Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary: The Virgin Mary, The Whore of Babylon and Sexual Violence

For I am the first and the last. I am the honoured one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one.

– Unknown author, The Thunder, Perfect Mind

In this essay, I seek to problematise the virgin/whore binary which, I argue, has enabled, normalised and sustained violence against women. This binary positions women into two opposing categories: the virgins or the “good” women who express their sexuality only within culturally-sanctioned and patriarchally-defined boundaries such as marriage. All other women who fail to conform to this ideal are considered “whores”—morally corrupt and dangerously concupiscent.

Previous studies have shown how this binary has been deployed to justify and perpetuate sexual violence against those who are labelled as a “whore” or “slut.” The logic is that sexual violence against these women is deemed “normal” or “make sense” because they have transgressed cultural norms. By being “promiscuous,” they have been played as responsible for trouble themselves so that it is their own fault if they were sexually assaulted. In my research, I have discovered that this binary has been drawn on by Indonesian Christian youth whom I interviewed regarding their understanding of sexual violence. Below is an example:

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Soetjipto, Djalan Sampurno. Undated manuscript (1928). The Library of Arsip National Republik Indonesia, Jakarta.


by Teguh Wijaya Mulia

When I was in Year 7 (13 years old), I was very naughty. In my class at that time there was a girl, like a cheap girl. One day I and other boys played a prank on her. When there was no teacher in the class, we turned the light off, then we stormed her and grabbed her things [i.e., sexual parts of her body].

(Ayub, 18, high school student, male, heterosexual)

Besides trivialising this incident as a prank (which implies something un-serious, jokey and common among youth), this narrative shows how Ayub also normalised this act of sexual violence by constituting the target as a “cheap girl”—a girl who has (or is perceived to have) engaged in sex with many boys. Since these “cheap girls” are presumed to be no longer virgins and thus morally corrupt, boys believe that they can treat these girls any way they like, especially sexually. It is her own fault, they reason, because she has failed to comply with the “acceptable social practice,” unlike “good girls” who maintain their virginity. Drawing on the binary of virgin/whore has enabled these Indonesian youth to justify sexual violence against certain women.

One of the cultural and historical representations sustaining this justified

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3 Narratives presented in this essay were translated from Indonesian to English by the author. All the participants’ names are pseudonyms.
violence against “misbehaving” women can be found in the Bible, namely, the narrative of the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17. This narrative has been used to justify violence against “misbehaving” women throughout the history, such as prostitutes and other sexually “mischievous” women. Many feminists and queer theologians have found difficulties in generating alternative meanings for this narrative. Tina Pippin, for instance, considered it as almost unrecognizable from its misogynist template. Among the few feminist re-readings of this text, most of them refuse to see violence towards the Whore in a literal way in preference to metaphorical and contextual readings. Marion Carson, for example, argues that previous feminist readings which focused on violence towards women were reductionistic and failed to identify the metaphorical nature of the book of Revelation. She invited the reader to understand that the destruction was directed against the idolatrous greed represented by the Whore, instead of the Whore herself representing an actual woman. Similarly, Nelava condemned the apostle John’s violent attitude towards the Whore, but also suggested that the reader needed to be empathetic to his socio-political situation. The enjoyment he expressed in watching the violent destruction of the Whore came from his experience of being oppressed by the Roman coloniser. Thus, it was the destruction of the coloniser which he celebrated here, not the violence perpetrated against a woman.

I want to take another route, however, and think differently about this narrative. I will juxtapose the Whore of Babylon with another biblically-based character who best represents the virgin category—namely, the Virgin Mary—in order to queer or denaturalise this binary. In contrast with the Whore of Babylon, Mary is the sinless virgin mother who gave birth to Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-35). According to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, since Adam’s fall, the disposition of sinfulness is passed down throughout the human race via the act of sexual intercourse between parents—an act which is characterised as concupiscence. Through her complete disassociation from sex (i.e., immaculate conception, virginal conception and perpetual virginity), Mary has side-stepped the cycle of hereditary transmission of sin and maintained her uninterupted state of perfect purity. In other words, she is totally sexless, and therefore, sinless. In this essay, I will explore the possibility that both these characters are not situated at opposite ends of this virgin/whore binary. Rather, I argue that they share similar characteristics, such as the centrality of sexuality and violence in their narratives, and their radical challenges towards male-dominated sexuality. My aim is to queer—to interrogate, to denaturalise, to rework—the virgin/whore binary by demonstrating that it is fundamentally unstable and unnecessarily categorical. I hope that this queer theological juxtaposition of Mary and the Whore of Babylon might provide new discursive resources to give alternative meanings to the “cheap” girl character in Ayub’s narrative, and subsequently disrupt the normalisation of sexual violence against the so-called “mischievous” women.

