

The Diplomat's Daughter: on Domestic Affairs

Ariane Sommer explores the myths of modern muliebrity.

No generation before us has simultaneously had such an abundance of options and such an utter lack of protocol concerning the game of mating and dating.

The dispelling of traditional gender roles and the emanation of new, ill-defined ones in the post-feminist era have left many of us in a confusion of paradoxical expectations that vacillate between the egalitarian and the traditional. A plethora of media have become devoted to commenting about the issue in a relentless attempt to define its essence. I have lost count of how often the 'New Man' or the 'New Woman' has been fanfared from glossy magazine titles and broadsheets. Between the metrosexual and the 'retrosexual', the 'alpha vamp' and the 'desperate housewife', what reigns is downright confusion.

Life in the days of yesteryear, when our grandparents were looking for a partner, was not nearly as problematic as it is today. The rules were simple back then. Ladies would demurely wait for men to ask them out, permitting men to pay for the dates, and quicker than you could say yours truly, marriage was brewing on the horizon.

A closer look at gender-role stereotypes from the past unearths a rigid view that each sex has a particular emotional and mental make-up on which behaviour is based. These gender roles, or sexual scripts, were adhered to as strictly as an actor sticks to his lines. They designated the role of the male as taking possession of the object of desire and the female as serving as the object of desire. Men were taught to be proactive in initiating sexual advances and women were brought up to resist, or refuse them. And if 'love' were in the air, they would finally give in and snare their man.

With the vital social emancipation of woman in the last 20 years in the modern world, these stereotypes have become obsolete. Since they have not yet been replaced with a generally accepted set of new rules, they secretly are still resonating in many people's heads.

Many women, like the archetypes portrayed in 'Sex and the City', feel empowered nowadays – financially,

socially, sexually, and otherwise. They are able to conceive later and have sexual liberties unparalleled in contemporary society. The Mosuo are a small ethnic group of about 50,000 people living in a land the Chinese call 'The Kingdom of Daughters', in the Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. They trace their lineage through the female side of the family, since it is not always clear who the father of a child is.

Women choose their mate for a night, a year, or a lifetime (according to their desires), and men have little to say about this. Women run the households, control the money, and also own the land and property that they will have inherited and will eventually pass on to their clan sisters and daughters. They have become their own providers and see no more need for holding back on their desires. A trait that was hardly de rigueur for a lady in the past.

In the olden days women liked to pretend to faint or ever so accidentally drop a scented handkerchief – whoops, how clumsy – to the floor to get closer to the object of their desire. Nowadays 'The return of the femme fatale' gets hailed in the media.

Men who still cling to more traditional gender roles feel threatened by this reinstated archetype of femininity. The 'new' woman is seen by some as a frightening sexual aggressor. The hunter, all of the sudden, feels hunted.

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Reality though, often can look rather different. 'Me Tarzan, me conquer Jane' is still, sadly, the mantra of many men. But 'Me Jane, sitting stupidly at bar for two hours waiting to get approached and going home alone' still appears to be the modus operandi of many single women who, ironically, are not yet quite sure what to make of their new freedom. I personally am a staunch proponent of fortune favouring the bold. Either a man wants to go out with a woman or he doesn't. If she asks him and he does, they'll go out. If he does not like her he can say 'No thanks' and she can move on.

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This of course does not mean a woman should clobber a man over the head and drag him back by his hair to her cave. Women have to learn to live with the consequences of rejection, a feat men have perfected over the last millennia. Nor does it mean I am an advocate of testosterone spewing females who try to out-butcht their male counterparts. Every so often subtlety does the trick. Sometimes the best hunter disguises as prey...

While I am not in favour of splitting every bill right down the middle, as a working woman I don't think it is necessary for a man to whip out his wallet for every movie ticket, cappuccino, and round of martinis. It is all about balance.

Although it is acceptable for a woman to initiate first contact, men should not confuse this new assertiveness with an anything-goes attitude. Gallantry is still highly valued. Yes, even after demanding equal pay, sexual freedom, and to take care of ourselves, we still want the dashing gestures, the tenderness, and the care. The damsels might not be in distress anymore, but bravery, chivalry, and politeness rank high on the check list of a desirable partner in life – or between the sheets.

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As far as sex is concerned, while many women have their hearts set on Mr Right for the future, in the present they are having fun and experimenting with Mr Right Now. In my opinion a good thing, for it is important to know what you don't want in the first place in order to be able to hold on to what you do want once you find it. In this vein women have dismissed many of the dusty mating and dating rituals, living by new principles instead. Men are well advised to be more direct and honest about what kind of a relationship they want and about their desire for sex. They would be surprised how being consistent, and doing what they say they will, might get them what they want far more often than scheming, games, and deception. The same applies in turn for women, of course.

New freedom brings new responsibilities towards others. The golden rule should not be 'who has the gold rules', but to ensure to leave every person who crosses our path in life feeling better for knowing us, and not deceiving them. Essentially, treat others just as you wish to be treated. If social, and especially sexual, encounters are looked upon like uncontrolled spinning plates then eventually, one by one, every one falls and smashes on the floor.

As with all other things in life, honesty and integrity are at the core of good style. Good style, in its essence, being an extension of inner kindness. **SL**

The Diplomat's Daughter™

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