

Women, Culture and Society, Part 1: From Antiquity to the Renaissance

Fifteenth article in the series

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This analytical overview of the situation of women in society from historical to modern times and the redoubtable problems they have faced in winning acceptance of their right to an equal place in it, not only from men but also from the society as a whole, is intended to be non-partisan and objective. I fully recognize that for a man to undertake such an endeavour is like him deciding to walk through a minefield without the benefit of a mine detector, so much has this subject area come to be regarded as an exclusive female preserve. However, I am convinced that an issue which has such important development and societal implications could benefit from a perspective that is not exclusively female, and since I am no stranger to intellectual controversy I am willing to be the intrepid male who is prepared take a hazardous walk through that hypothetical minefield.

Women represent more than a half of humanity but they have been discriminated against in every society and culture, in every historical period, in every religion, and under every political regime and social system. In his monumental study of race relations in mid-20th century America, Gunnar Myrdal was struck by the extent of discrimination practised against blacks, which he likened to the discrimination that women have historically suffered: *"In every society there are at least two groups of people, besides the Negroes, who are characterized by high social visibility expressed in physical appearance, dress, and patterns of behaviour, and who have been 'suppressed'. We refer to women and children."* (American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944), Vol.11, p.1073). Although, largely through their own efforts, women have achieved considerable improvement in their situation in recent times in an increasing number of societies, the discrimination against them has persisted to a greater or lesser extent in virtually every society. Why has that occurred? Why do women continue to suffer restrictions or discrimination in most fields of activities, even in the so-called "developed" countries when numerous studies have conclusively shown that countries benefit economically from their greater participation? Why does such discrimination persist despite the proven economic advantages societies would derive by eradicating it?

The conclusions of a 1999 report of the *Conseil d'Analyse Economique* (France) demonstrate that women are an engine of economic growth. The report makes a correlation between the level of unemployment in certain European countries and the percentage of women in those countries who remain economically inactive. Thus

Denmark, with an unemployment rate of 4.6% that year, had 74.2% of its adult female population in economically active life, while Spain, with 18.2% unemployed had only 45.6% of its adult female population in active economic life. The report concluded that countries desiring to stimulate economic growth should promote a greater participation of women in the work force and reduce the inequalities they suffer, through government measures that would help them reconcile the demands of family life with those of the workplace. A reduction of the glaring inequalities that exist between the sexes to the detriment of women almost everywhere in the developing world would have a positive economic and social impact. The World Bank declared, in respect of Africa for example, that “*Educating girls may have the highest payoff for poverty reduction, because it raises the economic productivity of women and leads to healthier, better-nourished, and better-educated children.*” (Ismail Serageldin & June Taboroff (eds), Culture and Development in Africa, p.137, 1994). In that last respect, there must surely be a causal connection between Sierra Leone's designation as the world's least developed country, in UNDP's last Human Development Report, and the fact that two-thirds of the country's female population are illiterate and, also, that it has the world's highest maternal mortality rates – eloquent testimony to the severity of the discrimination suffered by women in Sierra Leone.

Although several countries in the North have begun to take heed of the conclusions of such studies and have consequently increased the percentage of women in executive positions, one finds that the situation, even in the public service, falls far short of gender equality. A report issued by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) in November 2008, (Human Capital: Diversity in the Federal SES and Processes for Selecting New Executives) revealed that the representation of women in the Senior Executive Service increased from 23.2% to 29.1% between 2000 and 2007. It was a substantial increase *in percentage terms* but one that still left a yawning gap between the sexes *in quantitative terms*.

The reason for the stubborn persistence of such gender inequality appears to be due more to the irrational than the rational. It seems to lie in conceptions, preconceptions, misconceptions, and prejudices that are rooted in culture, history, religion, and tradition but which continue to have a tenacious life because they are firmly planted in the collective unconscious. The current situation of women in the communications media is a revealing example of the type and nature of the problems women still encounter in the workplace, and the huge challenge they face in attempting to overcome them. The gender inequality reflected in the media has a special significance, particularly in the case of television because of the subliminal effect that images on the screen can have on public perceptions and prejudices, which can either be reinforced or undermined by what audiences see and hear.

In an article entitled Half the Population, A Fifth of the News, which was published by the Inter Press Service

on 15 February 2006, a spokesperson for the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), a NGO that promotes communication for social change, commented: *"What we see in news subjects is that whilst women make up 52 percent of the world's population, they make up only 21 percent of news subjects."* The good news in the article is the steady increase in the number of news stories reported by women between 2000 and 2005 – from 31% to 37%. Those findings were based on a survey of some 13,000 news items which appeared on a single day (Feb. 16, 2005), in the 76 countries surveyed.

The survey revealed a significant difference between the print and the radio and television media in the number of women reporting the news. Only 29 percent of the women behind the news in print are women, appreciably below the average of 37 percent for the media as a whole. Discrimination between the sexes appeared in the subjects allocated to reporters. The survey showed that women are more likely to be found at "the soft end" of the news spectrum - celebrity stories, social and legal issues - but they are much less present in the reporting of politics and economics news, which not only make up the bulk of the news agenda but are also perceived as being more important.

In television reporting, there also appears to be gender discrimination on such non-substantive details as age and appearance. The survey revealed that the number of women below the age of 35 in television is greater than that of men but, past that age, many more men report the news than women, from which the WACC spokesperson concluded that appearance and age are a criteria for women journalists but not for men. A surprising bit of data, revealed by the survey, was that although there was a steady increase in the number of female reporters over the five-year survey period, 2000 to 2005, the number of women featured as subjects of the news remained more or less the same. Although the WAAC did not suggest it, that result may mean that the "soft" subjects reported by women lost out to the "hard" subjects reported by men when editorial decisions were made on what to print or broadcast. An important lesson to be drawn from the survey is that increasing the proportion of women in a given field of activity does not necessarily lead to a *qualitative* improvement in their situation, even when hierarchical status is not a particularly relevant factor. The first survey of the Global Media Monitoring Project was conducted in 1995, with subsequent surveys in 2000 and 2005. Besides finding little improvement in the representation of women as news subjects, the surveys also showed that the pattern of gender discrimination in the media can be similar in countries as dissimilar as Britain and Zimbabwe.

The Greek chorus, comprising between 15 and 50 individuals, played an important role in classical Greek drama. It offered commentary about, and underlined, main themes in the play, and expressed to the audience what the main characters could not say, such as their hopes, fears, anxieties, or secrets. In Euripides' play, Medea, the chorus chanted; *"The race of women shall have honour. No longer will men tell disreputable tales*

about them." The chorus (or rather Euripides) was mistaken in its (his) optimism. Men had told disreputable tales about women long before Euripides, and they continued to do so long afterwards. Indeed, they have never stopped doing so. Although it now rarely occurs in mixed company in Western countries, such "tales" have remained the standard fare of male locker rooms and, in a more refined manner, of Gentlemen's clubs, many of whose members consider those clubs their sole refuge from women. "*Cherchez la femme*" ("Look hard enough and you will find that a woman is the cause of the problem") is one of the male slogans traditionally associated with such "disreputable tales." Even if a woman might be the innocent cause of an incident that brings misfortune, in men's minds, she would inevitably be associated with that misfortune in some unflattering way.

Whether Helen of Troy, the wife of the Spartan king, Menelaus, was the innocent cause or not of the ten-year long Trojan War between Greeks and Trojans (that is to say, whether she eloped with, or was abducted by Paris, the Trojan prince, according to which version of that epic tale one wants to believe), the root cause of the age-old hostility between West and East has been attributed to that war and, consequently, to Helen. The tale of Helen of Troy has become a metaphor for the problems women can supposedly cause in life. Helen has been cast as the archetype, emblematic *femme fatale* whose beauty, wiles, and charm can make men capable of doing the most foolish or crazy things, like fighting over them.

In his Renaissance play, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, Christopher Marlowe, the English poet and playwright, has Faustus declaim:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships □

And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?.....

I will be Paris and for love of thee, □

Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked

And I will combat with weak Menelaus

And wear thy colors on my plumed crest; □

Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel

And then return to Helen for a kiss.

Oh, thou art fairer than the evening air □

Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars; □

Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter...

The idea of the *femme fatale* is as old as the oldest myths. In Greek mythology, Zeus created the first mortal woman, not as a companion for newly created man as God is supposed to have done with Eve, but rather as a punishment for him. He decided to create the first woman so that she would bring misery and unhappiness to

mankind. Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus had made Zeus very angry by giving mortal man the secret of fire. Although Zeus was very angry with the brothers for going against his wishes, he couldn't punish them directly because they had played a pivotal role in the war against the Titans. Instead, he devised a way to seek revenge on the brothers but in a manner that would look like gratitude. Zeus commanded Hephaestus to create a woman by taking water and earth and moulding a woman from them. To ensure that she was created perfectly, Zeus had Hephaestus use Aphrodite as a model. When Hephaestus had completed his task, the Four Winds breathed life into her and, once she was alive, Zeus asked the other gods to each bring a gift for the newly created woman.

