

2. The prevalence of male pressure on a related woman, whose husband is absent for a long period of time—for example, on labor migration—to instigate divorce. Thus, one of my friends complained that her male kin placed great pressure on her to do so, when her husband had been gone for two years continually. They were not content that she loved him and wanted to wait.

3. An expectation that if an "elder" girl (about eighteen or older) fornicates, the Wali will punish her father, or other male guardian, not the girl.

4. The case of Sheikha—which should need no further comment. But there is a paradox here: On the one hand, it is the woman who commits the destructive act. But because men do not grant a woman the ultimate responsibility for herself, she goes free, and there is that absence of stigma and other consequences, which we have noted for the woman who falls short. Yet we also have difficulties in identifying the dire sanctions for the *man* whose female ward fails in these supposedly terrible ways. He may suffer some economic loss, but where is the "honor" or other aspect of the person which is supposedly devastated?

To judge from the ethnographic literature, there can be little doubt that potency in Oman is a more explicit and emphatic theme than in most other parts of the Middle East. It seems reasonable to see a connection between this fact and another one that seems also peculiar to Oman: the high frequency of male transexuals. A man is a male who *acts* the masculine sexual role. No wonder the bride's family becomes struck with fear when their son-in-law fails in this test. And no wonder the groom, who knows how much is at stake, is inclined to become paralyzed. And again, those ultimate sanctions that one expects to find behind absolute rules elude us. *Xaniths* are tolerated, grooms are given a long period to succeed, cuckolds are *not* publicly shamed, and so forth.

The themes that receive fundamental emphasis in Omani gender roles, and culture in general, stand out clearly—but their ultimate force, how compelling and crucial for a person—remains an enigma.

To give more complete answers to these questions, we shall have to develop our analysis further in the following chapters. But it is quite clear that in a comparison between male and female in Sohar, the rhetoric of female chastity notwithstanding, it is male potency that is really consequential, and, *in the judgment of women*, it is the male who faces the more exacting demands and ordeal.

CHAPTER 12



The Visit of an Undutiful Daughter

"That is what we get for marrying her to a stranger!"

One would think it a terrifying experience for a thirteen-year-old bride to be abruptly uprooted from her family and home, where she has spent her whole life, and transferred to strangers: a husband she has never met, and his relatives, whom she does not know. To her parents as well, the separation and loss of the daughter would seem painful. Yet we remarked about how Mariam moved with (apparent) grace and confidence among her new relations, only three days after the marriage. And, in Meimona's case, we commented upon the impressive loyalty to her husband that she displayed on their visit to her parents, only three months after the marriage.

Noted, too, has been the Sohari saying, summarizing their life experience and expectation, that the bride on the wedding night fights desperately with the groom, but, on the following morning, he is her husband and she loves him.

This chapter examines the transformation that takes place in a young Sohari girl upon her marriage, and the accompanying changes in her relationships to those closest to her. Until the event, her self-presentation is characterized by unquestioning obedience and submissiveness to all elders; modesty, gentleness, and tact toward everyone; and an unequivocal identification with parents and siblings. Marriage implies new tasks and new responsibilities and a wholly new status or position in society: How does the young girl accommodate to the change? What self-image does she construct for herself and present to the world?

Statuses (like daughter, mother, father, wife, husband), are in one fundamental sense always reciprocal: they occur in *relationships*. A girl is a daughter only so long as her parents are alive, and she is a wife only provided she has a husband. Each reciprocal pair of statuses is characterized by distinctive mutual rights and duties that determine what each may rightfully expect of the other. But because every person, at every stage of

life, occupies many, more or less compatible, statuses, special problems may arise when he or she is called upon to *act*—and particularly when several statuses have to be acted out simultaneously. Only rarely are rights and duties unequivocally defined. Expectations and demands are usually more diffuse and do not provide the person with clear-cut guidelines for behavior in all exigencies of life. It is up to the individual to review the situation and find a practical solution. Thus in each *role*—the actual behavior associated with a status—the person has to consider more than the particular rights and duties of that status: he or she has to pay attention also to limited resources (like time, affection, money) that will be needed in other relations, and to the qualities required in other contexts. Particularly when acting in one capacity before an audience to whom one relates in another capacity (for example, Meimona talking with her parents in front of her husband), a person could otherwise easily discredit himself or herself in their eyes, in terms of the commitments he or she has to these other persons.

