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Madawi Al-Rasheed

Excerpt

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Introduction

The 'Woman Question' in Saudi Arabia

Saudi women often conjure up contradictory images. They are either excluded, heavily veiled victims of their own religion and society, or wealthy, glamorous, cosmopolitan entrepreneurs benefiting from inherited wealth and state education. Notwithstanding these sensational stereotypes, the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report demonstrates that Saudi women lag behind in economic participation and political empowerment, although in health and educational attainment they may achieve better scores. The country has a very high gender gap index, ranked at 129 out of 134.¹ Saudi women remain excluded from full participation in society, despite a recent increase in employment. In 2008, the unemployment rate for women was high, reaching 24.9%.² Their employment opportunities increased during a four-year period, but women remain underrepresented in the economy in general. Their economic marginalisation is combined with strict rules that affect their lives as women. Their movement, educational choices, employment, and even health are subject to decisions made by their male guardians. In the West, the ban on women driving attracts attention and comment, but the deep-rooted exclusion of women and their subordination at the legal, social, political, and economic levels remains perhaps unmatched in the Muslim world.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, an early generation of educated Saudi women highlighted their plight and scrutinised

¹ Ricardo Hausmann, Laura Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report*, Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2010.

² Patrice Flynn, 'The Saudi Labour Force: A Comprehensive Statistical Portrait', *Middle East Institute*, 65, 4 (2011), pp. 575–86.

their own subordination through a plethora of literary texts, fiction, poetry, and editorial essays. It must be noted that girls' mass education started as late as 1960, thus delaying the development of awareness and articulation of the 'woman question', itself a reflection of Western socialist feminist thinking on gender inequality in capitalist society.³ A handful of early female literary figures benefiting from education in neighbouring Arab countries spoke as women, but their voices failed to reach a mass audience. Many women published their poetry, novels, and essays in Cairo and Beirut. When they wrote in the local press, many used pen-names. But they were the nucleus of a small emerging intellectual community. Their awareness of their subordination and reflections on their own marginalisation failed to reach the rest of the female population. The voices of this first generation of educated women remained marginal. In the 1970s, Saudi society began to enjoy the many opportunities, services, and benefits of the new oil wealth without concerning itself with serious questions relating to political and civil rights and gender equality. The ban on independent associations, mobilisation, and weak organisational potential, still observed today, prevented women from developing into a pressure group to push for greater equality and an end to exclusion at a time when Saudi Arabia was just beginning to enjoy the benefits of sudden wealth. We may find answers to questions regarding why Saudi women were keen to engage with writing at a time when they were completely excluded from the public domain. Bourdieu reminds us that women are drawn into 'the domain of production and circulation of symbolic goods (publishing, journalism, the media, teaching, etc.)'.⁴ This helps to explain why Saudi women have been active in teaching and in the production of literary texts at a time when their exclusion from other spheres of economic and political activity was severe.

Today the situation is different. We begin to hear multiple voices attempting to investigate the issue of women's status, and reaching out to society with calls for reflection on women's persistent marginalisation. Women are challenging society through daring voices, critical texts, and real mobilisation. With the expansion of communication technology and satellite television over the last decade, Saudi women are now part of the public sphere, inserting their campaigns and voices into the national

³ The concept of the 'woman question' has its roots in socialist feminism, in which women's domesticity in marriage is considered to be rooted in the economic realm of capitalist production. See 'The Woman Question', transcribed by Sally Ryan for Marxist.org, 2000 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/eleanor-marx/works/womanq.htm>.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 92.

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agenda. After decades of ignoring the ‘woman question’, both state and society recognise a problem, although there is still no consensus with respect to causes and solutions.

A Most Masculine State explores the interconnection between gender, politics, and religion that shapes and perpetuates the persistent exclusion of Saudi women. It identifies the historical roots of what might appear to outsiders as an extreme form of gender inequality, marginalisation, and exclusion. This problem remained ignored by historians of the country and social scientists until very recently, when the ‘woman question’ began to be discussed vigorously both within Saudi society and the international community.