Zeus gave her the gift of being foolish, idle, and mischievous. Hermes' gift was cunning and pettiness, and the gift she received from Hephaestus was lying and deceit – three gifts that are quite instructive of the opinion which men (whether "divine" or human) have traditionally held about women's "true" nature. Venus gave her beauty, Mercury gave her persuasion, Zeus' wife, Hera, gave her the gift of curiosity, and Epimetheus gave her a box that she was forbidden to open. The gods then named her Pandora, which means "All-Gifted." Hera's gift was the fatal one (which could be seen as a metaphor for the belief held by some that a woman's worst enemy is other women), because it was Pandora's curiosity that wreaked havoc on mankind. Every day Pandora wondered what was in the box. She knew she mustn't open it but she was extremely curious and could not bear not to know its contents. As soon as she pulled the cover off, all of the evil and mistrust in it flew out into the world.

Pre-Christian classical writers, like many modern ones, exhibited the near-universal male habit of considering "bad" women to be typical of their sex and "good" (faithful) women as exceptions to the general view of their evil nature. Men, on the other hand, were always treated by those same writers as *individuals*, not to be judged as an undifferentiated group. Some men were bad, others were good. Folklore is full of examples of such discriminatory "literary" treatment of women. In tales told of people endowed with the gift of magical power. witches, were depicted as irremediably evil while wizards, like Merlin, were kind, good, old men. Fairy tales were a potent medium for perpetuating men's notion that women had an essentially evil nature as, for example, Cinderella's bad stepmother; the stepmother of Hansel and Gretel who cruelly abandoned them in the woods; and the old witch in the candy house who took in the two children so that she could roast them in the oven. It was a woman, Medusa, who turned men into stone. In Greek mythology, the Fates (*Moirae*) were three women who controlled the metaphorical thread of life of every mortal from birth to death. The *Moirae*, who were usually described as cold, remorseless, and unfeeling, and depicted as old crones or hags, were supposed to appear three nights after a child's birth to determine the course of its life. Their power was such that even the gods feared them. In William Congreve's Restoration play, The Mourning Bride (1697), Perez, a male

character, makes a comment on women that has since become part of the conventional wisdom: "*Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned / Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.*" And in his play, Melanippe, Euripides has one of his characters declare: "*There is no worse evil than a bad woman; and nothing has ever been produced better than a good one.*" The Chinese saying that "*one woman can cause more havoc than a thousand armed men*" is in much the same vein.

Whenever, in spite of the tremendous odds stacked against them, women have succeeded in gaining some masculine respect for an achievement of theirs, or obtaining even the smallest improvement in their situation, men have always found a way to cancel or block it. Women thus get shafted and short shrifted all the time, something that occurs in *every age and in every culture*. The *châtelaines* of 12th century France and England enjoyed a great deal of freedom when their menfolk were away fighting Muslims in the Crusades, during which time they proved perfectly capable of managing the châteaux and the family domain, all on their own. But *châtelaines* were relegated to their role of helpless, dependent women when their menfolk returned from the Crusades, their amply demonstrated capacity for independent decision and action denied or ignored by their menfolk.

Women played a significant role in the Paris Commune (1871), when some 10,000 of them "manned" the barricades, fighting and dying beside their menfolk. But that did not help improve their status in French society. It was only in 1938 that French law gave women legal capacity, and French women were the second but last in Europe (Swiss women have that dubious honour) to obtain the right to vote, in 1945 - 27 and 25 years, respectively, after women in Britain and the US were enfranchised. French women did not gain the legal right to work, or to open a bank account without their husbands' consent, until 1965 and they became the owners of their possessions in the eyes of the law only in 1966. Frantz Fanon expressed the conviction that Algerian women, having won the esteem of their menfolk for the key role they were playing in the war of liberation from French rule, would escape their traditional social and legal infantile status after the war was won (*L'An V de la Révolution Algérienne, 1959*). Gillo Pontecorvo's film, The Battle of Algiers (1966), depicted the urban guerrilla war, which the Algerian liberation waged against the French occupation, and the successful tactics it employed against the French, so accurately and realistically that, in the summer of 2004, when the United States found itself bogged down by similar urban guerrilla warfare in Iraq, the Pentagon arranged a screening of the film for a group of senior military and civilian strategists, as a training exercise in Arab guerrilla tactics. The Pentagon labelled the viewing "*How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas.*"

One of the features highlighted in Pontecorvo's film was the important contribution Algerian women had made to the liberation struggle. They regularly put their own lives on the line by smuggling bombs and arms out of

the Casbah, access and entry to which were closely controlled by the French military, for the planned insurgency in Algiers. On occasions, they even planted the bombs themselves. But like the chorus of Medea, Fanon was mistaken in his optimism. At the end of the war, when Algeria had won formal recognition of their independence from France, Algerian women found that the sterling contribution they had made during the war of liberation did not translate into a better status for them. Algerian women are still fighting for freedom from social constraints and for a complete reform of the family law (the Algerian government claims that reform is an ongoing process) which originally gave them the legal status of an infant – a victory women in Morocco and Tunisia have already won. Algeria has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) but the country has maintained several reservations to CEDAW, including those pertaining to article 15 on equality in legal and civil matters, and article 16 on equality of rights within the family.

A similar fate awaited Kurdish women in Iraq who had participated fully in the underground resistance against Saddam Hussein's regime. But after the Kurds won their autonomy, there was a regression in the position of Kurdish women in the society. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese women kept the Ho Chi Minh trail in an operational state during the Vietnamese war (which the Vietnamese, quite justifiably, call "the *American* war"). The North Vietnam military command had placed the trail's repair and maintenance under their exclusive responsibility. Vietnamese women did such a magnificent job repairing, during the night, what the Americans destroyed in their daylight bombing raids that they won the admiration of the American Military High Command. Their sterling contribution to the liberation struggle did not prevent Vietnamese women from being relegated to their traditional dependent role when the war was won. In the three liberation struggles mentioned, the fruits of victory were enjoyed by men, and by them only.

Claude Lévy-Strauss, the doyen of French anthropologists, observed that "*Marriage is the exchange of women between groups, and women were the first currency in the history of mankind.*" Treated by men as mere objects of exchange from the very origins of human society, women have been exchanged in dynastic marriage between warring tribes and countries, in order to seal a peace; between business and landed dynasties to seal an economic partnership; and between impecunious aristocratic families and wealthy non-aristocratic ones in order to rebuild the fortunes of the former and to improve the social status of the latter. Many aristocratic English families succeeded in rebuilding their fortunes, and saving their family castles, in that very manner. In the year 1895 alone, nine American heiresses married titled British men, including a duke, an earl and three barons. The sole Duke among those aristocrats was Winston Churchill's cousin, the 4th Duke of Marlborough, and the American heiress he married was Consuelo Vanderbilt. Churchill, who nearly inherited the Ducal title himself, was born in Blenheim Castle, the ancestral home of the Malboroughs. As is the case with any property

transaction, in such "arranged" marriages, an estimate was usually made of the value of the "goods" to be exchanged or the benefits to be obtained by the respective parties. Anthropologists have explained bride price in market terms, as payment made in exchange for the bride's family's loss of her labour and fertility within her kin group. In some population groups, dowry is paid to the groom, or used by the bride to help establish the new household. The custom of dowry still exists in Europe in one form or another.

Every society has, at one time or another, established the exchange of women as a custom governed by clearly defined rules or enshrined it in its laws. The Hammurabi Code, which dates back to the 18th century B.C, is the most ancient set of laws yet discovered by modern archaeologists. Enacted by Hammurabi, King of Babylon, the Code mentions bride price, in various laws, as an established custom for the practice of which certain rules were prescribed, examples of which are: *"A man who paid the bride price but looked for another bride would not get a refund, but he would if the father of the bride refused the match;" "If a wife died without sons, her father was entitled to the return of her dowry, minus the value of the bride price."* The ancient Greeks also practiced bride price. In the *Odyssey*, Homer, recounts how Ulysses, who had gone off to fight in the Trojan War, was presumed dead by all except his wife, Penelope, because there had been no news of him for many years, and how their son, Telemachus, complained about the suitors wooing Penelope: *"They are too craven to go to the house of her father Icarus, that he may himself set the bride-price for his daughter, and bestow her on whom he will, even on him who finds favour in his sight."*

The practice of the bride price is also found in the Bible: *"If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins." (Exodus 22: 16-17).* *"If a man find a damsel that is a virgin, which is not betrothed, and lay hold on her, and lie with her, and they be found; then the man that lay with her shall give unto the damsel's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife; because he hath humbled her, he may not put her away all his days." (Deuteronomy 22: 28-29).* Several pastoral groups in Africa pay the bride price in cattle.

Like many objects of value, women in early human society were not only exchanged but also stolen. They were considered legitimate trophies of war by the victors, looted, or rather abducted, and taken away as well-deserved war booty. The abduction of women also seems to have occurred in another context. As is the case with many immemorial customs and practices, the origins of the "Honeymoon" are shrouded in mystery. There are several theories about its origin, one of the more credible of which is that the word honeymoon is etymologically derived from the Norse word *"hjunottsmanathr"* which means "in hiding". It describes the

exogamic custom of abducting a bride from another group. It was imperative that the abductor and husband to be take his bride into hiding for a period of time. Once the bride's family ceased looking for the groom and laid down their battle axes, the bridegroom could return home with his bride.

