

Excerpts from the Writings of Women Feminists

Aminah al-Said speaks⁽¹⁾

If we look at women as a group which represents half the Arab nation, we cannot help but admit that this group is the weakest area of our social body. Why? Because women have been subject, more than men, to the pressures of ignorance, poverty, and general backwardness. These pressures in turn reduce the total value of the society and delay or retard new movements in our national life.

I do not think I am exaggerating if I say the general situation of women as a group forms the greatest obstacle to national progress to be found in our country today. I say this, despite the great efforts made in the cause of emancipation of this group and despite what has already been achieved for women in the past ten years in some of the Arab countries (I will not say all of them) where the achievement of rights seems almost complete. Many years and much effort lie ahead of us before we are able to reach women of all classes in all Arab countries and raise all socioeconomic levels to a standard suitable for the twentieth century. It is true that Arab men, too, have a long way to go before they are raised to a higher level, but, with all their problems, they are farther ahead than women. To begin with, the percentage of illiteracy is much lower among men than among women. This is because men in our society have always had a better lot than women. From past times, our society has traditionally favored men and given them opportunities denied women. Further, society did not enslave men with the veil, a custom which has continued to hinder our civilization until very recently and which is still preventing the progress of our sisters in more than one Arab country.

As a result of this obvious difference in the situations of men and women, a strong imbalance between men and women is found in the percentage of trained persons. This imbalance only increases the burden of the progressive Arab governments who are struggling with development. Because of the great diversity of socioeconomic levels throughout the Arab lands, different plans and approaches to reform must be developed which answer the needs of each level. And the needs of the weakest level, that is, women, call for a different approach as well. We should remember, as we plan, that this backwardness of women as a group is not a part of all our traditional history.

Women enjoyed a reasonably good status in our ancient civilizations, under the Pharaohs, the Assyrians, the Babylonians. In these periods, women sat on thrones and exercised positions of importance in religion and politics. Then Islam arose, and in its time Islam appeared as a great social revolution in the history of women's position, not only for us in the Arab nations but also for the whole world.

Just before the rise of Islam, thirteen centuries ago, woman was scarcely a human being; she had no rights, and no respect was accorded her as a person. But this new religion, which arose in the desert, among people who lived with nature, managed to reverse the situation of women at that time. Islam restored to woman her total humanity; it armed her with weapons of independence and freed her from the domination of the male by giving her (a) the right to education, (b) the right to buy and sell property, and (c) the right to

hold a job and go into business. She was even drawn into participating in managing affairs of religion and politics.

While the European woman was still living on the margin of life, as a follower of the man, we find her Arab sister, daughter of the empty sands and the primitive desert society, enjoying her existence as a person and exercising the same basic rights as man, with the same obligations as a man to her duties on earth. Islam did not differentiate between men and women except in giving the woman half of the man's share of inheritance, in return for the fact that the man was to be responsible for the woman's material needs. **At the time this was a gain, but it is now considered a curse.** For with the decay of Arab civilization reactionary forces gained ascendancy, and these forces used inheritance as an excuse to lower the entire status of woman to that of half the man or even, in some cases, less than half.

I am not pursuing this point simply to defend Islam. But I do want to emphasize that Islam, as far as codifying laws is concerned, was the first religion to give woman a status as an independent person. And the rights given to women by Islam, 1,300 years ago, did not appear in the western world until many centuries later. Economic independence of women, particularly a fixed right to inheritance, equality in earning an independent living, these rights were not found in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Thus Arabs were innovators in the field of woman's rights. We may be proud of this, but we must not

(1) Quoted from "Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak" ed. by Elizabeth W. Fernea & Basima Bezirgan, pp. 375-378, from a lecture entitled "Al-Mar'ah al-Arabiyyah wa tahaddi-l-Mujtama'", delivered in Beirut on Dec. 12, 1966 & published in *Muhadarat al-Nadwah* (Les Conférences du Cénacle) 21, nos. 11-12. Trans. by the Editors.

deny the fact that the Arabs stopped at this magnificent beginning and did not develop the situation of woman as time passed. Nor did they make any attempt to conform their spiritual and social values with the changing of the circumstances of life. European women's emancipation began at the point where the Arab women's emancipation ended. We were the predecessors, they, the successors. They moved with the times, but we stayed in one place. The result was that the procession of civilization passed us by and has been ahead of us in many areas.

