

THE FEMALE EUNUCH

The Female Eunuch

by Germaine Greer

Paladin, 1971 354 pp.

reviewed by Alice VanWart

A piece of literature it is indeed, with intellectual distinction, as it is also one of the newest and hottest treatises for women's liberation in print but unlike most of the other literature on women's liberation ie. Juliet Mitchells perceptive insight in "Women- the Longest Revolution"; or Anne Koedt's, "The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm", or even Kate Milletts success, "Sexual Politics", "The Female Eunuch" is much more probably one of the most perceptive and profound studies yet to be done on women.

The basis thesis or premise of "The Female Eunuch" is implicit in its title - that of the castrated women. Greer intelligently and perceptively traces the castration process physically, psychologically and sociologically, revealing in her analysis how and why women have been placed in their submissive, inferior, dependant and insecure roles. She sees that:

"The whole castration (process) of women has been carried out in terms of a masculine - feminine polarity, in which men have commandeered all the energy and streamlined it into an aggressive conquistatorial power, reducing all heterosexual contact to a sado-masochistic pattern." (p.11).

From this premise Greer suggests and advocates throughout the book the possibilities and of alternatives, to the stereotyped ideals of the differentiation between man and women. Her ultimate aim is to show women that they have a free and independant will and mind. Within this aim lies the small germ of hope that once women have discovered this they will be able to tell the rest of the world how and what they (we) really want, in terms of future change for liberation. In this respect Greer's book is one of new concepts, provocative suggestions, and for every argument laid down there is the hint or blatant suggestion of an alternative.

She begins her book with a summary and explanation of the growth of her arguments. She does not believe in a Utopia nor does she advocate violent revolution for liberation, she is much more sensible and starts once again from the very beginning. This time by reassessing the definitions and components working together to make "women". She views

how she was and is; who she was considered and is now

considered; and how she was and will be placed in society until she is able to free herself. Greer logically begins her analysis and arguments with the assumption that, "it is impossible to argue a case for female liberation if there is no certainty about the degree of inferiority or natural dependence which is unalterably female." (pg. 14) Her first assumption made and the dissection begins, first physically with the ever celebrated female body. Her assumption for point of analysis is "everything that we may observe could be otherwise". (p.14) We know what we are, but not what we may be, or might have been. In other words Greer is talking about conditioning, "women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which have been successively locked off by conditioning." (p.14) The discussion of the body attempts to show how such conditioning has masked and deformed female sexuality by most observers, alias the 'bones', 'curvex', 'hair' and the wicked 'womb'.

All of those more acutely analyzed leads to the definition of today's stereotyped women. "The stereotype is the Eternal Female. She is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others." (p.58) Greer goes into a highly detailed and interesting analysis of the growth of the stereotyped women, by a study of the suppression and deflections of women's energy from Baby to Womanhood. It is woman's energy perverted by conditioning and wrong channeling which turns it into a destructive rather than a creative force and which in modern time results in the great "psychological Sell", the further conditioning by psychologists and psychiatrists.

This constant and continued psychological and sociological conditioning leads to the biggest and most fatal distortion in a woman's life - that of love. Greer's analysis and examination of the concept of love is both perceptive, provocative, and embarrassingly real. She traces "Eros" and its growth by passages from various pieces of literature through the centuries, beginning with the celebration of ideal love to its present perversions of altruism, (sacrifice of woman to man which becomes self-abnegating), egotism (the narcissistic basis of love or love of self) and obsession, (love here is can't

as the relationship is usually

parasitic). Greer, herself concludes,

"In fact, men and women love differently, and much of the behavior that we describe by the term is so far from benevolence, and so anti-social, that is must be understood to be inimical to the essential nature of love. Our life style contains more 'thanantos' than 'eros' for egotism, exploitation, deception, obsession and addiction have more place in us than eroticism, joy generosity and spontaneity." (p.148)

Unfortunately this is what is disguised in the name of romance. "Romance" is probably one of the most enjoyable and delightful chapters in the book, where Greer put wit and perception together to condone and condemn the popular romantic novel. i.e.

"She felt her love rise up in her like a flame. She felt her whole body tremble with the excitement and the ecstasy of the thrill that in a few seconds she would be his wife and belong to him forever." (Barbara Cartland, "The Wings of Love.")