Pre-Christian attitudes and practices towards women

From the earliest of times until well into the Neolithic Age, women were thought to possess creative powers – the gift of life. Ancient man assumed that women created life on their own and, in the belief that they were favoured by the deities, men would ask them to intercede with the latter on their behalf. As a result, the very first intermediaries between man and the gods were women. Thus, it was priestesses rather than priests who mediated between the gods and man, a role that ensured women a privileged status in the earliest human societies. The Neolithic period brought the domestication of plants and animals, which led to the first Agricultural Revolution - the transition from hunting and gathering communities to human settlements based on animal husbandry and the cultivation of domesticated plants. When, from their own observations over a prolonged period of time, men came to realize that male animals played an essential role in procreation it dawned on them that they, themselves, also played a similar role in the creation of human life. Consequently, women lost their special status, marking the beginning of their fall from grace and their subsequent descent to their present inferior status. Although women continued to play a limited number of roles in man's relations with the deities – Vestal Virgins, Temple prostitutes, the personification of Oracles etc. – it was men (seers, then priests, rabbis, pastors, shamans, holy men etc.) who subsequently became the sole intermediaries between man and God. Over the following thousands of years until well into the second half of the 20th century, men have jealously guarded that all-important function as an exclusive male preserve, not refraining from the use of sophistry and casuistry to justify their continued exclusion of women and their claim of a divinely conferred right to decide on the major questions concerning human existence.

The Roman philosopher, Seneca (4 BC-65 AD), classified women as innately inferior to men, and Plutarch (Parallel Lives) described Cicero's wife, Terentia, as hard-hearted, ambitious, and mean - a harsh judgement that has been echoed by many modern historians who have perpetuated the image of a domineering, unlikeable woman. But that very unflattering image is not supported by evidence from Cicero's published Letters to his wife, in which he expressed much love for her. Moreover, Cicero appears to have trusted his wife to manage his estate throughout his 35-year long marriage until almost to the very end of his marriage when he divorced Terentia in order to marry a young woman, Publilia – perhaps the principal occupational hazard that wives have faced from time immemorial. Plutarch's apparently false portrait of Terentia, no doubt based on a prejudiced source, and its uncritical acceptance and perpetuation by subsequent (male) historians,

illustrates one of the major problems women have had to face from the most ancient times – the fact that, most of recorded history has been written by men who have been unable, or unwilling, to filter out of their work their personal prejudices towards women. In his epic poem, *Aeneid* (Book 4), Virgil expressed a typical male opinion of women, one that has endured up to the present time: *"Woman is always fickle and changeable."* Such widely prevalent masculine prejudices towards women in ancient times were not restricted to the West. They appear to have been universal. In his *Analects*, Confucius was unable to conceal the extent to which women exasperated him: *"Treat them in a friendly manner, and they become impertinent: keep them at a distance, and they take offence."*

Charles Carlston has summed up, perfectly, the Greco-Roman world's view of women: *"On balance....the picture drawn is a grim one. Women....are basically ineducable and empty-headed; vengeful, dangerous, and responsible for men's sins; mendacious, treacherous, and unreliable; fickle; valuable only through their relationships with men; incapable of moderation or spontaneous goodness; at their best in the dark; interested only in sex--unless they are with their husbands, in which case (apparently) they would rather talk. In short, women are one and all 'a set of vultures,' the 'most beastly' of all the beasts on land or sea, and marriage is at best a necessary evil."* (*Proverbs, Maxims, and the Historical Jesus, Journal of Biblical Literature*, 99 (1980), pp.95-96).

There appears to be only one exception to the gender discrimination which characterized societies in ancient times. The Etruscans, who inhabited parts of Italy in constant rivalry with the Ancient Romans during the millennium preceding the Christian era, apparently displayed little or no discrimination towards their women. The freedom and privileged status women enjoyed in Etruscan society, which were unknown in the other Mediterranean civilizations, horrified Romans and Greeks. Unlike Greek and Roman wives of the period, who were excluded from their husbands' banquets at which the only women allowed to be present were prostitutes, Etruscan wives were always present at Etruscan banquets, seated in affectionate proximity beside their husbands, a practice that attracted strong criticism from Greeks and Romans. At public games, also, Etruscan women were to be found seated side by side with their husbands instead of being relegated to a special enclosure (a kind of "henhouse") as were Roman wives. Etruscan tomb murals picture women and men together, apparently enjoying relations of equality.

Looking at some of the scenes depicted in Etruscan murals, one is particularly struck by the kind of relationship (what the French would call *complicité*) that appeared to exist between Etruscan men and their wives. There is no term in English that corresponds to *"complicité"*, which is perhaps no coincidence since words are not normally coined unless the language concerned has a use for them. A very approximate

translation of "*complicité*", in that context, is "an empathetic relationship". Explaining the healthy relations that exist between the two sexes in France, Elizabeth Badinter, a prominent feminist writer, observed that, unlike the Nordic and English-speaking countries, a certain "empathy" (she used the word *complicité*) has existed for many centuries between women and men in France which, she considers, to have helped minimize men's innate fear of women. The German writer, Eva Figes, has commented on that perceived male fear of women: "*There is a hidden fear that somehow, if they are only given a chance, women will suddenly do as they have been done by.*"

Ever since Aristotle first formulated the concept, gender polarity has been the subject of much debate and controversy, particularly with the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. Influential anthropologists, like Margaret Meade and Claude Levi-Strauss, were convinced that there were no societies which did not divide their world into men's and women's spheres. That opinion, widely held at the time, appears to have lost ground in recent years with the growing belief that there is nothing natural or inevitable about gender polarity; that malehood is not a genetic force; and that it is a fragile creation of the learning process. Margaret Meade's observation that "*Many societies have educated their male children on the simple device of teaching them not to be women*" suggests that she, herself, felt that the "universality" of gender polarity was due to nurture rather than nature.

The Semai, a tribal group who inhabit the central mountains of the Malay Peninsular, are perhaps the only people in modern times who are known not to practice gender discrimination. There is little differentiation between the roles of men and women among the Semai. They wear the same clothes, perform the same tasks, share the same social arenas, and cohabit on an egalitarian basis. Moreover, there are no separate ideals or aspirations for women and men. Semai men do not compete with one another nor do they display feelings of sexual jealousy or aggression - all behavioural traits which contribute greatly to the problematic relations that exist between the sexes in other societies.

The Semai possess two primary moral values or ideals - non-violence and sharing. Disputes in the Semai community are resolved by holding a *bcaraa*, or public assembly, at the headman's house which may last for days. It involves a thorough discussion of the causes, motivations, and resolution of the dispute by the disputing parties and the whole community. It ends with the headman admonishing either or both of the disputants not to repeat their behavior, which is seen as dangerous to the community. That fundamental value/virtue of non-violence necessarily applies to relations between the sexes. The Semai's other primary moral value, sharing, is based principally on the sharing of food. Semai women share the food they harvest immediately after they return to the village from their fields and Semai men similarly share the fruits of their

hunting, fishing, or gathering. Such sharing experiences have a symbolic importance – they are public expressions of mutual dependence which help cement close ties within the group. Their values of sharing, the absence of interpersonal rivalry and competition, their non-aggressive relationships, and their community solidarity, all combine to give the Semai a strong sense of security. That sense of security, in turn, makes it unnecessary for individuals to prove themselves in their relationships with others.

The Semai might have a natural disposition for non-violence but its nurturing is not left to chance. It is reinforced by the learning process. From the age of two until four, a Semai child discovers that crying and violent temper tantrums bring no reaction from parents or anyone else in the village. Children do not witness aggressive conduct between adults nor are they, themselves, subjected to parental aggression. They are never punished or forced to do things they don't want to do. If a parent asks a child to do something and the child says that he "*bood*" ("does not want to") the matter is dropped. Children are also taught to be beware of their own aggressive impulses. When Semai children fight among themselves a parent will normally take the angry child, or children, back to the house, an act that reinforces the social taboo against violence and anger. Like the adults, Semai children do not play competitive games. All their games are non-competitive, which prevents any feelings of rivalry from being implanted in their young minds. Semai society might have valuable lessons for people in Western societies who despair of bringing an end to gender discrimination. Judging from the Semai experience, male insecurity, for example, might well prove to be one of the principal factors, if not the principal one, in the persistence of male discrimination against females.

Misogyny in Early and Medieval Christianity

Misogyny is present in all cultures, but it seems to have assumed its most virulent form in Western culture, in which the Christian church and Christian doctrine appear to have played no small a part. Misogyny is present in all religions, particularly the three organized monotheistic religions whose patriarchal character and structure have been indelibly stamped on the societies where they predominate. The Old Testament, written before religion became "organized", had laid a firm basis for such misogyny, and the age-old male treatment of women as inferior creatures, via the story in Genesis of God creating woman from Adam's rib. That creation myth made woman, in effect, a mere *derivative* of man. The centrally-important place accorded to Patriarchs in the Old Testament did nothing to mitigate such male attitudes.

Despite the universal scope of male discrimination against women, it appears to be only in Western cultures that anti-female discrimination has been accompanied by feelings of hate, fear, and a general denunciation of women. R. Howard Bloch considers such denunciation of women to be a cultural constant in the West:

"Reaching back to the Old Testament and to ancient Greece and extending through classical Hellenic, judaic, and Roman traditions all the way to the fifteenth century, it dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, and discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part of biological, gynecological, and medical knowledge; folklore and philosophy. The discourse of misogyny runs like a vein throughout medieval literature." (Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love, 1991, p.7).