Why, one may ask, did the west move forward while we did not? The dogmas of the west were envisioned only as a set of rules created by man to achieve the common good. Why not? I see no reason why men cannot change their dogmas and their sets of rules when necessity demands such change. Our society did not do this. With the decline of all civilizations which came upon our countries, the reactionary thinkers were encouraged to protect the old social beliefs

and dogmas, and they did so by surrounding them with an aura of holiness which prevented the dogmas from being touched or changed in any way, except by a society open enough and strong enough in its own pride and culture to challenge such reaction. And during that period we were not strong enough to overcome these forces. This situation is hardly unique in world history. One of the basic characteristics of a backward society is an inability to adapt to new situations. This in turn creates an imbalance between what is happening in the society and the society's perception of it, and such imbalance influences spiritual values so that in time they diverge from their original meanings. History is full of many examples. During the Dark Ages, Europe committed great mistakes in the name of Christianity; human mistakes which had nothing to do with this great religious belief, based on peace and love, mercy and forgiveness. Galileo, as well as other scientists and philosophers, were concerned to death; the Inquisition fostered horrible deeds, and nothing

in these acts expressed anything of the spirit of Christianity. The situation stayed this way generally until European civilization began to mature; then the reaction was slowed, and the Christian church managed to raise the flag of peace and mercy once again.

The Arab world offers a similar case. Here, too, backwardness and reaction have cast dark shadows across our own spiritual values; it is hardly necessary to say that woman was the principal victim, and until now she has continued to suffer from the effects of reactionary thought, which is still rooted deeply in our collective mind. Even in those countries which have established laws to facilitate the emancipation of women, we find that the implementation of those laws is quite a different matter; in practice, the new idea of emancipation clashes with the static attitudes of thought so prevalent in our society, attitudes remaining from the inherited traditions which have militated against women in general over the centuries.

They all pass by Lebanon

The apostles of peace in the world place Lebanon first on their list in their international anti-violence campaign.

"The Pilgrim of Peace" Edmund Khayat, carrying his traditional cross, handed over to the Apostolic Delegate in Beirut a message addressed to the Pope John Paul II, asking him to remember Lebanon in his forthcoming speech before the U.N. General Assembly, on Oct. 3, 1979.

Paolo Aceto, the Italian humanitarian artist, a specialist in mural frescoes, deeply moved by the sight of a little girl, Amal, who had lost her leg in the Lebanese war, decided to paint the mutilated girl on the fresco of the

façade of the silo in Beirut International Port. The picture will seem to say to those who look at it: "Do not forget! I want to live!"

(Le Réveil, Oct. 5, 1979)



The future painter of silos:
"I am a sniper of Peace"



The Pilgrim of Peace

Real Freedom is Freedom from Harmful Stereotypes

The process of awareness regarding woman's problems and demands has not achieved any significant progress, either on the cultural or on the social level. Her claims have received a restricted response which consists in the recognition of her right to education, work and suffrage. Her oscillation between the traditional role of wife and mother and her new roles in the fields of education and work has blocked her ambition and forced her to be contented with secondary responsibilities in the private or in the public sector.

In spite of her success in both education and work, she is still enslaved to stereotypes which create in her an inferiority complex, a state of diffidence favoring the habits of cowardly submission, faith in fate and fear of adventure and defiance.

