

The Arab Woman's Personality

Studies of changes in the life and status of the Arab woman to-day deal with her education, her working conditions, her rights and needs, rarely analyzing the impact of such changes on her psychological make-up, on her personality. The above topic raises the following questions: What traits distinguish the Arab woman of to-day? How different is she from her mother and grandmother? What are her new goals and how far has she gone in her struggle for freedom and self-realization?

No significant studies have dealt with the above questions. However, at the seminar held by the Center for Arab Unity Studies⁽¹⁾ on 21-24 September 1981, the subject of the Arab woman's personality was scheduled in the agenda and some of the participants attempted a discussion of it. In his lecture, Dr. Abbas Makki, from the Lebanese University, referred to two studies he had undertaken with another professor from the same university, Dr. Zuhair Hatab, which deal with parental authority and youth. Taking as a sample a group of Lebanese boys and girls whose ages ranged between 18 and 23, the researchers came to the conclusion that girls are subjected to a more repressive system of values than boys. The degree of their submission is twice that of boys. They suffer less than boys from inner conflict, which shows that they have been trained to control themselves and to conform to parental authority. Consequently they are less prone to show a spirit of revolt.

To remedy the situation, Dr. Makki proposed reform in the personal status laws with the aim of giving women equal rights with men, in the family and in society. Such a reform, he said, is also needed in the labor code so that working women might enjoy equal rights with men regarding salary and promotion. The reform should also satisfy certain demands connected with their condition as mothers and housekeepers.

In commenting on Dr. Makki's lecture, Ms. Amira Al-Durra, director of the Family Welfare Planning Project in Syria, said that he had neglected to analyze the causes that made young women more submissive than young men. He had mentioned the values adopted in women's socialization but had failed to

show which of those values are worth keeping and which should be rejected. When recommending the reform of the personal status and labor laws, he had overlooked the fact that legislation should be shared by both men and women. Otherwise, how could we expect men legislators alone to give up their acquired rights and allow women to enjoy the same status that men have monopolized for so long?

Women to-day, she said, are going through a process of awakening. A large number of them are experiencing a state of latent or active revolt, which takes either a positive or a negative aspect. In the positive category are those women pioneers who are working sincerely and diligently to realize their own freedom, to bring about the emancipation of other women, while they are caring for the welfare of their family and of their country as a whole.

In the negative category, she continued, are those women who exploit their freedom and their authority for personal interests, or use them to persecute, to slander or suppress other women.

According to her, men's attitude toward woman's liberation generally takes a negative aspect. On the one hand, professional men with a high income rarely choose an intellectual woman for a mate. They are still dominated by old-fashioned criteria which require a wife to be young, pretty and capable of bearing children but not necessarily intelligent. On the other hand, men with a low income are willing to marry women with a profession or an employment on the ground that they would be a source of financial help. For this class, marriage is a transaction.

Drawing a parallel between educated men and educated women, Ms. Amira Al-Durra tried to prove that, although men have achieved a higher status in education and responsibility, they have less social and psychological freedom. A highly educated woman refuses to marry an ignorant man while the contrary is true of highly educated men. The result is that many emancipated and highly educated women prefer to remain unmarried, while many of those who made inappropriate marriages have resorted to divorce.

She concluded by saying that the question of women's liberation should be entrusted to a group of modern-minded men and women, who would work on an equal basis for the execution of proposed reforms on the legal, social and educational levels.

⁽¹⁾ See Al-Raida, Feb. 1, 1982, vol. V, No. 19, p.5
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