

# Guests of the sheik

Family



Ethnocentrism: The Cultural Differences between Western and Middle Eastern Cultures Through its ethnocentric tales and family based beliefs, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's *Guests of the Sheik* suggests that to find the true representation of Islamic culture, one must leave ethnocentrism behind. Not only will we discuss ethnocentrism and the cultural differences between Western and Middle Eastern societies, we will also take a look at the women of El Nahra and family within the differing societies. Fernea entered El Nahra naive to the culture.

However, as an innocent bystander, she became indignant because of the reference of wearing the abayah, "because she viewed the "abayah" as not being a part of her culture and did not have to wear it, "Why should I have to wear that ugly thing—it's not my custom" (1965: 5). However, through her stay in the small Iraqi village, she gained cultural insight to be passed on about not only El Nahra, but to all foreign culture. As Elizabeth entered the Sheik's village, she was viewed with a critical eye, "It seemed to me that many times the women were talking about me, and not in a particularly friendly manner" (1965: 70).

The women of El Nahra could not understand why Elizabeth was not with her entire family, and why it was just her and her husband Bob: "Where is your mother? Kulthma asked. I told her she was in America far away, and when Selma repeated this in a better accent, the women clucked in sympathy. Poor girl, they said. Poor child. To be alone without any of one's womenfolk was clearly the greatest disaster which could befall any girl" (1965: 36). The women did not recognize her American lifestyle as accurate.

This is not only ethnocentrism on the part of the El Nahran women because of their belief system that you are suppose to have your parents living with you or near you but American's do not see this as a bad thing to live far from ones parents. Conversely, Elizabeth-BJ or Beeja, as named by the village and Bob did not view the El Nahra lifestyle as particularly proper either. They were viewing each other through their own cultural lenses. However, through their constant interaction, both sides began to recognize some benefits each culture possessed.

It takes time when you are immersed in a particular community to understand the cultural ethos and eventually the community as a whole. Through Elizabeth Fernea's ethnography on Iraq's El Nahra village, we learn that all cultures have unique and equally important aspects. In El Nahra, for example, the cultural ethos is family honor. The actions of the community are based on the solid family bonds that exist throughout. However, individualism drives the majority of America. Our actions seem to be a direct result of the cultural ethos.

In this, lied much of the uncertainty between Bob, BJ and the El Nahran people. In America, we spend a great deal of the time away from home and our families and completing tasks that will further the success of the individual. Generally, Americans are willing to sacrifice a lot of their family solidity for individual success. A sacrifice of this magnitude would be unheard of in a community such as El Nahra. Their relationships, both marriage and friendship are based on their family, and no one seems to know any other lifestyle. Marriages in El Nahra were, for the large majority, predetermined.

This tradition in America would be strongly questioned and completely disregarded, based on the cultural ethos of individualism. Americans put a large emphasis on courting their own spouse. However, based on El Nahra's cultural ethos of family honor, the people trusted their family unit to make quality choices for them. Obviously, from an American perspective, a women's freedom of choice in this facet of El Nahran culture is lacking. However, viewing marriage cross-culturally, their priorities as a tribe and culture are different and we cannot view them through American eyes.

We should understand that family is the most important feature of each of their lives, and the preservation of the family line is of the utmost priority to them. In El Nahra, it may have seemed to Beeja that women have no power in their society. However, power may have multiple meanings as one travels from culture to culture. In America, a woman may view power in terms being able to obtain and maintain a stable, high-paying job on her own. We may also view a woman of no power as one without a job, simply satisfied being a common housewife. However, in El Nahra, as Beeja finds out, the women have more power as housewives.

Their power comes from their ability to please their husband, and it is known, who were the preferred wives. As a favored wife, bearing children gives the woman power in her community amongst both women and men. " A typical well-respected wife would have served and respected her husband, worked hard, kept herself beautiful for him, made him laugh, and of course borne him sons (1965: 169). They also obtain their power and respect from their capability to do what American women may consider to be menial chores.

Preparation of meals and the cleanliness of ones home are essential to how a woman is viewed in El Nahra.

When the sheik visited BJ and Bob's home, BJ experienced this concept of power first hand. To make a good impression and understand the customs better, she had her servant Mohammed helped with Sheik Hamid's feast. " Then Mohammed and I dished up the food, the chicken, the kebab, the meat dishes, the vegetables and salad and yogurt", (1965: 96). " We piled the platters, twelve of them, onto the tray. Mohammed mopped his brow, readjusted his headdress, then lifted the heavy, steaming tray to his shoulder and set out for the other room", (1965: 97).

These feasts are very imperative to the reputation of a woman in El Nahra. There are benefits to being a woman in El Nahra. Many women in American communities do not have the opportunity to experience the support and close bond between other women in their community. In America, it is hard for women to find enough time to spend with other women in the same manner as the women of El Nahra. The lifestyle is slower paced, and the importance is more on relationships instead of money and individualism, as in America. These close groups of women are a result of purdah, the veiling and seclusion of women. They say an uncovered woman is an immoral woman," Bob explained, " and the tribesmen ask why a woman should want to show herself to anyone but her husband", (1965: 6). Predictably, Americans would perceive this behavior as degrading, while El Nahran women identify with it as a part of life. El Nahran women do not view it as degrading; rather, from BJ's many interactions with the women of the community, they recognize it makes them stronger. The time they spend

together is precious. They all gather together in a seemingly jovial atmosphere.

Most American women never get to experience that kind of bonding with such a large group of women. Granted, American women some times gather for tea parties to catch up with each others lives, but the women of El Nahra are in constant daily contact, and already know each others lives inside and out. The bonds that the women make are unique outlooks of El Nahran culture that make it equally as important as any other culture in the world. El Nahran women have many unique and important aspects of culture, which contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

These aspects are unique to their village and create a positive environment for them to live. However, members of foreign cultures may disagree. At that point, people must understand that cultures can be equally as productive and beneficial no matter the means they use to achieve their particular goals. Elizabeth Fernea conducted herself as a respectful and somewhat open individual within the Iraqi community, she accepted the change of culture in which she was not accustomed and experienced the concept of Iraqi culture.

I believe Elizabeth started out with strong ethnocentric views: " Thus, although I balked at wearing an all-enveloping black abayah, I had elected to live like the women of El Nahra-in relative seclusion behind walls, not meeting or mixing with me" (1965: 5), but left with a more opened mind and respect for different cultures, especially the Middle East culture: " when I came to Selma, heavy and clumsy with the child she was carrying, she

smiled politely in a set way and then as I smiled back, her face changed and she threw her arms around me and cried aloud.

At this my own reserve broke and I found myself weeping, passing from one abayah-clad figure to another in a welter of embraces and tears”, “ they were bidding me goodbye” (1965: 331). This shows how Elizabeth started ethnocentric coming to El Nahra, but her interactions with the women of El Nahra mad her more culturally relative to the Iraqi culture of El Nahra.