And some statuses are best understood as identities that affect the person's relationship to all others. Thus, in the case that concerns us here, a maiden's marriage not only makes her the wife of a particular man, it also transforms her into a *horma*, a "woman," and this is now the identity in terms of which she partakes in all social relationships, also those to her parents, her siblings, and so forth. Although her rights and duties in these relationships are to a considerable extent unchanged, she must nonetheless shape her role performance in them differently, because of her changed identity.

The young Sohari wife might thus come under cross-pressures to satisfy the legitimate rights of husband and parents simultaneously, and she will be faced with the continuous task of always acting in the for her new ways becoming to a *horma*, a woman.

Role dilemmas of this kind have received much attention from anthropologists, and the solution a person chooses is thought to reveal his or her priorities and self-image. For example, a Bengali husband chooses to shower all attention on the mother and to let the expression of his relationship to the wife be suppressed (Roy 1975). The wife's only "solution" is never to be together with her parents and her husband at the same time, such a situation being inherently unresolvable.

The case of Meimona's first visit to her parents after three months of marriage provides the necessary material for a concrete discussion of these changes in a young Sohari wife's identity and relationships. January 2, 1976, marked the first day of the Muslim New Year, followed by a long two-day weekend. Meimona had two months previously moved all the way to Muscat and had been wholly without contact with her parents during the interval. They missed her painfully and were worried about her well-being—so wholly on her own and far away from everyone she had known

and loved before. Taking it for granted that her husband would return to spend the holidays with his family in neighboring Zaffran, they were high-spirited on the morning of Thursday, January 1, expecting to see their daughter that very afternoon—Muscat being only a two-hour ride away.

We were also eager to see Meimona; she had been a good friend. But so as not to impose ourselves on the family, we waited till next day, at noon, before we dropped by their home in the date-palm garden.

We found no Meimona, but a very despondent family, getting ready to have their lunch—alone. The mother was cooking, the father was praying, and the four children were tense and noisy.

The reason for their distress was promptly disclosed: as they had discovered, Meimona had arrived as expected in Sohar the previous afternoon, around 5 P.M. But she had not so much as stopped by to see them for a moment on her way to Zaffran, though the road passes close by their home. They might not even have known that she had arrived, had not her father, Abdullah, run into his son-in-law, Mubarak, by chance in the market that morning. The son-in-law had excused himself, saying they had planned to visit that very morning, but then his brother had, unexpectedly, driven off with the car. At noon, however, they would surely come.

So everyone was waiting, dressed up in their best attire, but becoming more and more tense as the minutes dragged by. Abdullah showed visible signs of annoyance, bordering on anger. "It is plain nonsense, this excuse about how the car had disappeared. There are dozens of cars in Zaffran," he commented. "Mubarak could and should have asked one of his friends for a lift. Besides, there are also plenty of taxis. Mubarak is not poor; he should have hired a taxi."

Because lunch was ready, and it was clear Meimona would not arrive, we were invited to partake. But we politely excused ourselves and went walking in the gardens while the family ate. Immediately afterward, Abdullah declared that he had urgent business in town, but would return shortly. It seemed to us that this was his way to escape from a situation of rapidly escalating emotional distress.

So we waited with the rest of the family and tried to provide some distraction and consolation. Rahmeh was visibly restless and unhappy. She repeated again and again how a daughter *should* visit: all day every Friday if she is close, a week every month if she is far away, a month a year if she is abroad. When she and Abdullah lived in Kuwait, they flew into Oman for a month's vacation every year and stayed with *her* family—no, not with *his* family, but her mother was his aunt, so that was really the same thing. Meimona *must* visit them now. Abdullah had become very angry that she has not yet arrived.

The children, too, were agitated. They ran purposelessly about, clashing and fighting and trying to pass the time by being boisterous and

clowning. Rahmeh remarked how they had hardly slept the night before from excitement and anticipation because of their sister's impending visit.

About 4 P.M.—standard time for Omani afternoon visits—Abdullah returned. He was tense and asked for coffee. Both he and his wife clearly tried to remain polite and controlled in front of us, but their deep disquiet broke through in the tone and content of their own exchanges.

