

# Woman's Image in the Lebanese Press 1935-1975

Woman's image in Lebanese textbooks, in Egyptian mass media and in the Egyptian cinema has been treated in brief reports published in former issues of *Al-Raida*<sup>(1)</sup>. Woman's image in the Lebanese press has been contributed through the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World in a detailed study project recently made by Mr. Richard Allouche, assistant professor at Lyon University II (France), on the image of woman in the Lebanese press between 1935 and 1975.

The image as defined by the author of the study is the sum of functions, real or theoretical, attributed to woman by society and thus projected through the press. The place occupied by woman in the press means, according to him, the area occupied by her in the sample of study used by the researcher.

In presenting his work, the author shows some reserve regarding the conclusions. There are certain principles, he says, that should serve as a guideline for both researcher and reader and which are not easy to detect by either of them. First is the differentiation between woman's function as a free individual struggling for her independence, and that of a mere follower who speaks in another's name and blindly applauds his or her liberal or feminist ideas. Another principle is that of differentiating between an independent feminist movement springing out of local awareness and an artificial activity spurred by foreign publicity, or by a desire to shine or to imitate the West.

## Woman's Place in Daily Papers

In studying six daily papers that appeared between 1935 and 1975 the author has found a positive correlation between the sample of study and that of the area allotted to women, which means that an increase in the volume of samples studied corresponds with an increase in the said area. But the increase does not necessarily indicate a corresponding growth in woman's standing. It could be merely dictated by the necessity of filling a vacuum.

Between 1945 and 1965, the number of Lebanese daily papers doubled as a result of the economic prosperity which Lebanon enjoyed at the time. As a result of political and economic changes, the woman's section reached twelve times its size in 1935. In the so-called "moderate" papers woman's image concentrated on social events. In the rightist "bourgeois" papers, a romantic attitude toward woman restricted her role to love, maternity and voluntary social work. In other conservative papers her role was insignificant while in leftist papers, leftist ideology emphasized her political and social activities.

## In Weekly Magazines

The study limits its extent to three: *As-Sayyad*, *Al-Usubu'-al-Arabi* and *La Revue du Liban* 1965-1975.

The first periodical devotes to women a quarter of its printed space but 70% of this space is occupied by pictures. In 1965, 76% of the area reserved for publicity is occupied by women. The main articles on women in this magazine discuss her activities as social worker, writer, artist, singer, university student. They contain news items of social parties, fashions, cosmetics, etc. The traditional functions of woman and her feminine characteristics are emphasized. The proclamation of the year 1975 as the Woman's Year did not create any positive reaction in the woman's section of this magazine.

*Al-Usubu'-al Arabi* 1965 gives women 36% of its printed space. Its outstanding feminine page is the weekly article written by Ghada al-Samman, a Syro-Lebanese writer who expresses an acerbic revolt against traditional attitudes toward women. Her articles relate and vehemently attack certain current events which bear witness to the degradation of women and confirm their slavish behavior. In one of these articles Ghada attacks the African ruler Mobutu, whose picture in a certain magazine represented him sitting on a chair while two women servants diligently polished his shoes. In another she violently criticizes Fidel Castro who proposed the exchange of 20 women prisoners in his country for one Cuban male prisoner in the United States. A third article protests against a religious leader who authorized the "beating of woman under given circumstances."

Ghada's articles and other items dealing with civil marriage and problems of the woman artist show a progressive step achieved by *Al-Usubu' al-Arabi over As-Sayyad* in 1965. This Progressive step was not followed up in 1975. Ghada al-Samman's articles take on an obscure, surrealistic style. The International Woman's Year stimulated a few people to declare their doubts concerning the efficiency of its recommendations. A study published in this magazine by Afif Farraj, critic and researcher, attracted Mr. Allouche's attention for its new approach. It draws a parallel between two opposite philosophic trends in Arab history: 1) the rationalist, led by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and adopted by modern thinkers like Taha Hussain, supports women's liberation; 2) the mystic, represented by Al-Ghazali of the 10th century A.D. and taken up by Al-Accad and Ali Wafi and others of the present age, considers woman as an inferior creature, incapable of standing on the same footing as man.

Richard Allouche approves the philosophic approach used by A. Farraj who links woman's liberation with that of society as a whole. But he prefers a more up-to-date reference like Annie Leclerc, a woman writer who argues in one of her books that "all our culture has been produced by men who imposed on woman their own points of view and obliged them to serve their own interests." She adds that "one-sided opinions must be revised, and women be given the opportunity to express themselves."

An article written in 1975 by Walid Shmait, and published in *Al-Usubu' Al-Arabi*, criticizes film producers for restricting their films to the theme of love ever since the creation of the cinema industry. "Woman has been

(1) See *Al-Raida*, June 1978, No. 4, p.4; Nov. 1978, No.6, p.17; May 1979, Vol. II, No.8, p.11; Nov. 1979, vol. II, No. 10, p. 4.

represented as a sex object, her personal and family problems have been neglected, while the question of guarding her honor seems to be her main preoccupation."

