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## **A Contemporary Palestinian Reading of Gender Politics in Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy***

By Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* (1650) is both tribute to and critique of Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633). I argue that *The Unnatural Tragedy* undermines the masculine ideology on female speech and silence, linking male figures' voices with treachery and incest and female voice, conventionally sexualized, with truth and honesty. The main thrust of *The Unnatural Tragedy* is against the passive feminine virtues embodied by Madame Bonit and Soeur whose adherence to the feminine virtues of silence and obedience and the masculine ideology of honour lead to their loss of control over their lives. In contrast to silence, Cavendish shows that speech is a subjective space from which female figures criticize male figures' voices and systems of governance. Following the methodology of presentism, I argue that *The Unnatural Tragedy* resonates with contemporary Palestinian representation of gender difference through the binary opposites of speech and silence. Bonit's oppressive silence and her refusal to publicize her husband's mistreatment of her and Soeur's rape and subsequent murder by her brother offer my female students a point of focus to consider the destructive Palestinian ideology of honor which is based on silencing the female voice.

*Keywords:* Contemporary Palestine, Gender Politics, Margaret Cavendish, Silence, Speech, *The Unnatural Tragedy*

### ***The Unnatural Tragedy* and Contemporary Palestine**

Of Cavendish's dramatic oeuvre which consists of thirteen plays, *The Unnatural Tragedy* is the only one that is categorized as tragedy. Cavendish transgresses the borders of gender roles by writing a tragedy, a conventionally masculine domain. She challenges the masculine construction of the binary opposites of speech and silence. While she associates the male voice with lust and blasphemy, she criticizes the patriarchal idealization of female silence which leads female figures to lose their control over the movement of the plot and their lives. In contrast to the conventional construction of the tragic closures in which outspoken women are silenced, Cavendish shows that silence and obedience to male figures' voices are the causes of female figures' deaths. The majority of tragedies written

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by male playwrights endorse the conventional association between female speech and wantonness and thereby consolidate the demonization of female speech<sup>2</sup>. However, Cavendish deploys the discourse of motherhood, privacy, domesticity and virginity to legitimize her female protagonists' voices and her own writing.

In contemporary Palestine, the cultural conception of honour is articulated through a gender construction under which women are represented as symbolic vessels of the honour of their families, and men are determined as the protectors of their female relatives' honour. This construction of gender roles is inextricably linked to Palestinian traditions and Israeli occupation which impede women's emancipation from the fetters of traditions. Hamamra (2016) points out that 'the construction of gender difference in contemporary Palestine can be attributed to the interrelated systems of traditions, occupation and discriminatory laws and legal systems which reinforce each other's dynamics and limit the advancement of women' (p. 1). However, regardless of differences in historical and ideological contexts between early modern England and contemporary Palestine, there are affinities between *The Unnatural Tragedy* and contemporary Palestine in terms of the representation of gender roles and the destructive idealization of female silence and obedience. Thus, to illuminate the relationship between these cultures, I deploy the critical line of presentism which entails the deliberate use of 'A critical and productive use of anachronism, a deliberate "presentism", offers one way of disrupting that "violent hierarchy" between present and past, collapsing the distance between them in a double gesture that both inverts and defamiliarizes' (DiPietro and Grady, 2013, p. 12). While Bruce R. Smith (2012) argues that 'Presentism [...] goes too far in denying continuities between past and present' (p. 41), I employ some examples of gendering speech and silence in contemporary Palestine to reveal trans-historical and trans-cultural continuities between *The Unnatural Tragedy* and contemporary Palestine and to demonstrate the power of analysis and relevance to refocus this early modern English text through the lens of contemporary Palestinian culture.

