Chapter Four
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF ALTERNATIVES
FOR THE POWERLESS WOMAN

It is possible to escape the reality of our day-to-day lives. Day
dreams, theoretical possibilities, madness, or dreams while asleep
are all ways to escape the 'massive facticity' of the reality of everyday
life. The powerless woman may experience her powerlessness in the
reality of everyday life, and escape into a world of fantasy where she
is the powerful one, or indulge in myths about the powerful Amazon
women, or dream that she has all the power of the world in her hands.
But, compared to the reality of day-to-day life, "other realities appear
as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount
reality...... The paramount reality envelops them on all sides, as it
were, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality
as from an excursion" (1). On return from the 'excursion' the reality
of day-to-day life confronts us once again, making the reality of the
excursion seem tenuous and ephemeral.

Individual attempts at changing the condition of the powerless
woman are looked at in similar fashion. The individual concerned could be viewed as an exception to the rule, or as a mad person. In the former case, the exception might, at most, serve as a 'role model', but the rule continues inexorably despite the exception. In the latter case, the individual is dismissed as belonging to another world (i.e. the world of madness), and so does not pose a threat to the reality of everyday life.

Studies reveal the ambivalence that women attempting to change their powerless situation experience (2). The global picture remains one that features the powerless woman (3). Legislated and institutionalized changes have been lacking in potency (4). Changes remain 'enclaves of meaning' within the paramount reality of everyday experience.

Therefore, it is important for those who wish to work out alternatives for woman, to construct the means to sustain the reality of these alternatives. This is one reason why it is very difficult for initiatives to succeed when they are single-handed; alternatives require an ambient in which the reality of everyday life can be
adequately countered. It requires a group of like-minded individuals to construct an alternate world. The reality of everyday life is a social construction, and this is what gives it the 'massive facticity' with which we are confronted. Therefore, alternatives to this reality also must be social constructions, if they are to be equally potent. This is how a subculture — or, more accurately, a contraculture (5) — comes into being. It is the social construction of a viable alternative to the reality of everyday life as conventionally practiced.

The social construction of alternatives could have varying degrees of efficacy, depending on whether the subculture forms the total social world of the members or not. "In their strong form, subcultural membership is synonymous with social identity: what are you? I'm a Hell's Angel...For the Hell's Angel devotes all his time to being and expressing that fact...Subcultural membership may then form a total identity either because that is what is desired, or because of the stigmatizing reaction of others (in the Hell's Angel case, probably both)" (6). In this case, the subculture becomes the 'paramount reality', since this is the reality of everyday life for the Hell's Angel. The reality of everyday life as it exists for those outside
the subculture then becomes an enclave of meaning within the world of the Hell's Angel. Women who live together in their effort to work for the liberation of woman, may approximate this type of contraculture. Yet, the outside world impinges upon them as they move out of their commune, to go to work or to the market, and they cannot create a social world that is completely sealed off from the conventional world of everyday life, unless they establish a totally self-sufficient village or township that is entirely run along their ideals, and do not admit anyone else into it at all.

This would be an extreme case, and it has not yet been known to exist. But there is a continuum of approximations to this ideal. A woman's collective, like "Bailancho Saad" in Goa (7), may have women who live in the reality of conventional everyday life, and make regular excursions into the alternative world that they construct (perhaps this occurs only at times of meetings and activities), but it will already have the typical features with which such an alternative is created. However, these will be a milder version than in the extreme type. They will still be regularly returning to another reality, and the latter will occupy the majority of their conscious-
ness (unlike the women in the extreme case). This gives rise to several contradictions in their value-systems and choices, e.g. a woman may join a protest-march to decry the degradation of women in the Carnival festival in Goa, and yet attend the Carnival dance later that day. When a subculture forms the total social identity of an individual, there is much less of what according to Matza is 'deep-rooted ambivalence' — when the individual is not able to commit herself fully either to the reality of conventional everyday life, nor to the alternative value-system, but exists in a situation of drift, shifting between the two unacceptable systems (8). Conflict in values is inevitable for one living in two worlds. Apart from the conflict within the individual, however, two social realities emerge, and these also conflict with each other, at a social level.

The subculture can be seen as a group solution to individually felt problems. There can be various solutions to any single problem, and the group solution is one of these. Problems arise from two sources: the actor's "frame of reference" (i.e. his mental and moral make-up) and the situation (including his position in the social system, the role he plays in the social structure, and the different
opportunities that he gets accordingly) that he finds himself in. Solutions to these problems, therefore, naturally require a change either in the frame of reference or in the situation. Thus if one can't change a situation (e.g. a situation of starvation cannot be changed, because it is not possible to obtain a loaf of bread by legitimate means) one might attempt to change the frame of reference (e.g. reorient one's frame of reference in such a way as to justify an illegitimate means of obtaining the bread — stealing, for example), in order to solve the problem.

Faced with the coercive reality of everyday life, where it is taken for granted that woman is inferior/powerless as compared to man, women who think otherwise find themselves powerless to change the situation. The most perfect solution to this problem seems to lie in action that does not as yet exist in their cultural model. Subcultures are the innovations that are born to embody these new solutions.