GENDER, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

In other Arab countries where anti-colonial secular nationalism defined gender relations and the contribution of women to the modernisation of the nation, women found themselves incorporated in national projects and visions that had mixed results in contributing to improving their status and legal rights. As Deniz Kandiyoti reminds us, the liberation of women was used by secular nationalist elites as a symbol of progressive politics. As such, any adequate analysis of the position of women in Muslim societies must be grounded in a detailed examination of the political projects of contemporary states and their historical transformations.⁵ Even when states intervene in the private realm through the creation of new institutions and legislations, they often provide limited emancipatory potential. In her opinion, emancipation is dependent on democratic development and the strengthening of civil society. In the majority of post-colonial states in the Muslim world, the nationalist emancipatory project coincided with authoritarian rule and quasi-civil society organisations. The question of women and their emancipation persisted as an urgent project in the absence of serious change in women’s status. From Egypt to Iran and Turkey, Kandiyoti questions the rhetoric of secular nationalist elites who made the question of women central to constructing modern nations. When women are elevated to a special status, they become ‘privileged bearers of national authenticity’.⁶

⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State*, London: Macmillan, 1991.

⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, ‘The Politics of Gender and the Conundrums of Citizenship’, in Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics (eds.), *Women and Power in the Middle East*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, pp. 52–8, at p. 52.

Furthermore, nationalist struggle and its connection with anti-colonial liberation movements added another dimension in determining the position of women, who were constructed by nationalist elites as a 'gateway' for Western colonialism. Colonial discourse that singled out women as oppressed and in need of liberation was seen as yet another attempt to facilitate colonial penetration and subjugation. As a response, nationalist elites equally endeavoured to highlight the urgency of liberating women, and made it an important precondition for national renaissance. Yet, in this appropriation, women were endowed with the added burden of preserving national identity, tradition, and culture. Arab nationalist discourse in countries such as Egypt and Iraq among other places developed a paternalistic protectionist approach to gender reform.⁷ Education and participation in the workforce were considered essential for nationalist revival. According to Suad Joseph, national leaders from Atatürk to Nasser used women to imagine their communities as modern. As such, women became emblems of modernity.⁸ But authoritarianism remained anchored in the patriarchal sensibilities of constituencies as rulers cooperated with these constituencies to confirm the subjugation of women rather than challenge it. The state reinforced the control of sub-national communities such as tribes, ethnic groups, and sects over women.⁹

In some instances, but not always, the state endeavoured to break local loyalties around tribe, ethnic group, and religious circles, and transfer this loyalty to a central agency, namely the state itself. The regulation of women's private and public lives became important in this transformation. While the state may seem to liberate women from private patriarchy, it may also cooperate with certain conservative constituencies in order to perpetuate this control. The patriarchy of family and community can sometimes be reproduced in the public sphere. The role of the state in this evolution is well theorised in radical, Marxist, and liberal feminist debates. The state may be central in the resolution of certain key conflicts between private patriarchy (e.g. the domination of male relatives within the institution of marriage) and capitalist forces that aspire to free women's labour but at the same time confirm their domesticity. In the context of her analysis of Britain, Sylvia Walby challenges the limitations

⁷ Mervat Hatem, 'The Pitfalls of the Nationalist Discourse on Citizenship in Egypt', in Joseph and Slyomovics (eds.), *Women and Power*, pp. 185–211; Shereen Ismael, 'Gender and State in Iraq', in Suad Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, pp. 33–57.

⁸ Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship*, p. 6.

⁹ Joseph and Slyomovics (eds.), *Women and Power*, p. 13.

