

LIVING

Small Talks and Inane Chatter

by Fayza Haq

WRAPPED in silks and chiffon, laden with pearls and uncut diamonds, our "begums" — with their sophisticated backgrounds, their expensive education and string of qualifications ranging from foreign finishing schools to MBBS and MBA — make it a point to flaunt themselves at various exhibition, cocktail party and formal reception. With outsize hairstyles and yard-long false eyelashes, these ladies indulge in the most insipid and puerile conversation that one can imagine. Lacklustre, languorous and lacking in matter, the thought content of their talks often fails to range beyond a weekly account of the set of "saris" and material for trouser suits acquired from London or Paris or the rumours of broken engagements and whispers of infidelity.



Well, not interested to prepare CVs

Scandal, gossip and tips on slimming, dieting or hairstyle remain the focal point of discussion along with new-fangled patterns for outlandish ornaments. If it is not a titter or a giggle over a childless marriage or an ensuing divorce, the minds of these ladies fail to be extricated from the morasse of hackneyed laments over the lack of servants — their petty pilfering and commissions — or the "in-law" problem, with demanding relatives overstaying and eating them out their house and home.

Matching the curtain shades with the furniture or the carpets appear to be a world crisis for some of our society ladies, as they gush and blush over their treasures of the dowries and wedding presents of their nieces of recently married younger sisters. Materialistic and mundane, the "begums" have little qualms about prattling about prices of cosmetics and expenses of coffee parties, when in the "bastis" only a few lanes away from their palatial bungalows of pleasure and leisure, hundreds can barely manage two square meals a day and are satisfied with the tattered hand-me-down clothes they receive as charity once in a blue moon.

The Ex-Femme Fatales
Prizes they won at gardening or Ikebana shows — where most of the work was actually done by the "mal" or the teen-aged poor relation — appear to be a palatable morsel of conversation for the distinguished one-upon-a-time femme fatales, who are now on the rampage to get suitors for their often selfish and impulsive, and inevitably pseudo-sophisticated daughters. The precious young female's playacting, piano-playing or paintdabbling efforts are inflated while the reputation of possible rivals

are played down and ripped asunder with righteous indignation and ferocity.

Meanwhile, if the "begum" is lucky enough to have a male heir in her "collection," she will be on an unhindered and much advertised hunt to share a docile young woman with a fair-face-cum-a-fortune as her "dowry" as her befitting daughter-in-law. Thus the conversation fluctuates from a hunt for a more economical and reliable cook or "aya", for the new addition in the family, to deciding which shade of "sari" to wear when visiting the prospective son-in-law's house. To hunt at the usual "halud" or musical for the new addition in the family tree appears yet another dilemma of enormous dimensions.

The expenditure over the unmarried younger sisters of the husband is another burning topic of the high priestesses of the decorum of high society, who flaunt the "Mirza" or "Nawabi" title hand in hand with the reproductions from the "Vogue" or "Harper's Hazaar" along with the sachets of expensive perfumes and fancy trinkets from New York or even New Delhi. To let the world of garden-parties, mah-jong or bridge sessions know that they enjoy the best of both the words — with the enormous bank accounts of their ever-obliging husbands to back them — appear to be the vital aim in these ladies' lives. There are no qualms about the blowing of the trumpet and flourishing of the fanfare about the family well-being. The lives of these well-fed and well-cared views of the wealthy ones revolve around cliques and clans, like some medieval creatures with limited visions. This is despite the fact that they have abandoned

the restrictions of the "burqa" long ago.

After Marriage

Even the younger wives in the upper strata of society who have had a progressive, rational and even near-intellectual approach while at school and college, ultimately marry the millionaire playboy. They then settle down to talk about the innumerable sets of richly worked from their dowry that the could go on wearing a new change of clothes every day, without any repetition. They proceed to flaunt how there is an "aya" each to look after the little ones at home, besides the entourage of "bearers", "khansamas", "chowkidars", a private "darzi" and chauffeurs. They will talk blithely about how many thousands they lost in a gambling session or at the race-course, or how the second Chevrolet or Mercedes at home is giving trouble and must be replaced by a new one, scheduled soon from the Germany or USA or whatever.

If it is not an opulent and shameless display of their excesses, they proceed with their experiments in tinting their hair or manicuring or pedicuring their nails and toes or going on a milk or cheese diet.

Seldom is the topic of conversation of the wives of bureaucrats, *nouveaux riches*, and the decadent pseudo-nobility, anything like current affairs. The country's foreign policy, scientific discoveries or experiments in poetry or even the science of cinematography. None bothers to take up a career — even a part-time one. Or if they do, and while they talk of it, it is dealt with strictly as some hobby or an added attraction to their feminine

charms. If Mrs X is asked why she shies away from serious subjects at casual get-togethers and functions, she replies: "I like to let men feel superior and not scare them off as some talkative self-opinionated brash, young women do today. A man feels that his superiority is at stake if his wife talks sensibly and like a pro on stocks and shares or the balance of payments". Well, that is a smug and sly minx-like thinking if there is one!