"Mubarak had a moral duty to bring Meimona here this morning and was perfectly able to have done so," argued Abdullah. "This brother of his could have taken them here in the car first and *then* done whatever business he had afterward. Besides, it is plain nonsense that she could not come even if he had taken the car. What if they sold the car! Would she then never visit her family at all!"

Rahmeh answered softly, "Maybe the real reason is they do not wish to bring her."

As sunset approached, the tension mounted noticeably. Everyone listened for the sound of cars to note which way they were coming; Abdullah distractedly kept looking at his watch. They spoke disjointedly, if at all. Shortly before 5 P.M., and only a few minutes before Meimona actually arrived, Abdullah again addressed his wife, harshly:

"Perhaps the Ministry doesn't have vacation tomorrow, and they will return to Muscat without Meimona visiting us at all, or merely dropping in on their way. This business about his brother's car is just an empty excuse. There are cars passing by that house twenty-four hours a day, and he has plenty of money for a taxi. . . . Think of poor Meimona, sitting there in an unfamiliar place and never seeing her own relatives at all. . . . But she *herself* should have insisted on being taken here; *she* should not have accepted this!"

Rahmeh, in a low voice: "That is what we get for marrying her to a stranger!"

Finally, shortly before 5 P.M., a car arrived. The children rushed to the gate while the parents remained motionless on the sitting platform. Too disappointed and probably also humiliated, they did not go to welcome the longed-for visitors.

Meimona was dressed in the *abba* and the *burqa* (she later explained that she only uses the *burqa* here in Sohar, not in Muscat). Her husband was dressed in fashionable Gulf-style clothes. With the children clutching them and dancing around them, they slowly walked the thirty-yards-long path up to the house. Not till they were a few steps from the sitting platform did the parents arise. Meimona embraced and kissed, in the formal fashion, first her father; then her mother, on both palms of the hands and then on the forehead. Her parents remained passive. We were amazed at the unemotionality of the scene; had we not known better, we would have taken this to be a meeting of complete strangers. Abdullah and Mubarak also embraced in ritual fashion, as did Meimona and myself.

Then we all sat down on the sitting platform, in a circle, with Meimona

and myself in the seats of honor. She looked markedly shy and uneasy and kept on the *burqa*. Abdullah opened the conversation with elaborating for his son-in-law how they had been waiting for hours and hours, the son-in-law ought to have come a long time ago. This was definitely a reproach, but voiced with sufficient control and induction so it remained, barely, within the requirements of politeness. There was no explicit criticism, and his face revealed no annoyance; there was only a slightly noticeable nuance in his voice.

Mubarak could not have failed to sense the message, however, and he defended himself by saying that the car had been used constantly that day (four brothers share one car). Someone urgently needed to go to the market, another to visit a business associate; besides, there was his grandmother, who's sick in the hospital, to visit. Rahmeh could not constrain herself and remarked that surely there must have been taxis and other available cars—after all, cars pass by that house twenty-four hours a day.

Upon hearing this, Meimona became annoyed and stubborn—and defended her husband:

"*Wallahi* [By God], there was no car. We *did* try, in vain, to find one. Also, there were a lot of people we had to visit!"

"Who?" asked her mother.

"Well, Mubarak's grandmother in the hospital."

"Well, your grandmother is also ill and expecting you to visit her!"

The topic was dropped, but the scene was noticeably tense, despite the efforts of all to control themselves. Then Abdullah asked how Meimona liked it in Muscat.

"I'm fine."

"But Said [the husband of Abdullah's niece] said you looked tired." (Sharply) "Why should I be?"

"Because you are by yourself and don't know anybody."

"I'm not by myself. I know a lot of people."

"Who then?"

(Manifestly irritated) "Some Zanzibaris,¹ and some from Oman [that is, interior Oman]."

"And they speak Arabic?"²

"Yes, they do!"

"And they come to you, and you go to them?"

(Moodily) "Yes, of course!"

Throughout this exchange, Meimona emphasized her distance by keeping on the *burqa*. She seemed shy, embarrassed, and annoyed at the parents' marked display of concern.

Not till half an hour had passed and her mother headed for the kitchen

¹Zanzibaris are Omani citizens from Zanzibar in present-day Tanzania.