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of previous feminist approaches to state and gender, especially Marxist and liberal feminist perspectives. She reminds us that the state is both patriarchal and capitalist. Its intervention does not always generate the same outcomes across time and place. Nevertheless, the state may seek the preservation of patriarchal structures to promote capitalist development as it embarks on the regulation of employment, citizenship laws, fertility, marriage, divorce, adoption, and sexuality. The state may use legislation to free women to enter the labour force, but its intervention does not automatically lead to the elimination of gender inequality. On the transformation of patriarchy from the private to the public domain, Walby argues that ‘patriarchy changed in form, incorporating some of the hard won changes into new traps for women. Women are no longer restricted to the domestic hearth, but have the whole society in which to roam and be exploited’.¹⁰

Away from the specificity of the industrial capitalist world, in newly formed post-colonial states in North Africa, Mounira Charrad’s excellent differentiation between three phases in the relationship between national states and communitarian patriarchal structures is illuminating. She identifies a first stage when, after decolonisation, the state emerges in close alliance with tribal kin groups to adopt conservative family law, confirming private patriarchy (Morocco). A second phase follows whereby the state develops in partial alliance with tribal kin groups and stalls between alternatives before finally enacting a conservative family law policy (Algeria). In the third phase, in national state formation, the state evolves in relative autonomy from kin grouping and promulgates a liberal family law, expanding the legal rights of women (Tunisia).¹¹ As the historical analysis of gender relations within Saudi Arabia in this book will show, the Saudi state remains dependent on kin and tribal solidarities for its consolidation. The difference from the North African cases studied by Charrad is the historical alliance of the Saudi state with a different kind of solidarity – religious nationalism – discussed below. Despite breaking the military and political autonomy of the tribes after its formation, the state endeavoured to keep their tribal ethos, which, among other things, keeps women in a patriarchal relationship under the authority of male relatives. The state forged an ongoing alliance with the Wahhabi tradition and its ideologues, whose support and loyalty are still cherished for the

¹⁰ Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 200–1.

¹¹ Mounira Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

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stabilisation of the polity, obedience to monarchy, and the imagining of a Saudi nation. In return, it has not been possible for the state to become an autonomous agent, capable of moving towards any 'liberal' understanding of gender relations. Since the 1960s, the state has oscillated in its gender policies between severe restrictions and partial liberalisation, without being able to initiate progressive gender policies. Liberalisation came with many caveats that above all ensured that when women were freed from private patriarchy, the state would step in to regulate and control the outcome, often in favour of a conservative approach to gender relations.

In Egypt, historical analysis confirms that professional nationalists who worked within the state over more than a century appropriated the notion of family honour and elevated it to create national honour. As such, the state took over the guardianship of family honour from fathers and brothers.¹² Moreover, through extensive welfare women were drawn into the state as recipients of benefits that they had previously received from their kin. The state assumed the role of a control agency, shaping the prospect of women's emancipation and entitlement to benefits. Most post-colonial states in the Arab region championed women's causes, thus generating state feminism, often under the patronage of the wives and daughters of authoritarian leaders. Perhaps Jihan al-Sadat and Suzan Mubarak remain obvious examples. In Kuwait, female relatives of members of the ruling elite patronise women's charities and civil society.¹³ Since the 1960s, Saudi princesses have established charitable organisations that deal with education, orphanages, and other welfare services for women. These initiatives are not exceptions, but signs of a general trend in which the 'woman question' is often entangled with wider political issues that dominate the gender politics of nation states in the region.

The anti-colonial nationalism that emerged in countries from Egypt to India was a response to a historical moment of subjugation and loss of sovereignty. As such, there is a vibrant debate among scholars as to its origins and differences from the classical cases in Europe, especially those associated with eighteenth-century state-consolidation

¹² Beth Baron, 'Women, Honour and the State: Evidence from Egypt', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42, 1 (2006), pp. 1–20.

¹³ In her study of women's associations in Kuwait, Haya al-Mughni highlights the fact that these associations were an extension of the patronage networks cultivated with the ruling group. See Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender*, London: Saqi, 2001.