Women as an instrument of publicity receive great emphasis in the 1975 issues. They occupy 85% of the advertising illustrations and 57% of the whole advertising material in the magazine.

**La Revue du Liban**, another weekly published in French in 108-124 large size pages, gives almost the same space to illustrations as that allotted to texts. Woman as a topic occupies 17.45% of the whole amount of texts and 82.55% of all the illustrations.

Among the serious articles published by this magazine, one written by Louis Armand (of the French Academy) asserts that women are qualified to play in the future an important role on the social, emotional and physiological levels. Socially, the author of the article says, women must participate in the elaboration of systems and laws whose formulation has been monopolized by men. From the emotional and humanitarian point of view, woman's potential in this respect can modify the rigid, technocratic image imposed by men on our present age. From the physiological point of view, electrochemical studies of the brain have shown the existence of a close interaction between the physiological and the psychological phenomena. Women's physiological make-up tends to produce psychological traits which complete those of men. Woman's natural interest in child-bearing and child care forms a parallel or a counterpart to man's natural bent toward adventure and risky exploits.

Mr. Allouche criticizes this article on the ground that the desire of the author to modify the present systems in favor of woman, is contradicted by his covert statement that each sex has a different nature which justifies considering woman as a complement, not an equal, to man.

As a conclusion about the weekly magazines, the author of the study sees the impossibility of drawing final conclusions based on common denominators and parallel treatment of topics. This is due to the absence of planned programs and of field questionnaires preparing the ground for further study and discussion of woman's status and problems. Articles are mainly inspired by daily events or by the particular experiences of their authors.

### Woman in Feminine Periodicals

According to Mr. Allouche, no outstanding differences exist between the contents of feminine magazines and those of the general ones regarding woman's status as a whole.

In 1952, when Lebanese women obtained political rights, the question was discussed by several papers and magazines including **Sawt-el-Mara'a**, a feminine monthly founded in 1945. The editor, Edvick Shayboub, showed the validity of women's political claim in an article published in this magazine in 1952. By way of contrast, the author of the study published an article written in 1911 and published by a feminine magazine of that period, **Al-Hasna'**, in which the author, Bishop Boulos Abu Adal, attacks the campaign launched by Western suffragettes claiming the right to vote. Using a religious argument, the bishop says that God created woman for a certain function out of which she should not deviate.

Two years later, 1954, Rose Ghurayyib wrote an article in the same magazine, condemning the acceptance of

ready-made theories and ideas regarding woman. In preparation for the Unesco Conference on Women held in Lebanon in the same year, she recommended the scientific study of woman's condition and needs instead of using rhetorical speeches and ostentatious recommendations which would remain dead material.

To this Mr. Allouche replies by approving the idea of resorting to scientific research in treating woman's problems, since the himself has adopted this type of work as a career. Yet he makes certain reserves concerning scientific theories which should not always be taken as mere facts, because even scientific judgments are apt to change and become obsolete.

### Final conclusions

Weekly magazines, though they give woman more space than daily papers, still restrict her sphere to feminine activities and keep her away from man's world, i.e., from the areas of leadership and major decisions.

Articles handling woman's participation in politics vary between sheer condemnation and reserve based on woman's particular nature, which differentiates her functions from those of man. Taking this as an argument, supporters of sexual discrimination overemphasize the biological function of women and their emotional nature. This "natural difference" is the arm they use to legitimize for men polygamy and other privileges, while women are called upon to vow eternal faithfulness to their husbands and to consider love and devotion to them as a duty, even though no real feeling may exist between the two.

The study made by Mr. Allouche is limited in both time and space. It presents the ideology of the so-called conservative classes in Lebanon between 1965 and 1975, versus that of a few liberal writers such as Ghada al-Samman, concerning woman's status and claims.

Woman's cause continues to be a subject of debate all over the world and remains in great need of further study and elucidation. The image of woman as presented in this study of the Lebanese press at a certain period carries a reiterated call to the education and emancipation of woman but within certain traditional limits.

As to the attitude of the researcher regarding the "natural difference" between the sexes, taken as an evidence for sexual discrimination, it does not fall within the scope of his research.

### GIVE US LOVE

This poem, written on New Year's Day, 1958, by Fadwa Tuqan, the Palestinian poet, sounds like a universal prayer.

*Give us love: through love will the treasures of good  
Burst out in our souls,  
Our songs will blossom and flower,  
Will shower gifts, blessings and power,  
Give us love that will rebuild our crumbling world  
And restore fertility to our sterile earth.  
Give us wings by which we conquer ascending horizons,  
Wings to free us from abysmal caves  
And shatter our prison chains.  
Give us light that will cut through the deep dark waves,  
Its flooding brightness carrying us to extreme heights  
Where we may reap victory and taste pure delights*

Fadwa Tuqan  
(Trans. from Arabic)