²Zanzibaris often do not know Arabic, but only Swahili, their mother tongue.

to prepare snacks—followed by the children, who seemed glad to get away from the strain of the situation, and thereupon by Meimona—did Meimona take off her *burqa*.

The hospitality was rather modest by the standards of Soharis of their economic level, but ample by those normally practiced by Abdullah. We were served three plates: canned cherries, sliced oranges, and cookies. The children were instructed to sit in the background and wait for their turn, while Meimona's eldest brother, aged twelve, was included, with a remark about being adult now. Both Meimona and Mubarak were visibly shy and uneasy, causing Abdullah to remark that surely no one is shy about eating with their own family (*alita*)! Mubarak had two pieces of orange and one cherry and then put down the spoon. His father-in-law put the spoon back in his hand, to make him take more, but had to repeat this several times—with little success. Meimona also helped herself very modestly, with embarrassment.

The conversation kept flagging, though Abdullah tried being vivacious. But he was nervous and started suddenly shaking his right thigh, though sitting cross-legged. He made occasional attempts to play up to me, who had so wanted to see Meimona again; to my husband by talking of the importance of his work for Oman; and to little Feisal, Meimona's two-year-old brother, who had asked ceaselessly for Meimona the day before. Meimona also played up to me by sitting very close to me and telling me how she had missed me. Her younger sister, aged twelve, who had always been her closest friend, kept staring at Meimona and smiling to her, but was too shy to utter a single word.

After coffee (the son-in-law drank one cup only), Meimona disappeared with her mother and sisters and brothers. Father-in-law and son-in-law sat passively and said nothing. After a long pause, we tried to break what to us was an embarrassing silence by asking Mubarak about his work, and which Ministry employed him. Abdullah was clearly surprised to hear that it was the Ministry of Defense (he had thought it was the Army High Command) and inquired what were the tasks and responsibilities of this ministry.

At the conclusion of this desultory conversation, we prepared to leave. The length of our stay had extended to an hour. Meimona hugged my arm and insisted that we must come and visit her in Zaffran the next day. Her mother overheard this and asked, surprised, if Meimona was not coming back to visit them then? To which Meimona answered that she was not. When her mother inquired why, she received an abrupt reply: "*Bas*" ("Nothing doing!" or "Stop it!"); it is difficult to find an adequate translation for this very meaning-loaded word). The mother exerted much self-control to hide her disappointment. I felt embarrassed and told her that in case we went to Zaffran, we would surely drop by and fetch her.

The son-in-law took the opportunity to get away by driving us to the market, claiming that he had to buy petrol.

The next day, we arrived at Abdullah's home around noon, anxious to see whether Meimona had in fact come back. Her mother told us that Meimona had said the day before that she would come by 11 A.M. and have lunch with them. Meimona and Mubarak had stayed only till 7 P.M. the previous night; they left immediately after supper.

Abdullah was out on some errand or other; Rahmeh did not know where or what. When he returned a half hour later, his first remark was, "Meimona did not come?" By 1 P.M., Rahmeh observed again that Meimona had asked them to make lunch, saying she would arrive around 11 A.M. "What is the use of saying and not doing?" And, with a sigh of resignation, "Oh well, let's make lunch for us at least."

We left, but returned at 5 P.M. to find a sad Rahmeh, all alone. The father and children had gone to the fort where an army baggage band was performing for the festival. But she had preferred to stay behind, in the hope that *maybe*, against all odds, Meimona would appear.

My husband excused himself, and I remained with Rahmeh, who seemed so disconsolate and in need of company. In the privacy of this setting, she confided in me in words roughly as follows:

She is terribly disappointed that Meimona did not come today. And also that yesterday all she did was stay for two hours. They, the parents, had wanted her to spend the night. But the son-in-law had refused, saying he himself had to return home and he would naturally not allow his wife to stay behind alone. However, in this he is not to blame. It is only natural for the man to want his wife to be with him. The fault lies entirely with Meimona. *She* should have said "No, I will not go with you. I want to stay with my family." But Meimona said no such thing.

When I asked her if she has any idea of the reason why Meimona is so happy with her husband's family, Rahmeh answered:

"Yes, she is happy; she likes it there."

"So there are girls who are more fond of their husband's family than of their own?"

