

# From "The Feminine Mystique" to "Self-realization"

Social institutions are subject to a movement of flux and reflux because they are essentially related to human nature which remains enveloped with mystery. While scientists succeed to a large extent in unfolding the secrets of nature and submitting it to the service of man, the components of society, including political, moral and economic life, undergo a continuous change. Every system that is worked out, is readily counter-balanced by an opposite system. Theories which for a long time enjoyed popularity are sooner or later exposed to severe criticism and rejection.

One example illustrating this fluctuation is the feminist movement which flourished in Europe and America in the 19th century. Led by a group of strong-minded women, it produced a good deal of agitation. One of its American leaders, Lucy Stone, organized public meetings in which she condemned all forms of slavery, including that of women. To prepare herself for this activity, she practiced public speaking in the woods because girls were forbidden to speak in public. In the pact which joined her to Henry Blackwell, her husband, she included: "This act on our part implies no sanction of, nor promise of voluntary obedience to such of the present laws of marriage as refuse to recognize the wife as an independent, rational being, while they confer upon the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority".

Those pioneers succeeded in obtaining the following rights for women:

1. The right to education
2. The right to speak in public
3. The right to own property (which Arab women already enjoyed)
4. The right to vote

## The reactionary movement and its factors

Feminism was tolerated before 1920. After that date, the movement started to decline. Romantic philosophy, though it favored the liberation of women, insisted that they should enhance their womanhood as a source of inspiration to men, and find their fulfillment in motherhood instead of trying to share man's struggle to build civilization.

Freud's theories (1856-1939) confirming sexual determinism and considering women inferior "by God-given, irrevocable nature" contributed much to create the anti-feminist movement in Europe and America. Nietzsche (d. 1900) had equally degraded woman in his philosophy which asserted that her only aim in life was to bear a male child in whom she would find a compensation for her deficiency.

In America, the anthropologist Margaret Mead, influenced by Freud's theories, and her studies among the tribes of South Sea Islands, declared that woman's function as child-bearer more than outbalances man's function as

producer. "She joined the other functional social scientist in their emphasis on adjusting to society as we find it, on living our lives within the framework of the conventional cultural definitions of the male and female roles." (1)

Researchers of the period, from Freud to Margaret Mead, neglected cultural relativity and drew their theories from the limited culture which they investigated. Yet their ideas spread like fire in educational centers. Everywhere the call resounded to fight masculinity in women and bring them back home.

Anti-feminism was most active in America in the fifties and sixties, during the McCarthian control of liberties. The campaign tried to make college girls concentrate on home economics courses and repudiate those courses that "do not fit women, like maths and engineering". As a result the number of college women was greatly reduced, the average age of marriage was lowered, and the fertility rate reached a proportion never attained before.

## "The Feminine Mystique"

This is the name given by Betty Friedan to the anti-feminist movement of which she made a major research study, carrying this same title, which was published in 1963.

Among the promoters of the Feminine Mystique were some followers of Freud and Mead, who attributed to women's liberation the failure of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. They said that American women had created in their homes a suffocating atmosphere which forced husbands and children to run away, as shown by some of Tennessee Williams' and other dramatists' plays.

Betty Friedan's study showed, however, that depressed American soldiers were not the children of liberated or highly educated women. Their mothers were neither career women, nor feminists, nor used their education, if they had any; they lived for their children, had no interests beyond home, family or their own beauty.

Chiefly responsible for the Feminine Mystique campaign were the merchants and businessmen who said that "if all women get to be scientists and such, they won't have time to shop. By all means we must try to keep them at home". Since women represented 75 % of the buying power in America, businessmen were ready to spend millions on making housekeeping an attractive occupation and a full-time profession for women. Housewifery was expanded to fill the time available. "Study after study revealed that housewives were spending as many, or even more, hours a day on housekeeping as women thirty years earlier, in spite of the smaller, easy-to-care-for homes." On the other hand, women who worked many hours a week outside the home did the house-keeping on which the full-time housewife still spent sixty hours a week, in half the time."