My teaching of Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* as a part of Drama Course challenges the male-dominated scholarly tradition in the Department of English at An-Najah National University where female themes and concerns are to some extent marginalized by the instructors' interpretations of early modern English literary texts. My colleagues focus on male-authors such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, Synge, Pinter and Beckett. While they exclude female texts from Drama Course, they focus on male themes and concerns and marginalize female figures to the extent that they attribute the deaths of female characters such as Shakespeare's Desdemona and Webster's the Duchess of Malfi to their defiance of, disobedience to, male characters. In this respect, my discussion of Cavendish's tragedy brings to light previously unheard female author and heroines' voices. Furthermore, my discussion of the theme of rape, a salient taboo in contemporary Palestine, alongside Palestinian feminist activists' recovery of oppressed female voices, challenges the masculine ideology of gender difference which is based on the hegemony of the male over the female who is allegedly driven by her libido. Frere's rape of his sister reflects the

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Tragedy of Arden of Faversham* (1592), Alice uses her 'sweet-set tongue' to tempt Mosby into an adulterous relationship (I.iii.147). Also, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1591) endorses the conventional association between female speech and sexual looseness in the figure of Tamora. *Titus Andronicus* represents Tamora as a 'foul adulteress' (2.2.109) who voices and acts on her sexual desire towards Aaron the Moor.

rape of some Palestinian girls by members of their families, deconstructing the Palestinian ideology of honour. Soeur's inability to publicize her brother's lust and rape of her is a comment on the Palestinian idealization of the female silence. I contend that Madame Bonit's obedience and submission to her husband anachronistically resonates with many Palestinian women who submit themselves to the wills of their husbands even though they are mistreated. However, Bonit's oppressive silence and her refusal to publicize her husband's unfaithfulness and mistreatment of her offer my students especially female ones a point of focus to the tyranny and oppression embodied in the masculine idealization of female silence<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Sociable Virgins' Subversive Voices**

*The Unnatural Tragedy* subverts the conventional association of female speech with wantonness in early modern England and contemporary Palestine. The female voice in contemporary Palestine, especially in rural areas that are enmeshed in the web of traditions, is taken to signify sexual looseness. The most iterated Palestinian dictum about a woman's speech is that 'a female voice is a sign of shame'. Hamamra (2016) observes that 'It is a common folkloric tradition that Palestinians call a vocal woman *mostarjelli* (mannish woman) or *emzanebrri* (horny woman)' (p. 17). From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, *The Unnatural Tragedy* undermines this Palestinian association between female oral and genital openness in the figures of the Sociable Virgins. The tragedy depicts Sociable Virgins who meet publicly 'every day to discourse and talk' about 'everybody, and of everything' (I.3.46), about subjects ranging from 'State-matters' (2.3.44) to 'speeches and oration' (2.6.36) to the treatment of women in their society. Their debates show that these Sociable Virgins are educated women who subvert their society's perception of women as inferior to men intellectually. One of the Matrons accuses the Sociable Virgins of being 'wild and wanton' (1.1.6) because of their witty discussion of 'naked truth' (3.4.35). However, Cavendish questions the authority of the Matron and her link of the Sociable Virgin's speech to sexual looseness, for the Matron is unable to distinguish between literal and figurative meaning. These wordy young women, who are of 'voluble tongues and quick wits' (1.3.49), 'resolve to live a single life' (1.7.11), suggesting that they are identified with sexual purity rather than sexual looseness.

Cavendish shows that the Sociable Virgins are involved in the public sphere of politics, criticizing male governance of the society. The Sociable Virgins remark that 'if women were employed in the affairs of state, the world would live more happily' (2.3.6), and 'if we had that breeding, and did govern, we should govern the world better than it is' (2.3.26). Many of my students find a parallel situation in contemporary Palestine where to some extent women are precluded from the public sphere of politics and decision making. However, while the Sociable Virgins (like many Palestinian women) comment critically on the exclusion of women from politics and government, the Sociable Virgins never move to the public sphere of politics and their engagement with this conventionally masculine

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<sup>3</sup> While female silence is traditionally taken to signify obedience and submission, female silence is also a sign of oppression and sexual violation. A housewife from a Camp in Ramallah said that 'I know of so many [women] who were sexually abused by their husbands or even their brothers, also possibly their fathers, and the women must keep silent' (Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, 2010, p. 35).

domain is a possibility that is not translated into action. Cavendish's confinement of the Sociable Virgins in the domestic sphere where they unleash their voices against male systems of authority shows that Cavendish dissociates herself from the public theatre so as to legitimize her writing and the Sociable Virgins' voices.