Within this negative philosophy, the patriarchal system works to assert man's superiority and arrogance. Inherited myths affirm that she was created out of man's rib, that she was born to be a wife and mother because, biologically and socially, she is unable to achieve personal independence. Without marriage and motherhood, she is reduced to a state of nothingness. The same sources pretend that it is better for a woman to marry a mediocre, worthless fellow than to remain unmarried; that barrenness is a shame and a result of an inherited or acquired curse, that it is a woman's duty to seek motherhood at the expense of her health and life.

Among the generally accepted stereotypes is the one which imposes chastity on woman but not on man. Though adultery and sexual intercourse outside marriage are condemned by developed religions, public opinion tends to overlook man's amorous adventures and even to admire them, while a woman who sins against chastity is said to defile her honor and that of her family; therefore she deserves to be killed and her blood would wash off her shame.

According to popular tradition, a woman "was born" to please others

and be a source of enjoyment to the eye and to the ear. Hence her constant worry about her appearance, her huge efforts to embellish her face by treating it with cosmetics, to dye her hair, hide her age and her physical defects. Of equal importance is her endeavor to acquire a sweet tongue, to learn dancing and singing by which she could win her husband's favors.

A similar tradition says that a woman "was born" to be a source of blessing for her family, seeking their interest before her own, following the path of women saints and martyrs who sacrificed themselves for the benefit of their family or clan, their group or their community (Esther, Judith, Joan of Arc, etc.)

A woman's life, whether she is a wife, a mother, a sister or a daughter, has to revolve around a man. If she claims any of her rights, she has to obtain his agreement. If she works, it is for him that she reserves the fruit of her work. If he monopolizes his parent's inheritance, she excuses his greed out of weakness and cowardice or out of goodness and leniency. If she practices a job or a profession, she hopes to lure with it a prospective husband. If she participates in elections, she does it to add her vote to his, increase his prestige and give a new evidence of her enslavement.

As a housekeeper, she readily accepts overwork because she was made to believe that the home is her kingdom, her reason for existence and her main source of happiness. She devotes her time and energy for her family without any return except food and lodging. If she reaches old age and becomes unable to work, she is tormented by the idea that she has to require help and become a charge for those whom she served all her life. She feels like a burden which her family has the right to reject and throw off. It never occurs to her that now she has the right to claim an indemnity or a pension, like other workers who retire after a long period of effort.

Surely the kind of liberation achieved by the woman of to-day is no more than a farce. It has given her the right to wear trousers, to smoke and to hunt a man, but it has failed to change her mentality or that of society regarding her status. Educated or not, old-fashioned or modern, she is still enslaved to the above mentioned traditions and feels unable to eliminate their impact on her life and personality.

A young girl is usually obliged to accept an inconvenient marriage because she is afraid of living alone. If she chooses single life, she is over-ridden by worry and is apt to develop a variety of complexes. Her problems are neglected or superficially treated because those who deal with them lack faith, seriousness or honesty.

One might think that the above description is negative and pessimistic. It could not be otherwise because it is a natural result of the persistence of traditional methods used in the upbringing of children in both family and school. These methods are at the root of the **distorted personality** which characterizes both men and women, since injustice toward the latter results in spoiling both groups.

The troubles suffered by Lebanon and other Arab countries are a clear evidence of the defective training which tolerates and encourages in youth a number of primitive traits such as: jealousy, rivalry, emotionality, aggressiveness, greed and money worship, flattery and lack of frankness, duplicity, tribal fanaticism, nepotism, sectarianism, favoritism of the strong against the weak.

According to our traditional beliefs, a country is only a farm whose tenants compete and fight over its products, each trying to obtain the lion's share in profits. Everything becomes a tool used to satisfy the appetite of the greedy. **Woman is one of those tools.**

Against this entrenched way of life, a **cultural revolution** must be waged by a group of honest and experienced leaders who would plan for the formation of really freed men and women, freed from the blemishes of the past, intent on developing a totally renewed personality, and on building up a modernized nation.

From an article
by the Editor