Georgette Heyer, Barbara Cartland and Lucy Walker all take a well deserved beating as Greer says about such Romantic Trash, "if women's liberation movements are to accomplish anything at all, they will have to cope with the Cartland industry." (p.178) Once she has suitably shot down the ridiculous fantasies of such literature she goes on to the "Object of Male Fantasy" which analyzes the perversion of love to hate revealed by the favorite ways women are revealed in male literature. She takes a particular swat at Norman Mailer, who repeatedly uses his penis weapon aggressively on the Great Bitch - an aesthetic imagination dominated by war and the imagery of wars, the perversion of love into the prohesion of hate. Her hypothesis upon the concept of love are tantalizing, but it is when she begins her analysis of "The Middle Class Myth of Love and Marriage", with her ideas of the nuclear family and security (the cornerstone of such marriages) that one realizes that Germaine Greer is really making sense. We've all read about this great myth, talked about it, and argued about it, and in one way or another we've all been a part of it. Security is the dominant factor in her argument, or insecurity since everybody is insecure. From this point on she hammers away revealing all the perversions suffered because of the great myth and insecurity - bathing

disgust, abuse, misery, resentment, all of which lead to rebellion and revolution.

That is essentially the main outline of the book. The last chapter on revolution is in itself a brief but concise summary and study of the Women's Liberation to date. She points out the various pitfalls encountered by Women's Lib. Movements and the resulting dissention within their own movement. Again she re-defines "Revolution ought to entail the correction of some of the false perspectives which our assumptions about women, sex, love, and society have combined to create. Tentatively it gestures toward the redevelopment of energy, no longer to be used in repression." (p.18)

The conclusion of the book is really only the beginning for the reader. So much left to consider and reconsider. In such respect Greer succeeds with what she basically wanted to do, provoke, and stimulate. These are the very reasons why the book is and will continue to be a success.

Greer has provided in "The Female Eunuch" enough information to supply women, men and the womens liberation movement with food for thought on the subject of women for at least a decade. Scholastically her arguments and analysis are documented by two hundred and ten references in all. The logic and clarity of her ideas and arguments have been well researched and the incredible amount of reading put into this book plus the brilliance and knowledge of Greer's lively mind are the hue factors which brought this book together. However, despite the fact that the book leans heavily on outside data, it never becomes heavy or burdensome reading material mainly because of her informal and pleasant style of writing. Inrested within various pages are random quotations taken from a range of literary sources from Mary Wollstonecraft, "A girl whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp..." (the Vindication of the Rights of Women", 1792) p. 78 to a poem by Rodger McGough, "Discretion" quoted in her analysis of womens body.

"Discretion is the better part of Valerie though all of her is nice; lips as warm as strawberries; eyes as cold as ice; the very best of everything only will suffice not for her potatoes and puddings made of rice." (p.41)

Such and the fifty or more quoted passages are relevant to the point being made and make the reading of the book more enjoyable along with the few personal glimpses she allows us

to catch of herself. For example when her wrath overcomes her she screams:

"So whats the beef? Maybe I couldn't make it. Maybe I don't have a pretty smile, good teeth, nice tits, long legs, a cheeky arse, a sexy voice..... Then again maybe I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of helping my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex..... I am a woman not a cast-rate." (p. 61).

Or when she reveals some personal experience like:

I cannot claim to be truly emancipated from the dream that some enormous man, say six foot six, heavily shouldered and so forth to match, will crush me in his tweeds, look down into my eyes and leave the taste of heaven or the scorch of his passion on my waiting lips. For three weeks I was married to him. (p. 180).

Her writing is detailed, her style erudite and intelligent; passionate and personal; lively and aggressive; witty and crude. I kept a dictionary beside me (her vocabulary is incredible) for words like "vituperative", (which in meaning she does) and when she's really angry and adamant about making a point she leaves all dignity behind and its more like reading bits of sophisticated pornography.

But its all there- about women and about men- and its all together and thats the important of all is the impact. Greer says it herself.

"Hopefully this book is subversive. Hopefully it will draw fire from all the articulate sections of the community. The conventional moralist will find much that is reprehensible in the denial of the Holy Father, in the denigration of sacred Motherhood, and the inference that women are not by nature mimogamous....if it is not ridiculed or reviled, it will have failed of its intentions. Of the most successful women parasites do not find it offensive, then it is innocuous." (p. 22).

The Female Eunuch will be offensive and it will be ridiculed and reviled but it will also be brilliant. I said at the beginning that Greer herself thought this book should be added to the second wave of womens lib. literature. I disagree. It will either stand alone as one of the most promising studies to be done on women or it will be the beginning of a new wave of womens liberation- one of better understanding on the part of both men and women. It is to be read by both, since both man and women will learn alot about each other and themselves.