Cavendish deploys the discourse of motherhood in relation to the Sociable Virgins and in extension to her construction of her authorial identity to dissociate herself and the Sociable Virgins from the blot of sexuality ingrained in female speech and writing. The Sociable Virgins assert that their words are the 'children of the mind, begot betwixt the soul and senses' (3.1.10-11). By representing themselves as figurative mothers whose minds conceive thoughts and ideas, the Sociable Virgins push themselves to the domestic sphere. Furthermore, the use of the discourse of motherhood suggests that the Sociable Virgins present their discourse as a procreative offspring, thus assuming an appropriate feminine role of motherhood. The fact that the Sociable Virgins refuse the yoke of marriage and dissociate their speech from sexual looseness shows that their procreative power redeems Eve's transgression.

Cavendish uses the technique of a female-to-female conversation to legitimize the Sociable Virgins' speeches and in extension her own writing of *The Unnatural Tragedy*. While the two gentlemen suggest that they go and listen to the speeches of the Sociable Virgins, the Virgins' discussions occur in a female setting. Their speeches which are taking place among them are mediated by the Matrons who function as listeners and commentators. The trope of virginity that Cavendish associates with the Sociable Virgins as illustrated below suggests the enclosed nature of their voices and in extension Cavendish's writing. This dissociation between the Virgins' voices and sexual looseness is further substantiated by Cavendish's linking of the Social Virgins' bodies and voices to the enclosed garden, the pure Virgin Mary.

The association between female speech and sexual purity is illuminated in Cavendish's use of the trope of the garden in relation to the Sociable Virgins. For example, the third Virgin says that 'natures Flowers are Poets Fancies, and Natures Gardens are Poetical Heads' and the matrons suggest that they should 'leave her in her Garden, and talk of something else' (3.1.9). Cavendish's employment of the image of the garden alludes to the reign of the Stuarts where gardens are taken to signify 'the paradigm of natural perfection and original setting of humankind's unity with God' (Vaughan 1994, p. 92). The courtly gardens disclose an image 'not merely of royal harmony with nature but of absolute royal control over the floral world as a corollary of the absolute monarch's magical power over the heavenly realm and its flora, the stars' (Vaughan 1994, p. 95). Furthermore, the trope of the garden subverts the myth of Eve whose speech is associated with seduction and lasciviousness. While Eve's speech brings about man's downfall, Cavendish redeems female speech from the taint of sexuality and danger embodied in the myth of humanity's Fall.

In spite of being outspoken, the Sociable Virgins maintain control over their lives and the movement of the plot. While in the public stage outspoken female figures are silenced in the tragic closures<sup>4</sup>, the Sociable Virgins consolidate their subjectivity all the way through. This shows that Cavendish is writing against the dominant ideology of the

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Middleton's *The Changeling* (1622) end with the silencing of Tamora and Beatrice-Joanna whose deaths mark out the reassertion of patriarchal voices and authority.

binary opposites of speech and silence. Cavendish subverts the link between female speech and lasciviousness in the figure of the Sociable Virgins whose speeches are signs of sexual purity. While women who adhere to the feminine virtue of silence fail to achieve transcendence over death by fashioning their own deaths, the Sociable Virgins secure their lasting fame by displaying their linguistic talents. While the wordy Sociable Virgins evade male figures' authority, I contend that male figures deploy silence as an oppressive strategy to oppress and dehumanize female figures. It is silence that brings about the downfall of Soeur and Madame Bonit.

