mirror. They are infinitely far from us, although living (or rather barely lingering on) on the outskirts of Europe, and they present a world which is quickly vanishing, ‘melting into air’, ‘profaned’. The communities they belong to inspire horror and disdain, given their extreme conservative and patriarchal nature, but also fascination and awe. The harsh constraints under which these women live and the tough choices they make point to the hidden constraints and invisible choices that underpin our own postmodern societies.