**Juxtaposing the Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon: Sex, Violence and Contestation of Male-Dominated Sexuality**

In Ayub’s narrative, the girl whom he and his friends targeted is defined and characterised by her sexuality. She is known and named after her genital activity. She is the “cheap girl,” or the girl who has (or is perceived to have) engaged in sex with many boys. Thus, she is allocated to the “whore” category in the virgin/whore binary. From this viewpoint, it is not difficult to link her with the character of the Whore of Babylon. The Whore of Babylon is also named and known by her sexuality. Her name is “the Whore,” or “the Great Whore” (Revelation 17:1), or the “mother of whores” of Babylon (Revelation 17:5), the great city (Revelation 17:18). The central story of her life is her confrontation with the kings of the earth (Revelation 17:2), which made her rich and powerful (Revelation 17:3-4). Her compelling sexual appeal took the Apostle John’s breath away—John was “greatly amazed” (or ἀποδημάσα, v.6) when he looked at her. It is therefore evident that sex and sexuality are central themes in the narrative of the Whore of Babylon, just as it is for the girl in Ayub’s story. In contrast, the figure of the Virgin Mary is characterised by sexlessness: sexuality, chastity, and purity. Instead of sexuality, the absence of sexuality is the main feature of her character. As Joseph N. Goh noted, “the worth of Mary as a product of theological assemblage rests upon her desexualized body by virtue of her virginity-maternity.”

Feminist and queer theologians have identified that this desexualisation of Mary is not unproblematic. Denying Mary’s sexuality, or condemning her to eternal chastity...
by making her name synonymous with virginity,” as Sian Taylder argues, means a preservation of Mary as “an agent of patriarchy” who embodies the “impossible role models of Virgin and mother” and espouses purity, obedience, and submission. Thus, the figure of Virgin Mary became an icon of subjugation to “male imagination and, indeed sexual fantasy.”

Marcella Althaus-Reid calls this desexualization of Mary “a theological clitoridectomy,” which denies and nullifies women’s sense of sexual agency and entitlement. However, it is not impossible to reinvent Mary as a sexual theological figure or reveal the centrality of sexuality in her narrative. Her narrative revolves around one sexually-related event, namely, her surrogate pregnancy. She was chosen among all women on earth to be the mother of God’s son (Luke 1:42). She too, is defined by her genitals—a virgin. On the one hand, virginity might be associated with subjection, asceticism, and sacrificial self-denial. On the other hand, it can also symbolise sexual potentials, fertility, fecundity, and to a degree, autonomy and belonging-to-no-man. With all these potentials, as Taylder has noted, there is nothing to suggest that Mary did not experience any form of sexual ecstasy in such a transcendent event, which might have been accompanied by the most exploitative orgasm ever experienced by a woman.

The centrality of sexuality in the Virgin Mary’s character can also be found in her exercise of sexual agency regarding her body as a site of spiritual struggle. As Goh has argued:

I see Mary’s body as queer ... because it is a body in which sexuality is prioritised and exercised in accordance with the authority of personal agency and body knowledge. It is possible to theologically construct a Mary who manifests a sacred choice of bodilyness due to a keen awareness of her own sexual epistemologies. As such, I advocate a revision of theological bodilyness on Mary who discovers her inner holiness in the strength of choice that is informed by the promptings of the God that she finds in her sexual personhood ... This Mary places authority in the depths of her bodily self-knowledge and locates the “power of the Most High” to her embodied, sexual self.

Goh identifies Mary’s decision to surrender her body as an act of faith—an agentic exercise of power which radically challenged the dominant patriarchal control of female body at that time. In contrast with her relative Elizabeth (to whom the angel communicated through her male guardian about her pregnancy), Gabriel spoke to Mary directly, and Mary made a decision regarding her (sexual) body on her own (Luke 1:26-27, 38). It is through this particular act of faith in which body, sexuality, and spirituality were entangled in a sacred life-changing moment that the Virgin Mary became a (sexual) theological figure. From Mary’s decision regarding virginial conception, the usual participation of men in important historical events and decisions was replaced with the Spirit. The conception of Jesus was a sexual act from which men were entirely absent. As Sojourner Truth puts it, “Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him!” Consequently, having challenged the normative (patriarchal) way of being woman and sexual subject, Mary was then accused of being “not-a-good-woman,” particularly by Joseph who planned to secretly divorce her (Matthew 1:19).

