

The American Female: Fact and Fantasy

REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

Although there may be some truth in writer Nora Ephron's assertion that the only significant result of feminism has been the Dutch treat, most of us would agree that women have changed and been changed by mass culture during the past 20 or so years.

Now three recent books address different aspects of such transformations. Taken together, they describe the components of women's movements from the intrapsychic to the extra-terrestrial.

Many readers, however, will find Canadian psychologist Paula J. Caplan's "Myth of Women's Masochism" terribly outdated. In this era of women astronauts, corporate officers and world leaders, who assumes any more that women are looking for pain, afraid of success and self-destructive in relationships? Mental health clinicians, for one, argues Caplan.

"For many professionals," Caplan writes, "it's as though the women's movement never happened." These professionals apparently tend to blame women for their problems and their children's problems, give more credit to the proportionately fewer men who participate in therapy and, like the general population when surveyed, tend to locate women's

problems within the individual while assuming men to be the victims of circumstances when troubled.

Caplan does make some valuable points in a clear and accessible style. That women want to suffer, argues Caplan, is about as absurd a rationalization as the frequent claim among users of rifles that "deer love to be hunted." Most women, even battered women who stay with their abusers, are looking for happiness and success, she argues. Their willingness to put up with pain and suffering should not be confused with a desire for it.

"There is nothing essentially more masochistic about a housewife running herself ragged waiting on her husband hand and foot than there is about a businessman driving himself to a heart attack to further an already solid bank account," she writes. "The only difference lies in the social value attributed to each activity."

Even what we call masochistic sexual fantasies, she believes, almost always involve being wildly desirable to one or more people, being able to trust them physically and wishing to have them make the sexual advances. Actual rape is never enjoyable to anyone. "The second element in rape fantasies is about being able to focus completely on one's own sexual enjoyment."

Women still are labeled masochistic, according to Ca-

THE MYTH OF WOMEN'S MASOCHISM

By Paula J. Caplan
E.P. Dutton, 253 pages; \$16.95

THE FEMINIZATION OF AMERICA

By Elinor Lenz and Barbara Myeroff
Jeremy P. Tarcher, 276 pages; \$15.95

WOMAN OF TOMORROW

By Kathy Keaton with Yvonne Baskin
St. Martin's, 313 pages; \$16.95

plan, because they tend to give more attention to relationships. When psychoanalysts label the progress made by women in the past decade a "defense against masochism," she suggests we rename so-called "dependent" behavior as "relational" and reinterpret women's reasons for doing things — seeing the health, strength, beauty and creativity in their motives.

The premise of "The Feminization of America" is that it is precisely this "relational" focus of women that has helped to transform American culture in a positive way. Authors Elinor Lenz and Barbara Myeroff believe the "values and behavioral style that women have developed over the centu-

ries ... are breaking through the hard-packed soil of habit and tradition in many areas of the American cultural landscape." Since women have "traditionally imposed order on the chaos of daily life," they offer "our best hope for a safer, saner and more humane world."

Cited as evidence of change elicited by the corporate presence of women and their more "affiliative propensities" is a new breed of managers being trained to "encourage common goals, employee participation and cooperation." The more humane workplace has not only made employees more happy, it has made their bosses more money, too. Clearly the most delightful suggestion made by Lenz and Myeroff is that women have made business and especially politics more efficient. The authors give much cross-cultural and historical evidence to prove that "men left to themselves are going to engage in almost endless ceremonial activity." Nowhere is it more apparent than in Washington D.C. that a greater female presence is helping to get things done. "The women in Congress work and they work like Trojans. They don't engage in nearly as much ceremony."

Unfortunately, "The Feminization of America" promises a bit more than it delivers. Its erudite and learned authors (anthropologist Myeroff is best known for her book and TV documentary about elderly Jews in Venice, California, entitled "Number Our Days"; Lenz is an educational

consultant and lecturer who once directed UCLA Extension's Western Humanities Center) introduce topics such as "Reshaping the Family" and "Feminine as a Second Language." But they go into little if any detail about how dramatically the women's movement has changed family and linguistic life. On the other hand they suggest far-reaching, positive and humanistic changes in the medical establishment that, with the possible exception of birthing and hospice centers, remains for the most part firmly entrenched in masculine ideology and practice.

All authors reviewed here would probably agree, however, that many attributes are mistakenly associated with one gender or another. Assertiveness, for example, is mentioned in all three books as a quality more descriptive of women than of men. What men do more than women is interrupt.

Omni editor Kathy Keaton would and does argue in "Woman of Tomorrow" that even genetic engineering and Star Wars technology are, if not the result of women's energies, still the answer to their problems. "We'll decide not only if and when to get pregnant, but whose eggs and sperm will be used, where fertilization will take place, whose womb the fetus will grow to birth in, what sex it will be, what defects call for abortion or correction and, eventually, what genetic improvements in intelligence, character or appearance we want to make."

Such outrageous, master-race proposals are commonplace in Keaton's book, which is as provocative as it is disturbing. The woman of tomorrow, she argues, will embrace high technology without reservation. Any concern for ethical considerations about matters as diverse as self-cloning (through "cryopreservation" a girl might grow up and through the transplant of a frozen embryo give birth to her own identical twin) to the colonization of Saturn (with its potential "ring view" resorts) she dismisses as ignorance and/or resistance to change. She relegates as analogous to "wandering tribes, waiting for lightning to give us fire" any women so backward as to have concern for natural integrity and doesn't even mention the political or economic factors inherent in her proposals.

The absurdity of Keaton's presumptuousness and narrow vision is countered somewhat by a few worthwhile

'Women offer our best hope for a saner world'

suggestions and much factual information. It's foolish, she says, to give so much meaning to gender distinctions, still dividing our children into girls and boys when "sex is a range of possibilities, a whole medical textbook of in-betweens with various combinations of chromosomes, physical appearance, behavior and internal and external organs."

For someone as enamored by science and technology as she is, Keaton's survey of women's attitudes is oddly homespun. The opinions of the women in her New York publishing house along with those of a few friends of family members in South Africa and Japan can hardly be representative of women internationally. And, although it is a well taken argument that "brute strength is not where the opportunities for the future lie," to dismiss as she does as almost irrelevant the "few primitive tribes, some Middle Eastern Countries and the Third World" where it does still matter is as elitist as her claims that "the very best you can do for your health and longevity is to achieve success and prominence and preferably a listing in Who's Who in America."

"The Myth of Women's Masochism" may be somewhat out of date and "The Feminization of America" somewhat incomplete, but "Woman of Tomorrow" is totally out of touch with some of its truly horrific implications.

Curiously, all three books mention that sports have become just about the only public arena still segregated by gender — laying the bases so to speak for a new field of literary exploration. ■

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