The most important point presented by Betty Friedan's study was the existence of "a problem that has no name", a sense of dissatisfaction, "a yearning that women suffered in the middle of this century in the United States." Its victims were mainly the very "feminine" women who had devoted their lives to marriage and children and had no material problems of any kind. "I feel as if I don't exist", said one of them. They suffered from an absence of identity and personality. New neuro-

(1) "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan, 1963, pp.126-149

ses were seen among married women, and a frenzied, desperate search for a man among unmarried ones.

"The problem that had no name" had its roots, as the study showed, in the fact that women were prevented from using their full capacities. For "capacities clamor to be used and cease their clamor only when they are well used. The unused capacity or organ can become a disease center or else atrophy." (2)

### Need of a new life plan

Accordingly it was shown that women need a new life plan by which they pledge, at an early age, life-long commitment to creative work in the form of art, science, politics or profession. The educators who encourage a woman to postpone larger interests until her children are grown make it virtually impossible for her to acquire them.

The new life plan for women implies the idea that self-realization or self-actualization, is equally needed by men and women.

People who achieve self-realization "customarily have some mission in life, some task to fulfill, some problem outside themselves which enlists much of their energies."

[2] A.H. Maslow, quoted in "The Feminine Mystique" Op. cit. p. 316

They are less self-centered and more concerned about other people. "They work within a framework of values that are broad and not petty, universal and not local, and in terms of a century rather than a moment."

These people are capable of continuous growth, unhampered by age, and of a wide capacity to love others and identify with them without losing their individuality. Love for them is not motivated by need but by a kind of spontaneous, disinterested admiration. Their love is free from jealous, artificial and diffident behaviour. Studies showed that "education and independence increased woman's ability to enjoy a sexual relationship with a man and to affirm more fully her own sexual nature as a woman."

A woman can realize herself by sharing the experience of another and actively contributing to it. One example of this possibility is Mary Haskell who was to Gibran a counselor who inspired him and criticized his work. She was thus able to realize herself by writing her wonderful letters and journal, which are indispensable for those who study Gibran's life and works.

But can a woman truly realize herself through her husband and children or some other person? The answer is 'no', because 'self-realization' or a 'will to power' requires self-reliance and independent achievement.

## "OPERATION FLOOD" in India

A successful program which has brought about profound economic and social change.

"Operation Flood is the best nutrition program that has ever been introduced in India," said Dr. Jul, a departmental head with the Ministry of Agriculture of Denmark, who led an evaluation mission that reviewed the full impact of the project. "Its biggest achievement is that it has created the knowledge and awareness in the small and poor farmers that unity and cooperation are strength."

"The backbone of Operation Flood is formed by more than 1.2 million farm families who produce a 'flood' of milk that is marketed primarily in four major cities: Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras." One of the keys to the success of the project has been the contribution through WFP (World Food Programme) of massive supplies of milk powder and butter oil from EEC (European Economic Commission).

Aside from increasing the income of farm families, the O.F. program has brought about profound social change in the country-side, as shown

by the case of the village of Khadgodhara.

This village, located on the far edge of the Kaira district, was deprived of a cooperative society while some 800 village cooperatives were established in Gujarat state through efforts of the Kaira District Cooperative Milk Producers Union.

Facing the opposition of Dairy Union officers, of well-to-do farmers who saw the cooperative as competition, and of officials of the State government, Mrs. Jashmatiben Mayeta, a diminutive, determined widow, decided to work for the creation of a cooperative in Khadgodhara. In 1967, she succeeded in registering her society and constituting a management committee of which she became the chairperson.

The by-laws of the society stated that no men would be included in the 261 voting members or in the management committee. Why? "Because the milk business is ladies' business," says Mrs. Mayeta. "Women

have long had the responsibility of running the dairy economy of rural India. They look after the milch animals, milk them and carry the milk to collection centres. However, they have not been accorded institutional positions commensurate to their manifold possibilities."

The formation of the Society immediately had a significant social side-effect. The cooperative in the neighboring village had always refused to accept milk from untouchables. But Mrs. Mayeta, though a Brahmin and therefore of India's highest caste, decreed that "Untouchables would be treated like every one else."

Today all the societies of the district accept untouchables as members, even though ten years ago (1967) the caste system was still strong.

(Condensed from an article on "Operation Flood" by George Dorsey, World Food Programme News, April-June 1978).