A challenge to male-dominated sexuality and patriarchal culture can also be found in the narrative of the Whore of Babylon. The image of the powerful, wealthy, and sexually seductive Whore of Babylon conquering kings of the earth has posed a serious threat to the male-dominated culture of the male audience (and other audiences that identify with the male-dominated culture of the Book of Revelation). The combination of the Whore of Babylon with the beast represents “the collapse of masculinity back into the morass of femininity and animality.”

The Whore of Babylon incited fear and desire, hatred and attraction, amazement and trembling among the audience of the Book of Revelation. Moreover, the Whore of Babylon might have also blurred or even parodied the gender binary. Reading the Whore of Babylon as a perversion of Roman goddess Roma, Stephen D. Moore argues that while Roma is represented as masculine (often depicted in military attire with a helmet, a short sword signifying high rank, and a spear), the Whore of Babylon is “Roma stripped of her military attire and re-clothed as a prostitute.” By occupying this powerful and genderqueer subject position, the Whore of Babylon contested the stability of the male/female binary and challenged the wider patriarchal culture at that time.

Similarly, the Indonesian girl in Ayub’s narrative has also posed a challenge to the male-dominated sexuality present within her context. She contested the male privilege of sexual pleasure and exploitation by engaging in sex with multiple partners. Like Mary, she made decisions about her sexual body and travelled an unusual path of sexual relationship. Like the Whore of Babylon, she charmed a group of boys who were both attracted to and hated her. They were secretly talking about her, degrading her, but also desiring her. She was “the whore” who is despised and desired, shamed and sought after. Eventually, these “admiring” expressed their fear and desire by violently harassing her, that is ominous but challenging male privilege and invading a male-controlled area (i.e., sexuality), while simultaneously satisfying their sexual desire toward her.

Similar violent expressions of fear and desire can also be found in the story of the Whore of Babylon. At the end of her narrative in Revelation 17, the Whore was destroyed in a violent way. The beast, or the kings of the earth who once desired her (Revelation 17:2), who raised the Whore to positions even higher than themselves, eventually killed the Whore in a gruesome scene. They made her desolate and naked, devoured her flesh, and burned her up (Revelation 17:16). The combination of desire and fear has generated such strong feelings of discomfort and, thus, strong reactions towards her. As Goh notes, “John is secretly in love with Roma ... He loves her and hates her with equal passion. Which is why he deals so savagely with her.”

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15 Marcella Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics (London: Routledge, 2000), 49.
17 Goh, “Mary and the Mak Nyah,” 227.
20 Haber, “Gazing at the Whore,” 308-314.
23 Moore, “Metonymies of Empire,” 87.
25 Runions, The Babylon Complex, 236.
The Virgin Mary is also not a stranger to violence. In her afterlives in theology and church tradition, she experienced a kind of violence from people who once held her in a high position. Luther, Calvin, and other figures leading the Protestant reformation in the 16th century had attempted to theologically "kill" the Virgin Mary by eradicating her role in Christian doctrine. This theological murder was then translated into physical violence, and the scenes at that time were no less grisly. The embodiment of the Virgin Mary in statues, paintings and church ornaments were violently destroyed during the iconoclastic riots that took place throughout Europe at this time.27

Furthermore, there is also another kind of violence that Mary might have experienced, which relates closer to the experiences of the Indonesian girl in Ayub's narrative. I am referring to an experience of sexual violence. While the moment of annunciation can be seen as an exercise of Mary's sexual agency as I have discussed above, there is also a possibility to interpret this moment as a kind of non-consensual sexual encounter. As Mary Daly writes, Mary's virginal conception can be seen as a retelling of an ancient patriarchal myth of the rape of the goddess, similar to some Greek goddesses who were raped by Zeus.28 Or, as Althaus-Reid puts it, Mary has successively endured the sexual aggressiveness of the "Highest Phallus."29 Here I will examine closely Luke 1:26-38 in order to explore this possibility further.