### **Incest and Subversion of Gender Roles**

Cavendish shows that male figures' voices are associated with incest and immorality and female figures' voices are associated with truth and honesty. Soeur who is married to 'so worthy a person' that she would not 'change him for all the World' (2.5.52-54) is raped by her brother, Frere, who treats her as an object of sex. Frere articulates his incestuous desire towards his sister and strives to convince her to sleep with him. In response to his expression of this taboo, she remarks, 'Brother, speak no more upon so bad a subject, for fear I wish you dumb: for the very breath that's sent forth your words, will blister both my ears' (5.1.1-3). While Frere uses his tongue to corrupt his sister's ears and swell her with immoral sexual desires, Soeur unleashes her voice to assert her sexual purity and morality and to oppose her brother's wanton thoughts and desires: 'No Brother, I never was wild nor wanton, but always modest and honest' (2.5.48). Deborah Burks notes that 'Cavendish appeals to her readers' expectation that noble Ladies are inherently chaste. In the same sentence, however, she appeals to her readers' knowledge that the chastity of noble men is not to be dependent upon' (2000, p. 85). Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy*, therefore, subverts the stereotypical association between female speech and lasciviousness.

Cavendish subverts the conventional masculine ideology on female speech and listening. While conventionally female speech is associated with lasciviousness, Soeur is the mouthpiece of morality. In Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* on which Cavendish's plot of rape is modelled, Annabella's aural openness to Giovanni's speech is a sign of sexual looseness. Giovanni tells Annabella that he has 'suppressed the hidden flames' of his love for her for so long that they 'almost have consumed' him, and that she 'must either love' him, or he 'must die' (1.2. 227-234). Annabella has been suffering because she 'durst not say [she] loved, nor scarcely think it' (1.2.256). While Annabella's aural openness is associated with lasciviousness, the openness of Soeur's ears defies the gender convention, identified by Bloom (2007), in which 'for the gentlewoman, aural generosity compromises honor' (p. 115). Soeur's aural openness to her brother's immoral voice enables her to ineffectively resist his temptation, wishing that she did not hear his vile words.

### **Honour Ideology in Contemporary Palestine and *The Unnatural Tragedy***

From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, Soeur's concern about her reputation and honor undermines the Palestinian honour ideology where men are cast as the guardians of their family honour which 'is linked to the sex organs of daughters and wives' (Awwad, 2001, p. 41). Peteet (2000) points out that honour is 'a defining frame of [Arab] masculinity [which] is attained by constant vigilance and willingness to defend

honor (sharaf), face (wajh), kin and community from eternal aggression and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety' (p. 107). Soeur, pointing out the sinfulness of her brother's incestuous desire and the infamy this desire brings to the family, plays the role of the guardian of her honour: 'Do not pursue such horrid acts as to whore your sister, cuckold your brother-in-law, dishonour your father and brand your life and memory with black infamy' (p. 49). Some of my students recognize that Frere's rape of his sister undermines the deep-rooted traditional notion of honour ideology in which men are the guardians of their honour based on female sexual purity.

In associating Frere's speech with incest and Soeur's voice with morality and sexual purity, Cavendish dramatizes an inversion of gender roles with respect to discourse. While women are believed to be 'the passive prey' and tongue of 'external forces' (Purkiss, 1992, 144), Cavendish subverts this ideology by associating Frere with wicked spirits and Soeur with truth and morality. Frere is a feminine figure who rebels against the law of God who prohibits incest while Soeur is a masculine figure who defends the spiritual voice of God. Like Ford's protagonist Giovanni, who tells his sister Annabella that the 'holy church' (1.2.246) endorses their incestuous desire, Frere implores his sister to 'follow not those foolish binding laws which frozen men have made, but follow nature's laws, whose freedom gives a liberty to all' (4.3.13-14). For both Frere and Giovanni, an objection to incestuous desire is based on its transgression against Frere's 'laws of frozen men' or Giovanni's 'customary form, from man to man' (1.1.25). Ford's Annabella consents to have sexual intercourse with Giovanni, calling him a 'celestial creature' with a 'blessed shape' (1.2.137-38). However, as Gweno Williams notes, in contrast with Ford's Annabella, 'significantly [...] the sister in Cavendish's play is raped, and never consents to the incest. This is a further example of Cavendish's refusal to create female characters who are commodified as whores' (2000, p. 117). While Soeur uses biblical discourse to resist her brother's wicked desire and to express her concern about her brother's morality (4.3.31), Frere mocks the authority of God, deploying religious discourse to sanction his rape of his sister: 'if Gods had power, they sure would give me strength [...] and if they cannot help, or will not help me, Furies rise up from the infernal deep, and give my Actions aid' (4.4.3-5). Frere's use of pagan terminology and his invocation of religious discourse to fulfill his incestuous desire and the fact that Soeur uses religious discourse to defend God's doctrine and keep her sexual purity undermines the masculine association of female speech with sexuality.

