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incestuous: A Childhood Memoir in Verse

By Sleiman El Hajj¹

Abstract

Childhood sexual abuse, including incest, is underreported and often unreported in the staunchly patriarchal Lebanese setting. The revolutionary spirit that accompanied the country's October 2019 uprising instigated hope that Lebanese patriarchy, and its concomitant juggernaut of warlords and/or formidable father figures—social, political, cultural, religious, and familial—were not immune to opprobrium in public and private spheres alike. It is within this context that this poem's protagonist, a friend and fellow demonstrator, managed to share her memories of traumas lived in 1980s Beirut. Written not only with the permission but also at the request of the subject in the story, this childhood memoir in verse retells its female narrator's experiences of child sex abuse in Lebanon, a topic largely shrouded in debilitating silence.

Keywords: Incest narrative, Childhood sexual abuse, Biographical verse, Lebanon

Context

Given the sensitive and taboo nature of child sex abuse in conservative contexts, biographical and literary research on incest in the Middle East, in general, and in Lebanon especially, is scarce. Lately, with increasing recourse to assisted reproduction treatment, fears of (unwitting) incest—an otherwise proscribed subject in the Arab world—have loomed over the possibility of incestuous relationships among the children of anonymous donors (Inhorn et al.). In general, otherwise, the collectivist nature of the Arab social fabric means that, in cases of incest, “enforcing the laws against sexual perpetrators, typically, threatens the unity and reputation of the family, and therefore this option is rejected and the family turns against the victim” (Abu Baker and Dwairy 109; Raufman).

Indeed, as Ouis has reported, when children's abuse occurs in conservative Arab setups, the victims of incest and/or other forms of sexual exploitation by “adults in their closest social environment” (446) remain mute. Knowing that the potency of converting traumatic experience into narrative poetry—in terms of raising awareness on occluded or contentious topics and/or personal catharsis—has been established in numerous art-based inquiries/outputs (Lahman et al.; Teman; Prendergast), the biographical and arguably ethnographic incest narrative that I have rewritten in verse form, based on a personal oral history divulged by a close friend and upon her request, aims to help revoke this silence.

This lived narrative was shared with me during the early days of the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon when we were still taking to the streets and our hope for change was at its highest. The gendered and inclusive revolution brought together women, migrant workers, refugees, and the LGBTQ+ community, uniting around principles of secularism, liberalism, and human rights (Fakhoury; “In Lebanon”). Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, and its successive state-enforced

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lockdowns, demonstrators by the hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets daily, asking for an eradication of sectarian patronage and systemic accountability, even retribution, over the long-standing morass of Lebanese politics and patriarchy (Salloukh). The revolutionary spirit fostered by the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon generated a transiently hopeful impression that Lebanese patriarchy, and the clout of its constituent warlords and/or formidable father figures—social, political, cultural, religious, and familial—were not impervious to interrogation and critique. It is within this context that the protagonist of this poem requested that the story, which unfolded in the 1980s,² finally be told.

incestuous

the imam's voice is graceful
you listen to the words
but do not understand their meaning
you gaze at the ceiling, and feel as though it is also bowing
before God
you are reminded of Baba's Quran recitations
before you sleep
he reads from the Quran, and he orders you
to sleep next to him
every night
he asks you to massage him
everywhere
because he gets tired from reading
and because he says you have
strong hands

in the mosque, the men are bowing
standing too close to each other
your teacher, Miss Mirvat, has said
it's because we don't want *Shaytan*³
to pass through us
sometimes, while we pray,
we start thinking about other things
this happens to you a lot
Shaytan whispers in your ears
you start cursing God
in prayer
you become scared
no one
must know this
but if this is *Shaytan*
scheming, whispering

² In the 1980s, Lebanon was still going through episodes of civil war that only ended in 1990.

³ The Devil is, in Arabic, referred to as *Shaytan*.

you are relieved
it's not you

now you look at the men
and you understand,
you don't like anyone touching you
but as long as it keeps *Shaytan* away
you will do it. Next time you pray with them,
you shall put your shoulders next to their shoulders,
your feet next to their feet
even though you can't stand the smell
and even though you feel like you
will fall, you will do it. Even if they
try to touch your hand
they shouldn't,
but it's okay
you will do it
for God

you walk around, walk around, walk around
many Qurans, dusty
lie on the floor, as do the baskets,
filled with dirty skirts
you take one, it is ripped
you put it back, and open another basket
it is filled with used headscarves
you do not dare touch them

you run to the other side of the mosque
and you see an old, old man
old like your Baba
the first thing he asks
is whether you are alone
when he hears you say so,
the muscles on his face relax

the man who looks like Baba sits down
asks you to sit down next to him
you don't, and he insists
so you sit next to him
but not too close
he asks questions
about the mosque and its architecture
you don't have answers
at ten, you don't know
what architecture means

he says your face is beautiful
and pulls down his pants
the Qurans, the floor,
blurry
spinning
this will be our secret
the old, old man says

out of the mosque
running
running
running
under Beirut's manila sun,
home
you tell all to Baba,
but things like that
occur all the time,
he says
you have to be stronger,
that this even might have happened
because you don't pray
a lot
but I was at the mosque
and I was praying
he says pray more
to protect yourself

*habibi*⁴,
how did he look like?
you think about telling him
that he was an old, old man
who looked like him

but you say you don't

remember

Concluding Remarks

Since composing the above poem, I have had further exposure to incest testimonials. The forced reunion of younger estranged family members with parents or older relatives, a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, meant that traumatic childhood memories were retriggered. Working against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, my students in creative nonfiction penned personal narratives, some of which engaged the topic of incest. Despite the

⁴ A widely used term of endearment in the Lebanese context, "habibi" in Lebanese parlance is often gender-neutral and means "sweetheart".

generational gap, a lot of their stories mirror the turpitudes experienced by the subject in the poem. Many, mostly women writers, reflected on childhood episodes that left similarly indelible memories; they pondered the legacy of trauma that they have needed to negotiate afresh with the constraints, both physical and emotional, of Coronavirus lockdown and the return to contested homes/spaces. At the heart of all these narratives is their disarming candor, steeped in the need to express lived yet sidelined realities, vigorously discouraged in Lebanon. Thus, albeit succinct, this biographical poem sheds light, at least in small part, on a seemingly ongoing plight that is all the more insidious for unfolding behind closed doors, regardless of space, setting, or sanctum.

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