So let us, for a moment, conceive of sexual interaction on a communicative rather than a contractual model. Let us look at it ... as if it were a proper conversation rather than an offer from the Mafia.30

Viewed through this perspective, Mary's short conversation with the angel about her pregnancy might not be considered a proper conversation. It might be closer to an offer from the Mafia, in which the angel did not seem to care about Mary's consent, but simply pronounced what the angel's "boss" wanted to do to Mary's body. Thus, Mary's "voluntary" consent "let it be with me according to your word" might be similar to "please don't kill me, I'll do whatever you want." Just like the Indonesian girl in Ayub's narrative, Mary might have suffered a sexual assault. Mary might have been a "total rape victim" in a manner beyond physical invasion, in which "physical rape is not necessary when the mind/will/spirit has already been invaded."31

In this section I have identified the centrality of sexuality, violence, and disruptions toward male-dominated sexuality and patriarchial culture in the narrative of the Whore of Babylon, the Virgin Mary, and the Indonesian girl in Ayub's story. They have been defined and named after their sexuality. They have travelled unusual paths of sexual relationships. They have been accused of being "not-a-good-woman." They have subverted some patriarchal assumptions about women and sexuality. They have experienced some kinds of violence. In considering their shared characteristics, I argue that the categories of virgin and the whore may not be oppositely different as the binary has suggested. In the next section, I will further queer this binary by showing how these categories may be far more fluid and unstable within different historical and social contexts.

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"Promiscuous Virgin?: Fluid and Unstable Social meanings of the Virgin and the Whore"

My closer look at the virgin/whore binary reveals that these categories are far more fluid and unstable than previously acknowledged, both in contemporary and biblical contexts. The virgin category is not always the desired, the heroine, the ideal; and the whore category is not always the despised, the villain, the immoral. There is evidence of a fluid combination or a hybrid fusion between the virgin and the whore categories.

One contemporary example of the hybrid combination of the virgin and the whore is the symbiosis of Mary and Ezili, a Vodou love spirit in Haiti. In contemporary Haitian society, the Ezili spirits were believed to be essentially the same as the Virgin Mary.32 This Ezili (or Mary) figure is constituted via two conflicting images: Ezili Freda, who is portrayed as a wealthy, promiscuous and flamboyant lady, and Ezili Danto, who is portrayed as the Black Madonna, a mother with a militant persona fighting violently to defend her children from oppression. Both images are considered contradictory embodiments of the same figure of the Virgin Mary or Ezili spirits. In this way, the virgin and the whore categories are dissolved into one character, that is--as Terry Rey puts it--the "promiscuous virgin."33

Another contemporary contestation of the virgin/whore binary can also be found among the narratives of some Christian youth.

28 Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 127-129.
29 Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology, 48.
33 Pineau, "Date Rape," 235.
35 Terry Rey, Our Lady of Class Struggle: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).
36 Rey, Our Lady of Class Struggle, 199.
participants, whom I encountered during the course of my research. While previous studies in Indonesia have shown the importance of preserving virginity before marriage especially for women, there were participants in my study who challenged this dominant norm by giving alternative meanings to sex, women, and virginity.

I think having sex is okay, as long as you are being responsible. I mean come on, who doesn’t need sex? We are grown-ups. Losing your virginity isn’t like losing both your hands.

(Anggi, 22, office worker, female, heterosexual)

Coming from a not-so-good family relationship, I want more love and intimacy. So I have sex with my boyfriend. Sex is basically a normal human need. I think nowadays such thing is quite common in Indonesia, depending on which community you are.

(Lusi, 22, medical doctor trainee, female, heterosexual)

These participants disrupted dominant meanings around virginity in Indonesia. For these participants, losing one’s virginity does not mean immorality, and engaging in sex outside of marriage does not make a woman a “whore” or a “cheap” girl. Instead, sex is constituted as “a normal human need.” In other words, virginity is no longer the only ideal or the desired condition. Instead, engaging in sex is considered a positive way to enjoy “love and intimacy.” As Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott have noted:

Sex is now seen as positive, playful and life-enhancing. Where once it was thought to bring out the beast in us, it is now more often seen as having the potential to bring out the best in us. ... Good sex has become a key life goal and

a source of personal fulfillment: *sex as secular salvation.*

In a discursive landscape where sex is no longer constituted as “the beast,” there might be a possibility that the “whore” will be the ideal, the heroine, the saviour. She might be the new role model in which sexuality has become the source of meanings and personal fulfillment, or secular salvation. From this perspective, the girl in Ayub’s narrative might not necessarily be positioned as immoral and deserving of sexual violence. She might be a heroine in the making.

