

## LE FEMINISME

By Andrée Michel

Que Sais-je? Series (French)  
Presses Universitaires de France, 1979

The author Andrée Michel who has to her credit more than ten published works on various sociological topics, occupies the position of director of research at the National Center of Scientific Research, Paris.

In introducing her book, *Le Féminisme* (feminism), she says that she tried to take her sources of documentation from unbiased authors whenever this was possible. "Unbiased authors" meant especially women historians and anthropologists; also anglosaxon authors rather than those of Latin countries, who are generally more prone than the former to legitimize male domination. She then proceeds to relate the history of women's evolution through the ages until the present time. In the Paleolithic period, men and women led a peaceful existence in which they depended on hunting, gathering and horticulture. Women took an active and creative role, especially in the last two activities, and it is supposed that the use of the hoe in farming was a product of women's initiative. Matriarchal civilization continued until the middle Neolithic period (6000-3000 B.C.) when the invention of the plough asserted man's domination because he could handle the new implement better than woman did.

Agriculture encouraged conquest through war, the patriarchal system replaced the matriarchal, deterioration of international relations brought about the degradation of woman's condition and her seclusion within the family and the city, which later gave birth to the harem or women's apartments where they were deprived of all communication with the outside.

The enslavement of women continued through the later Neolithic period and, with little change, during the three periods of history. Although Judaism, Christianity and Islam have the reputation of displaying sincere efforts for the establishment of social justice, they are patriarchal religions which have confirmed male domination.

In spite of general restrictions,

individual women, in both the East and West, resisted oppression and succeeded in achieving leadership and skill in various fields, more particularly the intellectual. In medieval times, many women distinguished themselves as priestesses, prophetesses, founders of monasteries, abbesses, directresses, teachers, authors, poets, queens, rulers, counselors, saints, theologians, artists, singers and dancers. It is generally known that women in nomadic tribes, like the desert Arabs and the Germanic tribes, enjoyed more freedom than women in urban communities. The "purdah" or veil is considered by Muslim historians as a Byzantine institution adopted by the Muslim Arabs in the Arab peninsula and elsewhere.

Women's struggle for liberation began in Europe in the 16th Century when Marie de Gournay (1566-1645), a French woman, wrote a treatise on the "Equality of Men and Women" and another on "Ladies Grievances." The struggle continued all through the 17th and 18th centuries, when a large number of women from the bourgeoisie and other social classes vehemently claimed their rights and worked for emancipation. Feminist movements started organizing themselves in England, France, Holland and the United States in the early twentieth century. So far, feminism has succeeded in obtaining for women a large number of their claims in politics, education, working conditions and civil status but a good deal more has still to be accomplished for the complete elimination of sexism, i.e. traditional discrimination between the sexes. Feminists of today plead for the respect of woman's dignity, including the right of women to develop all their potentials (sexual, affective, moral, political, intellectual) without accepting the traditional limitations imposed on them by men.

In her conclusion, the author says that women today, in spite of progress achieved, are still subjugated to the repression which was imposed on them in the middle Neolithic period, when social relations were established on the basis of endless accumulation of power, profit and prestige; when dire competition, economic war and conquest replaced peaceful and cooperative activity. Women are still the victims of patriarchal norms and

traditions which should be the targets of the on-going feminist struggle all over the world. The forms of injustice traditionally inflicted on women are only a part of the general world wide injustice which reformers and humanitarians have been denouncing ever since the dawn of the present civilization, 8000 years ago.

The history of women is not only that of their repression but also that of their resistance to repression and occultation. This resistance culminates nowadays in the large number of liberation movements in the Northern Hemisphere with the hope that the feminist struggle would reach the Southern Hemisphere. In the latter, the feminist movement has touched only a few educated and isolated women, separated by a large abyss from their illiterate and ignorant sisters in village and city.

The claims of middle class women of the Northern Hemisphere do not form priorities for those of the Southern, who are overburdened by frequent maternities and deprived of the opportunity of securing for their children a minimum share of welfare and education. Western women are increasingly conscious of the needs of Eastern women, which may be summarized in proper education and technical training leading to social and economic independence.

The patriarchal system which stands as the antipode of feminism, is strongly tied to the system of accumulation of money and power, adopted by both capitalist and socialist states. A careful analysis would show how these states support oppressive military and political groups of the Third World for the sake of achieving expansion and market monopoly.

