

# Honour and Shame

by Sana al-Khayyat

Book Summary by Wafa' Stephan Tarnowski

**S**ana al-Khayyat is an Iraqi journalist living in the United Kingdom. Her book is the result of interviews with fifty Iraqi women in the year 1982, during the war between Iraq and Iran, at venues ranging from schools, literacy centers, offices and people's homes. Only married women were included in her sample and all the interviews were held in Baghdad. These women involved illiterate wives, teachers and higher professionals such as heads of departments, lawyers, lecturers and so on.

## The ideology of honour and shame

According to al-Khayyat to understand how behavior is regulated in Iraqi society, one must understand the Arab concept of honour which is generally linked to the sexual conduct of women. If a woman is immodest or brings shame on her family with her sexual conduct, she brings shame and dishonour on all her kin. The concept of honour for a man, by contrast, is only related to an upright general behavior.

Thus, there are two words for honour in Arabic: one is *sharaf* which means honor in the wider sense, and the other is *'ird* which is directly related to sexual conduct and chastity. The author quotes an Arabic proverb saying "al bint tala' la-umha", which means "the daughter takes after her mother, (morally)" to illustrate how the purity of the daughter reflects that of her mother. It also explains that while the family's economic status or *sharaf* depends on the father, aspects of shame or *ird* derive from the mother.

al-Khayyat mentions another term associated with honour, *aib*, which can be translated as immodesty. For instance, a woman who speaks loudly or wears see-through clothes would be considered *aib*. Thus, girls must learn to control themselves and behave properly in order not to embarrass their families.

They must learn what is *aib* and what is not at an early age.

## Gossip as a form of social control

According to the author, gossip operates as one of the strongest forms of social control in policing women. Women are very conscious of gossip and suffer from constant feelings of guilt without necessarily having committed any dishonorable act. Fear of gossip, for instance, makes parents spy on their children. It makes parents over-protective of their female kin. It makes them afraid of people's talk, *kal-am in-nas*. By this, al-Khayyat means not "how people will evaluate and judge each other" but "how they condemn and distort." (p.24)

## Blood is stronger than marriage

If an Arab marries a woman outside his family kin group, says al-Khayyat, his wife will remain a stranger to him and his family until she bears children. If the wife were to misbehave, or commit adultery, she is not punished by him but by her brother or father, uncle or cousin. If a husband is allowed to punish his wife, this would eventually reduce and diffuse the control the family has over its members. This behavior is effective as her male kin will try and ensure that she is well treated by her husband. If a woman divorces, she is accepted back into her own family. In return, a woman has to behave in a re-

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spectable manner at all times and under all circumstances. According to al-Khayyat "an ideal woman is a married woman who is a mother, but who is virginal in mind and feelings." (p. 26)

### Growing up female in Iraq

By tracing the stages of a girl's life, says al-Khayyat, we can see that a girl is unwelcome from the moment of birth. "Compared with her brothers, she grows up relatively neglected." (p. 36). When she reaches puberty, her family imposes a list of compulsory behaviors, which regulate her every movement both inside and outside the home. This isolation of girls within the family, says al-Khayyat, prevents women from seeing their lives in relation with each other. Hence, collective movements do not emerge and "Iraqi society itself can change little because each individual will think she is on her own with her own grievances." She quotes one of her interviewees as saying: "I didn't have a choice in my marriage." (p.37)

Other chapters of **Shame and Honour** include the relationships between members of the family such as

*mothers and daughters, parents and daughters, women and their children, traditional and contemporary marriages.* As shown above, al-Khayyat, through her interviews, reviews women's experiences and perceptions of the various relationships in the family putting gender roles into perspective. According to al-Khayyat, although the factors such as education and work for women are giving them more choice among suitors, the importance of moral values, family origins and reputation remains very great (p. 78). The author sees the life of an Iraqi woman as a series of conflicts. The conflict between wanting to be independent and having a career and the wish to appear dependent and weak. And although the Iraqi system encourages women's participation in every sphere of government, the low number of women in high posts is insufficient to influence decision-making.

It is interesting to note that these interviews were conducted in 1982 and the material could only be published ten years later. Have things changed since then?

— Wafa' Stephan Tarnowski  
Journalist



## Awards

Rabat, Morocco. April 21, 1994.

**Andrée Chedid, writer, was awarded the Hassan II of Four Jurists Prize for her French books.** Andree Chedid is Lebanese, born in Cairo and lived in Paris since 1946. She published various books of poetry, theater scripts, essays and eleven novels(\*). Her style reflects her Franco-Egyptian-Lebanese background. Chedid's most recent book and one of her most prominent ones is **Job's Wife** which is inspired by the Bible (see Al-Raida, #64, Winter, 94). The Four Jurists Prize was founded 35 years ago and is awarded to a writer who has received at least one of the four leading literature awards namely, Goncourt\*\*, Renaudot, Interallié, Femina.

\*List of André Chedid's books: *Les Nombres*, 1968. *l'Autre: Roman*, 1969. *Le Monteur*, 1969. *La Cité Fertile*, 1972. *Nefertiti et le Reve d'Akhnaton*, 1974. *Ceremonial de la Violence*, 1976. *Fraternite de la Parole*, 1976. *Les Corps et le Temps, suivi de l'Etoile Peau*, 1978. *Les Mouches de Sable*, 1981. *Visage Premier*, 1972. *La Femme de Job*, 1993.

\*\*The Goncourt Award in 1993, was granted to a leading Lebanese author, Amin Maalouf, for his recent novel, *Le Rocher de Tanios*.