That regrettable peculiarity of Western culture has been traced to Christian mythology, particularly to the alleged role of Eve, the "temptress" in the Fall of Man, and the visceral misogyny of the early Church Fathers, both of which have had an indelible influence on the psychological make-up of Western man. The Bible states: *"He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD"* (**Deuteronomy 23:1**). That biblical authority was reinforced by a canon of the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), which decreed: *"If anyone in sound health has castrated himself, it behoves that such a one, if enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted."*

By deduction, therefore, it could not have been possible for a castrated man to go to Heaven, and that is allegedly the reason why Origen, the 4th century Church Father and monastic, was never made a saint. He had castrated himself in order to be free from temptations of the flesh. Castration was considered such a terrible fate to befall a man that it was deemed a capital offense in ancient Jewish law for a woman to cut off a man's penis. It is very significant that the Jewish "state" not only considered it necessary to enact such a law but, also, that the law designated women as the exclusive perpetrators of such acts. It does suggest that such crimes actually occurred in Jewish society and that they occurred often enough to warrant the adoption of a specific law, with a punishment sufficiently severe to be an effective deterrent. In many societies, women have traditionally been seen as a castrating force, and man's castration phobia is allegedly one of the principal reasons for Western man's innate fear of women - of their capacity to render him impotent either literally or figuratively - and their power to cause him grievous harm or bring about his downfall. The Biblical tale of Samson and Delilah, which recounts how Delilah brought about Samson's downfall by persuading him to cut off his hair, thereby sapping his strength and making him vulnerable to his enemies, has been interpreted as a metaphor for man's castration phobia.

The widely-publicised 1993 American drama of John and Lorena Bobbitt and the tremendous amount of attention it received both nation-wide and world-wide (a Newsweek poll revealed that 60% of the U.S. population followed the 1994 trial) could only have crystallized and validated such primordial male fears. It

was revealed in the trial that Lorena Bobbitt had been repeatedly subjected to physical abuse by her husband. She cracked one night in June, 1993 when her husband came home intoxicated and allegedly forced his wife to have sex. Traumatized by the experience, Lorena got out of bed in a state of shock and went to the kitchen for a drink of water. Picking up an eight-inch carving knife which she noticed lying on the counter, Lorena returned to the bedroom and cut off almost half of her sleeping husband's penis. Leaving her husband bleeding on the bed, Lorena got into the family car and drove off without realizing that she was still clutching the severed half of her husband's penis in her hand. She lowered the car window and threw it out of the moving car into a field. When Lorena recovered her senses, she telephoned the emergency services to report what she had done.

Following a painstaking search, the severed half of John Bobbitt's penis was found in the field where it had been thrown, and it was successfully sewn back in a nine-hour operation. When she was arrested on the charge of causing grievous bodily harm, Lorena Bobbitt gave the police the following reason for her act: *"He always have [sic] [an] orgasm and he doesn't wait for me to have [an] orgasm. He's selfish."* Lorena was treated as a feminist hero in America. Participating a few months later in a BBC television programme which was titillatingly titled, The Penis Unsheathed, Camille Paglia, the American feminist, opened the discussion with a typically provocative salvo: *"The penis – should we keep it or should we cut it off and throw it away? Either way, the penis is shaping up to be the central metaphor of the gender crisis of the nineties. In a sense, Lorena Bobbitt has committed the ultimate revolutionary act of contemporary feminism."* The reason Lorena gave the police for cutting off her husband's penis and Camille Paglia's approving description of that "revolutionary act" would have done nothing to soothe the anxieties of American and Western men who, consciously or subconsciously, suffer from a castration phobia. It would also have done nothing to allay their alleged primordial fear of women.

It has been argued, with some justification, that the image of Eve as a temptress who induced Adam to sin in the Old Testament fable, is of central importance to the Christian faith because, in the Christian conception, man's salvation for having committed that original sin was the primary reason for Christ's mission on Earth. He was sent to redeem mankind. The angel of the Lord told Joseph, the husband of Mary: *"She shall give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* **(Matthew (1:21))**. Every woman was believed to have inherited, from Eve, both her guilt and her guile which served to render her untrustworthy, morally inferior, and wicked. Menstruation, pregnancy, and childbearing were deemed a just punishment for woman's eternal guilt. In certain parts of the Old Testament, women are condemned in the most absolute terms: *"I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner*

she will ensnare....while I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand but not one upright woman among them all" (Ecclesiasticus 7:26-28). "No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman.....Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die" (Ecclesiasticus 25:19,24).

That very disparaging Old Testament view of women as the cause of Man's downfall was reflected in the New Testament, in an admonition by Paul: *"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I don't permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (I Timothy 2:11-14).* That well entrenched Biblical tradition was perpetuated, from the very first centuries of the Christian era, by the Church Fathers and Christian theologians (St Augustine, St Ambrose, St. Jerome, Tertullian, Eusebius, Origen etc.) who further expounded and elaborated on that derogatory view of women. They considered women to be the nemesis of man and humankind; they demonized both women and sex, both being intricably associated; and designated women and their sexuality as presenting the greatest danger to man. Nancy Astor, the first female member of Britain's parliament had the following sarcastic comment for that age-old male penchant: *"In passing, also, I would like to say that the first time Adam had a chance, he laid the blame on a woman."* Despite the inferior position women have traditionally occupied in virtually all societies and cultures, the demonization of women and their sexuality does not appear to have existed either in the pre-Christian West or in most non-Western cultures before Christianity began to exercise a world-wide influence, at least not to the same extent,

In the first of two pamphlets on the subject, Tertullian (160 – 220 AD), a Christian theologian who is perhaps best known for having coined the term "Trinity" and for being the first to elaborate that fundamental Christian concept, declared: *"Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil's gateway: You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree: You are the first deserter of the divine law: You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert even the Son of God had to die" (On Female Dress).*

In a letter to a friend, St. Augustine (AD 386-396), refused to break with that now hallowed male tradition of condemning women for the mere fact of being a woman: *"What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman.....I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children."* (Letter 243, 10). St. Augustine was also at a loss to understand why God created woman: *"If it was good company and conversation that Adam needed, it*

would have been much better arranged to have two men together as friends." (The Literal Meaning of Genesis). It is not surprising, therefore, that such inflammatory statements would incite male violence against women. Hypatia, a female Neoplatonist philosopher and one of the leading mathematicians of the time, was murdered in 415 A.D by a Christian mob who was allegedly acting under the orders of St. Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria. Male violence towards women has continued to characterize relations between men and women, right up to the present time. It is difficult to imagine that such violence, which occurs at all social levels, is unconnected with the virulent condemnation of women which existed for almost two millennia in the Christian tradition. Buried deep in the male subconscious, there might well be a residual feeling that such violence has Divine sanction – a punishment for woman's inherited sin of having caused the Fall of Man, a sin that can never be expiated. There is ample evidence from the scriptures (pre-Christ and post-Christ) and the declarations of the Church Fathers to explain such a buried sentiment, if it does indeed exist.

The early Church Fathers thus rejected the healthy, open attitude Jesus had always shown women, the warm welcome he gave them, and his demonstrated esteem and love for them. Karen Armstrong observed that, for the early Church Fathers, *"woman's only function was the child-bearing which passed the contagion of Original Sin to the next generation, like a venereal disease.....Western Christianity never fully recovered from this neurotic misogyny, which can still be seen in the unbalanced reaction to the very notion of the ordination of women. While Eastern women shared the burden of inferiority carried by all women of the Oikumene at this time, their sisters in the West carried the additional stigma of a loathsome and sinful sexuality which caused them to be ostracised in hatred and fear."* (A History of God - From Abraham to the Present: The 4000-Year Quest for God", pp.145-146, 1993).

Meryl James-Sebro and other feminists have demonstrated how the monotheistic religions have manipulated religious scriptures and texts to support a patriarchy that was neither Divinely ordered or intended. Feminists point to the embedded control mechanisms, particularly in Christian and Islamic religious systems, which serve to maintain male power by controlling women's economic independence and sexuality, a control that is rooted in violence -- physical, emotional, psychological, economic, and religious. *"It is the irony of all ironies that while values of love, harmony and concern for the oppressed and less privileged underpin all religious philosophies, organized religion represents the most rigid constraints against women's freedom and equality."* (Meryl James-Sebro, Faith, Gender Equality and Development: Excavating a Hidden and Powerful Nexus, 2006, article). She has underlined the contrast between those discriminatory attitudes towards women, which are so characteristic of organized religion, and the attitude of Jesus Christ who broke through social, cultural, and religious traditions so as to empower women.

The early Church Fathers did more than manipulate Biblical texts to justify their visceral misogyny. They actually falsified them. In the eyes of the Church Fathers, virginity became the quintessential Christian value, not only because the sexual act was the sin that had caused the Fall of Man but it was also the means by which original sin continued to be transmitted to future generations. A glance at the titles of a selection of their writings indicates the extent of the Church Fathers' obsession with virginity and chastity: St. Augustine's "On Holy Virginity"; Tertullian's "On the Veiling of Virgins" and "On Exhortation to Chastity"; St. Ambrose's "Concerning Virgins"; St. Cyprian's "The Dress of Virgins"; St John Chrysostom's "On Virginity, Against Remarriage"; Bishop Methodius' "Treatise on Chastity"; and St Gregory of Nyassa's "On Virginity". Howard Bloch comments revealingly on that obsession: *"For the early church fathers, virginity always carries a reference to Adam and Eve before the Fall, a time when, it was assumed, because of the absence of sexuality the sexes were equal....Indeed, much of the imagery surrounding virginity focuses upon the notion of a bodily integrity that rhetorically holds out to woman willing to renounce her sexuality the promise of escaping the consequences of the Fall."* (1991, pp.97-98).

