



4-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Sanderson, Stephen K. (1991) "David G. Mandelbaum. *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 24 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol24/iss24/13>

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THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN IN AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

David G. Mandelbaum. *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1988.

David G. Mandelbaum's *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor* offers us a close look at some of the most important features of the relations between the sexes in a part of the world in which economic life is still built largely around a peasant agrarian mode of production: North India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Specifically, Mandelbaum is concerned to identify, describe, and account for a sociocultural complex that he labels the *purdah-izzat complex*. *Purdah* is an elaborate social practice that is centered around the veiling and seclusion of women, whereas *izzat* refers to the honor conferred upon men by virtue of their wives' and daughters' conforming to the rules of the *purdah* complex. These rules involve the radical separation of men and women into almost mutually exclusive arenas of social interaction. Men are associated with the public sphere, or that outside the domicile. They own the land and other productive resources, and only they perform public ceremonies and participate in public discussions. All important leadership roles fall to them. Women are almost totally excluded from this social arena. They are confined largely to the household and the domestic roles associated with it. Within this domicile they interact little with men, frequently withdrawing to their own private rooms when men enter. When encountering men they must veil themselves so as to show only their eyes, a practice that extends considerably beyond the range of the household itself.

The *purdah-izzat* complex is at the centerpoint of an elaborate sociocultural pattern of male domination in which women are almost totally subordinated to men. Women play little role in the public sphere, a fact that men explain by reference to women's alleged inability to cope with the demands this sphere would place upon them. In general, women are viewed as weak and vulnerable and thus as needing the protection of men. Mandelbaum correctly notes that women are, in fact, sexual property in this part of the world. Men are greatly concerned with the regulation of female sexuality, and the *purdah-izzat* complex, Mandelbaum claims, is designed to facilitate such regulation. It is after reaching puberty that a girl is expected to conform to the rules of *purdah*, and the more a man is a potential sexual partner for her, the more she is expected to veil herself when encountering him.

The extent to which *purdah* regulations actually impinge upon women varies according to a number of conditions. These regulations are notably less stringent for women of lower social classes, and educated women are much less likely to conform to them. Of greatest interest to this reviewer is Mandelbaum's observation that *purdah* is much less significant in South India. Mandelbaum offers a plausible materialist explanation for this (p. 129):

An environmental-economic reason for these differences in women's place in the south and the north is suggested by Barbara Miller. Greater

rainfall in the southern regions makes possible rice cultivation by the labor-intensive transplanting method. Women provide an important part of the total labor input in this way of growing paddy. Climatic conditions in the northwest . . . favor the growing of wheat as a staple. Women's labor is much less important in the cultivation of what than of paddy. "Work makes worth" is Miller's summary phrase and so women occupy higher status where their work is more important economically.

Elsewhere Mandelbaum notes that where the *purdah-izzat* complex is most developed women are more valued for their *reproductive* than their *productive* services—that is, they are mainly important to men as sexual property. This explains why women from higher social classes are expected to follow *purdah* regulations much more than their lower-class counterparts. In the higher classes, men have real wealth to protect and enhance, and women's reproductive services are crucial to their success.

Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor is actually little concerned with theoretical questions, being mostly a descriptive analysis of the details of the *purdah-izzat* complex. And Mandelbaum himself ends the book on a decidedly eclectic theoretical note, in spite of the materialist explanation quoted above. However, the book has great relevance to a theory of sex-role differentiation in human societies and, Mandelbaum notwithstanding, I believe that his very own data consistently favor a materialist argument. Most of what Mandelbaum describes is highly consistent with the materialist theories of sex-role differentiation developed by the anthropologists Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies (1975) and the sociologist Rae Lesser Blumberg (1984). Martin and Voorhies have mapped out their theory as a result of inspecting a great deal of ethnographic and historical data for societies at all stages of the evolutionary spectrum. They claim that sex roles should be viewed largely as adaptive consequences of particular ecological, technological, and economic arrangements.

In hunter-gatherer bands women fare better than in any other type of society. In such societies women usually play a major economic role as gatherers of wild plant foods, an activity that gives them control over important economic resources. This control, it appears, can be translated into relatively high status.

