

Beyond the Veil,

BY FATIMA MERNISSI

The author of *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, is a Moroccan sociologist, university professor and writer. While she uses Moroccan law and society as a background for her study, she makes a careful analysis of the Muslim theory about woman and demonstrates how this theory is apt to undergo complete modification by means of modern change.

As an introduction to her study she draws a parallel between Freud's concept of female sexuality and that of Al-Ghazali, the famous authority on Muslim theology and scholasticism who lived in the 11th century A.D. According to the author, both Al-Gazali and Freud see woman as a dangerous aggressive power, but while in Freud's theory female aggression is turned inward into a masochistic, passive attitude, in Al-Ghazali's concept it is turned outward, giving woman a destructive power, a fateful attraction which bewitches men and leads them into sin. To prevent her fatal influence on man she should be veiled and subdued.

Making another comparison between the Muslim woman and that of pre-Islamic society, Dr. Mernissi says that, in pre-Islamic Arabia, matrilineal trends existed, giving a woman the right to stay with her kin and keep the child as her own. She had independence and self-determination when backed by her tribe. Promiscuity, fornication, unrestricted polygamy, temporary marriage (al-Mut'a), inheritance of widows by their kinsmen, infanticide were all practiced by the Jahiliyya Arabs. Islam put an end to all these chaotic practices. While it recommended monogamy, it limited the number of wives to four, promulgated definite marriage laws, gave women a share in inheritance and imposed their subordination to men.

The "Umma" or nation-system which united the Muslims and steered the tribe's bellicosity into new channels, confirmed male domination and responsibility as a safeguard of unity. It gave the husband unconditional right to divorce provided he paid the Mahr or bride-price. Being the guardian and the sole provider for the family, he required the legitimacy of the children for whom he provided and complete conjugal fidelity from the wife. An adulterous wife was condemned by both law and society. Her husband or guardian had the right to kill her, while the husband's adultery was more likely to be tolerated by public opinion if not by law.

Because of the supposedly irresistible attraction of women, Islamic law ordered the segregation of women and recommended marriage as a protection from fornication. Sexual satisfaction is considered necessary for both men and women because a sexually frustrated person is apt to become a troublesome citizen of the Umma.

Results of the Author's Investigation

Her interview with 50 people, males and females, showed that modern minded couples condemned sexual segregation while traditional people favored separation of the sexes and arranged marriage. They considered early

marriage as a sign of prestige and a means to avoid problems of sex. The parents' right to impose their will regarding their children's marriage was considered sacred. The parents' blessing, they said, is necessary and their curse is to be feared. The parental opposition to love marriage comes from their desire to bind their children's freedom and serve their own interest. Heterosexual love is equally condemned by Islamic tradition because it deviates a man from God's love. "Passionate love for a woman is pure madness" said Al-Ghazali.

In the household triangle of mother, son and wife, the mother holds a very important place. Love to the mother being recommended by the Quran, she has a decisive role in the choice of the bride and the direction of the house. Kissing her hand is still a current practice in traditional households. The traditional "hammam" (public bath) is a powerful information center for women who thus hold in their hands the fate of the younger generation and contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Harmful Effects of Sexual Segregation

Women's seclusion has contributed to arouse men's passionate interest in them, specially in their physique. Women's response has been to focus their concern on their bodies and try to make themselves attractive and seductive through the use of cosmetics and jewelry. The male has been idolized by women of his entourage and made to feel that society was organized to satisfy his sexual needs. When he is later upset by sexual restrictions, his anger toward society is turned in toward the family and woman. Sexual repression arouses his preoccupation with symbols such as purity and honor. He feels bitter toward a sister or a wife working in an office and contacting men.

Effects of Modernization

Modernization, on the other hand, has contributed to the breakdown of traditional sexual segregation. More and

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