

British Mensa's: ANDROGYNY



Editor:
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Volume 2 – (Issue 2) – June 2018

Monograph: Why gender is important to me and to the work I do: In the name of freedom, health, and good education.

Shereen H. Shaw

GENDER has played a big part in my upbringing and education. I recall not being satisfied with such female heroines as Jane Eyre and Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Both females portrayed an image I was unable to identify with; that of vulnerability and perhaps eagerness to please the significant *Other*. I felt their lack of confidence and self-belief was their downfall. Females such as Zena from Greek myths and Medusa attracted me. Their characters had multiple sides and dimensions. I knew from a very early age that my gender was not what defined me and certainly others' opinions have played a very small role in shaping who I am today. I had a strong female role model to look up to: My mother who I would say is an intellectual, an avid reader, and writer.

It is fair to say that if parents are well-educated in Egypt, equal opportunities exist between males and females in the family. I was often reminded that I was privileged as a young female brought up in Cairo to have received a good education and, more so, the opportunity to venture in my early 20s to live and settle in 'the West'. The common Egyptian tradition when it comes to gender is that men provide for women and the role of

women is solely to bear children and to nurture them. Often poorer families make a choice between siblings as to who will receive an education and who will stay home. Male offspring are expected to seek a good education to be able to provide for all family members, whereas females are expected to find a suitable suitor.

I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by influential females who left a lasting impact on my character. To some extent, as I grew up, I began to grasp that female authors, teachers, and lecturers seemed to struggle to justify their existence in a predominantly patriarchal society like Egypt. I was a student of Ferial Ghazoul, Professor of English & Comparative Literature, who taught me about the history of women in classic narratives from the Eastern and Western traditions. I recall writing an essay once about Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eyes" and debating with Ghazoul the protagonist's strong emotions of strength and liberation. At such a critical age, and in what I can only define as a period in which my character was most influenced, I felt empowered by women. Ghazoul's teachings, Nawal El Saadawi's writings, and Radwa

Ashour's narratives have all shaped the woman I am today.

The wider image of Middle Eastern women sadly is somehow controversial. The stigma is that women in patriarchal societies are oppressed. Though, to a certain extent, this is true, there are a few whose names have managed to rise above all barriers and obstacles. Their voices were heard and resonate in young women's minds generation after generation. Although Saadawi's name is one that received more criticism and threats, than praise; her literary talent in speaking out against Islamic dogma, the governments' malpractice and poor policies, have allowed her to remain, both nationally and internationally, a pioneer in Egyptian feminism. Her work is also widely read in many languages and across every continent. It may seem to many that women, naturally, have a bigger battle to fight than men. On a closer look, the truth of the matter is such that women are blessed with so many talents that if put to good use, can change the world.

It is common in Egypt to hear as a young female, stories of daily harassment, if not be subjected to one; whether walking in the street or on public transport. It is also common to be reminded every now and then at any special occasion that your future is dependent on a potential suitor who will one day appear and ask for your hand in marriage. One might feel a sense of sympathy at what I can only describe to be a burden on every Middle Eastern woman: The burden

to justify one's existence and struggle for a sense of worth and appreciation from the male *Other*. The struggle is real and El Saadawi's writings capture beautifully perhaps a fraction of the issues that face women in the Arab world. From being subjected to female genital mutilation [FGM], to rape and harassment, to the stigma regarding divorce, and the sense of shame assigned to the female body, and to the struggle of the self and identity in culture and religion.

Gender is a difficult topic to discuss when you have grown up in a traditional double standard environment which un-Islamically put so much emphasis on the avoidance of shame and necessity to maintain purity and chastity; pressures women itself. I recall that at sixteen years of age, I saw a scene in an Arabic film where a female on her wedding night presented the stained sheets from her bed to her in-laws and guests as proof of her virginity. These customs and traditions exist still to this day, perhaps more so in poorer areas. These scenes are common in Egyptian films and seen by many young females who will grow up to follow and believe that their only worth is in this specific moment where they have to prove their chastity and virginity.

Gender inequality continues to be one of the key issues present in the Arab world and it manifests itself in different forms from abuse of authority by subjecting women to virginity tests during the Egyptian revolution, to expecting full obedience from women in marriage

to sexual harassment in relationships and on the streets.

It is, therefore, paramount as educationalists, writers, feminists, and philosophers to continue a gender discourse in order to empower females to make well-informed choices, and to put an end to gender inequality and injustice in the name of religion, family traditions, and customs which limit a women's world.

Please cite as:

Shaw, S.H. (2018). Monograph: Why gender is important to me and to the work I do: In the name of freedom, health, and good education. *British Mensa's: ANDROGYNY*, 2(2), 6-8.



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Call for Next Issue...

The theme for the Autumn Publication (*Volume 2* – Issue 3) will be:

“Gender & Sexual Health”.

Submission deadline for the next issue is: **20th August 2018.**

Contributions are welcomed for all three sections of the next issue which

shall be published on: **20th September 2018.**

All contributions should be submitted via e-mail to:

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