

Eric S. Cohen

Emerging from a Dark Wood

A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue
by Wendy Shalit. The Free Press, New York, NY, 1999.

Whether Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* will have a "comic" ending remains to be seen, but the book does resemble Dante's great *Comedia*: both works are elegantly written; both are written in three parts, mirroring the ascent of the soul from emptiness to love; and both begin in a "dark wood," an apt metaphor for the "world of postmodern sexual morality."

Shalit's stated purpose is "to restore the lost vocabulary of sex," but her book in no way resembles the sexual self-help books that top bestseller lists. This is truly a book about what it means to be human, and it is filled with tragic example after example that suggest we have forgotten how. It is a sobering critique of the sexual revolution from someone who has lived in its aftermath—and who, upon serious reflection, has found it dark, empty, and wanting, especially for women.

"I was born in 1975, and from anorexia to date rape, from our utter inability to feel safe on the streets to stories about stalkers and stalking, from teenage girls finding themselves miserably pregnant to women in their late 30s and early 40s finding procreation miserably difficult, this culture

has not been kind to women," she writes.

The feminist and sexual revolutions, which promised the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchy, turn out to have a rather mixed record. It is true that since the 1960s women are more powerful and more professionally successful than ever before. But at what cost? Are women really free?

The idea of "liberation" lies at the heart of the feminist metaphysic, the sexual revolution it inspired, and the postmodern culture that lingers in its wake. According to feminists, the cause of female unhappiness is a patriarchal society that subordinates and objectifies women. Female modesty, once the moral center of womanhood, is really just a form of "false consciousness" invented by men to deny women equal opportunities in the workplace, suppress female desire, and enslave women in the home. Since modesty in particular and morality in general are arbitrary constructs, all things are possible, once the prevailing cultural order is deconstructed and overthrown. This is, ultimately, the meaning of "liberation," at least on the surface.

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Divorced from tradition and nature and therefore bound by nothing, the “self” becomes the “touchstone of cultural judgment,” the new king of kings. In the postmodern world, self-fulfillment is the highest ideal and preservation of rights the singular political end. As *Cosmopolitan* magazine recently put it: “Let’s face it.... In this age of instant gratification, there’s something a little perverse about people who refuse to satisfy their deepest needs.” The only problem is that our deepest needs cannot be instantly gratified, and to believe that they can is to trivialize the human soul and blur the traditions, codes of conduct, and moral ways of knowing that once grounded human life by preserving the sacred.

Modesty, Shalit argues, is an ideal that we have wrongfully abandoned, a natural virtue that preserves the mystery of the erotic, enchants the relations between the sexes, and cultivates the natural differences between them. Modesty not only makes us civilized, it makes sexual love holy again, and so reconnects human sexuality with the deeper human longing for wholeness, connectedness, and purpose. Modesty is not only useful, but natural, and it is the only serious alternative to an androgynous, “anything goes” culture where everything is possible because nothing matters.

“We want our dignity back, our feminine mystique back, and along with it, the notion of male honor,” Shalit writes, speaking on behalf of a disheartened generation.

The feminist metaphysic, by contrast, defies the claims of human nature, perverts history, and betrays a sad coarseness about what it means to be human. It is rooted in the false notion that enlightenment is the singular privilege of the present and requires an overthrow of the misguided past. Accordingly, feminists claim that women have always been oppressed—that is, until feminists came along in the 1960s to liberate

them. This view, which claims to be on the side of women, does not give civilized women of the past four millennia very much credit. As Shalit asks: “[W]hich, really, is the more misogynist view: the view that for all of world history women have been idiots, or the view that...thinks we have only gone overboard in the blip of the past thirty years?”

