

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FINAL WORDS*i*

Let me conclude, then, by trying to capture in a few words the current crisis in Western gender discourse. As good a place as any to do this is Germaine Greer's book 'The Whole Woman,' released in 1999 to an interesting mix of befuddled anger and encomia from the press.

This is an important book, not least because it casts itself as a dialogue with the author's earlier, more notorious volume 'The Female Eunuch,' and published thirty years previously. Throughout, Greer, who is one of the most conscientious and compassionate of feminist writers, reflects on the ways in which the social and also scientific context of Western gender discourse has shifted over this period. In 1969, liberation seemed imminent, or at least cogently achievable. In 1999, with states and national institutions largely converted to the cause which once seemed so radical, it seems to have receded somewhere over the horizon. Hence Greer's anger descends upon not one, but two lightning-rods: the old enemy of male gynophobia is still excoriated, but there is also a more diffuse frustration with what Greer now acknowledges is the hard-wiring of the human species itself. Most feminism in the 1960s and 1970s was 'equality feminism', committed to the breakdown of gender disparities as social constructs amenable to changes in education and media generalisation; feminism in the 1990s, however, was increasingly a 'difference feminism', rooted in the growing conviction that nature is at least as important as nurture in shaping the behavioural traits of men and women. Most politicians, educators and media barons and baronesses are still committed to the old feminist idea; however, as Greer's book shows, the new feminism is growing and promises to take the world through another social shakedown, whose consequences for Muslim communities will be considerable.

Modern oppression

A further area in which women seem to have found themselves degraded rather than liberated by the new cultural climate is that of pornography. This institution, opposed by most feminists as a dehumanisation and objectification of women (Otto Preminger once called Marilyn Monroe a 'vacuum with nipples'), has not been chastened into decline by the feminist revolution; it has swollen into a thirty billion pound a year industry, populated by armies of faceless Internet whores and robo-bimbos. As Greer remarks, 'after thirty years of feminism there is vastly more pornography, disseminated more widely than ever before.' Pornography blends into the fashion industry, which claims to exist for the gratification of women, but is in fact, as she records, largely controlled by men who seek to persuade women to denude or adorn themselves to add to a public spectacle created largely for men. (Many fashion designers, moreover, are homosexual, Versace only the most conspicuous example, and these men create a boy like fashion norm which forces women into patterns of diet and exercise which constitute a new form of oppression.) Cellulite, once admired in the West and in almost all traditional societies, has now become a sin. To be saved, one 'works out'. Demi Moore pumps iron for four hours a day; but even this ordeal was not enough to save her marriage.

Fashion Industry

Greer and other feminists identify the fashion industry as a major contributor to the contemporary enslavement of women. Its leading co-conspirator is the pharmaceuticals business, which, as she says, deliberately creates a culture of obsession with physical flaws: the so called Body Dysmorphic Disorder which is currently plumping out the business accounts of doctors, psychiatrists, and, of course, the cosmetic surgeons. As Dolly Parton says, 'It costs a lot of money to look as cheap as I do.' The world's resources are gobbled up to service this artificially-induced obsession with looks, fed by the culture of denudation. And perhaps the most repellent dimension is the new phenomenon of hormone replacement therapy, billed as an anti-aging solution. The hormone involved, estrogen, is obtained from mares: in America alone 80,000 pregnant female horses are held in battery farms, confined in crates, and tied to hoses to enable their urine to be collected. The foals that are delivered are routinely slaughtered.

Depressed women

The consequences of the new pressures on women are already generally known, although no solutions are seriously proposed. Women, we are told by the old school of feminists, today lead richer lives. However, it is also acknowledged that these lives often seem to be sadder. 'Since 1955 there has been a five-fold increase in depressive illness in the US. For reasons that are anything but clear women are more likely to suffer than men,' (p.171) while '17 percent of British women will try to kill themselves before their twenty-fifth birthday.' This wave of sadness that afflicts modern women, which is entirely out of keeping with the expectations of

the early feminists, again has brought joy to the pharmaceuticals barons. Prozac is overwhelmingly prescribed to women. (This is the same anti-depressant drug that is routinely given to zoo animals to help them overcome their sense of futility and entrapment.)

Liberation of women

Greer concludes her angry book with few notes of hopefulness. The strategies she demanded in the 1960s have been extensively tried and applied; but the results have been unclear, and sometimes tragic. What is clear is that there has not been a liberation of women, so much as a throwing-off of one pattern of dependence in exchange for another. The husband has become dispensable; the pharmaceutical industry, and the ever-growing army of psychiatrists and counsellors, has taken his place. Happiness seems as remote as ever.

ⁱ Extracts from a transcript titled 'Boys will be Boys' By Shaykh Abdul-Hakim Murad,