"Yes, there are *many*; for example, Meimona's cousin Aisha. She hardly ever visits her parents, even though her mother says to her, 'I have small children, I cannot come to you, so you must come to me.' But Aisha does not like to."

"Why not?"

"*Bas*. *Hayya ktida, bi rohhia* [Simply, that's the way she is, that's her nature]."

"And Meimona, why do you think she does not want to visit?"

"I do not know. *Bi rohhia ktida* [That's just her way—her nature]."

As it turned out, Rahmeh's vigil was purposeless and only aggravated

her disappointment and distress. Meimona returned to Muscat that very evening without stopping by to tell her parents goodbye.

This case reveals some fundamental features of how persons in Sohar experience themselves and others in their most intimate relations. Thus it provides premises that are basic to our understanding of Sohari society. Although the case is concerned specifically with the transformation that takes place in a young girl upon her marriage, it reveals both basic aspects of how she conceives of her own most important relationships, how she evaluates and adjusts to the claims of persons close to her, and also how they in turn respond to her transformation.

In my own field experience, this encounter with undutiful daughter cum devoted wife, distressed parents, and detached son-in-law constituted one of those "enlightened moments" when vaguely sensed intuitions, statements never quite believed or understood and assimilated, and observations waiting for their interpretive context suddenly come together and are transformed into clarifying insights and a new basis for understanding.

A number of themes stand out and deserve individual discussion. Some have already emerged in previous chapters. But they are so fundamental to the constitution of persons in Sohar, that additional evidences serve to clarify the distinguishing features of this society and to throw it into relief.

First, it is an axiom of Omani culture that persons are endowed with different natures, which determine the way they behave. It is for others to acknowledge and accept this—no matter how painful the consequences. The only exception is where the behavior in question violates the legal or moral rights of the other person, in which case counteraction may be taken.

We have seen repeatedly how this view of behavior permeates Sohari understandings and provides people with an ever-ready answer when they are called on to explain the acts of others. In the present case, Rahmeh resorted to it when I asked her about her daughter and volunteered her niece Aisha as another example. More importantly, in the behavior of each of the main actors we can recognize the effects of this way of understanding others; rather than directly or indirectly putting pressure on others to change unwanted behavior, one seeks to keep up appearances and acquiesce, despite one's discontent.

A corollary of this way of conceptualizing fellow human beings is that it also serves to relieve some of the hurt caused by the acts of others and thereby to shield the cherished self-image of the "offended" one; this is so because acts that might otherwise be insulting can be understood to arise in or from the other's nature, rather than being a response to one's own acts and qualities.³

³I am indebted to Professor Wilhelm Aubert for this interpretation.

Second, implicit in this view of the connection between human nature and behavior is the premise that each person is accountable for his or her actions (with the one exception of women's sexual conduct, for which, in the *male* view, their guardians are responsible). Although Meimona's parents were truly angry with their son-in-law's "nonsensical excuse" for not visiting, they placed the ultimate blame upon their own beloved daughter: *she* should not have accepted the situation; *she* should have demanded to come before; and *she* should have refused to accompany her husband back to his home in the evening. What a remarkable emphasis upon the individual's power and ability, and possibly even duty, to shape the events of his or her own life!

I do not seem to find comparable attitudes described in the anthropological literature on other parts of the Arab world: on the one hand, a *woman* being regarded so completely as an actor in her own right, and, on the other, that one's own daughter or other close kinsperson should be faulted when there is a likely candidate for blame close at hand who is less closely related (in this case, Meimona's husband). Rather, the characteristic pattern in most Arab tribal and village societies is summed up in the saying, "Me against my brother, me and my brother against my cousin, me and my brother and my cousin against the outsider."

Similarly, in an urban situation like Cairo, where kinship solidarity is not particularly strong, one nevertheless finds a pattern of accusations of *taslit* (manipulation), whereby the close person is absolved from direct responsibility for undesired acts by the hurt person constructing often elaborate explanations of what pressures or deceptions he or she has been subjected to by more distant and less cherished third parties (Wikan 1980). In Sohar, however, an unsentimental objectivity is generally practiced toward those dearest to you.

