

Guests of the Sheik

By Elizabeth Warnock Fernea

Book report by ~~Dianna S. [redacted]~~

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Guests of the Sheik by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea is an account of her two year stay in El Nahra, a rural Iraq village. She accompanied her husband, an anthropologist working on his doctorate degree. Her reason for going to Iraq was to collect data on the customs, values and daily lives of the secluded women of El Nahra. Her husband didn't have access to this information because it wasn't proper for a woman to have conversations with a strange man.

Not being an anthropologist, she didn't have the formal training of collecting data in the field. In fact, her only preparations for the trip were brief lessons in Arabic and a description of the town from her husband. Not letting that stop her, she became part of the women's culture. This included being fully veiled in an abaya and living in a mud hut. She tried her best to learn what the women do by visiting them, listening and watching. At the end of the day she wrote down her experiences in a journal and talked them over with her husband. The book was divided into five parts, her arrival, summer, autumn, winter, and her departure. Each part contained two to eight chapters, which covered marriage, housekeeping, seasons, and religious ceremonies. Other chapters were narratives of certain women or episodes in their lives.

The town of El Nahra is divided by a canal, on one side is the tribal side where the Farneas lived and on the other is the market people's side. Upon closer examination another aspect of the town is divided, the men and women. Male and female autonomy is a constant part of the lives of El Nahra people. The daily activities

separate men and women, but men still have overall control of their wives, forcing women into a secluded life. In El Nahra a good woman has a reputation for fidelity, she is hard-working, a devoted wife and mother, a good cook and housekeeper and is an obedient companion to her husband. A virtuous woman also wears the abaya, which is a black, full bodied veil which exposes the eyes and, if wanted, the face. Many people would look at abayas as cumbersome and unnecessary, but in El Nahra it is improper for a woman to show her body to a man other than her husband. It's a symbol of submissiveness and modesty. The abaya provides a cover from comments on physical appearance, if a woman wasn't pretty, her abaya would cover her saving some well as a mask for facial emotions. Abayas are worn in public or when men are in the house.

When a girl is old enough, no exact age was given, she is married. The paternal first cousin is the preferred marriage partner, the author didn't specify if this was cross or parallel cousin. The marriage is usually arranged by, and definitely approved of by the parents. Farnea stated that one way women have control is by arranging marriages. El Nahra is patrilocal, so a mother will want a daughter in law who will help her in old age. If she is marrying off a daughter, she tries to pick a man who will be kind to her daughter and can afford a large bride price. Although the mother doesn't receive any of the money, her family reputation will benefit by marrying into a wealthy family. The bride price amount is set by the tribe. The amount, which varies according to the wealth of the groom's family, is paid by the groom's father to the bride's family. The money is given to the bride to buy household items and gold.

good point!

Gold is very important to a woman because it is sold for money to live off of in case of a divorce or the husband's death. It can also be sold to pay for her children's schooling. A woman tries to collect as much gold as she can from her husband and family because a woman with no husband or money may have to resort to doing shameful things, such as prostituting, to support herself. Such an act would make her worthless to her family and any potential husbands. On her wedding day a bride sits on a mat in her house while women visitors come in to observe her. They comment on her gown, her hair and beauty, and give her words of encouragement. In El Nahra, a physically beautiful woman has fair skin, long black hair, a large chest, large set apart eyes and she isn't fat, but not skinny either. The bride stares ahead and isn't supposed to notice anything. The men hold a feast in their main meeting house, where women aren't allowed, while being entertained by dancers and singers. The men come to the bride's house with the mullah, a spiritual leader. The bride and groom agree to marry. They enter a bridal chamber and the crowd waits outside beating their drums. The groom comes out a few minutes later to be congratulated and the women go in to observe the bloody sheets. A bride is expected to be a virgin. If she isn't the groom can demand that her relatives kill her to save his reputation and that of the women in her family. For the men, a wedding is a day of celebration. For the women, it is a happy day, but it is also one of concern for the bride. They worry if the groom will find her pretty, if he will beat her, or if she will bear him lots of sons. They worry more if the woman is moving to another village where she won't have relatives to protect her.

A good wife is expected to bear children for her husband. Sons are preferred because they are a more prestigious and economic asset to the family. A barren woman is a disgrace, they think she is being punished by Allah for something she has done. Being barren is grounds for a husband to divorce a woman. There was no mention in the book about adoption or wardship. A barren woman can pray to Allah for a child or buy magic fertility charms, other than that, nothing can be done. If her husband divorces her it is tragic because no one will marry her, even if she is a good wife in every other way. There are no doctors in El Nahra, the closest ones are far away in large cities and are too expensive. Babies are delivered in the home by a midwife. While the women like pleasing their husbands with children, they complain if they have too many children because it destroys their figure and raising a lot of kids can be a burden. Like the Kpelle women, women of El Nahra place high value in their children. A child is a reflection of how good the woman was at raising her children. They dedicate much of their time to their children, and will do almost anything for them. One woman sold all her gold to give her son money for school because the father didn't think it was important enough. Children can be an asset too. Since women are confined to their homes much of the time, children become their eyes and ears to the outside world. Women send their kids to observe any happenings or events in the town and they come back and tell their mothers about it. Children can also be messengers or sent to the market to buy goods. They also help out with chores.

