

An apology for the Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in Tariq Ali's *The Stone Woman*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the representation of Muslim women in Tariq Ali's novel *The Stone Woman* in which the writer gives sexual freedom to Muslim women on purpose. The present paper questions if the writer is truly representing the Muslim society, role of a Muslim woman in it and her rights or appropriating the social transgressions as appropriation for 'modernized' Islam. The textual analysis of the novel shows that the writer is toeing the line of Eurocentric approach that furthers stereotypical images of Muslim women and misrepresents their sexual life and freedom as transgressive contrary to their religion and society.

Key words: Misrepresentation of Muslim Women, sexual freedom, transgression, Islamic Feminism

Introduction

This study investigates the sexual freedom given to Muslim women so it is analyzed in term of Muslim societies and Islamic concerns. The objective of the study are to investigate Muslim women's sexual freedom as given in *The Stone Woman*, compare given freedom in Muslim societies and scrutinize approach used in this novel either it is 'Eurocentric' or 'Islam centered'. The current research paper studies if the writer is trying to set new trends to be followed in order to counter Western criticism, if the sexual freedom is the core issue for Muslim women and if the writer is ignoring

Islamic aspects of sexual freedom while dealing with Muslim Women. With the colonization and globalization, the West promoted the stereotypical images of the colonized and weak nations to an extent that after many decades of decolonization, these images are still persistent and in vogue. The Post-colonial writers invariably document their resistance against imposed Eurocentric images which Tariq Ali also in his own way tried to address. The West often criticize that the Muslim women do not have sexual freedom that Ali in *The Stone Woman* has tried to respond. In literature, the images of race, sexuality, gender, nationality and religion are not only stereotyped but also misrepresented owing to the prejudices and discriminatory rendering by the authors.

Islamic feminism: A contrastive Perspective

Since feminism is talking about the right of women, Muslim women's rights are discussed under the label of Islamic feminism. Badran's (2009) definition of Islamic feminism is a discourse and practice that is informed by the "Islamic paradigm," and it "derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (p. 242). Ahmad (2016) further elaborates that Islamic feminism has two main words "Islam" and "feminism".

Islam is not a “monolithic religion” (p. 6) in the sense that there are different sects which adhere to their variant interpretation that further increases the level of complexity like the term “feminism” that also meets diversity since it allows “multiple feminisms” that together work for rights of woman against patriarchy (p.6). To get an equal place with man, Islamic feminism tries to reinterpret the holy texts from woman friendly position in order to challenge patriarchal interpretation. Arab women writers like Assia Djebar and Fatima Mernissi have tried to recover a lost history of Muslim woman during Prophet (P.B.U.H) life time. Islamic feminism also claims for its undisputed rights like willingness in marriage, polygamy, children, right to divorce and their right to have agency to their life (Ahmad, 2016, p. 6). Islamic feminism is not an isolated practice. Ahmad (2016) divides the proponents of Islamic feminism into two different schools like Islamist feminists and secular feminists. Former believes that Islam is a complete conduct of life, not biased as it is shown by patriarchal interpretation of holy texts. Through reinterpretation of holy texts other than patriarchy centered approach, a woman can get equal place to men in society. Secular feminists believe that universal rights of human beings, modernity and advances which are in West are not suggested by Muslim woman. Haideh Moghissi (1999) holds that the issue of women’s rights are not religious in nature rather secular, cross-cultural and have universal grounds which evade specific social and religious conditions. In the Muslim societies, the secular feminists are accused of as alien, anti-Islam and corrupt school of thought stooge to the Western interests.