This leads to a third point, noted but not stressed before: a spectacular ability to empathize with third persons and take their point of view. Thus Rahmeh's comment, "It is only natural for a man to want to have his wife with him." The world is regarded an imperfect place where people pursue their own interests, which is another way of saying that they act according to their nature—that is natural and right. But why, then, was there no *expressed* attempt to take Meimona's point of view—beyond "poor Meimona sitting there all by herself . . ."—when they no doubt accept the rule that a woman should defer to her husband (cf. how Rahmeh criticizes and distances herself from, yet accepts, Abdullah's acts and decisions)? It was perhaps due to the unsentimental and true reasoning that Meimona had been away for three months and had a legal right to see her parents—and her right was ideally compatible with their wish.

Fourth, we had been struck, long before this event, by the uncompromising loyalty that Meimona displayed toward her family. Whenever we met her—about every other day—she appeared cheerful and content,

with a genuine affection for her sisters and brothers. If reality backstage took on a somewhat different aspect, we had no inkling of it, and no way of knowing. Only three months after her marriage to a complete stranger, she had been literally transformed in her relationship to those previously dearest to her: from a respectful and obedient daughter into an autonomous, self-aware wife and woman; she is visibly annoyed and embarrassed by her parents' display of anxious concern for her, and for their controlled but clear criticism of her husband. She comes out in *active*, avowed defense of him—so there can be no doubt where her loyalties lie. Her parents' disquiet for her own person she answers with staccato comments voiced with all overtones of "Stop it!" or "Leave me alone!" The only sign that she still identifies with her family of origin is her getting up and following her mother into the kitchen, but only after her siblings had already gone before her.

So it is that in this situation, which embodies all the characteristic components of a typical role dilemma, Meimona acts *as if* there were, for her, no dilemma at all. Had she indeed experienced it as a problem—of how to satisfy simultaneously her parents' and her husband's expectations of loyalty (that is, affection) from her—she might, with offense toward none, have chosen the easiest way out: remaining entirely passive. But Meimona did not. She chose to make it perfectly clear where she stood, where her priorities, wholly and singly, lay, by overemphasizing or *demonstrating* her unequivocal loyalty to her husband.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, it is characteristic that when predicaments arise in any meeting between a newly married couple and his or her parents, it is the marital relationship that is suppressed (see Barth 1971, and Peters 1965). Not so in Sohar: spouses prefer to confirm their relationship with each other, even at the cost of those with their parents and other close kin (for a male case, see Ch. 13).

Fifth, we have seen how Meimona's parents felt hurt and humiliated and how they criticized their son-in-law, but put the blame on their daughter. How did they accommodate to the "loss" of a daughter? Mainly with sighs of resignation. During the twenty days that we remained in Sohar after the event, we heard scarcely a mention of Meimona, beyond Rahmeh's reflection, "When a daughter marries, she transfers all of her affections to her husband. That is not right. There should be one part for him, and one for her parents."

This generalization, that daughters transfer all their affection, I take as an empirical and statistical statement of fact, as Rahmeh understands it, not her statement of custom or norm. The way in which Meimona's parents reacted throughout the incident demonstrates that they desired and expected it differently. This is in accordance with Sohari views. Persons are expected to cope with their difficulties and resolve them with grace. Meimona's parents recognized that her husband also had rightful claims

over her; had we challenged her parents, they would doubtless have agreed that for her to resist his will and insist on being with her parents might constitute a breach of wifely loyalty. But such is life, in the Sohari view; real life *has* such complexity.

If I were to summarize my understanding of these aspects of the Sohari world view it would be as follows: no categorical right and no perfect rule can provide the simple solution that will fit a complex and imperfect world. Indeed, apart from those cases that fall specifically under the rules and injunctions codified in the Koran and the Shariah, there is probably no true and perfect answer to *any* concrete life situation. Each person must judge and exercise fairness and tact and be responsible for the results. As the Wali said: "What some may think I did well, others will think I did poorly. One can never satisfy everyone."

Meimona's parents believed that had their daughter insisted on her rights, and her obligations to them, she would have had her way, the powers of her husband notwithstanding, and the outcome would have been better, in their view.

Sixth and finally, we can try to confront the major question that arises out of this chapter: How can such a transformation take place in a young wife, so profoundly and so rapidly?

