Chapter 6
Conclusion: Embattled Selves and the Dream of Liberation

The Trap of Masculinity

In his book *The Hazards of Being Male*, Herb Goldberg writes: “Cultural mythology has it that the male is in a favored position. After all, it does appear as if he has more options, more choices, more power, and greater freedom than the female. If all of this is in fact true, then he is paying an incredibly high price for being ‘top dog’ because the facts of his reality are frightening indeed.”¹ This observation is particularly applicable to the male in Arab societies, where patriarchal culture and Islamic laws “indulge” men by giving them a higher status than women and numerous privileges that are denied to women. As noted earlier, relationships within the traditional Arab family are organized hierarchically by age and gender: the young are subordinate to the old and females to males. In traditional milieus, the subordination of women is reflected in veiling, seclusion, and sexual segregation. Women are absent from public life, which is the exclusive domain of men, and confined to the private domain of the home. Muslim family law discriminates against women in matters related to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Specifically, a man is permitted to marry up to four wives at any one time but women must be monogamous; the husband has a unilateral right to repudiate his wife, but a woman’s right to divorce is severely limited; child custody laws favor the husband, who almost always receives custody of the children; and a male heir is entitled to twice the share of a female heir when dividing an inheritance.² As the provocative title of a short story by the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri declares, “Men Have All the Luck.”³ But do they?
A close examination of the male condition in Arab societies reveals that men, the apparent beneficiaries of all these privileges, are in reality paying heavy penalties for them. The institutions of polygamy and repudiation, for example, create a structural instability in the family unit and undermine marital relations. Given the prospect/threat of polygamy and repudiation, both husband and wife are less inclined to invest emotionally in each other and as a result the marital bond is weak. Traditionally, the weak marital bond is compensated by a strong mother-son relationship, a situation that produces intense rivalry, jealousy, and animosity between the son’s wife and his mother, who often interferes in her son’s marital life. The mother-son-wife triangle has adverse effects on the emotional climate in the family and on child development. The vulnerability of Arab masculinity is manifested in its inability to resolve the tensions between mother and wife, who make conflicting claims to it.4

Moreover, certain paradoxes that are embedded in the traditional code of masculinity are the underlying causes of many dark side behaviors in men. The sensitive concept of honor and the related practices of ritual murder and blood revenge are prime examples. As previously noted, while honor in its nonsexual connotation is termed sharaf, a woman’s sexual honor is called ‘ird. The sharaf of the man depends almost entirely on the ‘ird of the women in his family. This concept puts the man in a highly precarious position: he is judged not by his own actions but by someone else’s actions, and a woman’s to boot. Commenting on the absurdity of this situation, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi does not mince words: “That is the great tragedy of the patriarchal male: his status lies in irrational schizophrenic contradictions, and is vested in a being whom he has defined from the start as the enemy—woman.”5 Consequently, in traditional Arab families a girl’s virginity is a highly guarded property. To lose her virginity to anyone but her husband is the gravest sin she can commit. Correspondingly, the greatest dishonor that can befall a man results from the sexual misconduct of his daughter, sister, or cousin.6

When a girl brings dishonor on her family by losing her virginity before her marriage, it is incumbent on her paternal relatives—her father, brother, or uncle—to avenge the family honor by severely punishing her. In conservative circles, this means putting her to death. Ritual murder is considered the only way to cleanse the stain inflicted on the family honor.7 Even if a father (or brother or uncle) does not wish to kill his daughter (or sister or cousin) for losing her virginity, the pressure of public opinion may force him to do so against his will.