Guests Of The Sheik Essay, Research Paper

Element of Gender:

A review of the Literature

Through out Middle East the lives of women appear to have no influencing role in society. Elizabeth Fernea provides an survey of the traditions of an Iraqi village in her book Guests of the Sheik. Within this book, Fernea explores the element of gender and its impact on the roles of women in Iraq, directly in the village of El Nahra. She also encounters the expectations based on the gender-specific social constructs of polygamous families. Another woman author, Leila Abouzeid, explores similar elements in the work Return to Childhood, which is based in islamic Morocco. Fernea, who the women of the harem call Beeja, presents experiential information about the life of both women and men and her role within her husband’s life as it reflects upon this eastern culture. This provides for an interesting perspective about the different roles of men and women in distant eastern cultures. Abouzeid also comments on family structure from the eyes of a child and how she viewed the role of the woman also within the eastern culture.

In Guest of the sheik,Fernea’s narrative comes from her stay, with her husband, Bob, on the outskirts of a Iraqi village, and the encounters that they experienced as a guest2

he sheik though the eyes of a westerner. Even though Fernea and her husband were both well respected westerners, Fernea

herself recognized that the role of a female within the Iraqi community would require her to conform to some of the gender-based social norms. This was evident in her expectations of their first meeting. After being invited by the sheik to lunch, Fernea reflected on the visit by stating that the invitation meant that “Bob would eat with the men in the sheik’s mudhif or guest house, and I would lunch in the Harem, or women’s quarters”(24).Fernea is also forced to conform to the dress appropriate for woman, the abayah, to avoid insults and her own self-conscious about how she was being view a woman. “They say an uncovered woman is an immoral woman” (24).Immediately, the reader is brought into the view of the different gender roles and the perspectives of both the western guests and the eastern community within which they would visit.

Within both communities spoken of these books, there are three elements of life that appear over and over and underscore the gender differences within eastern culture. These include: the relationship between women and the rearing of children, customs and the process of marriage and the preparation and consumption of food (including the feast of Ramadan).Within Fernea’s experiences, these elements repeat

3

and continually provide greater understanding of the differences between western culture and the intricacies of the culture of the Iraqi village. These elements are also apparent when Abouzeid recalls the conversation and action of the men in and around her family.

Fernea experiences her understanding of the relationship between women and the of raising children through her exposure to the sheik’s harem. The women of the harem represent many different types and different ages, from the sheik’s earliest wives to his favorite wife of the current day. Though the sheik’s wives share the raising of his children, there appears to be a level of jealousy among the different wives, yet all accept Selma’s role as the immediate “leader” because of her favored status with the sheik. The women share not only their husband, but elements of bringing up a child and a concern for the social consistencies displayed by their interactions. Fernea is able to learn the importance of motherhood to the social constructs of the village through the presentation of Fadhila’s life. Fadhila, who is a wife of another village member, not the sheik, shares her greatest sorrow in life, her childlessness. Though no determination of her infertility was made, the societal norms pointed the finger at Fadhila as the woman and the bearer of children, rather than at her husband. Fadhila’s fate within the village is questionable because of

4

her inability to conceive a child; within the culture of the village, “childlessness is verifiable grounds for divorce” (43). Even though Fadhila appears in good health and is a vibrant lively individual, her value as a woman and a wife is depleted by her lack of children . Many members of the village pity her husband’s poor choice even though it has never been determined that Fadhila’s infertility is the reason the couple cannot conceive. Through Abouzeid memories women are placed in the community,not to go to school and learn but to raise a family.” A girls destiny is marriage, pregnancy and breast feeding..” (36). This also can reinforce the understanding that women are not to excel but to be part of and serve their family and desires of their husband. The other women that Fernea encounters celebrate the bearing of children, and many even have had a number of the sheik’s babies. It is interesting that the members of the harem share a common understanding of the importance of children, but also attempt to dismiss the gravity of the loss of a child, accepting that it occurs within the scope of their child rearing process.

The ceremony and practices surrounding the wedding also demonstrated the differences between western culture and the culture of the Iraqi village and support the belief that women were truly subjugated to their husbands. After a couple is married, the community shares in the ritual of their

5

consummation and the determination of the girl as a worthy wife for her husband. As the community waits outside, the husband and wife has sex for the first time, and determine if the girl is a virgin. The family of the groom share in this by celebrating a blood stained sheet following this act, and the community supports the determination made by the groom and his family. “The groom’s smiles meant that indeed everything was all right; the girl was a virgin, the man and his mother were satisfied. If they had not been, the groom had the right to demand that one of her relatives kill the bride on the spot” (148). No determinations must be made regarding the status of the man’s virginity and this social construct underscores the subjugation of women within the community.

When Fernea and her husband Bob were introduced at the home of the sheik, Fernea was ushered into the room with the harem and Bob was taken to away to visit with the men, and at no time during their visit was the couple allowed to share in discourse at the same time. “While the men sat in one corner, far away from the women, the women avoided eye contact with the men and even covered their faces with their abayahs whenever the men passed near” (45).It comes as no surprise that the same constructs applied when the sheik came to their house for lunch. In essence, there was no way of introducing modern american culture to the sheik without causing offense,

6

and so the couple utilized the knowledge of their worker Mohammed to demonstrate the ways to support both the customs and respect for the sheik. Pages 95-100 describe a significant section of Beeja’s preparation for the visit from the sheik and her growing understanding of the complexity of the culture. Even in her own home, Fernea is not allowed to feast with the sheik and her husband, but instead cooks for days and allows the sheik to be served both lunch and desert before she can leave the kitchen for a brief introduction.

The sheik’s brief interaction with Fernea and their limited discourse underscores the fact that she recognized the cultural differences and took their culture into account when considering her feelings following this interaction. It is interesting to note that Fernea was not as much impacted by the sheiks remarks, which were directed as inquiries about her father and their structure of her family rather than discourse about herself, but instead by what was not said following the meal. It is common in american culture for guests and family to compliment the cook, sharing enthusiasm about the dishes prepared at a meal. But this is not the case within the social expectations of the Iraqi culture of this village, and instead, it was believed that the excellence of the food was suggested by what was eaten. Fernea wrote: “I felt let down and disappointed. I suppose I had expected Mohammed’s to

7

comment enthusiastically on the excellence of each dish which we had presented for the sheik’s pleasure. He didn’t. No one ever did such a thing, I found out later”(101). Instead, the empty platters suggested what dishes were enjoyed, and the less successful foods were sent back to the kitchen after the meal.

Though Elizabeth Fernea acted as a respectful guest within the community of the Iraqi village and accepted the constructs of their culture, it was clear that many of their practices suggested an almost unbelievable level of female subjugation. There was a considerable double-standard within this culture as well as the one described by Abouzeid, and few of the expectations of women were also expected of the men. Instead, the account provided by Fernea, known as Beeja to the women of the harem, demonstrates the way in which ancient cultures have supported the subjugation of women and the differences that are inherently created when comparing these constructs against western culture.