One set of preconditions must be sought deep in the structure of personality and temperament: in how individuals in this society fundamentally relate to other persons and to fateful events. Highly suggestive parts of an answer lie deeply embedded in child-rearing practices common and peculiar to this culture.

We have seen how the two year old is abruptly and simultaneously separated from the mother's breast and the consoling opium extract, then handed over to the care of a sister or grandmother, because a rival baby is calling for the mother's full attention. He is gradually treated as no longer an irresponsible baby, but a child who will be expected to do as instructed. Surely, it is reasonable to expect a person, after such an experience, to repudiate the relationship to the previously beloved one, to respond actively to detach himself so as to ease the feeling of loss that has been inflicted. The experience may be so traumatic that in the future the person will fear any further attachment and seek to keep other intimates at an emotionally safe distance. This *might* explain the daughter's lack of pain as a bride at the separation from her parents. Obviously, this provides only a gross outline of a hypothesis, but the facts seem striking enough to warrant its formulation. Any elaboration, or deduction from it, would naturally require that a comprehensive and professional study of personality development be made in this culture.

I have, however, one observation that fits into the puzzle of the construction of the individual in Sohar—and that, judging from the literature, is so unique to all of the Middle East that it cannot fail to reflect

distinctive Omani conditions. All over the Middle East, the concept of "the evil eye" is well known, and most villagers and tribesmen strongly fear it. Soharis maintain that their people are envious and hence easily prone to cause the evil eye. If an envious person looks at another while complimenting him for some quality or other, the spell is transferred from the eye of the envious person to the person or object of envy, causing the latter to suffer any and all kinds of illnesses, accidents, and even death itself. As is common in the Middle East, the evil eye belongs to a non-relative, but the better known and closer this person is, the greater is the danger.

Soharis also have a conception of another kind of evil eye, which is even more powerful and dreadful, namely the "lover's eye" (*ʿayn ihmilīb*). In contrast to the ordinary evil eye, this is not a special power with which only some persons are endowed. Every person is prone to it, toward relatives, if their love is strong enough. Consequently, the mother is the most dangerous source, followed by other close relatives. According to Sohari belief, the effect is caused quite inadvertently, indeed very much against the agent's will. All a loving mother need do is look at her child and think of him or her as the most wonderful child in the world. The child instantly falls sick.

Does this mean that a Sohari mother must consciously try to suppress her feelings of love and affection for her child while in eye-to-eye contact with him? And if so, with what effect?

We have noted the general absence of overt affect in all intimate relations, and the deemphasizing of its very existence. It hardly seems adequate, for example, in view of the pleasure that mother and unmarried daughter seem to take in each other's company, to say that a mother is sad on her daughter's departure as a bride for the loss of labor that is entailed. Yet that is the explanation conventionally given—never a mention that the person of the daughter will be missed. The formal restraint on greeting when close relatives meet, noted previously (Ch. 11) and also exemplified in this case story, is likewise evidence, though ambiguous in its meaning: Are deeper emotions merely being shielded from public view? Are they being constrained from fear of "lover's eye"? Are they being genuinely suppressed? Are they absent?

In reflecting on these perspectives one cannot but be struck by the ambivalent character of all close kin relations in Sohar. They often seem to have basically contradictory features in the behavior that they enjoin. Let us consider each relationship within the close family in turn.

The father is responsible for his daughter until she marries; particularly, he must be concerned about the intimate matters of her modesty and virginity, yet his relationship with her should not entail intimacy. He has great legitimate powers to command and control her, yet it is only by

treating her with gentlemanly restraint and grace that he can win approval for his own behavior toward her.

In relation to his son, likewise, the father has responsibility and almost unbounded authority during the son's minority. Yet he can only permit the son to excel by leaving him free to act on his own responsibility, and he earns approval in his paternal role only if he succeeds without making use of the powers vested in him.

The mother should love and serve her children, yet not harm them with her "lover's eye" and abandon them for a newborn in need of nurturing.

Brothers are one. Their acts reflect on each other, as do those of fathers and sons, and the senior displaces the older as the object of maternal attention and love, and they are rivals. Each can only become a man by exercising autonomy and foresight.