Historically, the Muslim feminism emerged in 1990 with the purpose to reform the issues of freedom and rights to women while remaining in the ambit of

Islam. Its purpose is reform Islam legally through gender sensitive interpretation. Muslim feminism does not discard their religion for the reformation as the West has done (Cooke, 2000; Mojab, 2001). According to Mahmood (2000), the politics of feminism does not include religion as identity maker but it just includes race, class and national difference. The West views religion as anti-individual and restrictive. She questions why faith in God is not considered as matter of choice. Menon (2008) gives example of Egyptian feminism that chooses veil as a matter of identity for the Muslim women against the Western onslaught of consumerism and commoditization of women’s body. Anees (1989) writes Western extremism has portrayed Muslim woman as an uneducated docile who spends a secluded life in the harem, and prone to the “tyranny” of polygamy and economic contingency. He says that Islam is a sex positive religion contrary to Judaism and Christianity as sexuality is debated openly and critically in Islam. Many writers and scholar wrote openly about this issue as Abdul- Wahab Bouhdiba's *Sexuality in Islam* gives refreshing view about this topic. Muslims have totally different, cultural, social, political and religious circumstances in comparison with the Westerners. Since the colonization of Asia, the West judges and compares the Eastern people according to their will and their own defined scale in which the West has the standard position and is the reference point.

The West also points out the marginalized position of Muslim women due to religion that gives superiority to a man. It criticizes Muslim women’s role in harem where they have been treated as sexual object. But the truth is that harem life has been so obscure, unobserved and invisible for outsiders that the Western eye depicted unreal and imaginative life

removed from reality. Emine Erdoğan (2016), Turkey's first lady just recently praises Ottoman 'harem' and deconstructed European orientalist's imagination as an "educational establishment that prepared women for life"(Turkey's first lady praises Ottoman harem, para 1). Here, 'harem' is like a school for women where the ruler provided the women with the opportunity to learn secrets of life and they took part in many social works. The Muslim feminists have tried to answer back the West for their distorted views on the Muslim women.

There are different approaches of Muslim feminism given by Hujjatul Islam and Ameli (2001). First is the "apologetic" feminism that is a liberal approach in which scholars and activists take apologetic reaction towards the West with their secular and liberal perspective. It is necessary to find out if its purpose is reconfiguration of Women's position. Duval (1998) argues that the West associates "sexual inequality in the middle East" with Islam (p. 46) and veil is related as the main barrier to their civilization (p. 48). Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, tried to modernize society with forceful unveiling of women in 1977 in Iran. The women were not given freedom of choice but power hierarchy imposed its ideas on people. Another approach is "reactionary or defensive" feminism that considers that the Muslim women already have equal rights and respectful position in society and in the ambit of Islam. Through Holy texts, the women can regain their place in society.

Haifa Abdul Rahman, the deputy secretary of the General Federation of Iraqi Women, notes this divisive policy of the West and claims "We see feminism in America as dividing men from women—separating women from the family. This is not good for anyone" (qtd. in Fernea, 1998, p. 323). The "holistic" approach takes

man and woman as a whole and does not talk only about females as Western feminism does which is mono-sexism and ignores and excludes the male members of society.

Misrepresentation and transgression

Misrepresentation in literature means telling something in a distorted manner that is contradictory to truth. The false and untrue facts are given consciously on purpose or sometimes because of lack of knowledge. To take an example, the colonial literature is full of misrepresentation of the colonized people as the African people are misrepresented as cannibals in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly patriarchal literature misrepresents woman to maintain men's hegemony. In Islamic context, Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* is another example of misrepresentation where not only Hadiths are misquoted but Islam is also narrowed down as an extremist religion.

Ali's novel *The Stone Woman* not only challenges the Western concept about sexually marginalized Muslim women but at the same time transgresses the boundaries of Islamic teachings on sexuality. Langman (2007) defines "transgression" with the help of Jenks's (2003) argument that it is a type of moral and criminal violation of conventional principles and rules and involves crossing over the accepted conducts set and defined social limits. These are cultural practices which define what is normal and pathological (p. 5051). Lashgari (1995) "transgression (is) violating the literary boundaries of the expected and accepted" (p. 2). Lashgari gives four types for transgression discourse as decentring, heteroglossia, dialogics and traversia. In 'decentring,' marginalized speak and try to replace the centre (p. 2). Heteroglossia is multiple voices in a discourse. It is against colonizers who give monologic dialogic

definition of truth (p. 11). The dialogics is 'polivocal' discourse that interrupts the dominant monologue (p. 3). The 'traversia' is "movement towards understanding" (p. 3). Through multiple narrations and perspectives by different narrators, transgression of boundaries occurs. She states that there are "costs of breaking cultural taboos against speaking out" (p. 1). bell hooks (1994) states that transgression is "movement against and beyond boundaries" (p. 12). She is "urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think, and rethink, so that we can create new visions" (p. 12). She (1990) states that transgression is "pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination [as a form of] oppositional political struggle" (p. 14). In hooks' reading, transgression is not moral or criminal violation but rather a form of oppositional paradigm that encourages critical thinking.

