

The Modern Woman • *Shalinee Bhardwaj*

Since the time I grew up in India's capital and metropolitan city of New Delhi, I have been watching women undergoing their eternal chase towards modernity. When I moved to the Gulf about five years back, things were no different; only faces were! And now this contest has given me an opportunity to delve into this subject and give it some 'thoughtful' thinking.

Qatar is a growing nation, taking giant strides towards modernization in every sphere of its developmental course. Such a growing modern society is a huge global stage—encouraging population mobility from different regions round the globe and creating a nomadic society of 'the Expatriates' (lovingly referred to as the Ex-pats). I belong to that class of ex-pat women who are secretly envied for their "leisured, stress-free lives" but who are also often brushed aside as being non-working—housewives.

How can a housewife be modern?

A frantic surfing through the Internet gurgled out a number of sites out of which eighty percent dealt with 'feminism and divorce in modern women,' ten percent promoted modern women as sex symbols while only ten percent were meaningful sociological studies on the changing roles of women in different societies! Gathering courage I read through some of the sites and one point clearly emerged: in order to be "modern" one has to be economically independent—a working woman! All my hopes of reaching the summit were dashed.

Prior to my migration to Qatar; I was employed with the University of Delhi in the capacity of a lecturer. I voluntarily left my job because I prioritised being with my family more than anything else. To me emotional ties are stronger than monetary. (Thanks go to my husband who landed a good job and can sustain both of the kids and us.) Housewife is always taken as a synonym for non-working wife. For me work starts at five o'clock in the morning and ends only late in the night. My work involves: meeting the deadlines of getting the older child admitted to a school of choice; keeping track of their vaccinations and health needs; paying Q-Tel and Kahrama bills; planning for the vacation and getting all the reservations made; preparing healthy and nutritious meals (quality control); maintaining the household (grocery) inventory; budgeting in these times of inflation; managing manpower (housemaid, cable operator, newspaper man, electrician, plumber); operating, maintaining and trouble shooting for the computer and other techie gadgets; keeping up with the ever-increasing demands of a four-year-old and another less than one-year-old; and, in between, finding time for exercise and personal grooming. At this point in my life, my home is my office and the kitchen my lab; but I am not employed - so does it mean that now I have ceased to be modern?

More than eighty percent of the wives in Qatar were employed in their own countries and are educated enough to be self-dependent. So, it figures out that



the second pillar of modernity is education. Education is an inevitable reality that every human being should undergo in order to be called a human. The importance of formal education in anybody's life—man or woman—is well known. Its link to a modern woman, well...

While travelling through the sand dunes in Oman, I met a Bedouin lady, fully clad in the traditional attire and belonging to a remote village and clearly “uneducated.” She drives a Mitsubishi pick up. Every three or four days she brings water for her family and cattle in huge containers, from the nearest township. What it must have taken her to break the traditional image of women as meek, suppressed creatures holed up in their homes. Wouldn't you call her modern? To be confident and a go-getter doesn't always require a formal education. The difference lies in how you perceive education.

How does a modern woman look? When I go to the magnificent, posh shopping malls, I see beautifully decorated faces, body attired in the most fashionable labels, and hair set to perfection. I will call these women definitely modern since I absolutely believe that personal grooming is an inevitable factor in being modern. However, they fall short of modernity when they forget to wear a polite smile and mistake a smirk for a snug.

A modern woman is often misrepresented as a feminist. Surely being conscious of one's rights is very important, but demanding them even when you are not the suppressed being (nor is your family a monster) doesn't make any sense. I share family responsibilities, carry out chores for my husband, even polish his shoes when he is very tired and stressed out! Does it mean that I am demeaning my “self?” I call myself modern since I possess the capability of judicious analytical processing—discarding irrelevant thoughts and saving the better ones.

Yes, I call myself modern because I think I have found the basis of modernity—growth, a continuous perennial unstoppable growth in mind and actions and adaptability, implying an ability to develop new ways of dealing with unforeseen problems. Modern also means having an accommodating, open attitude towards change.

Mental challenges excite me, experimentation is infused in me, emotions flow within me, and the agonies of fellow beings pain me. The moment I let my mind get lazy and my feelings rusted, I will stop claiming to be The Modern Woman.

Shalinee Bhardwaj was born and brought up in the vibrant, historical National Capital Region of New Delhi, India. She is a botanist by education, a teacher and educator by profession, and a perpetual learner and researcher at heart. Formerly a lecturer in the Department of Education, University of Delhi, she has written and co-authored several technical papers on education, botanical research, and the environment.

