

British Mensa's:
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The Case of the Arab Woman.

Shereen Shaw

Abundant research suggests that self-image is inextricably linked to the convoluted issues that girls battle to conform with a media-driven ideal of beauty. The search for self begins during adolescence and thereafter. What research alone is unable to do when speaking of the Middle East is shine a light on a culture little known beyond the Arab world -- even to people who visit the region. In the case of the Arab woman, the battle is never-ending. From early on, girls are shown how to dress, how to behave in the company of others, how to speak and how to *be* in the public eye. Taught from a very young age what they are and are *not* expected to *become*. Causes of negative body image begin at an early age with the realization that expectations and behaviour are far more important than anything else. Some common causes of negative body image are a result of rape, sexual abuse, and media imagery. In this article, I shall attempt to explore some of the profound internalized causes of negative body image which lead to a decreased sense of self, feelings of unworthiness which contribute to mental health issues ingrained in culture, religion, and Arab traditions.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

wrote in the fourth and final volume of her pivotal autobiography, *All Said and Done* (1972/1993) that “faith is often an appurtenance that is given in childhood as part of the middle-class equipment, and that is unquestionably retained together with the rest of it. If a doubt arises, it is often thrust aside for emotional reasons – a nostalgic loyalty to the past, affection for those around one, dread of the loneliness and banishment that threaten those who do not conform... Habits of mind, a system of reference and of values have been acquired, and one becomes their prisoner.” Rightly so, dogmas of religion preclude critical thinking and analytical reasoning especially that which is needed for philosophical inquiry for one to evolve as a human being.

In a Beauvoirian sense, what hope is there for an Arab woman to be committed to looking reality in the face and speaking about it without pretence? Can the delusion of religion continue to deprive the Arab woman of the simplest of rights; the right to celebrate “the body”.

“To lose confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in oneself.”

~ Simone de Beauvoir (1952)

If we consider ourselves to be existentialists, and follow it as a philosophy of life, we may claim that we are born free. We are, as de Beauvoir (1949/2011) claims “not born, but rather, become a woman” because of our choices and what we have carved for ourselves with the resources available to us in society make our values, beliefs, limitations and ultimately our self-concepts. This presents an

ambiguous picture of human freedom. Unlike Jean Paul Sartre, de Beauvoir posits an understanding of freedom in which women struggle against the apparent disadvantages of the female body. As if one's merciless self-criticism is not enough, a young Arab woman bears the burden of the voices within her head which through an internal dialogue presents the barriers of how she should and should *not* live. The daily struggles can often be manifested as conflicting behaviour and/or actions between what one wants and what one should or should not do. The struggles that young girls endure growing up in a restraining patriarchal environment, which some succumb to over the course of adolescence, shape the critical transition from girls to women who suffer from low self-esteem, isolation, depression and often entrapment in unhappy relationships and marriages.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1949/2011) postulates a key question: that of the female embodiment. The question at the heart of her work is whether the supposed disadvantages of the female body exist objectively in *all* societies or are they man-made; namely "judged" to be disadvantages of our societies? Ingrained in Middle-Eastern thought and culture is this view of the female body as a disadvantage or a hindrance and yet it is a powerful vessel for the continuity of life. The two views are shown in de Beauvoir's thought when speaking of the female body as positive and negative. The Arab woman is both; oppressed and free. The body can be used as a vehicle

for freedom regardless of how it is the very reason for one's oppression in a dominant patriarchal society.



Defining Self-Mutilation in the Arab World:

The way in which a woman sees herself is affected by early traumatic experiences which demarcates her from the opposite sex. The internal struggle is often with the idea whether she sees herself as a free subject or as the object of society's "gaze" as de Beauvoir would say. Unfortunately, due to the development of a girl's body and how society reacts in a hostile manner, the latter view is often the one which moulds a girl's self-concept. The culture and certain societal attributes inhibits Arab women from finding meaning in uniquely female experiences such as menstruation, understanding the female sex organs, pregnancy and menopause. Each experience is tarnished by a hostile reaction from a society which imposes a meaning of burden, disadvantage and even shame. A young girl is looked at very differently once she

experiences her first menstruation cycle. Once this incident is known, questions are raised and alarm bells ring and the talks of honour, shame, chastity and the loss of innocence begin. This is one of the main causes for negative body image at an early age. A young girl, from this discovery onwards, is not only battling with her own understanding of her body and its functions which is entirely dependent on the support provided to her by significant others, but also is vulnerable to any ridicule from others about that very fact of life which happens to every female, every month until reaching menopause.

In an Arab household, where the woman is expected to look after the children, carry out the daily chores, provide a cooked meal and have these discussions with young daughters as early as 7 and 8 years old, the chances of this conversation being had in an informative and straight forward way is scarce. Often, the conversation brings about deep feelings of anxiety, shame and embarrassment of one's body (Reisel & Creighton, 2015). From speaking to several Arab women about their experiences, the majority expressed that it was altogether a taboo subject:

"I was only 10 when it happened. I did not know what was going on with my body. I screamed for my mother to come and help! She did not anticipate it happening so soon. I remember feeling utterly overwhelmed and even traumatized. I was unprepared, out of my depth and it took me a long time to get used to its dreaded arrival every month."

~ **Anonymous**

A ritual which has survived over decades from one civilization to another is female genital mutilation [FGM]. The belief that a young girl must be stopped from potentially bringing shame upon her family by engaging in sexual practices is at the heart of this ritual. For many years, women have advocated all around the world against FGM and called for women education to reflect an understanding of the female body or to raise awareness of negative body image and low self-esteem. This ritual has a huge impact on women sexuality and sense of self. To this day, in the Arab world, the ritual of partial or total removal of the female genital organs for non-medical reasons continues as an act of "honour" rooted in gender inequality (Toubia & Sharief, 2003). It is difficult to believe that FGM is conducted from days after birth to puberty and in later years. The foundation years of the female body is tarnished in the Arab world by misconceptions that are not grounded by any medical research. In fact, this practice causes recurrent infections, inability to get pregnant, complications during childbirth, urine retention and difficulty passing menstrual flow which in most cases fatal bleeding (Abdulcadira, 2011).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to report how many girls and women in the Arab world die because of this practice. FGM is either not reported or complications such as the transmission of diseases are not viewed as linked to FGM with some not even diagnosed.

It is fair to claim that there is limited research which ties together all three factors; how

negative body image, low self-esteem, and Arab traditions during these critical foundation years' impact directly a woman's development in life and self-concept. Equally, not enough is said on how these cultural and societal attributes continue to inhibit Arab women mentally, sexually, and emotionally: What message is sent to daughters today about their menstruation and which messages they will carry with them as they grow older to understand the process of *becoming* of a woman.

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Wider Suggested Reading:

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Call for Next Issue...

The theme for the Autumn Publication (*Volume 1* – Issue 3) will be:

“Social & Legal Acceptance of Non-Binary Genders & Lifestyles”.

Submission deadline for the next issue is: **20th November 2017.**

Contributions are welcomed for all three sections of the next issue which shall be published on: **20th December 2017.**

All contributions should be submitted via e-mail to: Silveris@edgehill.ac.uk