The view that woman was the one who sowed discord between man and God lies at the core of the biblical narrative of the Fall. The Christian theory that equality between the sexes existed before the Fall, and that woman was deprived of her equality with man as divine punishment for Eve's sexuality, which had caused Adam to sin, led to the logical conclusion that woman could recover her lost equality by renouncing either her sexuality (remaining a virgin) or her femininity (becoming a man). According to the Gospel of St Thomas, Jesus Christ himself evoked that latter alternative. The Gospel of St Thomas, which dates from between the second and third century A.D., was preserved in a Coptic papyrus manuscript for almost 2,000 years until its discovery in 1945, in Nag Hammadi, an Egyptian town not far from Luxor. Unlike the four canonical gospels, it is not a narrative account of the life of Jesus but rather a collection of short dialogues and sayings attributed to him. No major Christian group accepts the Gospel of St Thomas as canonical or authoritative, but whether it is apocryphal or not it does reflect the misogyny that prevailed in contemporary Christianity: *"Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' "* (Thomas: 114). The Gospel of St. John not only makes explicit the assumption that is implicit in the negative views about women, which appear in the Christian texts and in the statements of Churchmen of the time, but it also seems to take those views to their logical conclusion.

Since Jesus could not have been born with the taint of original sin, his conception had to be "immaculate". Mary had to remain a virgin since she could not be similarly tainted, which meant that her relations with Joseph had to be chaste. But that ecclesiastical construct presented certain problems, because each of the four Gospels mentioned the existence of Jesus' other brothers and sisters in unambiguous terms. *"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3).* Moreover, at least one of the Gospels made it clear that Jesus had been conceived in the same way as all other human beings. *"And [Joseph] knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called His name JESUS." (Matthew 1:25).*

As early as the second century A.D., the church began a progressive falsification of the Biblical texts. In the second century, it explained away the reference in the Gospels to the brothers and sisters of Jesus by claiming that they were his half-brothers and half-sisters from Joseph's previous marriage. That prior marriage appears to have been invented since it does not appear to be mentioned in any other contemporary source. St Jerome suggested, in the fourth century, that the word "brother" used in the four Gospels could also mean "cousin" because Hebrew had no word for "cousin" and the Greek word for brother (*adelphos*) has such a broad meaning that it could also be used for "cousin". Thus, Jesus' putative "half-brothers" and "half-sisters" were redesignated "cousins" by the Church on the basis of that specious argument. The Christian Church had, once again, changed the identities of Jesus' full brothers and sisters to make them consistent with Church doctrine, their previously allocated identities having remained valid for only two centuries. It was a good try. That linguistic sleight of hand foreshadowed the Catholic Church's subsequent well-earned reputation for casuistry. It was not the last time that the Greek language was utilized by the Catholic church to support doctrine which challenged reality. There is also no Biblical evidence that Christ glorified celibacy for its greater godliness. The Apostles had wives who accompanied them on their missions and some of them even preached, a practice that gradually fell into abeyance as the male church establishment solidified its dominance.

A corollary of the total abhorrence of sex displayed in Christian teaching and tradition is the condemnation of married couples indulging in sexual relations for reasons of pleasure only, a condemnation for which the authority came from St Augustine, himself. Writing In 423, Augustine declared: *"The union, then, of male and female for the purpose of procreation is the natural good of marriage. But he makes a bad use of this good who uses it bestially, so that his intention is on the gratification of lust, intend of the desire of offspring."* (On Marriage and Concupiscence, Book I, Ch. 5). That condemnation of sex for pleasure was a basic tenet of all Christian churches until 1930 when the Anglican church, breaking ranks with the Catholic church and its sister Protestant churches, announced at that year's Lambeth Conference that contraception

would be permitted in certain circumstances. The Anglican church lifted all the restrictions it had placed on the use of contraception not long afterwards and the other Protestant denominations subsequently followed suit. That decision recognized, in effect, that a married couple could legitimately engage in sexual relations purely for the sake of pleasure. The Catholic Church remains the only Christian church which continues to adamantly prohibit contraception and, also, to condemn sexual relations within a marriage if engaged in for pleasure, not procreation.

That implacable ecclesiastical injunction, which has been so stubbornly imposed on the Christian faithful by the Catholic church for almost two millennia, illustrates the utter absurdity of a celibate clergy arrogating the right to establish rules and regulations in matters relating to sex. Unless the real objective of the church has been to ensure that the Catholic faithful live in a permanent state of guilt so that they would be more malleable and more beholden to it - the only authority that can give them absolution for their sins and thus pave their path to salvation. Such a ruling betrays an abysmal ignorance of the physical makeup of normal human beings and their (in)capacity for sexual abstinence while co-habiting legitimately with someone of the opposite sex, whom they love and to whom they are physically attracted.

Celibacy for priests was another theological construct which had no Biblical authority. The first attempt to impose it dated from 4th century. In 305, the Ecumenical Council of Elvira ruled: *"It is decided that marriage be altogether prohibited to bishops, priests, and deacons, or to all clerics placed in the ministry, and that they keep away from their wives and not beget children; whoever does this, shall be deprived of the honor of the clerical office "* (Canon 33). And later in the century, the Council of Carthage reiterated that decision in 390: *"It is fitting that the holy bishops and priests of God as well as the Levites, i.e. those who are in the service of the divine sacraments, observe perfect continence, so that they may obtain in all simplicity what they are asking from God; what the Apostles taught and what antiquity itself observed, let us also endeavour to keep...It pleases us all that bishop, priest and deacon, guardians of purity, abstain from conjugal intercourse with their wives, so that those who serve at the altar may keep a perfect chastity."* (Canon 3). However, It was not until the 11th or 12th centuries that the Church succeeded in making those ecclesiastical rulings a reality for a reluctant clergy. Even then, it appears that the reason why the question of priestly celibacy had become so urgent at that time had less to do with spirituality and more to do with preserving church property. By the Late Middle Ages, the Church had become the wealthiest institution and the largest landowner in Europe. The Church establishment was very concerned to protect and preserve Church property from possible legal claims by the wives of priests. Protection of wealth and property is a long-held male concern, one that has been met in recent decades by pre-nuptial contracts.

Throughout the succeeding centuries, Christian theologians continued relentlessly to condemn women because of their sex. The fact that several of them were subsequently elevated to sainthood made their views even more influential with the Christian faithful. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) considered women to be mutilated males - defective creatures: *"As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence."* (*Summa Theologica*). Even Martin Luther could see no other benefit in a woman than bringing into the world as many children as possible, even at the cost of the mother's life: *"If they become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth, that's why they are there."* Martin Luther could so callously envisage women dying in childbirth because of the doctrine, enunciated by St. Augustine, that unbaptised babies would be condemned to eternal hellfire. Because of that Christian doctrine, the lives of countless women have been sacrificed in childbirth over the centuries, whenever doctors in Catholic countries had to choose between saving the life of the baby or that of the mother. That discriminatory practice still exists, to a greater or lesser extent, in countries where the Catholic religion continues to exercise an inordinate influence.

In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII published the Papal Bull, *Summa Desiderantes*, which marked the beginning of the great witch craze that raged sporadically throughout Europe in what historians call the Early Modern Period (1480-1700). Modern scholars have estimated the number of people executed for witchcraft at between 40,000 and 100,000, of whom the vast majority (80%-85%) were women. Biblical authority was cited for the capital punishment inflicted on reputed witches: *"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live (Exodus 22:18); "A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them." (Leviticus 20:27).*

Those accused of witchcraft were cruelly tortured until they confessed to such astonishing crimes, as having sexual intercourse with demons and flying hundreds of miles through the air to take part in orgies at which Satan was worshipped. In Medieval Christian demonology, Satan was often represented as a large animal with huge genitals and a gargantuan sexual appetite. That satanic representation, the forced "confessions" of the accused, and the pointed questioning of the religious Inquisitors who extracted them, are eloquent testimony to the deep sexual fears and anxieties of the Catholic clergy and their associated fear and loathing of women, which appear to have left in Western man an abiding suspicion, fear, and mistrust of them. Camille Paglia might well have hit the nail on the head in identifying what she considered to be the root cause of the very troubled nature of male-female relations in Western societies, from the very beginning of the Christian era: *"It is not male hatred of women but male fear of women that is the great universal."*

Among Europeans who were not of the clergy, the innate male fear of women and their alleged sexual power gave rise to measures to control that power. It is perhaps no coincidence that the chastity belt, which dates from the Late Medieval period, appears to have been developed in Italy, the home of the Catholic church, as the name it was known by - *The Florentine Girdle* - suggests.

In 1486, Innocent VIII appointed two Dominican inquisitors, whose allotted task was to investigate the roots of witchcraft and to make proposals for eradicating it. On the completion of their investigations, they produced a document entitled *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches' Hammer) which contained a complete set of instructions on the interrogation and prosecution of witches. The *Malleus Maleficarum* had enormous success throughout Europe. With fourteen editions published by 1520 and another sixteen between then and 1669, it became the primary guidebook on the subject of witchcraft for inquisitors and judges. Subsequent writers used it as the basis for their own works, thus ensuring widespread public knowledge of the document and its contents. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Dominican inquisitors explained why most witches were women. They concluded, from their investigations, that witches could be equally male or female. However, women possess the capacity to be either better or worse than men but, in practice, they tend to be worse than men, which was why it is nearly always women who become "*the channels for the devil's intrusion in human matters*".

