

The House of Obedience

Book review

Lynne Clive (Marilynn Rashid)

1983

reviewed in this article

Juliette Minces, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society*, 1980, translated from the French by Michael Pallis, Zed Press, 1982.

French sociologist Juliette Minces has written an informative introduction to the extremely complex subject of the subjugation of Arab women. One cannot read this study without feeling great remorse, frustration and empathy for the plight of these women who remain physically, psychologically and emotionally enslaved by a deeply ingrained tradition of hierarchical power which depends on their very enslavement for its continued existence.

While maintaining an acute awareness of the different Islamic conventions of various sects and social classes, Minces describes a family system in which boys are consciously pampered and indulged while girls are consistently impressed with the necessity of their obedience and subordination: "Girls should be docile, submissive, discreet, active, modest, quietly spoken, and without curiosity about the outside world." The shortage of available women, the relatively late average age of marriage for men due to the difficulty of acquiring a bride-price, has engendered a world oddly obsessed with sexuality: "It is a society which condemns a man to masturbation and chronic sexual obsession."

Because women are brought up to be distant, alien, and uncommunicative toward men, most men only feel satisfied in the company of other men, and so homosexuality is a very typical and quietly accepted aspect of Islamic society. While men are allowed an outlet, women are taught to deny their sexual feelings and to use their sexual image as their only source of manipulative power over their husbands.

Minces points to the veil and female circumcision (or excision) as the most significant symbols of the repression of Islamic women. She notes that the strict practice of veiling women is a fairly recent reaction to urbanization and westernization. Formerly, the veil was worn only on rare occasions where a woman would have to leave her village to go to another town where she would be exposed to strangers. "The practice spread and became more or less strict when the village economy was transformed by the introduction of Western manufactured products which sold at cheap prices and ruined the old pattern of local production which had, until then, enabled village societies to be almost self-sufficient." There is, too, the strong, and certainly contradictory, fundamentalist reaction which has caused many educated women in some countries to consciously take up the veil in silent condemnation of Westernization.

Yet the most cruel and debilitating aspect of repression is female circumcision which is still a common practice in many Arab countries (Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, less so in Jordan and Syria) as well as in many parts of Africa. This painful and traumatic practice, which is performed in various degrees of severity (from removal of the clitoral hood to total clitorrectomy and infibulation) finds its origins in pre-Islamic customs. Despite laws established against such mutilation in some of these countries, the practice persists for a variety of reasons, including obligation to tradition and the deep-rooted belief in the suppression of women's sexual feelings and desires.

It should be remembered that it is the women themselves who are made responsible for maintaining and continuing the subordination of women: they teach their daughters submission while they indulge and honor their sons. They perform or arrange the circumcisions of their daughters and nieces. The older women clearly become the voices, the agents of their husbands' will, and their influence increases with age. It is only by submitting to the will of her parents in maintaining her virginity until marriage is arranged, by accepting the mate chosen for her, by having children and raising them according to the dictates of her husband, that a woman can hope to acquire a certain respect and legitimacy that will allow her to voice an opinion. "Only a few exceptional individuals, having at last acquired this power over the household, will use it to help younger women escape the traditional bonds."

In discussing the legal status of women, Mincis is quick to point out that there is much discrepancy between what is allowed in the Koran, what has been made legal or illegal in the modern Islamic states, and what freedoms women are permitted in actuality. Many reforms have been made as a result of Western influence, but it is primarily the more wealthy and educated women who have benefited.

Unlike Catholicism, Islam allows birth control; modern methods of contraception are used more often by educated women, while other women continue to use a variety of ancient methods. Islam also allows abortion before the fourth month of pregnancy, however Mincis notes that it has been made illegal in all Arab countries except Tunisia.

Forced marriage remains very typical and in spite of legislation in some countries against the marriage of girls under 16, young girls continue to be married off, and usually to much older men.

Polygamy is allowed in the Koran but with the stipulation that the husband treat both wives equally. Following this stipulation is the observation that such equal treatment is almost impossible to maintain. In ancient tribal times, polygamy was a reaction to a difficult nomadic desert life where a larger family unit increased the chances of survival. According to Jean-Paul Charnay (*Islamic Culture and Socio-Economic Change*, 1971), polygamy was never practiced on a large scale and was "always more prevalent among nomads, town-dwellers and the well-to-do bourgeois possessing wealth, than among the settled peasantry and small town craftsmen." He notes that polygamy often took place out of a sense of familial responsibility when, for example, a man would marry his brother's widow thus assuring the well-being of an otherwise abandoned family. Today polygamy is less and less prevalent (Mincis notes that fewer than 10% of marriages in most Arabic Muslim countries are polygamous), and it is clearly restricted to the wealthy classes. As nomadic life is systematically destroyed by western economic conditions, it becomes a financial burden to increase the size of one's family.

Although a woman can now obtain a divorce in many of these countries if she is able to prove her husband cruel, unfaithful, dangerous or insane, few women are aware of this right and few would be able to prove their claims. In reality, men continue to hold to the traditional Koranic right of triple repudiation. According to the Koran, a man may divorce his wife by repeating an oral repudiation ("I divorce you") in front of a witness three times—with a long waiting period between repudiations. Common practice in many sects has dispensed with the waiting periods, however. Despite the fact that new laws require a couple to obtain a divorce from the courts the simple repudiation formula continues to suffice. Traditionally, young divorced women were easily accepted back into their family havens and were treated again as single women who would soon remarry. But as families become less cohesive and less economically secure, such women come to be considered an extra burden. Mincis tells us that in spite of the difficulties that arise for divorced women, widows find themselves in a much worse situation. They are financially supported by their families, but, as they are considered bad luck, they rarely have the opportunity to remarry.

