

# The Image of Woman in Lebanese Arabic Textbooks

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- IN A RIGID, NON-PROGRESSIVE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION, THE TEXTBOOK, INSTEAD OF DEVELOPING THE CHILD'S INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL POWERS, CONTRIBUTES TO CREATE IN HIM A STATE OF DULLNESS AND INERTIA.
- IN WRITING A TEXTBOOK, THE CHILD'S OWN VISION OF HIS WORLD SHOULD BE CONSIDERED BEFORE OUR OWN VISION OF IT.

In developing countries, where there is a pressing need of reorganizing the educational system, modernizing the school curricula, and continuously training the teaching personnel, the school textbook may be considered an instrument of prime importance, particularly at the elementary stage, when the child's concepts of the outer world are permanently fixed in his memory and imagination, and are likely to influence his whole later life.

The textbook acquires an absolute value when the school or the teacher are unable to create a mobile, progressive system of education, in which case it becomes for the young child an agent of inactivity. Instead of developing his intellectual and emotional powers, it contributes to create in him a state of dullness and inertia.

A glance into the textbooks used in this country reveals the need for long and careful investigation which will bring out: **first**, the vocabulary repeatedly used to acquaint the child with the images of his environment: the native land, labor activities, educational activities, moral principles, cultural heritage, man and woman; **second**, the direct and static ideology contained in this vocabulary which will dominate the easily impressed mentality of the child.

This study limits itself to the task of bringing out the image and concepts of manhood and womanhood in Lebanese textbooks, with the hope that it might induce other researchers to take charge of revealing the other images. The various concepts are definitely inter-related. One by one, the rings of the rusty chain will fall apart.

Our ambition, however, is to present an inclusive picture of the feminine type, imposed in form and content, on the minds of pupils in the elementary and intermediate stages. By an objective analysis, this work will show: first, that the textbook image is more or less opposed to reality; second, that it is a static, repetitious image.

This inference has given rise to the following points:

1 – The content, vocabulary, and inherent logic of the textbook are based, by a naive and arbitrary classification, on the interaction of two opposites: town and village, manual work and intellectual work, old and young, beggar and king, male and female, suggesting an awareness of natural inequality and class differences.

2 – The static attitude of the educational specimen as compared with social change and the evident opposition between them are likely to create a dichotomy dividing the pupil's mind between his reading and his real life, between the answers in the book and those of the outside world. The pupil may consciously reject the content of the book, but it

will not fail to affect his subconscious.

The glaring need reflected in the above points is that of setting right the educational vision without recurring to dogmatism. The new school textbook should be based on an open mentality, unobsessed by selfishness and indolent repetition, and capable of adventuring without fear on the roads of progressive thinking. The new textbook must also into consideration the changing economic, social, and cultural circumstances which have required the change in its content and style.

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES OF THE STUDY

There is no unified reading textbook in Lebanon. The attempt made by the "Educational Center for Research & Development" in 1973-1977 has not yet been able to effect unification. Each subject has various textbooks. Each school has its own list of them. Moving from one school into another means a change of books as well.

There is, however, an official uniform program of studies for primary and secondary education, to which authors have to conform. Therefore, for my experimental specimen, I have used approximately 52 textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and used by the majority of Lebanese schools. These books represent a variety of subjects:

- Arabic reading books
- Conversation books
- Grammar books
- Civic education books
- Summer vacation exercise books
- General exercise books and teachers' guides.

The publishers are Lebanese. The dates of publication extend from 1970-1977. The authors or compilers belong to various communities, while the contents submit to one uniform mentality and morality, never transcending traditional concepts and attitudes. The illustrations are rarely successful and are in most cases, merely decorative, having no real educational value. The evaluation of the illustrations is treated in a volume apart. The references consulted for the preparation of the work, nearly nonexistent in Arabic, but numerous in other languages, have been listed together with the Arabic textbooks studied, at the end of the first volume. These foreign works have been surveyed and their methods used as a guide. Their comparative results show a good deal of similarity to the results of our study.

As to methodology, the topic could have been treated

through the choice and analytical study of specimen representative texts, taken from all the textbooks used for study. However, we have found it preferable to use all the texts and vocabulary and language structures, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order to attain more adequate and inclusive results.

The contents of the 50 books have been subjected to three stages of study:

**First** A documentation stage recording all expressions and illustrations regarding woman and femininity.

**Second** A classification stage, in which the documentation cards and patterns were classified according to their identity (mother, grandmother, etc.), their characteristics (activity, service, emotions), and the role they play (housemaid, housewife, laborer).