Perspective for the Holy Quran and Hadith

Before Islam, a woman was considered as disgrace and dishonor for her family. Islam gave many rights to Muslim women many centuries ago which the woman in Western society recently got like right to education, inheritance, property, freedom of earning and right to vote and recognition as an individual. Islam is the only revealed religion that does not solely blame a woman for the Fall from Eden, but it says that man and woman both have share in the sin. A woman according to the Holy Quran is not singled out for Adam's first mistake. Both Adam and Eve are declared wrong in their disobedience to God, both had to repent for their sins and were resultantly forgiven (The Noble Quran, 2:36; 7:20-24).. The Holy Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) first wife, Hazrat Khadeja (May Allah be pleased with her), was a

business woman who herself proposed the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) for marriage. Before Islam, the women were not allowed to marry according to their choice and same were the case in divorce, but Islam gave them this right. According to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry a person against their will and if a person forcefully tries to marry them, their *Nikkah*, the marriage bond, has no legal value and is annulled. "It was narrated from Ibn' Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) that a young virgin came to the Prophet (PBUH) and told him that her father had given her in marriage even though she was reluctant, and the Prophet (PBUH) gave her the choice. (Ibn Hanbal vol 2, No. 2469, p. 470). It has been narrated in a Hadith, "Abdur-RM bin Yazid Al-Ansari and Mujamma' bin Yazid Al-Ansari said that a man among them who was called Khidam arranged a marriage for his daughter, and she did not like the marriage arranged by her father. She went to the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) and told him about that, and he annulled the marriage arranged by her father. Then she married Abu Lubabah bin 'Abdul-Mundhir" (Ibn Majah, No. 1873, p. 74). It was narrated from Ibn Buraidah that his father said: "A girl came to The Prophet (PBUH) and said: 'My father married me to his brother's son, so that he may raise his status thereby.' The Prophet (PBUH) gave her the choice, and she said: 'I approve of what my father did, but I wanted women to know that their fathers have no right to do that'" (Ibn Majah Vol 3, No. 1874, p. 75).

A Muslim woman although has the right to marriage and divorce but polyandry that is to have two or more husbands at a time is not allowed. It is strictly forbidden for both men and women to have relations without marriage bond. A woman can marry another man only after divorce or after death of husband on the completion of her 'iddat' which is specific

time period after divorce or death mentioned in Quran and Hadith. In Quran, it is ordained, “And those who guard their private parts, except from their wives or those their right hands possess, for indeed, they are not to be blamed. But whoever seeks beyond that, then they are the transgressors”(The Noble Quran, 70:29-31). Islam focuses on sincerity in every sphere of life and in every relation. It was narrated that Abū Hurairah said: "The Messenger of Allah said: 'Allah does not look at your (outward) forms and your wealth, rather He looks at your hearts and your deeds'" (Sahih Muslim vol 6, No. 6543, p. 74). Islam protects women in every sphere of life. It teaches them how to avoid evils as it is a verse: “O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful” (The Noble Quran, 33:59). Wearing of veil is sacred and symbol of honour and modesty in Muslim cultures.