The crucial condition for the emergence of these new cultural forms is the effective interaction of like-minded people who experi-
ence this problem and desire to find a solution to it. Individuals who share in this problem, gravitate toward one another and jointly establish new norms, new criteria of status, and new perspectives on women which re-define the perceptions that were taken for granted by the reality of conventional everyday life (9). The emergence of these group standards is the emergence of a new subculture.

The possibility of a subcultural solution depends on a number of favorable factors, and is endangered by numerous obstacles. Even though individuals may meet and interact with one another, potential concurrence is always problematical. Therefore, the interaction tends to take the form of a set of 'exploratory gestures': each one testing the receptivity of the other as she seeks to fulfill solutions to the problem as she experiences it. Each one takes the cue from the other, and together they 'build' upon their various reactions.

Thus the subculture is not so much the master-work of one dominant leader in the group, but rather, a process of mutual
conversion, an answer to the needs of all. Several members in the group contribute to its initial conception and growth. "There is a certain chemistry in the group situation itself which engenders that which was not there before, that group interaction is a sort of catalyst which releases potentialities not otherwise visible" (10).

However, this very innovation, or impulse to innovate, is in itself, a stimulus for anxiety. Therefore, the innovation occurs by very small increments, and each increment is so tentative and ambiguous as to permit the person concerned to retreat if the signs be unfavorable, and she/he does not want to continue with the 'joint exploration'. In the first stage of search, therefore, there is ample scope for withdrawal, without much social pressure being exerted by the others who are together in the search. It is a process of mutual exploration and joint elaboration of a new solution.

At a later stage, as the subculture begins to take shape, it becomes one of the most important 'reference groups' for each individual, and then it begins to exert a very strong hold on each one. Now they are no longer mere individuals, but members of a
group, and there grows an unspoken commitment between these members, which prevents them from leaving the group without becoming identified with an unpopular position. As the group grows closer, leaving the group would be tantamount to treason. Besides, all the persons who have remained till this stage, have contributed to the establishment of the subculture, and so there is generally little desire to leave. The group is the result of everyone's contributions, a "real emergent at group level" (11).

Subcultures may originate, live and die as subcultures, or they may originate as subcultures and then get institutionalized in some way. As subculture, it normally has more hold as an enclave of meaning within the paramount reality of everyday life.

Institutional groups do not normally have the same efficacy, unless the institutionalized form that the subculture has taken is that of a highly motivated mass movement.

The subcultures that concern us are those contracultures that provide a route to power for the powerless woman. Like other
subcultures, they develop around certain focal concerns (12). The focal concern in a women’s contraculture (13) is the powerless woman — the battered wife, the raped woman, the degraded representation of woman in the media, etc. Women who band together, are concerned about these expressions of the powerlessness of woman, and attempt to analyse, find root causes as well as immediate solutions to the problem. They are concerned not only about solving these problems, but also in developing alternate social structures and ideologies where the social construction of woman will be different.

The group is very important in this process. For many of these people, this form of response would not be available if it were not socially legitimized and given a kind of respectability, albeit by a restricted community of fellow-adventurers (14). Social consensus gives our frame of reference a certain validity. “For every...role there are certain kinds of action and belief which function as truly and effectively as do uniforms, insignia and membership cards, as signs of membership... However much we may speak of tolerance of diversity and respect for differences, we cannot help but evaluate
others in terms of the measure of their agreement with ourselves. With people who think and feel as we do we are relaxed. We do not have to defend ourselves to them...But in dissent there is necessarily implied criticism, and he who dissents in matters the group considers important inevitably alienates himself to some extent from the group and from satisfying social relationships" (15). The importance of the subcultural group arises from the fact that the reality of everyday life exerts great pressures towards conformity and if we are to break through these pressures, we have to be ready to face total 'anomie', or shop around for a group that provides the benefits that we are losing by opting out of the conventional world. Being at odds with the established social order generates tension for the deviants, and during this period of stress a subculture acts as refuge. “Collective support can provide reassurance, security and needed validation of a frame of reference toward which the world at large is hostile and disapproving” (16). The group provides a sense of belonging, social validation, solidarity, and the possibility of an alternate reality of the everyday world.

Contracultures are normally characterized by close relation-
ships within the group, heightened interaction, and it might even have certain expressive symbols (special vocabulary, certain ways of dressing, ornaments, etc) that integrate the group from within (17).

Subcultures are expressive forms “but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives” (18).

Central to the formation of subcultures is a body of norms that are particularly its own. These norms are power-generating strata-gems. They include knowledge, beliefs, values, codes, tastes and prejudices. The degree of internalization of these norms, prescriptions for behaviour and description of the world (i.e. world-view), will spell out the comprehensiveness of the reality of the alternate everyday world.