The Dominican inquisitors supported their conclusions concerning the sinister nature of women by textual citations from the Bible and the writings of the early Christian Fathers who were all misogynists, which ensured that their judgement (or rather one-sided condemnation) of women was a foregone conclusion. The *Malleus Maleficarum* became the justification for the systematic practice of the Catholic church in singling out women to be tried for witchcraft while leaving men relatively free from such accusations. The Dominican authors protested that they were not misogynists. Nonetheless, their entire work reflected a pathological hatred of women on account of the dangerous power they allegedly exercised over men, as evidenced by their lengthy commentaries on the ability of witches to deprive men of their sexual powers – a recurrence of the castration theme. The document was yet another illustration of Christianity's fixation with sex from the very beginning, a fixation that is still very apparent in Western society.

In Homily 13 on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, St. John Chrysotom preached: "*Hearken about the women of old; they were great characters, great women and admirable; such were Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Deborah, and Hannah; and such there were also in the days of Christ. Yet did they in no case outstrip the men, but occupied the second rank. But now it is the very contrary; women outstrip and eclipse us. How contemptible! What a shame is this! We hold the place of the head, and are surpassed by the body. We are ordained to rule*

over them." Although that particular reference was to women outstripping men in virtue, not vice, it fitted in perfectly with the prevailing church doctrine that women had the capacity to be both better and worse than men but that they were almost invariably worse. Chrysotom's reference to man being the head and woman the body also accorded with the church's teaching that woman's quintessential quality pertained to her body – her sexuality – which, being integral to the nature of woman, guided her desires and her actions. A man, on the other hand, was by nature guided by his head, that is to say, his mind.

From the early Middle Ages, up the 15th century, female witches were invariably portrayed as horrible, ugly, old, gnarled creatures. It was only from Renaissance period did witches begin to be depicted with normal, even attractive, features. That custom, which reflected the very unflattering image women had, from the beginning of the Christian era right up to the end of the Middle Ages, was contrasted starkly with the way sorceresses were depicted in the pre-Christian era. In Greek mythology, sorceresses were often (though not always) endowed with a beauty and a seductiveness which made it very difficult for men to resist their temptations.

Women in Islam

As in Christianity, women have suffered gender discrimination under Islam almost from the very beginning. Muslim women have also suffered from a degraded image, although not quite to the same extent as their Christian sisters. That degraded image was reflected in the comments of no less a figure than the Prophet himself. On his return from the miraculous mystical adventure which had taken him from Mecca to Jerusalem and, from there, to his celestial journey, Mohammed allegedly declared that "*Hell is predominantly peopled by women.*" Commenting on the Islamic narrative which depicts Heaven as a man's paradise, with numerous women readily available to satisfy his sexual needs, Slimane Zéghidor asks rhetorically, and with undisguised sarcasm, whether devout female Muslims would be secluded in the Divine Garden as they were on Earth. She noted that, according to the Koran, only four women had found sufficient grace in the eyes of the Divine Creator to merit a place in Heaven – the wife of Pharaoh (without further precision); Mary, the mother of Jesus; Khadidja, Mohammed's first wife; and Fatima, their daughter. (*Le Voile et La Bannière*, p.31, 1990).

Ancestral male fears concerning the dangerous nature of female sexual power which have characterized Christian/Western society also appears to exist in Muslim society, though not to the same extent or in the same manner. According to Zéghidor, in the thinking of a Muslim man, a woman's vagina could easily become the eye of a hurricane. She argues that Muslim fundamentalists make use of a modern allegory to liken sexual desire to nuclear energy, and a woman to a nuclear power station, invested with all the danger and

potential destructiveness of nuclear fission. *"As dense and as invisible as nuclear radiation, erotic desire could just as easily illuminate a man's life as destroy it. Prevent the escape of dangerous radioactivity, avert that of the conjugal home, establish the nuclear power station near a supply of water to cool the reactors, copulate near the bath in order to immediately perform elaborate purification rites after the sexual act, that is the only manner in which sex could be enjoyed without incurring any risk from nuclear fission, or from the flame of sexual desire."* (Zéghidor, p.32).

Islam presented a stark contrast to Christianity in its attitude to sex. Despite traditional Muslim male wariness towards the female sex, Islam has always manifested a refreshingly healthy attitude towards sexual relations. Medieval Islamic sources reveal both a delight in, and a frankness about, matters of sex which would be shocking to most devout Christians. In the important Arabic genre of *Adab* (an Islāmic concept of polite behaviour which became a literary genre in the 9th century), both women and men extol the joys of sex. The soaring flights of Arab love poetry and the highly metaphorical celebrations of sexuality in Persian romances reveal, in unambiguous terms, the physical yearnings of both sexes and their absolute delight in consummation.

Unlike Christianity, neither Islam or Judaism condemns, or has ever condemned, sexual relations within marriage which are indulged in purely for pleasure. Indeed, both religions hold that a husband has a marital duty to satisfy his wife physically. That fundamental difference in the attitudes which all Christian churches had manifested for more than 2,000 years on the subject of sex and pleasure, and those manifested by Islam and Judaism, inevitably had a major, if not a determining, influence on gender relationships in the respective cultures and societies.

Both Christian and Islamic culture have traditionally underlined the potency, and the disturbing and potentially disruptive effect of female sexuality, but each has had a different response to it. Islam traditionally employed the veil, and a more or less strict isolation of women, to contain the passions which exposure to female sexuality through the close proximity of the sexes might unleash in men. Christian culture, on the other hand, has tended to control male exposure to female sexuality by erecting a barrier of distrust, fear, and hatred of women by demonizing them; by blaming them for their own sexuality as if it were a sin of which they were guilty and for which they should do eternal penance; and by indirectly accusing them of being the root cause of the ills which afflicted the world following the Fall of Man, as a consequence of their sexuality. Such Christian demonization of women led to almost 2,000 years of Western misogyny, punctuated by periodic outbursts of barbarity towards them, as exemplified by the Late Medieval and Early Modern witch-hunts in Europe. Christian opinion in the West generally considers incomprehensible, uncivilized, and even barbaric

the Islamic response to the perceived “problem” of female sexuality. Muslims may well harbour a similar view of the Western Christian response to that same "problem".

Islam is commonly depicted in the West as an inherently misogynistic religion but, unlike early Christianity, women were regarded positively in early Islam. Moreover, unlike the Old Testament, the Koran contained no condemnation of women, who were portrayed positively both in the Holy Book and in the *Hadith* (the teachings and sayings of the Prophet). Furthermore, women were placed on exactly the same footing as men, as the following verses in the Koran attest: *"And their Lord answered them: Truly I will never cause to be lost the work of any of you, Be you a male or female, you are members one of another"* (**Quran 3:195**); *"Whoever works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof, and whoever works a righteous deed - whether man or woman - and is a believer- such will enter the Garden of bliss"* (**Quran 40:40**); *"The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil, they observe regular prayers, practise regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them will Allah pour His Mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise"* (**Quran 9:71**).

Couples are described as "partners" and garments for each other in the Koran: *"They are a sort of garment for you and you are a sort of garment for them"* (**Quran 2:188**). Male and female Muslims "are protectors of one another" and men are explicitly warned against treating women harshly: *"O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness."* (**Quran:4:19**). Not only is a Muslim man forbidden to mistreat his wife (or wives), but he is also warned against harbouring any dislike for *"this good creation of Allah"*: *"If you take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good."* (**Quran: 4:19**). Even in the case of divorce, the husband is enjoined to exercise the utmost caution in the manner in which he treats his former spouse(s): *"When ye divorce women, and they fulfill the term of their (iddah). Either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage."* (**Quran:2:231**). *Iddah* is the length of time that a wife must wait, following her divorce or the death of her husband, before she could re-marry so as to ensure that she is not pregnant. During that waiting period, her maintenance (*nafka iddah*) is provided for by her ex-husband, or his family in the case of his death.

In the *Hadith*, the Prophet Mohammed expressly forbade violence against women and preached against all forms of abuse of power: *"Let no Muslim man entertain any bad feeling against a Muslim woman. If he should dislike one quality in her, he will find another that is pleasing."* The Prophet warned that both men and women would be held accountable by God for the way they in which treated those in their care or under their authority. It is thus quite clear that the Koran viewed women no differently from men. They are both God's

creatures whose duty is to worship their Lord, do righteous deeds, and avoid evil and they will both be assessed accordingly. In the Koran, woman is never described as the devil's gateway nor is she considered deceitful by nature. Most importantly, the Koran never states that man is made in God's image; all men and all women are his creatures. According to the Koran also, a woman's role on earth is not limited to making children. She is required to do the same good deeds as any man.

