

Preface

In 1998, a month long stay in Saudi Arabia in many ways helped shape my early perception of Arab women. Shopping malls at the Olyia High Street, the down town of the Saudi capital, buzzed with activity. Along with men delicately dressed in white robes were Saudi women attracting attention. They were a beautiful mix of tradition and modernity; for behind the veil were western garments. This explained why so many branded stores in the Saudi capital sold western outfits. But there was a reverse side also. At shopping malls were the Mutawwa, the religious police. '*Ghat, Ghat*', they demanded and insisted that the face be covered. On subsequent trips there was more time for interacting with Saudi women, visiting their homes and partaking of their kind hospitality whence understanding of Saudi women deepened.

Back home in India when I was planning to do a Ph.D. my inmates suggested that a Ph.D. in Arabic literature should be natural choice for me as I had an M.A. in Arabic. Should I select a less known or forgotten poet for my research? The idea did not interest me. I felt more inclined towards contemporary Arabia which I had seen with my own eyes and which since then had become a passion for me. It was a major decision to switch over to a cultural study. In fact, my academic interest had already taken a new turn during my Saudi trips which I might not have noticed then.

However, after my registration for a Ph.D. program in the Centre for West Asian Studies, subsequent trips to the Kingdom were however not so interesting as I started looking at the things with the eyes of a researcher. The vastness of the subject made me feel very small and timid. I had chosen a huge subject.

At the King Faisal Foundation which houses a very impressive library and which has an exclusive women section I came across over three dozens of microfiches of PhDs about various aspects of women life in the contemporary Gulf. Some of the PhDs were done by women themselves and some specially focused on women participation in modern Arabia.

Women education in the Kingdom and in the neighboring countries has fostered a new breed of Arab women who appear no inferior to their male counterparts. But an impartial survey was not possible in a system which does not allow any formal research without prior permission from the concerned ministries. And the people I randomly met at Saudi homes or in academic and market places could or could not be the sole denominators of social reality. In such a situation the only cautious approach was to rely on Arab media reports and the relevant academic research. Nevertheless, with the arrival of internet and the popularity of Blogs yet another window opened on me to see how the educated women in the GCC see, feel and sometime even act on issues of vital concern.

Today, after years of hard work and the patience of turning thousands of pages, sitting hours and hours on the internet, moving from one link to another, I have this comfortable feeling that I have written only that much that the scope of the study allowed and left many things out for probably more academic work in the future.

A Ph.D. dissertation is never accomplished alone. The Center for Wet Asian Studies; its teaching and supporting staff deserve my sincere thanks. It is my

privilege to thank Prof Mohd. Gulrez, the Director of the Centre, under whose able leadership I have the honor of submitting this work. I feel short of words to express my thanks and gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Ghulam Mursaleen for his persuasive guidance and cooperation. From its first draft to the present shape, this dissertation has undergone many linguistic corrections and improvements. I took advantage of residing in the neighborhood of Prof Iqbal Ahmad, formerly at the Department of English, who so affectionately encouraged me to write presentable English. It would be churlish on my part not to mention the Women Section of the King Faisal Library, Riyadh for providing me very valuable material without which this research would not have been possible. My sons Abraham (9+) and Mohammed (6+) also helped me in their own ways. They were less naughty when I was giving final touches to my dissertation. And finally, it was the constant support of my husband who provided me sufficient space to complete this dream project of mine. I do not have any apt expression to thank my parents whose sincere prayers eventually led to the completion of this work . Last but not the least, it is my duty to thank God whom I owe everything.

I must however take full responsibility for any errors or inadequacies that one may find in this work.

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