As in the case of the social construction of the reality of day-to-day life, the social construction of contracultures is also affected by its temporal and spatial location. Each contraculture has its own specificity, its own ‘distinctive flavour’. “It has its characteristic niche in our social structure; elsewhere it does not ‘catch on’ ”(19).
It is spontaneous in character, growing indigenously. There may be similarities between one women's commune and another, or a certain women's collective and another, but in so far as they are not mere branches of an overarching institution, but truly contracultures in this sense, then they will have a special character of their own.
REFERENCES

(1) Berger and Luckmann, op.cit., pg.39

(2) See, 'Agony and ecstasy of the working woman' by D. Kanaka Durga and 'The changeless world of the changing woman' by C.K. Meena in "Documentation on Women's Concerns" (Jan to March 1993), Sandarbhini, New Delhi, pgs. 24-26 and 63-64 respectively.

A case study in U.P. puts it well when it says that changes among the women being studied were discovered to be a thin veneer over a basically very traditional perspective. See Sharma et al, "Women in Focus", op.cit. pgs.62-66.

(3) See 'Thereby hangs her tale', by Shoma Chatterji in "Documentation on Women's Concerns" (Jan to Mar '93), op.cit. pgs. 60-61.

The International Labour Organization of the United Nations
surveyed twenty-three industrialized countries and found that as many as one in twelve women in those countries were forced out of their jobs after resisting sexual harassment. "Documentation on Women's Concerns" (Oct-Dec 1992), op.cit., pg.38.

(4) In India, several laws have been passed with the hope of improving the lot of Indian women. For instance, recently Parliament introduced far-reaching changes in criminal law, and section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in 1983, now allows legal action to be taken against husbands and relatives of the husband of a woman who is subjected to cruelty. Yet, a negligible percentage of women avail of this legislation, and wife-beating is on the increase. See the section on 'Exploitation and Violence' in "Documentation on Women's Concerns" (Jan-June 1991), op.cit., pgs.36-44.

Institutionalized change has been attempted in India, by way of the Mahila Mandals. While these do provide a forum for a large number of rural women to gather together and discuss certain things, their efficacy as instruments of change in the
social position of women is doubtful. See 'Do Mahila Mandals help women's development?' by Bhargavi Nagaraja, in "Documentation on Women's Concerns" (Jan-Mar 1993), op. cit., pg. 40.


Yinger coins the term contraculture to avoid confusion, since the term subculture is used in such a number of ways. Contraculture is a subculture, too, but one that connotes a certain amount of friction and resistance. I have used the broader term, subculture, through most of this chapter, since I refer to various sociologists who have employed this term (meaning, by it, contraculture). However, subculture is a very broad term, and includes any group that is a 'subset' of the larger culture, for instance, a youth group, or a workers' group — any group that has norms and values that are particularly its own.

"Bailancho Saad" is a women's collective in Goa. It began as a member of the joint front, "Jagrut Goenkarachi Fauz" (meaning 'Army of Vigilant Goans'), formed mainly to fight the expansion of the Tourism industry in Goa. However, being a women's collective, they carried on independent activities to focus the attention of people on the adverse impact of the tourism industry on women. This led to a broader scope of activities concerning women. For instance, when the Golden Tobacco Company (GTC) launched its new cigarette "Ms" on the Indian market in 1990, claiming that it was a 'woman's cigarette', Bailancho Saad attacked GTC's ad campaign — first through the media, and then by disfiguring billboards that advertised the 'exclusively hers' product. GTC had targeted Goa for its campaign. (For a report on this issue see "Documentation on Women's Concerns", Jan-June 1991, op.cit., pg. 62.)
(8) Matza, David "Delinquency and Drift", University of California, Berkeley, 1964. He sees the formation of subcultures from an original point of view.

(9) Albert Cohen is considered the 'father of subcultural theory'. It was he who first worked out a detailed theory of subcultures, to explain the phenomenon of gangs formed by juvenile delinquents. Many of the ideas I deal with, here, have been inspired by his work, especially Chapter 3 — A General Theory of Subcultures — in his book, "Delinquent Boys: the Culture of the Gang", Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 1956.

(10) Cohen, op.cit., pg.139.

(11) ibid, pg.61.

Whenever I refer to subculture, I mean what Yinger referred to as contraculture. I have retained the use of the term subculture, because that is the term that most writers use, and reference to their work becomes unwieldy if I use any other term. However, the term subculture has been used as 'blanket term' to cover a very wide range of concepts. Yinger, who reviewed over a hundred books and articles that made use of this term, says that the term is used (very broadly) in three major ways: (i) in the sense of a substratum to culture, i.e. that which is natural to a human being and which one has prior to the acquisition of culture; (ii) that which refers to normative systems of sub-societies, i.e. a sub-group with traditional sub-society norms, and which refers more to differentiation within a society; and (iii) that which refers to emergent norms that appear in conflict situations. This latter he named contraculture. I use the term occasionally to make it clear that of all the varied meanings of the term subculture, this is the meaning that is currently being used in this thesis.

Cohen, op.cit. pg.135.
(15) ibid, pg.57-58.


(17) Hebdige, Dick "Subculture: the meaning of style", Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1979. Hebdige claims that oppositional subcultures are a challenge to hegemony, but this challenge is "not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style." This style consists of several possible expressions, among them being "gestures and movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority' which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus." pgs. 17-18.

(18) ibid, pg.132.

(19) Cohen, op.cit. pgs. 18-19.