Islam has very clear stance on the extra-marital affair— it is one of the major sins. It is strictly forbidden and rejected deed. Allah (SWT) says, “And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way” (The Noble Quran, 17:32). Both “adultery” and “fornication” are forbidden deeds in Islam and are labelled as “zina.” Adultery is defined as an illicit sexual intercourse by a married person except with his or her spouse while fornication is an illicit sexual intercourse between those who are unmarried. Zina is one of the most deadly sins (kaba'ir) after shirk (“to invoke with Allah another deity”) and unjust killing (The Noble Quran, 25:68-70). The Qur'an says, “And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way” (The Noble Quran, 17:32). The

Prophet (PBUH) said, “No adulterer(fornicator) is a believer at the time he is committing adultery (Sahih Muslim vol 1, No. 202, p.152). Allah said in the Quran: “The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse - lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah , if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment”(The Noble Quran, 24:2). In Islam, ‘zina’ is “haram” (strictly forbidden crime) and invokes hudud, an ordained punishment, to prevent and discourage it in society. This is not just punishment but it is a set boundary that the Muslims should be aware of and not transgress. This punishment is three dimensional. It is given to the criminal in order to purify him/her and enable the individual for his/her reacceptance in society. It saves the society from the crime and for the victim it is justice.

Appropriation of transgression in *The Stone Woman*

The setting of the novel *The Stone Woman* is ‘Istanbul’ Turkey of 1899 during the reign of Ottoman Empire. It narrates the story of Iskander Pasha’s family whose father Yusuf Pasha was exiled by Sultan and sent in a house near sea. The historical background goes side by side with the stories of current family members. This story starts when Nilofer, a girl, comes with her son Orhan to meet her parents after nine years of her elopement with “ugly skinny Dmitri, Greek school inspector from Konya” (p.2). Her father Iskander Pasha forgives her “for running away” (p.3). Now he wants to see her and her son not her husband and her daughter. Her mother have been visiting her daughter but “always in secret, bringing clothes for the children and money” but, later on, she acts as an “intermediary”

between her daughter and her husband in order to restore their relation (p.11). According to the Islamic law a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man. But here, Nilofer who belongs to a well-known Muslim family conveniently transgresses this religious rule, and marries a non-Muslim. Her father shows resistance against her decision and punishes her in the form of nine years exile but in the end he forgives her. His forgiveness shows his acceptance of her act and his gradual acceptance of religious transgression. Second thing to be discussed here is that in Islam it is necessary for women to marry in the presence of her 'wali' (her male elders, father, brother or uncle). But Nilofer breaks this rule too and marries in the absence of her male family members. Her marriage without the permission of her guardian is "invalid" (Ibn Majah vol 3, No. 1879, p. 78). Despite her wrongdoings, her father's forgiveness shows an exception to the Islamic laws and reveals his orientation to the Western thought that rejects all religious, social and cultural bonds in the name of individualism. Another matter of concern in the text is the relation of a husband and wife. Islam does not allow a woman to disobey her husband if he is on right side but Nilofer's mother goes against her husband to meet her daughter and give his money without his permission.

Here is another reference where Iskander Pasha is shown to return to Istanbul with "new pieces of furniture and fabrics and paintings of naked women for the western portion of the house." The Western portion of the house symbolizes their dual life. In theory, this family is Muslim but in practice appropriated as Western and modern as his son comments on the occasion, "perhaps this time, he has become a modern" (p.10). This sentence shows that nudity is associated with modernization. Islam does not promote evil or the things which directly or

indirectly induce sin. That is the reason that the 'naked' paintings are not brought to the Muslim living areas but particularly to the Western portion of house. This nudity is not fixed with painting but it also refers to the immorality of the society.

Another character, Baron says "Your Ottoman Empire is like a drunken prostitute . . . neither knowing nor caring who will take her next" (p.24). Such humiliating words and derogatory imagery is used by a Muslim member of the society for the celebrated "Ottoman Empire" that was considered and venerated as the center of Islam in history. It is blue comedy and off-color humor. This quotation itself refers to the colonizers' justification of their colonization. In the same manner, they would talk of "virgin" East that is waiting to be ruled over. Even words like "lustful Turk" which show impure love and sensual relations are used excessively for the inhabitants of Muslim society.