From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, Frere's incestuous desire and Soeur's moral voice capture a stark inversion of gender roles, subverting the convention that associates women with passion and men with reason. Zahira Kamal (1998) outlines:

"an ideological structure [...] based on ancestral traditions [which] derives its strength from Arab religious practices and is filled with superstitions [...]. One result of this structure is that Arab women are [...] considered weak, incapable creatures, mere shadows of their men" (p. 79).

Many Palestinian readers will recognize that the association of Frere with passion that overthrows his reason and Soeur with morality subverts the Palestinian association of women with moral weakness which is the basis of women's alleged inferiority to men.

Early in the play, the second gentleman tells the first gentleman that ‘Women are not capable of Reason’ (1.3.30). ‘Because it is thought – or rather believed – that women have no rational souls, being created out of man, and not from Jove, as man was’ (I.3. 32-33). However, Cavendish undermines this stereotypical representation of gender roles. While Frere’s passions and affections ‘pull down Reason from his throne and banish Conscience from the Soul’ (3.2.2-3), Soeur follows the dictates of reason and morality all the way through. From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, the association of Frere with passion and Soeur with reason and morality subverts the principle of male supremacy and female inferiority.

Frere’s rape of his sister has a striking parallel in contemporary Palestine where some women are raped and sexually abused by their male relatives. The Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2011) observes that ‘it is believed that the bulk of sexual violence against women and girls is located within the family’ (p. 10). Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) point out that ‘There are also indications that family members sometimes not only tolerate the sexual abuse of females, but also arrange for their female relatives to provide sexual favours to uncles, brothers-in-laws or other family members’ (p. 35). However, the victim ‘was pressured to remain silent, in order to preserve the family’s honour’ (Chaban et al, 2010, p. 35). ‘[W]hile women are expected to serve the interests of the family’s males’ (Baxter, 2007, p. 744), the rape of some women by their male members of the family manifests the deeply harmful concept of familial ownership of women and the destructiveness of the masculine ideology of honour. While Rubenberg (2001) states that honor is ‘the root of gender oppression’ (p. 43), the rape of Soeur by her brother may give a point of focus to my students to consider that many women, victims of honour killing<sup>5</sup>, are killed so that male figures can cloak their lust and evil deeds of sexual abuse<sup>6</sup>.

### **Female’s Visibility, Invisibility and Honour**

Cavendish shows that male figures prevent female self-representation verbally and spatially. Frere divides women into whores and virgins according to their association to the public sphere of visibility and the private sphere of invisibility. In the opening of the tragedy, Frere expresses his sexual desires to his friend openly: ‘I will stay here a while longer for the Curtezans sake: for we shall never get such store, nor such choice of Mistrisses; therefore, though the sober and chaste women are kept up here in Italy, yet the wild and wanton are let loose to take their liberty’ (1.1.5-6). Frere divides Italian women into ‘Curtezans’ who ‘dress themselves finest when they entertain strangers of acquaintance’ and virgins ‘enclosed with locks and bolts [...] so as a stranger cannot obtain a sight’ (2.5.26-28). Soeur subverts Frere’s association between female presence in the public sphere and lasciviousness, claiming that ‘Why, do they fear they would all turn Curtezans if they should be left to themselves’ (2.5.31). Soeur’s insistence that she will not

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<sup>5</sup> Awwad points out that ‘Honor killing is a form of gender based violence perpetrated by a male family member, usually a brother or a father, against a female family member believed to have dishonored the family by engaging in immoral and unacceptable forms of sexual behavior’ (Awwad, 2001, p. 39).

