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***Mothers of Invention, Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War.* Drew Gilpin Faust. New York, New York: Vintage Press, 1996. 257 Pages**

In Mothers of Invention, Drew Gilpin Faust has written a colorful history of the “Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War”. This informative study allows the reader to gain important insight into the life of privileged women of the south, through the eyes and in the words of the women themselves. Through the use of diaries, newspapers, political documents and expressive letters, Faust presents a variety of Confederate women whose lives were redefined by the societal upheavals caused by the Civil War.

The book, which contains eleven chapters, effectively explains how the civil War influenced and changed the privileged and educated women of the slave holding south. It is successful at analyzing how gender, race, and deteriorated and then transformed from the outset through the end of the military campaign.

The introduction leading into chapter one, portrays the platform for which these women stood before the war and leads the reader through the inevitable changes that arose out of necessity. Foust outlines their relationships in society prior to the firing at Fort Sumter and explains that from the very beginning, many women realize that their lives would be forever altered.

A major theme introduced in chapter one and subsequently interwoven throughout the book, is that of societal differences between the women of the north from that of

the south and how it related to their reactions to the war. Most privileged women of the south defined themselves in regards to the institution of slavery and the status that it afforded them. With the destruction caused by the Civil War the author maintains that the southern elite women faced social and personal upheaval which the northerners could not compare. She successfully illustrates that they stood to lose not only their homes and family but also their social standings and their traditional gender roles. The tough realities of the war and the social upheaval, pressed the southern women to come to new understanding of themselves and to redefine the meaning of what it meant to be a southern women.

Faust begins chapter one with the question “What Shall We Do?”¹ This involves the reader into the discovery of how women of the south were going to confront the crisis which loomed over them and what sort of changes were in store. Faust elects to give first hand accounts of how women dealt with issues such as adjusting to their men going off to war, the battle they fought in order to join the common cause of the Confederacy and the changing ideas of the being a lady in the south.

The author uses such women as Lucy Wood, who wrote insightful letters to her fiancé, to give the reader deep insight into how southern women dealt with their feelings of abandonment and the internal struggle to overcome self-doubt. This one woman’s struggle illustrates much more than just the lost of her mate but further how she had to deal with a new emerging role with politics.²

Faust further explores the growth of southern patriotism which began to spread like fire through the women of the south. This becomes evident as she presents the

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (New York: Vintage Press, 1996) 9.

² Faust 9-10

ceremony of sending males off to war. Women would encourage each other to be strong and to not show tears as their husbands, sons, or brothers left for war. One woman remarked that “It would unman them”³ This resolve in the face of their own difficulties back on the home front truly began to show women of the south as not just Southern Belles but further as active members of their Confederacy that was the backbone to the cause.

This period marked a massive movement of active citizenship on the part of southern women as they took up the role of the absentee men and became both politically and socially active. Faust describes the transition of the notion of self sacrifice which had formerly been held for a woman’s family to a shift to a noble sacrifice for the Confederacy.⁴ She describes not only individual women of extreme prowess who help to raise money to build ships but also gives ample attention to many whom who collected signatures and formed sewing groups to provide for the needy soldiers families.

Faust utilized both diaries and letters in order to build a picture of the changing households of women. Who at times were forced to move in with in-laws that were unruly as well as others who had to join with sisters or other women to share the expenses and burden of the household. Others, such as the Preston sisters of South Carolina who moved in with Mary Chestnut, found themselves living a more exciting and romantic life because of the raise in status that it afforded them.⁵

The author also gives a fair amount of attention to the newly arisen term: refugee, which arose during this time. Its negative connotation haunted the elite women of the south who sought to find refuge in non combative areas such as Texas. Faust explains

³ Faust 15

⁴ Faust 17

⁵ Faust 33

that the refugee tended to be the wealthy elite women of the south. This factor assigned a gender as well as a class identity to the word itself. According to the author, this identity began to make a division among the elite who voluntarily left their homes and those who had no other choice but to.⁶

Later in the book, Faust uses data from letters, newspapers, and diaries to portray the lives of the new working women. She presents how their new role as head of household transformed their position in society. While plantation women oversaw slaves and farming other upper and middle class women went out for the first time in search of work. Faust explains how the work gave the women a sense of usefulness that they did not feel at the outset of the war. More often than not however, it was more of a necessity than an act of patriotism that drove them to work.⁷

As the war waged on, Faust illuminates a shift in the role of women. She shows through documentation that some women had lost faith that their husbands would come home to them, while others wrote how they no longer depended on their husbands because they didn't feel that they understood the situation that they were placed in. With the use of diary entries one can catch a glimpse of the frustrations these women felt as their husbands failed to meet their needs.⁸

Religion was another major factor that was highlighted as a strong force that influenced southern elite women. They found it a form of comfort even in the midst of the battle that was raging around them. Faust notes "that political nationalism and religious mission came to seem all but inseparable."⁹ Many southern women believed

⁶ Faust 41

⁷ Faust 81

⁸ Faust 134

⁹ Faust 180

that the war would be determined by god and if it was a noble cause worthy of winning it would be so. They further looked to religion to make sense of their anguish and help deal with the tragedies that afflicted them and their country.¹⁰ Through the use of poetry, some expressed their weaknesses and frustration at their inability to make sense of the untimely deaths that God let happen..

Faust concludes that by the wars end the hardship and loss had produced an intense alteration in women's insight into the relationship between self and society. Their pain and loss brought about a new understanding of themselves as individuals with their own wants and needs which impacted the society and politics in the south.¹¹

The author expressed the loss of patriotism she believes was caused by the prolonged stress of the war and the toll it took on society. She believes that women began to lose their selflessness and began focusing on themselves and what they had lost. Words such as "worth" and "gain" were discussed by woman who now paid close attention to the cost of war. As an elderly Virginia woman stated "I cannot help being unpatriotic- to feel a little selfish sometimes-and regret our peace and comfort in the old Union."¹²

The epilogue closed with the same theme that started the book:"We Shall Never Be the Same".¹³ The author states through the echoing accounts of countless woman that they were all changed and altered by the war. They lost property, slaves, status, and an

¹⁰ Faust 181

¹¹ Faust 235

¹² Faust 240

¹³ Faust 248

old way of life that could never return to where it once sat. Many were forced to work while others struggled to deal in a world without slavery.¹⁴

Faust persisted that the gender identities in the south were still tied together by the presence of race issues which, she believes, placed women in the position of helplessness which led to the surrender to men for protection. These issues the author contends prevented the white women from challenging the patriarchal society and held back their political progress.¹⁵

Drew Gilpin Faust who is the first women president of Harvard University and also has her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania has proven herself as a respected historian on the history of the American South. In her book Mothers of Invention she artfully gives the reader insight into the lives of the privileged class of women on a broad scale. Although there are some generalizations for their reaction to the Civil War, it does clearly give insight into how the lives of these women would have forever changed. With the vast array of documentation including newspapers and other political accounts collected by the author, the reader is able to grasp the challenges that faced and changed a variety of women in the south.

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¹⁴ Faust 255

¹⁵ Faust 256