In horticultural tribes the status of women varies markedly, but it still seems to be closely linked to the material conditions that influence women's control over resources. In horticultural tribes without severe pressure against natural resources, matrilineal descent is prevalent. In these societies women tend to have fairly high status, largely because they become the focus of the entire social structure; land is owned and inherited by matrilineal kin groups, and women's productive labor is undertaken for the benefit of their own matrilineages. In those societies where severe pressure against resources is found, patrilineal descent typically develops. Under these circumstances, women's labor is performed for the benefit of their husbands' or fathers' patrilineages, and women become viewed as resources to be used for the benefit of males. Under such conditions, the status of women is relatively low.

It is in agrarian societies—those that cultivate the land very intensively, usually with the aid of plow and traction animals—that female subordination is most extreme. In these societies, women are almost always caught up in highly-developed male supremacy complexes. The highly disadvantaged condition of women that Mandelbaum has described for North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is typical of societies in which the bulk of the population makes its living from traditional agricultural methods. In agrarian societies women lose much of the productive role they had in both hunting and gathering and horticultural societies (the latter have been called, by the Danish economist Ester Boserup [1970], “female farming societies” because of the high level of involvement of women in the cultivation of crops). Men are much better suited for agrarian production, both because of their greater strength and because women are crucially needed for the production and nurturance of infants, roles that interfere in significant ways with women’s capacity to handle the demands of a cultivation system based on plows and draft animals. And when men come to monopolize economic production, this gives them a control over vital resources that they can use to gain control over the entire extradomestic sphere of social life.

Industrial societies have perpetuated a good many of the features of sex role patterns found in agrarian societies. This is attributable mainly to men’s continuing domination of production. Nonetheless, the steady evolution of industrial technology has altered numerous aspects of traditional sex roles. Increasingly sophisticated technology has permitted women to perform reliably a great many extradomestic roles. And as they have begun to do this, their status has improved quite substantially.

Blumberg’s theory is similar to Martin and Voorhies’s. Blumberg stresses that the critical factor shaping women’s status in the world’s societies is their level of economic power. Where women have much economic power, they secure a major resource that they are able to convert into relatively high status; conversely, where women’s economic power is low, their overall social status is consistently low. Blumberg stresses that the possession of economic power by women gives them substantial “life options.” These relate to such things as reproduction, sexuality, marriage, divorce, household affairs, freedom of movement, and access to education. Women in North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are obviously on the short end of the stick of economic power, and their life options are enormously curtailed by men. And they have little economic power and very limited life options because of the array of material conditions impinging upon both them and the male members of their society. This, I believe, is the theoretical context for understanding the purdah-izzat complex that David Mandelbaum has described for us.

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THE ENDOGENOUS AND THE EXOGENOUS IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Anouar Abdel-Malek. *Social Dialectics*. (2 volumes. Volume 1: *Civilizations and Social Theory*. Volume 2: *National and Revolution*). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981.

Anouar Abdel-Malek's *Social Dialectics* is a two-volume work that consists of many loosely related essays, all of which have been previously published by the author over a considerable period of time. Reading this work was a chore for many reasons. First, the essays in many cases bear only a very marginal relationship to one another. They range over such diverse topics as "The Future of Social Theory," "Orientalism in Crisis," "Joseph Needham: Encyclopedist of Civilizations," "The Army in the Nation," "Marxism and National Liberation," and "East Wind: The Historical Position of the Civilisational Project." Second, the writing style is ponderous and frequently obscure, something we have come to expect of works originally written in French (as this one was). (The following example of Abdel-Malek's frequent jargon is as good as any [volume 1, p. 156]: "In other words, the depth of the historical field is the face of the concept of time that is seen when one grasps the maintenance and the density of social dialectics in the history of human species." What this actually means I can only guess at). Third, the work is essentially a *programmatic* effort. Abdel-Malek continually tells the reader in very general terms what we should be studying and how we should be studying it, but there is precious little flesh put on these bare programmatic bones. One searches in vain for a concrete application by the author of his own guidelines. Finally, it must be said that there is not much, if anything, really new here. Even when Abdel-Malek has some interesting and valuable things to say, it is quickly recognized that these same points have been made by others, often to far greater effect.

If there is any single thread that runs through *Social Dialectics*, it seems to involve what might be called the *dialectic of the internal and the external*. Abdel-Malek insists that there are two great circles of social space. The first, which he calls *endogenous social dialectics*, consists of struggles