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projects. The classical theories of Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Benedict Anderson agreed on a modernist, instrumentalist, and constructivist approach privileging the role of elites, states, cultures, institutions (education, army), and language, often associated with top-down state initiatives or structural economic transformations triggered by industrial and capitalist development.¹⁴ Others, such as Anthony Smith, privileged cultural factors and the role of pre-modern *ethnie* that is at the core of nationalist projects.¹⁵ Yet these theoretical positions proved partially inadequate as frameworks to account for late anti-colonial nationalism. Here the work of Partha Chatterjee on India and Joseph Massad on Jordan are revealing despite their different interpretations. Nevertheless, both agree on the merit of situating this nationalism within the context of the colonial encounter. According to Chatterjee, Indian nationalism has culture at its heart and is by definition opposed to the colonial state. It combined an inherent contradiction between a Western modernist strand and anti-individualist, traditionalist longing for authenticity and continuity with a classical Indian tradition. Anti-colonial nationalism in India overemphasised a spiritual dimension underpinned by superiority to materialist Western dispositions, yet it aimed to combine material modernity with the glorification of an essentialised cultural tradition. Indian elites imagined their nation as capable of achieving this difficult task and strove to make it a reality. The glorification of Indian peasantry and past tradition was an integral aspect of this anti-colonial nationalism. The glorification of the Indian woman as repository of spirituality, perseverance, domesticity, and authenticity was from the very beginning paramount. The same woman must also embrace modernity, with education being the first avenue for emancipation.¹⁶

In contrast, Jordanian nationalism, according to Massad, was very much a top-down colonial project rather than an anti-colonial development. As a country, Jordan was a British invention, forged out of Transjordan in the 1920s. First, a state was created with an imported monarch,

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, New York: Verso, 2006.

¹⁵ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, London: Routledge, 1998.

¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

then a nation had to be invented with the help of two paramount institutions, the army and national law. Forging Jordanian nationalism depended on Bedouin culture, which was celebrated and romanticised in ways reminiscent of the glorification of the Indian peasantry, itself a fragmented and diverse constellation. Women came to the forefront with the invention of modern personal law, in which their status, marriage, divorce, and rights were fixed as if they were extensions of an authentic old Islamic tradition. The glorification of Bedouin culture was meant to homogenise the fragments, and more importantly to transfer loyalty from tribal chiefs and genealogically and primordially based traditional identities to the newly installed monarch and an invented Jordanian nation.¹⁷ The top-down project proceeded; but with time, bottom-up resistance and challenges from the constituencies that it was meant to homogenise and amalgamate as citizens emerged. Written tribal histories, manufactured by tribal intellectuals and produced in 'scientific' historiography and heritage manuals, competed for a place in the national narrative as legitimate claims to assert an autonomous tribal past and its relevance to the contemporary nation. The reinvention of Jordanian tribal genealogies and its fixing in textual sources, Andrew Shryock reminds us, reflects competition between a colonial invented nationalist monarchical narrative that draws on Bedouin heritage and bottom-up imagining of the tribal fragments that constitute the nation.¹⁸

AMBIGUITIES OF 'SAUDI' NATIONALISM

Where there were clear nationalist projects connected with state building in the Arab world, we find that the 'woman question' was a persistent preoccupation, the analysis of which was entangled with wider political projects and the invention of new states and anti-colonial struggles. But Saudi Arabia is a country where there was no anti-colonial struggle or secular nationalist movement. As such, it is perhaps controversial to invoke nationalism (in its European or Arab variants) as a framework to understand gender issues. Classical constructivist theories of nationalism in both Europe and the rest of the world fail to account for the imagining of