"Harem" is sizzling topic for the West since it has produced extensive literature on these Muslim women who are shown living in "harem" as sexual objects that are easily available to the royalty. In this novel, the same stereotypical concept of sexual objects is used in the chapters three and four. In the chapter three, Mahmut Pasha makes Circassian, "a kitchen maid," (p.31) his mistress against his wife's will, and the latter disappears with the "unborn child" (p.32). There are rumors in the text that his first wife killed her or she has run away. Although it is mentioned later that she attempts suicide but no one knows about her suicide and everyone keep on believing that Sabiha, Mahmut's first wife, is her killer. This whole scenario invokes the West's images of Muslim men and women—mere lustful beasts. There is war like situation between the family members and especially between husband and wife. This particular incident shows that a human life, of a maid here, has no importance in the eyes of the

rich and a poor can be deprived of her life at any time which is again against Islamic injunctions. Islam does not allow unjust bloodshed but here Muslim woman is shown as blood thirsty, ready to kill on purpose.

Then there is story of Nilofer who does not like her husband anymore. She is tired of him and never wants to be with him again (p. 45). Nilofer and Selim indulge in libidinous act. Selim tells a story of princess of a Muslim Sultan that unfolds that “she could never be satisfied with one man” (p.61) and there is reference that she would pick up a man of her choice, call him, lift her veil and say “you may gorge yourself on this feast till you are sated” (p.61-62). Even after the death of Nilofer’s husband, there is no concept of ‘iddat’ but still she allows Selim to “gorge” on her body. Nilofer, one of the central female characters, stands for female sexual “freedom”. After her rebellious act of elopement, she has lewd relationship with another man which shows her as a wife cheating and dodging her husband showing no guilt conscience or any feelings of remorse. Islam has given clear directions to its believers about the extramarital status. But here the Muslim characters are not shown Islamic centered but adopt modern European approach to sexual liberty.

There is a character of Stone Woman statue shown as goddesses to whom characters visit and confess their sins and feelings. When Nilofer confesses her relations with Selim, her mother listens to her confession (p. 63). The only thing mother is concerned about is that he should not boast or mention her name in “the coffee house” (p. 66). Her daughter’s illegal, unlawful and illicit relation does not invoke any wrath.

Then her mother Sara tells her story that she wanted to marry his mother’s cousin who lives in her house but her parents reject him on the plea that their

intermarriage will cause serious damage to their children. She confesses that her lover named Suleman paints her “unclothed body” (p. 72) and has lustful relations with her. She tells Nilofer that “you were born eight and a half months later” (p. 77) while discussing “an unusually complacent smile had crossed her face when she mentioned birth” (p. 77) and she further says that “You were the proof that my parents were wrong” (p. 78). She assures her daughter Nilofer that her marriage with her father Iskander Pasha was forced out of that pregnancy (p.78). Again a Muslim woman is shown as lustful immoral character. Not just that the new generation is shown in collision with Islamic teachings but the text is full of old generation’s references to illegal, indecent, unlawful and totally delinquent and wayward behavior to Islam. Her mother’s behavior is quite odd and strange who, instead of warning and teaching her daughter lesson of modesty and chastity, is telling her about lost love and illegitimate birth. This behavior shows that there is nothing unusual in such relations. Nilofer asks her mother if Iskander Pasha knows her mother hushes her up by saying, “He never asked. I never told him. This doesn’t mean that he is ignorant” (p. 97). These things are quaint and quite imperfect description for Muslim characters. Here, a Muslim lady is shown as cheater and immoral who instead of confessing her crime and sin is covering up her illegal pregnancy with her marriage to make it look legal. If she has been really sexually independent in her choice in the society, she would not have had to take refuge in an unwanted marriage.

The behavior of Iskander Pasha is also very weird when he tells her daughter Nilofer about his love for her daughter who bears her mother’s lost lover’s “green eyes and red hair” (p. 109). What a courageous man in Muslim society he is shown who is happy with her wife’s illicit love and daughter. He is aware that Nilofer

is not his biological daughter but he accepts her as his daughter. This is strong evidence that an evil is not taken as evil in the Muslim society projected in the text. The Muslim society knows no religion and maintains no ethical codes. There is nothing like evil in this society and every bad and immoral thing is allowed in the name of modernity and freedom.