Brother and sister should love one another, and the former should protect and take responsibility for the latter, yet they are divided by sex into the separate segregated worlds of men and women, from which places they can damage each other by their respective acts (for example, the brother by making concrete decisions on behalf of his sister if the father is dead, and the sister by proving to be a "woman" on marriage). But they can hardly establish any common field of assertion or interaction.

The relationship between sisters, uniquely, may be one not structurally predestined to become contradictory. From being legally under the same master, they pass into different spheres of authority. From being together, they become separated by physical space, which is difficult for either to cross. Their lives run parallel courses, and they readily retain similar interests without being at cross-purposes. Consistent with this, Abdullāh and Rahmeh concluded from their sad encounter with Meimona that they would marry their next daughter to a close neighbor and relative, "and then Meimona will come to visit her sister often, thereby we shall see her too."

Except under the fortuitous circumstance that sisters live geographically close, however, the strength and importance of this relationship will be drastically reduced with marriage. And certainly, during Meimona's brief visit the cleft of experience between her and her sister who was two years younger seemed to separate them, so that embarrassed uncertainty was all that remained. And the sister spent the entire two hours in silent, smiling admiration of Meimona.

Of all social relations, in fact, that between husband and wife may be the only true exception to this general character of ambivalence. Between them, sexuality unites instead of separating and segregating; they are mutually dependent for realizing the cherished identities of man and woman: their strong mutual vulnerability in their struggle to think well of

themselves makes for constraints on the husband's exercise of authority and paves the way for mutual trust to develop and wifely loyalty to be proved. Sohari men say, "A woman should be spoiled and indulged; only insofar as household economics and movements are concerned, should she be constrained."

The women, in turn, pride themselves on unconditional, wifely loyalty (for verbatim statements, see pp. 263, 289). All the evidence underscores the point Fatima once made, "Even if Ali acted unreasonably toward me, would I ever say anything, but Ali is z-e-e-n [very good]." The complementarity and mutual give-and-take is also expressed in women's common saying, "The wife respects the man, that the man shall respect her." "And give her things," some add.

Returning to Meimona's parents sitting there desolately in their garden, brooding over their lost daughter and promising that next time they marry a daughter, she shall live close, it remains to be said that only one woman I ever spoke to mentioned that close contact with the parents or the mother was a precondition for a happy life. What each and every one of them stressed, on the contrary, was the importance of having a *house* of one's own. It is autonomy that counts.

If my interpretation is correct, then a full fifteen years may come to pass before Meimona can empathize with her mother: the day when time has come full circle and it is she who sits there waiting in vain for her own undutiful daughter.

CHAPTER 13



Portrait of a Marriage

"When I get my month's salary . . . I show Fatima and say, 'Do you know why it is so little, much less than before? And she answers, 'It is not the money I want. I want you to be with me!'"

Fatima was one of the first women we came to know personally in Sohar. When in the evenings we used to go up on the roof of our house to watch the sunset and enjoy a refreshing breeze, Fatima would see us from her neighboring *barasti* hut, smile, and give a friendly wave to us. She was a young girl, approximately fourteen years old, with a rather Negroid appearance: dark skin, a flat nose, and kinky hair. She was always dressed in gaily colored and strongly patterned materials, more in the style of Sohari slave women than Arabs. On her family background, some of my friends later remarked: "Though her parents look white, Fatima is of slave descent. Her grandparents were dark, and therefore God made Fatima dark so that her family will remember their true origin and not pretend to be better than they are."

Fatima was living with her parents, two younger sisters, and a younger brother in a very ordinary *barasti* compound, and we assumed her to be unmarried because of three typical indicators. First, she wore no *burqa*, and though our neighborhood, Higra, was a mixed one, including residents of slave descent, we rightly assessed Fatima as not counting herself among them. Second, Fatima wore no golden jewelry, apart from a golden button in her nose, whereas married women in general are richly adorned. Third, she had a childlike, naive appearance, which contrasted to the self-assured looks of young Sohari wives her age. However, as soon as we became acquainted, Fatima proudly told us of her marriage to Ali.

They had been married for one year. Ali was her distant paternal cousin (their paternal grandfathers were brothers), fourteen years her elder. At present he was working with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) in the oil fields at Fahud some three hundred kilometers away. About once a month, he came home on a long weekend visit, which Fatima evidently looked forward to and cherished. She spoke of her husband with a combination of shyness and admiration, which we found