The houses of El Nahra are made of mud brick. The more money a family has, the more rooms there are in the house. In the

house there is always the man's bedroom and a kitchen. There is polygamy in El Nahra, the author wasn't clear on where all the wives and children sleep. Daily household chores of the women include bringing in water from the well, sweeping the house, feeding any animals the family owns, baking barley bread and other dishes, child care and doing dishes and laundry at the canal. If the family is wealthy, there are servants to help. If all of these things aren't done to the husband's satisfaction, the wife can be beaten. Fernea had trouble winning the approval of the other women her first few months there. They thought she was a bad cook because she couldn't cook Iraqi dishes. They also thought she was lazy and anti-social because she didn't go to the canal to wash dishes and do laundry. Some women felt sorry for her and showed her how to cook so her husband wouldn't beat her and since she was far away from her mother and had no children. She learned how to cook and embroider and gradually earned the respect of the other women.

Women have to follow a number of strict social rules or they face ostracism, punishment or even death. They aren't allowed to go out at night or take trips. They can't go to the market or the men's mudhif. A mudhif is the men's meeting house. It is similar to the film "We are Mehinaku" in which the women are forbidden to go there, although in El Nahra women won't be raped if they go there, they will lose a good reputation for themselves and their husbands. Putting their husband's and children's wishes before theirs is a must. If male guests are in their homes they stay hidden from them except to serve food. They can't be in the company of people who aren't socially approved of. If a woman breaks these rules, she is

punished by her husband because it makes him look bad. A husband who has no control over his wife is not respected. Women in the community also enforce these rules, mainly through gossip and ostracism. Reputation is very important to them and they don't want their friends to ruin their reputation. They also enforce them so that they won't be beaten, fear is an effective means of social control in El Nahra

Women only socialize with children and other women. There are two ways to socialize. One is down at the canal while washing. The other is to go visiting other women during the day. Visiting is usually informal. A woman sends her child to tell the other woman she is coming. Or an invitation to visit can be sent by messenger. When someone visits routine greetings are exchanged, such as, sorry I've inconvenienced you with my presence and welcome, you're not an inconvenience. The hostess offers the woman tea which is always refused the first time, but accepted the second. Cigarettes are also offered. The women sit and gossip with each other. Permission from the husband to visit other women isn't usually needed because the husbands are away from the house most of the day. The book strongly parallels the film "Some Women of Marrakech." Both societies place a strong emphasis on female chastity, family honor, patriarchal families, and social separation of men and women.

By tradition women are supposed to be housewives. In addition to these duties they can take on a job if their husband will let them. They earn some spending cash by embroidering, dress, charm, or rug making and tattooing. More prestigious careers are being a midwife, a Mullah (spiritual leader) or a school teacher. The money is spent on food, children's schooling, bride price and gold.

Most of the tribal women are illiterate and were only sent to school for a short time, if at all. Only the young generation of girls are allowed to go to secondary school to become a teacher or principal. In earlier times it wasn't acceptable for a woman to go to school. There is still much hesitation to send a girl to secondary school because they are expensive and far away in larger cities. In the city the girls may pick up on radical political ideas, take off the veil, have sex, or become unwilling to obey a future husband. The fact that the younger girls are allowed to go to school shows that women's liberation is starting to appear in the countryside, not just in the big cities of Iraq.

Since El Nahra is Shiite Muslim they celebrate Ramadan and Muharram, two religious festivities. Ramadan is a month of fasting where no food or drink is allowed from sunrise to sunset. After fast breaking each night the women hold krayas in their homes. They are religious ceremonies commemorating the death and betrayal of the martyr Hussein. The ceremony is conducted by a Mullah who tells Hussein's story while the women cry and beat their chest. During this women can ask favors of Allah and expect them to be granted. If they are, she has to hold a kraya in her house for a specified amount of time. After the ceremony they socialize and smoke. There is a festival after Ramadan, but it is for men only. During the second holiday of Muharram the krayas are held again. There are also mourning processions and plays for Hussein. These are held at night and most women are allowed to go. Women are allowed to go on pilgrimage without their husbands. Most can only afford to go to the nearest city of Karbala. There they visit Hussein's



tomb, pray outside the mosque, watch religious parades and purify themselves through prayer.

For an American woman to spend time in Iraq with women who lead such separate lives from the men and who are fearful and obedient must have been a great shock. I found her disbelief and amusement of the way women are treated to parallel mine. The women of El Nahra viewed American women with contempt because they showed their bodies to men, ate canned food, put old people in nursing homes and lived away from extended families.

In conclusion, I felt that while her book was less dry than other ethnographies, it lack some of the completeness that they have. Since the book was about women, it left out subjects like warfare and politics that I assume only the men take part in. Yet, compared to Bledsoe's book on Kpelle women, Fernea's was lacking in background facts. I didn't feel Fernea's study was complete enough, she seemed to just write down what she saw, instead of investigating. I would have liked to have known more about how women influenced their husbands, if some women had equal say with their husband in private, examples of shamed women etc.. If she would have conducted a more in-depth study I would have a clearer idea of the women of El Nahra.