Because these topics intersect and tend to be frequently repeated, they have been classified in the study according to the various feminine roles all through the ages, from which it was finally possible to deduce the **status** of woman as presented by the spheres already mentioned.

The feminine image here belongs to one of two worlds:

- The realm of reality
- The world of imagination

In the realms of reality, we meet woman in two spheres of influence: one inside the home, the other outside.

Inside the home we meet three generations: 1) the grandmother, representing the past and the nostalgia for it. 2) the mother, representing continuous and varied service 3) the little daughter whose future will repeat the mother's present life, just as the boy's future will be identical with the father's present life.

Sometimes the older sister or aunt is barely referred to as well as the wife, who is usually eclipsed by the image of the mother.

These three types repeat the same functional activity and play the same roles for three generations, without any awareness of change or evolution. The grandmother, with her long experience in housework, passes on the torch to the mother who takes over the task of preparing her daughter for the same role through the traditional functions of nutrition, child rearing, house arrangement, and repairs to the house.

These roles are presented as natural talents, requiring no great effort, though they may include child labor imposed on the little girl, exploitation of adults (the mother), and overburdening the aged (the grandmother), as may be inferred from the description of tasks and services which are too heavy for any one person to perform.

In the sphere of influence\* outside the home, several generations intermix, divided according to their social classes and classified into: the working woman and the lady of leisure.

The former is the nurse, the teacher, the olive gatherer, the cook, the dressmaker, the maid, and the poor widow. The working woman performs mainly manual work, because intellectual work is restricted to men. Most of her activity is performed inside the home, but if she works for outsiders and submits to external economic standards, then she receives a salary and becomes an object of pity and degradation.

The lady of leisure is the elegant lady, who travels by sea or goes to mountain resorts or sits in the public garden. Her presence in textbooks is rare. We usually see her in the company of her children. If she goes out alone and in town, she may arouse suspicion.

The woman of dreamland takes the form of a female beyond time and age and need. She is the fairy, the witch, the queen, the princess, or the circus player. We rarely come across this woman in textbooks. The wonderland which kindles the child's imagination is sadly superseded by flat reality.

In the sphere of relationships, we mainly concentrate on the woman in family gatherings, especially in family parties and anniversaries, where she is responsible for the preparation of food; in evening gatherings where she usually sits knitting or embroidering while the husband reads a paper.

Finally, this study proceeds to a comparison between the role and characteristics of woman and those of female animals in textbooks which reflect a certain similarity of roles in this respect.

Feminine presence has a multiform aspect in each of the preceding spheres but, considered from the point of view of its relationship with the environment, it may be divided into the following:

- The relationship axis: family, marriage, education.
- The economic axis: work, profession.
- The cultural axis: thought, knowledge.
- The social axis: femininity.
- The philosophic axis: type.
- The comparative axis: female animal.

## ANALYTICAL WORK

Two kinds of analysis have been applied to the ideas and classifications of this preliminary outline: 1) an analysis of vocabulary and language structures used in describing the woman or the female, in naming her on in talking with her or about her. Therefore, all examples have been reproduced in their original texts, including the sources. Word connotations are very significant in this connection, because they reflect the implicit meaning and may be used as indicators of the basic weak points.

If this study is adopted as a basic dictionary for vocabulary and structures used in creating the feminine personality in textbooks and in establishing its components, it may then be considered as a mobile work, an open window, capable of serving as a new and serious instrument of work in the hands of others.

2) The second type of analysis is that of the above-mentioned ideas, with reference to their agreement or disagreement with facts, their recurrence or isolation, their assimilation of a particular mentality which limits their characteristics and way of facing the world, and their numerous historical, social and economic roots.

I would have liked to add to this study a new educational field experience, based on extracting the image of woman from the daily, spontaneous life of the pupil himself, as compared with the text given in the book, thus leading him to express by writing and drawing a tentative new image, lively, truthful, and expressing the rich world of childhood. The present circumstances do not encourage such an attempt.

In the process of writing new textbooks, the child's **own** vision of his world should be considered before our own vision of it. This study may serve as an open field to those who are willing to use the old textbook as a means of creating a new, critical attitude, and leading to a better understanding of the complexity and variability of human truth. In other words, this work could be an initial step toward a creative, genuine, sensible textbook for the children of our country.