¹⁷ Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

¹⁸ Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

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Saudi Arabia, a country that was not conceived as a result of anti-colonial nationalist discourse (India) or colonial practices on the ground (Jordan) that amount to feeling, believing, and acting like a nation. The project of state building, following the violent conquest of Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (Ibn Saud) and directly linked to British imperial intervention after the First World War over almost thirty years, resulted in the amalgamation of regions, tribes, ruling elites, and chiefs into a state rather than a nation. In this respect, domination came without hegemony or consensus, but was articulated using the idioms and principles of nationalism, that is, the congruence between national and political boundaries, common culture, and language. Cultural specificity, regional identities, and sectarian and tribal belonging continue as lived realities, competing in the pursuit of narrow interest, and refusing to melt away under authoritarian rule and state constructions of a specific genre of nationalism, better understood as religious nationalism. Unequal distribution of oil wealth, together with weak notions of citizenship, contribute to exclusion and the perpetuation of narrow traditional identities. The country continues to call itself the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, an appellation that does not invoke a national identity or people but a reference to the Al-Saud family that brought it together in 1932. The contemporary Saudi project of building a nation, however, should not mask early rudimentary unsuccessful and short-lived projects that aspired to unite, narrate, and create an alternative to the fragmented Arabia of the past.

While all regions that became part of Saudi Arabia in 1932 were immersed in local identities, revolving around tribe, family, oasis, or city, an Islamic Arab national identity articulated by local Arab intelligentsia began to develop in the Hijaz early in the twentieth century. The cities of the Hijaz, mainly Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah, were the most ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan regions in Arabia. Nevertheless, the Hijaz produced a trend articulating an Arab Muslim identity developed in the context of Ottoman rule. This trend grew in the heart of well-established ancient links with Muslims from the Arab and non-Arab world.

From the nineteenth century, substantial networks of *ulama* and *madrasas* were established in Mecca. Muslims from all over the Islamic world found in the holy city a refuge, especially at times when nineteenth-century anti-colonial movements, mostly led by *ulama* activists, began to gather momentum. It was in Mecca where they rallied behind their cause and gathered funds, not only from their compatriots but also from other Muslims residing in the Hijaz.

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Muslims established endowments, orphanages, charitable foundations, and schools in the holy cities.¹⁹ Amidst this Islamic cosmopolitanism, local Hijazi cosmopolitan elites articulated the nucleus of an Arab Muslim identity.

It is in the context of the urban Hijazi cosmopolitanism in which indigenous inhabitants intermingled with other Arabs, Turks, Africans, Indians, and central and South East Asians that a discourse about an Arab Muslim identity was developed by elites who resided in the main cities. Like all those who espoused Arab nationalism in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Hijazi intelligentsia consisted of the elite who benefited from transnational connections with the Arab and Muslim world, the early introduction of schooling, civil service, and bureaucracy that grew around the Hashemite Sharifian emirate. The Hijazi elite, under Sharif Hussein, aspired to free the land of the Arabs from Ottoman rule, increasingly seen as a foreign Turkish occupation, and crown Hussein as king of the Arabs. The local Arab intelligentsia of the Hijazi cities took part in the wider articulation of Arab Hijazi heritage that was spreading across the northern Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in its eastern Mediterranean regions.

The establishment of the first Arabic school in the Hijaz in 1905, the al-Falah school, by the well-known merchant Muhammad Ali Riza (1889–1969), ironically belonging to an immigrant family from Persia, must have been a contributing factor. The Hijazi Arab nationalism that was endorsed by local Hijazis and other Arabs residing in the Hijaz was, however, different from the secular Arab nationalism of the same or later historical periods, for example 1950s Nasserism and 1960s Baathism. From the very beginning, Hijazi Arab nationalism was anchored in Islam, given the sacred status of the region and role of the Hashemites in its endorsement and propagation; both led to the 1915 British-supported Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

Under British-sponsored Saudi attacks on the Hijaz between 1918 and 1925, this intellectual trend developed into a political party that called for King Hussein to abdicate in favour of his son, Ali. From Jeddah, the formation of the Hijazi National Party (HNP) was announced by twelve activists who met in the house of a local notable, Muhammad Nasif, who later proved to be a Saudi loyalist. The party chose Muhammad Tawil as leader and Muhammad Tahir al-Dabbagh as secretary. All twelve

¹⁹ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 256.