<sup>6</sup> Awwad (2001) notes that ‘Women who are victims of rape and incest, usually perpetrated by a male family member, fall victim to this form of family aggression because it is believed that they have brought shame to the family’ (pp. 39-40).



be locked in the private sphere as the Italian women—‘I would not live there for all the world, for to be so restrained; for it is said that Italian men are so jealous of their wives as they are jealous of their brothers, fathers, and sons’ (2.5.37)—signifies lasciviousness on the part of Frere who rapes his sister under the pretext that her visibility and speech are manifestations of sexual desires. Frere who has not seen his sister since he ‘was a little boy’ (1.1.45) tells her shortly after he meets her that he loves her ‘so well, and so much, as ’tis a torment to be out of [her] company’ (2.5.59-60) and moans about ‘Love’s raging fire that’s in [his] heart’ (3.7.2-3). Frere defines his sister as the eroticized object to male figures’ gaze: ‘Your beauty, sister, will not only surprise, but astonish any man that looks thereon’ (2.5.5-6). Frere’s perception of his sister as an object of his gaze —‘*Monsieur FRERE all the while looks upon his sister very steadfastly*’ (1.5.18)— suggests that women are always scrutinized by their society and that their visibility is taken to signify sexual looseness.

Frere’s association of his sister’s visibility even in the domestic sphere with sexual desire gives my students a point of focus to the sexual violence to which some Palestinian women, especially those living in rural areas, are subject in their households. For many Palestinian readers, especially those who are steeped in the network of traditions, the domestic sphere signifies female sexual purity which could be tainted by the female transgression of the borders of the house. Baxter (2007) argues that ‘honor signifies male selves controlling the bodies, movement-in-space, and sexuality of female selves’ (p. 743). Many Palestinians control their female relatives’ movement so as to shield them from the public sphere which is precarious to their sexual reputation. However, many Palestinian women are sexually abused by their male relatives in the domestic sphere which marks out their sexual purity. Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) note that ‘Some young women noted that, even at home, women are at risk of being sexually assaulted. They indicated that women’s obligation to maintain a modest appearance extends to the inside of their homes, sometimes implying that women are responsible for “provoking” men’s abusive behaviour’ (p. 35). A university student from a city in Ramallah asserts that:

You can even be at home (...) and dressed properly, but you still fear how your brother looks at you and how your father looks at you. Our communities are somewhat scary. You must try to cover yourself up with your clothes, or you would attract the attention of your brother or father (...). We had cases of rape by brothers, fathers or uncles living in the same home. A woman cannot wear anything she wants (p. 35).

These lines problematize the construction of the house in contemporary Palestine as a haven space that marks out female safety and sexual purity. The masculine gaze that objectifies women and reduces them to physical bodies has psychological impact on the feminine relation women have to their bodies. The female attention is channeled towards her body rather than upon what can be achieved through the body.

While the confinement of women in the domestic sphere is exacerbated by the Israeli occupation, the rape of some Palestinian women by their male family members shows that Palestinian men are playing the role of the Israeli occupation in the domestic sphere of the household. The Palestinian nationalist discourse casts the female body as the

site of Palestinian purity based on precluding women from the public sphere which is detrimental to their sexual reputation. As Cheryl Rubenberg (2001) observes, ‘during the intifada, parents were very concerned about their daughters’ honor being sullied by contact with Israeli soldiers [...]. Many girls feared *iskat* (having one’s honor tarnished, especially by an enemy) and preferred to be at home’ (p. 124). Where sexual violence against Palestinian women ‘is likely to destroy a nation’s culture’ (Seifert 1999: 150), the chaste female body is regarded as the foundation for familial and in extension national stability. The construction of women as eroticized objects and their rape by male members of the family suggest that Palestinian men are playing the role of the Israeli occupation in the domestic sphere, inaugurating and supporting the rhetoric of Israeli occupation.

From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, the occurrence of rape off stage shows that the patriarchal oppression of women is not visible to the public. Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) assert that:

As in most societies, the issue of sexual violence in general, and within the family specifically, is highly sensitive in Palestinian society. When discussing family sexual violence, women mentioned cultural taboos as an important motivation for not speaking out about abuse, as the fear of scandal compels women to remain silent....Many, thus, believe that there is no way of fighting sexual violence perpetrated by family members (p. 34).