No Schoolmarm

"Well, how do you expect me to behave like some schoolmarm and talk 'clever' all the time?" Mrs Y asks indignantly when confronted with the same question. "It's a pity that I've lost my independence, in a way, having had the added responsibilities that marriage entails. While at a function, I'm worried sick about the children I've left at home though I have my mother-in-law and the servants to look after them. I feel the outings are a change to take my mind off the problems at home at the same time, so I let myself go and enjoy the evening. After all, a cocktail party is not a debating competition, in any case", she comments heatedly.

Mrs Z has her own line of defence: "O, I can see through the pseudo intellectual conversation borrowed from foreign books and news media. I see through the hollow conversations of some of our businessmen and self-conscious public figures — related to politics, education or the fine arts — who flirt with the so-called outgoing and liberated young things. All that 'high-browed' talk is a facade for shameless carrying-on of a mild affair in public". These flamboyant male characters — the talk of the town — belonging to the world of commerce, industry, and show biz, fail to charm the experienced woman, with their hollow bombasts and futile bravado", she insists with a knowing look and a bitter tone.

"I might appear overwhelmed and apparently incompetent to make lively conversation", Mrs So-and-so, yet another wife in the upper strata points out. "The parties are punctuations between the dullness of daily existence. Talking of feminine interests like clothes and jewellery takes the mind off many a disillusionment and disenchantment with life. You see, I'm not really such a happy person as you might believe me to be. I believe, in light conversation after the heavy notes of the reality of existence", the "begum" adds frankly.

Such is life for the many married women of our country — incredibly insipid and lacklustre.

The Next Move: Style Confidence

by SMS Joya

THE fashion world of the '90s is a complete blend of the '60s and the '70s retro: from capri pants, crop-tops and pencil skirts to dodgy flares, salin shirts and large collars. You have even tried to grow your hair long or straggly longish like Kurt Cobain and Bjork. But one trend only lasts through six months or one season at the most. Then, what is next? It is the punk rock movement of the '90s. The movement is 'Deconstruction' and it is not the endless recycling of retro trends.

The designer, Marlin Margiela, is a favourite of the fashion darlings and is called the next Gaultier or Lagerfeld of the '90s, what he actually does is pulls apart

old clothes and then reconstructs new ones. Where one dress is made from dresses the seams and fabrics mismatch. So, it seems that it is the return of the monochrome after too many gaudy Versace or paisley prints. White is obviously a common choice for basics but black is the ultimate mode again. "You can look sublimely in black without the fear of being called a yuppie, a 90th or a sad Morrissey — style indie-band loser" quotes the Sky magazine. Then again in '94 Gucci declared that after black, colour will be the most important fashion news.

When Vivien Westwood along with Malcolm McLaren

designed shirts that were pointed and patched with a blood-red portraits of Karl Marx in the late '70s, her shop was raided by police and the customers (young punks) were arrested and assaulted by skinheads. Now the same clothes are up for sale and worth twice as much as her current collection. So it is apparent that what the fashion world has come to now is a double-daring threshold. One can just amble past in the streets wearing anything that looks chic and with confidence. The saying goes: this is not so much the self decade as the look-into-yourself decade.

Rumour has it that the next century is going to be

ruled by India. Well, it is already starting to show in the fashion world. Where the west-meets-east it is flattering and accepted. Nehru-jackets were hot already in last summer and choti-sandals were posed for Max Mara in ELLE (March '94).

The Indian designers have already started working for the European market with accessories that are mainly eco-friendly and are a big-time collection.

Well, whether you go pseudo-religious or grunge or hippy, the hippest way to look this decade is being yourself and one last tip for the coming winter: mohair is going to be the maximum appeal this season.



Looking bright: Fashion in Bangladesh is coming up on Dhaka catwalks



— Star Photos

COOKERY

Pan-broiled Porterhouse Steak
1/2 teaspoonful salt
2 1/2 teaspoonful pepper
2 1/4 tablespoonfuls finely chopped onion
Salt
2 tablespoonfuls butter, or salad oil

Grilling steak between 3/4 in.-1 1/2 in. thick (allow 1/2 lb. per person) Pepper

Melt fat in a heavy seasoning and finally chopped brown steak quickly on both sides. Reduce heat and cook slowly until done, pouring off fat if necessary; sprinkle with salt and pepper to suit taste.

Hamburgers
1 lb. finely minced beef (allow 1/4 lb. per person)

Blend together meat, onion, mixing thoroughly, and shape into cakes. Melt the fat in a frying pan and cook for 10 minutes, turning carefully to brown both sides. The onion may, if liked, be cooked separately, and a little placed on top of each hamburger before serving.