The Koran accorded women legal rights of inheritance and divorce for which women in most Western countries had to await the 19th century. Muslim women played a considerable role in public life during the life of the Prophet, contributing *inter alia* to the election of the third caliph. (Hassan al-Turabi, The Islamic State, in John L. Esposito (ed), Voices of Resurgent Islam, 1983). Women in early Islam were thus able to express their views openly and be heard. The Koran also emphasized the absolute moral and spiritual equality of the sexes and quite frequently addressed women explicitly, something that rarely occurs in either the Jewish or the Christian scriptures. (Armstrong, 1993). The equality with which women in Islam were treated is said to have lasted for some 300 years following the *Hegira* - the emigration of the Prophet and his followers to Medina in 622, which is often described as the Golden Age of Islam. Subsequently, women came to be treated in a discriminatory manner in Islam. Many current Islamic restrictions on women and their activities, such as seclusion and wearing the veil are not a requirement in the Koran. They are “man-made” and therefore do not enjoy “divine” authority. When the renowned twelfth-century mystic, Rûzbehân of Shiraz saw a woman arrive at the mosque accompanied by her veiled daughter, he asked her mother “*Why do you hide God’s beauty with a veil?*” (Armstrong, p.184).

During the Prophet's lifetime, every Muslim woman who went to live in Medina could obtain full citizenship and, most importantly, acquire the status of *Sahabi* (Companion of the Prophet), just like any Muslim man. *Sahabi* is someone who saw the Prophet, believed in him, and remained a Muslim until death. The existence of the feminine form of *Sahabi* – *Sahabiyat* – is convincing evidence that gender equality existed in that respect. Muslim women also enjoyed the right to enter the councils of the *Umma* (the community of Muslims) and to participate in the management of military and political affairs of the community. Because all Muslims, regardless of their sex or social status, enjoyed equality and dignity during the lifetime of the Prophet, women fled aristocratic tribal Mecca by the thousands to settle in Medina during his lifetime. (Fatima Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam, 1991).

The current servile status of Muslim women in virtually all Muslim societies is therefore sanctioned neither by the Koran or by early Islamic thought and tradition. A return to the original Islamic tradition would certainly help to free women from many of the social and religious constraints which are now imposed on them in all

Islamic countries, thereby restoring a large measure of equality to them. Islamic tradition therefore contains a possible solution to the problem of gender inequality in contemporary Islam. It is likely that a fundamental acceptable change in the current status of Muslim women would come from that quarter rather than from increased Westernization of Islamic societies which, from recent and current experience, appears to have had exactly the opposite effect.

Romantic Love and the Positive medieval Islamic influence on the image of women in the West

European knights were dazzled by Arab civilisation when they first came into contact with it during the Crusades. That encounter proved to be a momentous event in the struggle of Western women, in pre-modern times, to be treated with respect and dignity by their menfolk. To their great amazement, the crusaders discovered a tradition of courtly love and an idolization of the female subjects of such love in the Arab world. They were absolutely fascinated by a tradition, inspired by Persian literature, which held women in great esteem, making them the subject of undying male affection and devotion which was often expressed in extravagantly complimentary terms. That encounter provided the stimulus for important social changes that occurred in Europe from the 12th century onwards, following the return to Europe of the first set of crusaders. Perhaps the most important of those changes was a gradual but fundamental transformation of male attitudes towards women, the earliest manifestation of which was the development of the chivalrous/romantic literary genre in 12th century Europe. It was the sudden male consciousness, stimulated by that encounter with Arab civilisation, that women had desirable feminine qualities which created the conditions that permitted tales of courtly love and chivalrous acts to flourish in Late Medieval Europe.

The French writer, Chrétien de Troyes (d.1185), is the emblematic figure of the European romantic/chivalrous genre which glorified courtly love, a genre to which he made the most significant contribution. Considered the greatest writer of Arthurian romances, his work constitutes the most complete expression, in European literature, of the ideals of chivalry and courtly love. All the canons of the European romantic/chivalrous genre were already present in the Perso-Arab literary genre which glorified traditions of courtly love: *Chastity*, the non-consummation of the lover's passion; *fidelity* on the part of the aspirant lover, which was expected to be life-long; and the *absolute subjection* of the lover to the wishes of the beloved. The Ring of the Dove, a medieval treatise on the art and practice of Arab courtly love, which was written in or around 1022 by Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi (994-1064), an Arab poet-philosopher from Cordoba, was translated into several European languages within a century or two after it appeared in Arabic. That work was perhaps the single most important influence on the birth of Europe's literary romantic genre. The Arab influence on the European chivalrous genre is illustrated by the fact that, for the first fifty years or so, the chivalrous hero in European

tales was no other than Saladdin, whose chivalry on the battlefield was praised in those early European romances, as well as in contemporary Christian accounts of the battles he fought against Christians.

After providing advice, in the preceding chapter, on how male suitors should disclose their feelings to the object of their love, and how they could woo her by means of verbal allusion only, Ibn Hazm continues his discussion on the art and practice of courtly love: "*Either they will quote a verse of poetry, or despatch an allegory, or rhyme a riddle, or propose an enigma, or use heightened language.....*" Ibn Hazm then proceeds to instruct his male readers on how courtship is conducted only with the eyes. The following is an excerpt from chapter 8, Of Hinting With The Eyes, which is typical of the work's style, subtlety, and the quality of relationship that is expected to be established between the suitor and the lady of his love. In that highly stylized, intricate game of courtship, it is quite clear that it is the woman who holds the trumps, that the male suitor accepts that situation willingly, and that he is dependent on her every hint, mood, or expression:

"AFTER verbal allusion, when once the lover's advance has been accepted and an accord established, the next following step consists in hinting with the glances of the eyes. Glances play an honourable part in this phase, and achieve remarkable results. By means of a glance the lover can be dismissed, admitted, promised, threatened, upbraided, cheered, commanded, forbidden; a glance will lash the ignoble, and give warning of the presence of spies; a glance may convey laughter and sorrow, ask a question and make a response, refuse and give-in short, each, one of these various moods and intentions has its own particular kind of glance, which cannot be precisely realized except by ocular demonstration. Only a small fraction of the entire repertory is capable of being sketched out and described, and I will therefore attempt to describe here no more than the most elementary of these forms of expression."

"To make a signal with the corner of the eye is to forbid the lover something; to droop the eye is an indication of consent; to prolong the gaze is a sign of suffering and distress; to break off the gaze is a mark of relief; to make signs of closing the eyes is an indicated threat. To turn the pupil of the eye in a certain direction and then to turn it back swiftly, calls attention to the presence of a person so indicated. A clandestine signal with the corner of both eyes is a question; to turn the pupil rapidly from the middle of the eye to the interior angle is a demonstration of refusal; to flutter the pupils of both eyes this way and that is a general prohibition. The rest of these signals can only be understood by actually seeing them demonstrated." (The Ring of the Dove, chapter 8).

Vis and Ramin, the first major work in the Persian literary romantic genre, is one of the world's great love stories. It was written in verse by the Persian poet, Fakhraddin Gorgani, between 1050 and 1055 and, like the

earlier Arab treatise on courtly love, "Ring of the Dove", it had a great influence on the later European romantic genre. Vis and Ramin is most probably the source for Tristan and Isolde, the medieval romance about the tragic love-triangle which first appeared in Europe about a century later. There are distinct resemblances between the two plots. From the time it was written in the 12th century, Tristan and Isolde had an enormous impact on Western art and literature, beginning with the Arthurian romance of Lancelot and Guinevere. Richard Wagner explored the limits of the traditional tonal system in his opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, which is seen as pointing the way to atonality in the 20th century. Some music historians date the beginning of modern classical music to the so-called Tristan chord which was considered innovative and daring when the opera was first performed. Thus, the 11th century Persian romance of Vis and Ramin continued to reverberate in the European artistic imagination, right down to modern times.

It is the smell on the letter of love and yearning that makes Ramin realize he cannot live without Vis:

*"But no not musk and roses filled the air,
The heady scent of Vis herself was there....
Why should I turn away from your sweet hair?
Where could I find the musk that I find there?"*

It is particularly noteworthy that much of the poem speaks from the woman's point of view, something that would have been utterly unimaginable in the literature of contemporary Europe where women were deprived of their voice, having long been silenced by the Church. In Gorgani's love poem, the nurse, whose role is not unlike that of her counterpart in Romeo and Juliet, explains the delights of love to Vis, delights that are more sensual than courtly:

*"God made us so that nothing's lovelier than
What we as women feel when with a man,
And you don't know how vehemently sweet
The pleasure is when men and women meet;
If you make love just once, I know that then
You won't hold back from doing so again."*

Vis is very open in expressing her feelings to Ramin, urging that they both rejoice in each other:

*"Choose me, and no one else, within your heart
As I choose you, and may we never part:
Rejoice in me as I rejoice in you,
Remember all our love, as I shall do."*

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1048-1122), the Persian poet-mathematician, is also a lyrical hymn to romantic love:

*Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness were Paradise enow.*

Like Vis and Ramin, the Rubaiyat valorizes the female object of that love in a manner that European literature and culture had not known since the romantic Latin poets, Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius (1st century B.C.), and was not to know again until the influence of Muslim Arab-Persian traditions of courtly love came to be felt. All three of the works cited above portrayed the female as an equal partner in a love relationship. She was not submissive, her consent could not be taken for granted and she had to be wooed sincerely, ardently, and for a long period of time before she could be convinced that her suitor was worthy of her and her love. The Arab or Persian Muslim lady was far from being the dehumanized, vilified, demonized creature into which the Church had transformed her Christian sister – someone reduced to being a mere device for procreation, an act in which a man would engage to his great peril because of the risk of falling victim to the power of woman's sexuality and the destructive use to which her supposedly innately evil character might put it.

