

### **A Cultural Theme**

Although *purdah* – the seclusion of women – is a well-known feature of Muslim culture, in Fernea's *Guests of the Sheik* the often violent or lethal consequences of a woman violating *purdah* or acting in a way that sully her honor run throughout the book, showing the serious nature of this aspect of Muslim culture and the extreme importance of a woman's honor. The first evidence of this is the constant referral to women being beaten for not being good wives, such as when Laila and two other women come to teach B.J. how to cook rice – a necessary skill for an honorable wife – so her husband, Bob, will not beat her (pgs. 78-79). The casual mention of this threat of violence against the women occurs regularly, as the way things are meant to be. Another more extreme example is mentioned when B.J. observes the marriage rituals and relates that if a bride turns out not to be a virgin, as evidenced by no blood-stained sheet, she can be killed or her life ruined (pg. 148). Laila even recalls this happening within her lifetime. Again this shows that it is not just a woman's honor at stake, but her life as well. The final example of the connection between a woman's honor and her life is much more immediate to B.J. and involves the trip to the country side that B.J. and Laila take with Aziza and Aziza's cousin. What seems like an innocent trip becomes serious when they return home and Mohammed informs B.J. that Laila could be beaten or killed because Aziza's cousin was not very respectable (pg. 262). Again, from a western perspective one might think that the consequence of a mistake such as this is the sully of the woman's, or her family's, honor only, but actually her life can be at stake. Clearly, a woman's honor, and by way of it her family's honor, is a very serious

aspect of Muslim culture that shapes many of the events we observe in Fernea's *Guests of the Sheik*.