In interviewing women from different Palestinian locations, Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) note that ‘Women often mentioned situations where a female family member was known to have been sexually abused by a male relative but was pushed to remain silent, in order to preserve the family’s honour’ (p. 35). While silence frees the reins for perpetrators, speaking out challenges patriarchal authority as it breaks the silence of what should be kept secret. A housewife from a camp in Ramallah says that ‘I know of so many [women] who were sexually abused by their husbands or even their brothers, also possibly their fathers, and the women must keep silent’ (p. 35). From a presentist, Palestinian perspective, the opening of the chamber where Frere rapes and murders Soeur to the public view suggests Cavendish’s exposure of patriarchal society’s oppression and mistreatment of women.

### **The Oppressive Discourse of Female Silence**

Cavendish suggests that male figures deploy the masculine construction of gender difference which is based on silencing female figures as a defensive strategy against female figures’ power which is detrimental to male figures’ authority. In a conversation with a friend, a gentleman asserts that he would not get married to any one of the Sociable Virgins because they are outspoken: ‘No, no, I will choose none of them; for they are too full of discourse. For I would have a Wife rather to have a listening ear than a talking tongue’ (4.7.42). The gentleman’s repudiation of the Sociable Virgin as a prospective wife suggests that a good wife should adhere to the conventionally feminine virtue of silence. However, the gentleman desires a silent wife that she may ‘by the ear [...] receive wise instructions, and so learn to practise that which is noble and good; also to know my desires, as to obey

my will' (4.7.44-46). In other words, the gentleman craves to marry a silent wife who shows aural openness to his instructions so as to control her. This masculine construction of silence as a strategy employed by men to exercise their hegemony over women is manifested in the figure of Madame Bonit, 'a sweet-natured creature' (3.6.2), who silently bears the whips of her husband's scorn.

Cavendish criticizes the social idealization of the conventional feminine virtue of silence by showing that silent women are mistreated by their husbands. While Bonit does not 'speak many words in a whole day' (2.4.8) and never contradicts her husband (2.4.10), her adherence to the feminine virtues of silence and obedience breeds her husband's mistreatment of her. As Joan says to Bonit, 'But many times a good-natured wife will make an ill-natured husband' (2.7.15), criticizing the ideology of feminine silence. Madame Bonit's husband takes advantage of his wife being 'virtuous and kind' (5.15.18) with 'a quiet obedient nature' (4.8.34), 'making her,' in his words, 'a slave unto [his] whore and frowns' (5.15.20-21). In response to Joan's suggestion that she cuckold her husband, Bonit says, 'Heaven forbid that I should stain that which gave me a reputation – my birth and family – or defame myself or trouble my conscience by turning a whore for revenge' (2.7.36-37). She refrains from publicizing her husband's violence towards her so as not to be 'the public discourse of the town' (2.7.29). From a presentist, Palestinian context, my students recognize a similar oppressive situation in Palestine where many women refrain from speaking about the verbal, physical and sexual violence they are subject to so as not to be subject to the destructive discourse of gossip and scandal.

Bonit's complicity with her husband's speech and her devotion towards him resonate with Palestinian women's submission to their husbands. In the fictional world of *The Unnatural Tragedy* and Contemporary Palestine, what 'makes married wives so sad and melancholy' is that 'they keep no other company but their husbands' (I.7.41-42). Bonit's adherence to the feminine virtues of submission and obedience to her husband resonates with many Palestinian women who submit to their husbands even though they are mistreated. Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) note that 'Women and girls describe Palestinian society's tacit acceptance of physical violence against them within the family circle as eliciting feelings of powerlessness. It is an unwritten rule that speaking out against this type of violence will cause more problems, as women and girls will likely be stigmatized by their families and by their communities' (p.31). Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler (2010) refer to the words of a working woman from a village in Hebron, who says that 'I was treated in a bad way by my husband. I've always been beaten and abused without telling anyone, not even my family' (p. 34). Likewise, Madame Bonit is the type of the silent woman who never opposes her husband's mistreatment of her even when he expresses and acts on his unfaithfulness to her.