Status

by Nico den Tuinder

"CAN I get a stapler?" I asked the man sitting on the other side of the desk. "Yes of course!" he answered. He rang his buzzer, and his assistant came into the office room. The aide opened a drawer, took out the required device, and put it on the glass plate of the desk. I took the apparatus, and started stapling myself. Everybody watched in utter surprise. Stapling was definitely not done.

Doing nothing. That is the main principle of seeking or emphasizing status in Bangladesh. When you have some work to do, let somebody else do it. Hire an army of servants or tea boys. Employ a 'deputy' or an 'assistant', or get a 'helper'. Then say you are too busy with your work to do the cooking and cleaning yourself, or call yourself a 'senior officer'. Stress this by putting a lot of files on your desk, preferably in a completely disorganised way. "I am too busy to clean up this mess." Let people wait. The more people around your working place who anxiously wait for a moment of your valuable time, the better. Never type out a letter yourself. Call for your 'deputy', and tell him to sit with the typist to get the work done. "Typing is too difficult for me."

But there is more to it. Status-seeking can be counterproductive. Everybody complains about the traffic jams in Dhaka, but nobody walks short distances, with the exception of the very poor. In offices, the boss is always right, even when he is wrong. He does nothing himself, and lets everybody wait. The result: near-zero productivity.



The Looks



Storm in the eyes: And she gets going with comfortable... Courtesy: ELLE

OUR social ethos is at present in a state of flux. This change affects our urban societies all the more. In this city, as in other urban areas, this presents a pervasive problem for young people in the form of peer pressure. In our social set-up, the present-day indiscipline and waywardness among young people is largely attributable to the ugly side of peer pressure.

In place of the conventional social values, which are gradually eroding, a distressing picture seems to be emerging in which television, movies and new trendy music make drinking, drugs and under-achievement look care-free and fun. Teen-agers argue in justification that "everyone is doing these things." Peer pressure in such circumstances becomes an important factor in encouraging delinquency in young people.

Admittedly, there are social factors responsible for this state of affairs. The scope for healthy recreation for young people is shrinking all over the city. This leaves them to their own devices for passing their free time. Such alternative means are often found to be injurious in our social context.

Many parents feel powerless to make a difference in this gloomy picture, though in the opinion of experts, the parents are actually in the best position to help their children resist troublesome urgings from their peers. According to psychologists, parents are the most important influence on teens, especially those in their early teens, and their involvement

Protecting Your Child from Peer Pressure

by ASM Nurunnabi

is the crucial element in the child's ability to resist peer pressure.

In majority of cases, the parents being placed in economically strained circumstances fail to play the role expected of them on account of various problems of their own. Firstly, the problem of insufficiency of living space for a large number of urban families creates cramped



The kid needs help

environ in which their children find little scope for pursuing their hobbies and interests. The prevailing atmosphere in schools is similarly discouraging. Lack of playing space in most of the schools, absence of incentives for culture of reading habits at home or in the school library, or encouragement of cultural activities among them leave an aimless fall-out effects which prove damaging to the growth of healthy habits or outlook in their life. In some cases, both the parents remain engaged in outside jobs from sheer financial necessity.

The absence of parents from homes leaves a measure of freedom for their children which, in most cases, is found to produce undesirable results. The absence of adequate control over their offspring in such circumstances tends to make the latter undisciplined and easy prey to peer pressure for undesirable activities.

Experts make some suggestions which may help parents to create self-confidence in their children in taking to drinks or drugs or skipping school or college. Their suggestions are on the following lines:

i) To really know your child's well-being, you need to listen and understand and not just hear his problems. Parents who exert that extra effort can make a major dif-

ference in their children's lives.

ii) For your child, it may be frightening to be different, to risk ridicule or loss of friends. Parents should help diffuse the child's fears by explaining the possible outcome of his actions. It should be explained that friendship cannot be lost by refusal of indulging in hard drinks really cause disdain and rejection. It should be explained that friendship will not be lost by a mere refusal of hard drinks.

Children are more likely to listen once they realise that adults face similar peer pressure too. A parent who withstands pressure provides an invaluable lesson.

iii) Parents can decrease vulnerability by bolstering the child's sense of self. Ask his/her opinions, trust him/her to perform tasks appropriate for his/her age and treat what he thinks, says and does with importance. The heightened self-esteem that results can help a child risk being different from peers and to say "no" when it counts.

Another way to build his self-esteem is to encourage your child to get involved in a hobby, volunteer work or part-time job. These activities can also combat boredom and help your child to meet new friends with similar interests, talents and positive ways of dealing with stress are less likely to yield to others.

iv) When your child's assertiveness and decision-making falter, it is the job of the parent to step in.