Sara's lover Suleman writes letters to her to share that he is married and has three children. Sara confesses that "the effect of his messages was to kill off all my dreams" and she stops writing letters (p.79). This shows that even after many years of marriage, the lady retained the hope to return to her lover but his marriage finally smashed her dreams. A lady is shown as a deceiver deluding every person in her life, her parents, her husband, and her daughter. She is not even caring for her husband who gives her respect and hides her sin, but she is shown lost in her past love.

When Selim proposes Nilofar and shows his unlawful intimacy, she questions, "is this what the dervishes have taught you?" (p. 99). She makes fun of 'dervishes' who are considered as pure and saintly. Here, purity is associated with evil behavior, and this black humor is again a direct attack on religion. Once Iskander remarks that Selim "forgot the sufis and embraced rationalism" (p.110). His behavior is shown as dynamic that changes from Sufism to rationalism. In larger context, this reflects shifting behavior of Muslim society that moves away from Islam to embrace the Western modernism. Selim expresses his audacity that he is no longer afraid of "being discovered" (p.157) with his illegal relations with Nilofar as society is shown permissible to sexual liberties. Nilofar herself tells her profane love story to her brother Salman who just smiles in response. She tells him story of her mother and her past love. The tabooed topics of illicit liaisons are openly

discussed with family members without hesitation in the newly constituted Muslim society on the Western lines that combine modernity and sexual freedom with nudity.

While discussing the Sultan, Iskander states, "the sultan has three hundred and twenty-six women to serve his needs . . . except during the month of fasting, when he prefers young boys from Yemen" (p. 114). This is quite supportive sentence to the Western concept of "harem" which is quite Eurocentric in approach. There is also another event when "Iskander Pasha recovers his power of speech" and Hasan Baba says "Allah be praised" for this "miracle" (p. 126), the latter refuses that it is Auguste Comte who he has restored his speech power by repeating his name. Comte is shown as the true follower of the Enlightenment.

Here is another extramarital love story of Marium who marries Salman Pasha. She leaves her husband and daughter "without even a note" (p. 146) for an Englishman. Sulman Pasha has two sons but in the end he is informed that he is not their real father. They are sons of furniture maker and she confesses it without any shame (p. 149). Selim's mother also has an affair after her marriage in the absence of her husband (p. 171). There is just one or two references where the army men "want them (the women) also to become experts in organizing the affairs of the state" (p.174) otherwise women and men both are hungry for lust.

In the chapter seventeenth, Hassab Baba tells Iskander Pasha's story in Paris where he marries a woman who refuses to share her bed unless he marries her. Pasha and Hassan Baba make fool of her with a wink and some nonsense actions to declare their marriage and divorce after some days in the same room happily (p. 192). She gets married after few months to another man. She shows photograph of her oldest son with "Ottoman complexion" (p. 195). When Nilopher asks Iskander Pasha about

that child, he mentions that the “blood relations” (p. 195) do not matter him. Ali even appropriates homosexuality in the text and shows that “Istanbul was full of women who preferred each other and it was not big problem” (p.239). The Muslim society is quite concerned with its bloodline but here it is shown as something insignificant. Men and women both are shown corrupt in the name of modernity and freedom. It is like reading about a Muslim society without Islam.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Stone Woman* is a magically transformed world in which the writer uses black humor for Ottoman Empire. The discussed Muslim society is not truly represented but it is better to say that a new Western model is created in the name of an Islamic Ottoman Empire. Here a Muslim woman is shown in sexual liaisons with many partners of her choice. In the Western eyes, religious teachings are considered evil and repudiating this “evil” is taken as freedom. The Post-colonial writers has been writing about their culture and norms to deconstruct the stereotypes of European world but this book does not show any resistance rather it accepts the mainstream misrepresentation of Muslim society. A Muslim woman is just shown a sensual object ready for hetero- /homo-sexuality. Islam not only has clear definition of evil but it is also necessary to call or know evil as evil, “It is also an evil not to call evil an evil” (p.133). All the characters in this book ingrain evil to the extent that evil is not evil anymore. Evil and transgression is not portrayed as a form of sin or vice but it is shown as a sign of freedom and modernization.

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