Contrary to many Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies where the outspoken women are silenced in the tragic closure, in *The Unnatural Tragedy*, as Corporaal (2004) puts it, 'a woman's silence leads to her disempowerment and victimisation, whereas wit and self-assertion result in a woman's control over her fate' (p. 12.2). Cavendish shows that Madame Bonit's concern for reputation forces her to suffer her husband's abuse 'in silent misery' (2.7.32). Likewise, it is Soeur's desire to 'keep [her] Honour [...] clear' (5.3.5) that prevents her from publicizing her brother's incestuous desires. Cavendish, therefore, demonstrates just how patriarchal culture's idealization of female silence contributes to the downfall of these two women. While Malateste's emotional cruelty causes the death of his

chaste and obedient wife, it is silence that leads Soeur to lose her chastity and eventually her life. Soeur's determination not to publicize her brother's incestuous desire—'I would willingly hide your faults— nay I am ashamed to make them known' (5.1.3)—makes her an object to his rape and murder. While Soeur asserts that she 'shall give a passage unto life' (5.14.9-10), she is not given a subjective space to fashion even her own death. Frere kills his sister and then himself because he is unable to be 'without [Soeur's] company, although in death and in the silent grave' (5.14.6-7). Furthermore, he kills her so as to prevent other men from possessing and enjoying her the same way Giovanni kills Annabella to keep her out of Soranzo's bed.

While Cavendish criticizes the masculine idealization of female silence, she shows that speech enables female figures to attain subjectivity and control over their lives. Even though Cavendish endorses the masculine association of female speech and lasciviousness in the figure of Madame Malateste who proclaims herself 'no good Wife', but one who will 'follow [her] own humour' rather her husband's (5.8.16). The virgin's adoption of Malateste's name shows that she 'match[es]' her husband's bad 'nature and disposition' (3.9.31-32). Determined that she will not stay in a 'dull place' with a husband who 'spends his time in sneaking after his Maids tails' (5.6.10-11), Madame Malateste moves to her own 'fine house in the City' (5.6.9), where she spends her time socializing and 'dancing' (5.13.8), and is 'never without her gallants,' giving the servants 'cause to think' that she 'cuckold[s]' her husband (5.11.4-5). In contrast to the convention of the tragic closures of the public stage where the outspoken and wanton female characters are silenced, the virgin escapes such a tragic end while her husband in a form of poetic justice dies of grief and loneliness.

## Conclusion

By positioning *The Unnatural Tragedy* alongside Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Cavendish shows that women are silenced in the tragic closures whether they transgress gender roles or not. While Soeur is the mouthpiece of morality, Ford's Annabella's voice is associated with incestuous desire towards her brother Giovanni. While both women are murdered by their brothers, Soeur's death (like that of Madame Bonit) is a comment on the patriarchal idealization of female silence which is a strategy that male figures use to oppress women. While women who adhere to the feminine virtue of silence lose linguistic control over the movement of the plot, the Sociable Virgins and the lustful Virgin who marries Monsieur Malateste maintain their linguistic control and subjectivity.

From a presentist, Palestinian context of reading, I have pointed out that the association between Frere's speech with incest and Soeur's speech with morality subverts the Palestinian principle of male supremacy over the female and the ideology of honour which is based on controlling women's movement and sexuality. The dramatization of familial rape in Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* can be read as an instance of Freudian return of the oppressed, commenting on and questioning the Palestinian construction of gender roles. Soeur's and Bonit's deaths as silent and helpless objects of man's tyranny have striking affinity with some Palestinian women who are silent victims of the ills of male figures of authority.

However, the discussion of this incestuous, pernicious and perverse desire does not receive a response from the majority of my students who, especially those who are coming

from rural areas, articulate their annoyance that such a play dramatizes an incestuous desire, a deviant act that veers from Palestinian social, religious and sexual norms. My discussion of the theme of rape in *The Unnatural Tragedy*, which is excluded from the traditional academic milieu within the university system, makes me subject to many students' accusations that I am an instructor of immorality and blasphemy. Such accusations act as a powerful challenge to many Western teachers' comfortable assumptions in offering feminist interpretations of Renaissance literature.

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