Mincis obviously considers education and employment in the outside world to be the only path to liberation. Progress in this direction is slow; she notes that in spite of the fact that education for girls has been strongly instituted, a general antagonism militates against it having significant influence. In most cases, the home conditioning of young girls is so deeply ingrained that they easily conform to their subordinate roles despite their education.

While supporting the supposed advances that Western organization would bring, Mincis points to some interesting contradictions. Confinement of women in the home is strongest in large urban settings (clearly Islam and modern massified society are a very dangerous, highly oppressive combination for women). Those women who are permitted to work, aside from wealthier educated women, find they must work much more than men since in addition to their jobs they are still expected to maintain their households.

Like many Western working women, they then find themselves doubly enslaved. Yet unlike Western women they lack modern home conveniences and the luxury of child-care. By implementing the Western formula for liberation, some repressive practices are slowly being rejected—yet in that process, the only positive aspects of these societies (family security and cohesiveness, community responsibility) are also being destroyed. Old forms of oppression (and certainly not all of them) are being replaced by more modern forms.

Minces is openly aware of these contradictions: “Modernism has simply disrupted the secure traditional family structure without providing any real compensation other than a meagre salary and extra tasks for those who work.” Yet she opts for the changes that Western modernism will bring as the only immediate, though inadequate, solution: “The fact remains that no other ideology has established norms of modernity.” She suggests that the need is for modern laws and reforms which, unlike those so far adopted on paper, will somehow be strictly enforced by the existing governments.

One can conclude then that Islamic women will become “free” only by being permitted certain rights issued from some higher authority which, unlike their fathers, brothers and husbands, will remain inhuman and anonymous. They will become “free” by being permitted to enter the work-force, by essentially becoming victims of a larger order in the same way that their men are victims.

In the Seventh Century, Islam provided women with certain rights of protection which they were previously denied. Minces tells us that in Pre-Islamic Arabia “women were treated as chattels, to be bought and sold or inherited,” Just as Islam did away with some of the repressive practices against women, so too do Westernization and modernization provide some immediate beneficial changes. But does this mean that Islam was the only possible salvation for tribal women, and that now modernization is the only possible road to the emancipation of Islamic women? Obviously, Islam enslaved and incarcerated women in the process of “protecting” them. It robbed tribal societies of a cultural diversity and complexity along with a potential for creating a myriad of profound solutions to their many problems. It was also ineffective against the most fundamental of repressive practices; it has allowed the practice of female circumcision to be incorporated into its rituals.

So too have most modern Islamic states been powerless in this regard as the laws against circumcision are simply ignored, except by some educated parents. Although many of these parents practice a modification of the operation (only the tip of the clitoris is cut) in order to comply with tradition.

Ironically, this practice has also quietly continued to exist in modern Western societies among immigrant Muslim Arabs and Africans who have brought their rituals with them. *Newsweek* (11/1/82) has reported that in France the issue has recently received notoriety due to charges brought against a north African father (from Mali) who had performed a crude excision on his three-month-old daughter who as a result almost bled to death. The article also mentions another infant who died after being circumcised by a professional “exciseuse.” There now exists legislation in Norway, Sweden and Denmark banning the practice. No such laws exist in Great Britain where some private doctors have admitted to performing clitorectomies on immigrant women—and for fees as high as \$1,700. In their native towns and villages, of course, no such fees exist, but under Capitalism even clitorectomies conform to the requirements of services rendered. Legally banning the practice does not stop it, not in the Islamic nations that have adopted such laws and not in our developed Western countries. The *Newsweek* article notes that experts warn that making the practice illegal would only drive it further underground. One could easily make an analogy here with the abortion issue.

The problem of female circumcision is overwhelmingly complex and cannot be solved by the imposition of laws or by isolating it from other aspects of Islamic life. Certainly a more fundamental change is needed, one that will come from within these societies, from the life-affirming energies of the women themselves.

In the opening sentence of this study, Minces cautions against the tendency of Western feminists to discuss the problems of women in different parts of the world according to their own experiences, as if they shared a similar history of oppression.

But after drawing attention to the complexity of the differences between East and West, rich and poor, modern and traditional, she gives a singular credence to the Western perspective: “Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of Western women as the only democratic, just and forward looking model? I do not think so. The demands of Western feminists seem to me to represent the greatest advance towards the emancipation of women as people.”

Minces does not make this claim blindly. She appears highly aware of the failures of Western society. But she has obviously carefully weighed the differences and has made a choice based on her concern for the well-being of Islamic women and on a desire to share her “freedom” with others. And yet, ironically, this statement implies a basic denial of profound cultural complexities that continue to remain outside of the narrow Western ken. It offers the curtailing power of “models” as the only viable solution and suggests that only through a “forward” vision will Islamic Arab women acquire their independence. Such a vision must surely deny the identity they do have, ignore the potential lessons of their own very distinct past and present circumstances, and impose on them a tragically inadequate and contradictory concept of freedom.

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