As ambivalent as what “virgin” and “whore” might mean in these contemporary situations, there is also ambivalence in biblical contexts such as on the social role of a whore. In ancient Hebrew culture, the social existence of

prostitutes or harlots was always contradictory. Prostitution was discouraged in the Levitical laws (e.g. Leviticus 21:7, 9, 14), but it was not a crime. As Phyllis Bird has argued, a prostitute was a shameful profession for a woman in that context, but it was also one of the rare situations in which a woman was recognised as an individual, independent from any male guarantor. For instance, she could sign a contract on her own, while average women could not. A prostitute was an outcast, but not an outlaw. They were rejected and accepted, tolerated and stigmatised. The whore subject position was somehow both enabling and limiting for a woman in this context.

The instability of the binary of virgin/whore is also evident when we examine closely other female biblical characters. Many heroines have used their sexual appeals to fulfill God’s will. Many harlots have also played the role of protagonists in the biblical stories. It is hard to distinguish them as honourable heroines or devious harlots, immoral whores or god-loving virgins. Ruth, for instance, is often portrayed as a faithful God-obeying woman, but she used certain strategies to seduce Boaz as instructed by Naomi (Ruth 3:1-13). She washed herself, dressed up and adorned herself and put on her best clothes, waited until Boaz was drunk and fell asleep, and then sneaked under his blanket to sleep with him. The character of Jael and Judith were heroines of Israel because they killed the enemy’s top military leader. But they also used methods which involved sexual appeal and appeal to kill their enemy. Jael invited Sisera into her tent, just like a street prostitute approaches a stranger: “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, have no fear” (Judges 4:18). Inside the tent, Sisera only asked for water but Jael comforted him with milk and covered him, before driving a tent peg into his head. In Judges 5, Sisera was described as one who “lay still at her feet” (Judges 4:27)—the word “feet” being a euphemism in Hebrew for genitals. In a similar way, Judith seduced Holofernes with her beautiful appearance, extravagant jewellery (Judith 10:3-4), and well-prepared speech (Judith 11:5-19). She made people leave her alone with the drunk Holofernes before eventually decapitating him (Judith 13:1-10). Another example is Tamar who disguised herself as a whore to trick and have sex with Judah, her father in law (Genesis 38:12-19), but she was vindicated and her actions considered legitimate since Judah had violated her right according to Levitical marriage traditions to marry his son Shelah in the first place. Meanwhile, Rahab, who was identified as a prostitute in Jericho (Joshua 2:1), became an honourable heroine because she bravely refused the order of the king to hand over the Hebrew spies (Joshua 2:2-7). This prostitute of Jericho was then included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1). Jesus himself stated that “the tax collectors and *the prostitutes* are going into the kingdom of God before you” while talking to the Pharisees, who were considered as the most religious group of people at that time (Matthew 21:31).

These contemporary and biblical examples show that the line between the virgin and the whore is not clear-cut and easily demarcated. Instead, these categories are fluid, unstable and somehow interchangeable. Thus, I argue that drawing on the virgin/whore binary to categorise women is inadequate, oversimplified and unnecessary. Indeed, as the unknown author of The Thunder, Perfect Mind has articulated in the epigraph of this essay, the honoured and the scorned one, the whore and


41 *Bird,* "The Harlot as Heroine," 100.

In God's Image

the holy one, might not be located in opposing sides. They might just be one and the same.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored some possibilities of denaturalising the virgin/whore binary that has been drawn on to justify violence against women among some Indonesian youths. I have juxtaposed the Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon as biblical characters that best represent the virgin and the whore categories in order to reveal the instability and insufficiency of this binary in categorising women. I have identified that both these biblical figures might not be poles apart, but instead share similar characteristics such as the centrality of sexuality in their lives, their experiences of violence, and also their challenges towards the dominant patriarchal culture.

I have also argued that the virgin and the whore categories might be fluid and interchangeable in various contemporary and biblical contexts. These analyses call for a more nuanced recognition of complexities beyond the oversimplified ways of categorising women into the virgin/whore binary. Throughout these discussions I have also highlighted some discursive possibilities to re-position or to give new meanings to the “cheap” girl character in Ayub's narrative. My purpose here is to examine possibilities that may encourage resistance towards the normalisation of sexual violence in this context and elsewhere. By denaturalising and making this binary discursively less sensible to be drawn on, I hope that violence as a “logical consequence” reserved for those in the whore category becomes unintelligible.

References


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