Women played a key role in the rise of courtly love in France. The two key women in that respect were Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne. They both actively encouraged the troubadours and writers to promote courtly love in their songs and their tales, giving them their royal patronage. Marie de Champagne was Chrétien de Troyes' patron, three of whose tales formed the foundation on which the literary genre was built – *Le Chevalier de la Charrette: Lancelot* (circa 1180), *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *Le Compte du Graal or Perceval*. The three-volume treatise, *L'Amour Courtois*, of Andreas Capellanus, Troyes' contemporary, was written at Marie's behest. Other prominent French noble women also played an important role. They include Emenjart de Narbonne and Marguerite de Flandres, the sister of Philippe d'Alsace, Count of Flanders. The stunning achievement of those extraordinary women was that they succeeded in completely changing the prevailing mores in Europe within a few decades, by the patronage and encouragement they gave to writers and troubadours who extolled the merits and delights of courtly and romantic love. Historical evidence shows that courtly love was against the mores and laws of 12th-century Europe, yet by the middle of the 13th century it had become practically institutionalized throughout France, subsequently spreading to England and Germany.

The medieval Arab-Perso traditions of courtly love had an almost immediate transformative effect on the image of women in Europe. The sea change that took place in European attitudes towards women, radically transforming the way in which they were depicted in literature and art, is illustrated by a comparison of the figure of St. Modeste on the north portal of Chartres Cathedral (decorated in 1220) with the female figures on the font of Winchester Cathedral, which had been constructed between 1079 and 1093 – little more than a century before. The figure of St. Modeste is that of a tall, graceful, gentle, beautiful woman. Those on the font of Winchester Cathedral are short, squat, ugly, shrewish women with bad-tempered expressions.

It was no coincidence that Mariology (the cult of the Virgin Mary) first appeared in the 12th century. The cult's origin owed much to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the most influential churchman of the time, who wrote a treatise, Praises of the Virgin Mary, in which he developed the theory of Mary as a symbol of all things good, as an ideal of feminine beauty, and as a mediator between man and God. In that last respect Mary became implanted in the popular imagination as a co-redemptrix (with Jesus) of men. The emphasis in church teaching subsequently shifted from instilling fear of damnation in the Christian faithful to promoting hope of redemption. The great Romanesque churches of the early and middle medieval period, like the Cathedral of St Denis, in the basilica of which the kings of France were traditionally buried, had been dedicated to the saints whose relics they contained. Beginning with the Cathedral at Chartres after it was rebuilt (between 1194 and 1220) following its destruction by fire, all French cathedrals were dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Notre Dame de Paris, Notre Dame de Reims, Notre Dame d'Amiens etc).

Mary had become not only the symbol of piety and virginity but also an ideal of beauty. It was a far cry from the traditional image of women as reflected by the shrewish women on the font of Winchester cathedral. A possible clue to the stimulus for that change is the fact that the earliest representations of Mary as an object of devotion are in a distinctly Byzantine style. The returning Crusaders had been in contact with both the Arab and the Byzantine worlds, the Crusades having been undertaken with a double objective - to free the Holy Land from the Muslims and to unify the Eastern and Western Churches. In their attempt to accomplish that latter task, the Crusaders brutally sacked the city of Constantinople in 1204. However, they brought back with them changed, or rather "evolved" attitudes towards women, which were reflected in an admiration for womanly virtues of gentleness and compassion and an appreciation of female beauty – all qualities the Mariology cult attributed to Mary. In his excellent book on medieval misogyny and romantic love (1991), Howard Bloch draws parallels between medieval courtly lyrics and hymns sung in honour of the Virgin Mother.

In the 2nd quarter of the 12th century, the code of courtly love sung by troubadours of Languedoc and Aquitaine presented an ideology opposed to procreation. It was an ideology preached by the Cathars, a religious group of indistinct origin who appeared in Europe in the eleventh century and whose ideas are believed to have come from Persia by way of the Byzantine Empire. The Cathars called themselves Christians but the contemporary Catholic Church designated them "The Great Heresy", claiming that Catharism was not Christian at all. The Cathars praised man's love for a woman, regarded men and women as equals, had no doctrinal objection to contraception, and taught that sex for pleasure was better than sex for procreation. There is an unmistakable resemblance between the Cathars teachings on the pleasure of sex and the following couplet in Vis and Raman, which tends to support the view that the inspiration for their doctrines on love and the relations between men and women came from Persia, doctrines that were the exact opposite of those held by the Catholic Church:

*"If you make love just once, I know that then
You won't hold back from doing so again."*

The Cathar religion took root in the Languedoc, winning more and more adherents, so much so that by the early thirteenth century, Catharism had probably become the majority religion in the area, supported by the nobility as well as the common people. That was too much for the Church. Pope Innocent III, called a formal Crusade against the Cathars of Languedoc and, from 1208, the Church waged a war of terror against the people of Languedoc and their rulers, the Counts of Toulouse and their allies. During that crusade, an estimated 500,000 Languedoc men, women, and children were massacred. The culture of the Troubadours was lost as their noble patrons were dispossessed of their lands and reduced to wandering refugees. The crusade against the Cathars of the Languedoc has been described as one of the greatest disasters ever to befall Europe.

There is a school of thought in feminism which perceives a similarity between anti-female sentiments and the courtly love tradition. The postponement of satisfaction required by that tradition's canon, namely that the love relationship should not be consummated, is held to be another way of expressing the principle of chastity which was so integral to the Church's conception of love, and the deferral of satisfaction implicit in its teaching that an individual's reward for leading a good life is not to be had in this life but in the next. In an anthology entitled New French Feminisms, (1980), Gisèle Halimi, the founder of the French feminist group "*Choisir*" ("To Chose") has dismissed, as "Doormat-Pedestal" tactics, male actions that seek to elevate women in order to debase her. Andrea Dworkin, the American feminist, has the following comment on the romantic love tradition: *"Romantic love, in pornography as in life, is the mythic celebration of female negation. For a woman, love is defined as her willingness to submit to her own annihilation. The proof of*

love is that she is willing to be destroyed by the one whom she loves, for his sake. For the woman, love is always self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of identity, will, and bodily integrity, in order to fulfill and redeem the masculinity of her lover."

Although neither is desirable, there is little doubt that being placed on a pedestal is much preferable to being used as a doormat. There is little doubt also that being depicted as pleasant, desirable, and physically attractive is preferable to being portrayed as shrewish, unpleasant, and ill-tempered; being flattered, complimented, and wooed is preferable to being reviled, vilified, and verbally abused; that being loved, worshipped, and adored is preferable to being despised, disparaged, and denigrated; and that being praised for one's fine qualities is preferable to being demonized for one's presumed failings of character. All those changes in the way women were traditionally seen and treated were influenced by the tradition of romantic love that began to take hold in 12th century. Those developments represented a quantum leap in the situation of European women, one that occurred within the astonishingly brief time span of a few decades. If it had not been for that sudden change in their hitherto unenviable situation, the admittedly hesitant commencement of Western women's emancipation would have been postponed to a much later date. Powerful reactionary male forces in Europe were adamantly opposed to any evolution in the situation of women at that time, as the barbaric violence which the Christian Church unleashed against the Cathars chillingly demonstrated. Western women should not forget that the inspiration and the stimulus for that fundamental change in Western women's fortunes, and for the radical transformation of the negative image they had in Christian society, came from Islamic culture, not from their own.

That sudden breakthrough, which was hardly imaginable only a few decades before, arguably laid the groundwork for the remarkable influence exercised by a number of French aristocratic women on the intellectual, social, and political life of 18th and 19th-century France. They were called *salonnières* because their influence was exercised through the salons they hosted, which became a privileged venue where the French intellectual and political worlds intersected. The French salon, the women who organized them, and the influence it exercised will be discussed in Part II.

Notwithstanding the fundamental changes in male thinking, which the romantic/courtly love tradition helped bring about from the 12th century onwards, such thinking was still restricted to a very small male minority, and it apparently made no impact at all on the clergy, as the writings of Christine de Pizan (1363-1434) reveal. Pizan was a Venetian writer who established her status as a writer concerned with the position of women in society by strongly challenging misogyny and female stereotypes which were a common feature of the literature of her time. She critically challenged male writers who peddled misogynist beliefs in their

literary works. Criticizing Jehan Le Fèvre's *Lamentations de Matheolus*, a popular work of fiction that reflected medieval clerical misogyny with its loathing for women and the female body, Pizan commented: *"Just the sight of this book even though it was of no authority made me wonder how it happened that so many different men – and learned men among them – have been and are so inclined to express, both in speaking and in their treatises and writings, so many wicked things about women....I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was."* (*La Cité des Dames*, p.4 ("The Book of the City of Ladies"), published in 1405.

Discussing attitudes toward women in the 15th century, the American writer, Blanche Dow, saw little or no evolution from ancient times: *"What Aristotle has said of women for the ancient Athenian, what Ovid had said to the society of Augustan Rome, what Boccaccio expressed for the dawning of the Renaissance, and the resulting attitudes toward women were identical."* (*The Varying Attitude Toward Women in French Literature of the Fifteenth Century: the Opening Years*, p.48, 1936). Dow's comment was most certainly an exaggeration, which was no doubt a reflection of her disappointment in discovering in 15th century French literature the same hoary male chauvinism that had marked the work of male writers in Classical times. However, it did serve to underline the fact that, from the perspective of the 15th century, achieving gender equality seemed light years away for women.