It is the duty of women socialists and economists in the Third World, aided by those of rich countries, to proceed to an analysis which would reveal the exploitation of women by trusts and world companies. Women form at least one half of the world population. If they join hands to fight war and armament, excessive accumulation of wealth, political repression, social and international inequality, they would be serving their own cause and preventing women from being the victims of publicity and the tools of big profit systems and practices.

**Images of Arab Women**

by Mona N. Mikhail

Three Continents Press, Inc.

Washington, D.C. 1979

The author, Mona Mikhail, is a young Egyptian graduate of Cairo University and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in Arabic and Comparative Literature. In introducing her book she says that it attempts to identify those significant patterns of change in the status of women through the examination of their role as reflected in Quranic teachings as well as in the writings of the foremost feminist reformists, who, from the turn of this century, have been clamouring for the betterment of the condition of women within these societies. Through these writings we can clearly identify discernible trends that have already been put in motion and are in the process of creating a new woman and a new man in a new society.

After expounding the status of the Arab woman in pre-Islamic times and how Islam contributed to its improvement, the author evaluates the work of four champion pioneers of the Emancipation of women: Qasim Amin<sup>(1)</sup>, Nabawiyya Musa, Al-Tahir Al-Haddad and Nawal Saadawi<sup>(2)</sup>. The fact that all these pioneers except one (Al-Tahir Al-Haddad, a Tunisian) were Egyptian, did not prevent her from mentioning writers and poets from other Arab countries, who defended the cause of the Arab woman and denounced the

(1) See *Al-Raida* 3, Feb. 1978, p. 2.(2) See *Al-Raida* 7, Feb. 1979, p. 5

elements within their societies which deterred her advancement: The poets Al-Zahawi and Maruf Rusafi from Iraq, Fahd al-Askar from Kuwait, and other poets from the Gulf: Abdallah al-Sinnan and Hamid Iryani; The Syrian Nizar Qabbani who "has perhaps become identified with the condition of women through his poetry more than any contemporary Arab writer."

A survey of North African Literature dealing with women's problems is given in chapter eight, particularly the novels of Assia Djebar which form "manifestos for the emancipation of women as well as great psychological masterpieces in their own right." Psychological analysis of a few short stories written by Yusuf Idriss and Naguib Mahfuz reflects the author's special interest in literary criticism and its modern interpretive aspect.

The translations from Maghribine popular poetry and folktales explore a neglected field and bring out men's attitude toward women in its romantic or appreciative aspects. The selections, together with the author's comments and analyses, seem to confirm her faith in the future, suggested by the dedication "to the women who believe that change will come about."

**Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak**Ed. by Elizabeth Warmock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan  
409 pp., illustratedThe Dans Danciger Publication Series  
University of Texas Press  
Austin & London, 1977  
Published in U.S.A.

"This volume is a collection of autobiographical and biographical

writings by and about Middle Eastern women. Many of the selections have been translated by the editors from Arabic, Persian or French. They not only represent real women from a wide range of occupations, points of view and socioeconomic status, but also touch on major themes in the contemporary Muslim world."

The book as a whole bears witness to the large number of women, who since the early days of Islam, succeeded in asserting themselves and achieving social prominence in spite of restrictions and taboos. Beginning with Khansa, the famous poet of early Islam, and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr, the Prophet's favorite wife, considered an important authority on Muslim Traditions (Al-Hadith), it includes biographies of, and excerpts from the works and sayings of such famous women as the Andalusian free-minded poet, Wallada Bint al-Mustakfi, Rabi'a the Mystic, Rabi'a Balkhi, the Persian poet of love. From modern times, it gives a short biography of Umm Kulthum, the brilliant Egyptian singer; it presents Nazik al-Malaika, the Iraqi poet who led the free verse movement in the Arab world; Jamila Buhayrid, the militant nationalist of Algeria; Amina al-Said, the distinguished Egyptian journalist; Ghada al-Samman, the writer who claims a sweeping radical change in the status of Arab women; and many others.

According to the editors, "the book offers a fresh and lively approach to the study of Middle Eastern Women and will be of value not only to those interested in the Middle East and in women's issues, but also to anthropologists and social historians."

Financial difficulties and increasing prices in Lebanon have prevented the expansion of *Al-Raida* into 20-24 pp. as announced in the last issue. We expect more financial assistance from our friends in the form of subscriptions or donations.

May we remind you to pay your subscriptions for the year 1980.

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