Feminism equates equality of the sexes with sameness, and so attacks the natural differences between men and women as socially constructed, as the patriarchy conspiring to keep women enslaved. But even simple biology should hint to the real differences between the sexes, which have revealed themselves in deeper ways throughout history. And yet, if one accepts the feminist argument for a moment, it appears that feminists want to become the evil creatures—men—that have oppressed women all this time. In their redefinition of womanhood, feminists embrace their own presentation of the pleasure and power-seeking male as the new androgynous ideal, the new goal of equality. Liberated from morality, men and women can have sex without rebuke, but sex has lost its deeper meaning, its mystery, and its obligations. Everything is possible, but nothing is sacred. The sexes are equal, and their love lives are equally unsatisfying.

“We thought we could have everything and everyone,” Shalit writes, “and really we came up with nothing. ‘If it feels good do it,’ was the motto of the sixties, and after we did it, we found it no longer felt good.”

In place of modesty, an entire etiquette of sex has developed to fill the void, mostly oriented around maximizing pleasure and minimizing emotional involvement. Again, sex is defined by the boorish male, which serves, paradoxically, as both the feminist image of oppression and the new feminist ideal. As Naomi Wolf puts it, “There are no good girls, we’re all bad girls now.” Embar-

rassment, the natural response to the crossing of sacred boundaries, to the encounter of innocence with the mystery of sex, becomes a “hang-up” that must be overcome. Shame, the uniquely human capacity to recognize the distance between our animal passions and our highest nature, is abandoned, replaced by a shameless culture of prurient talk shows. And when all else fails, the therapeutic culture prescribes Prozac—“a pre-emptive strike against any real emotions”—where there are no emotional struggles or disappointments because nothing matters. It is a Brave New World, where happiness is scientific, sex is free and easy, and the differences between the sexes no longer exist.

In the end, however, human nature cannot be denied. As Shalit puts it, “We can never succeed in curing men and women of being men and women...and so these differences emerge anyway—only when they do, they emerge in their crudest, most untutored form, such as swearing, stalking, and raping. And then we are shocked, and conclude that men must be evil.” She quotes Rousseau, who predicted the outcome of the uni-sexual society two centuries ago: “The more women want to resemble them, the less women will govern them, and then men will truly be the masters.”

Ironically, but not surprisingly, feminists oscillate between life as a “femme fatale” and life as a “victim,” with neither offering “a positive content to womanhood.” The “beauty myth,” which feminists argue is the result of the “objectifying male gaze,” is really the result of denying modesty’s natural claim, and the deeper meanings it both protected and affirmed.

“These pressures to be perfect and thin and have no laugh lines, all while balancing a career and a perfectly orgasmic sex life without any hang-ups—were not be-

queathed by the patriarchy. It was our eagerness to abandon those codes of conduct which informed our lives and grounded us, the ones that pointed to what is truly important,” Shalit writes.

As Shalit brilliantly illustrates, the modest culture and the modest woman are not oppressive and oppressed, but dignified, respectful, and erotic—not in the “free love” manner of the sixties, but in a way that preserves romance, wonder, and the sacred character of human love. A modest culture is one in which men respect, indeed revere, women; it is one in which the dignity of the modest, self-respecting female civilizes and humanizes the male’s “undifferentiated lust.” Most importantly, it is a culture that respects and cultivates the natural differences between the sexes, and the beautiful and complementary character of masculine and feminine.

“Our choices are always ‘given’ to us in some sense,” Shalit concludes, “and as long as they are going to be given, why not have them given to us by God, by traditions that hold warehouses of stored wisdom, rather than by Gallup polls.”

That said, the post-feminist dilemma is a serious and important one: How do we preserve and cultivate the masculine and the feminine in a society where men and women attend the same schools and compete for the same jobs? How do the sexes relate to one another in courtship, in marriage, and as parents? How do the natural differences between the sexes inform our choices and our culture? There is no simple answer to these questions, but a return to modesty and chivalry, not to mention the tradition of self-understanding that feminists have rejected as mere “patriarchy,” is an important start. After all, Shalit jokes, “I don’t see why our parents should get to have a monopoly on sexual revolutions.”