

ser (...) J'ai déplacé mon corps dans l'autre pièce pour ramasser les traces de son passage, les journaux, la boîte de kleenex, la théière. Puis je suis allée à la cuisine, ai préparé son dîner et l'ai mis au chaud. Enfin, après avoir éteint les lumières, je suis allée me coucher. A minuit, le grincement de la porte m'a réveillée et j'ai entendu sa voix. Il avait son ton du soir, cette fois, et ses paroles glissaient lentement, tendres, sans âpreté aucune, jusqu'à ce corps qui ne m'appartient pas».

Dans «Femmes», la même auteure se livre à une caricature perspicace de la femme saoudienne, voilée et couverte de la typique abaya, cette mante noire qui la rend anonyme, semblable à toutes les autres femmes et lui donne l'aspect d'un sombre spectre sans visage ni volonté. Cette nouvelle fait même état d'un involontaire échange de «femmes en noir», passé inaperçu et menant à tous les quiproquos que l'on peut imaginer: «Trop tard ... Elle était arrivée chez moi à ma place et le chauffeur, qui n'avait rien remarqué, s'en était allé. D'autant plus qu'elle n'avait ni protesté ni essayé de le rappeler. Quant à moi, je ne m'étais pas immédiatement rendu compte de la situation. Pour finir, je me suis résignée. De toute façon, aux yeux du chauffeur, nous ne sommes que des femmes».

Le blanc et le noir

Penser à l'Arabie saoudite, c'est immédiatement «voir» l'éclatante blancheur de la robe masculine qui contraste tant avec le noir de l'abaya des femmes, cette mante qui les couvre de la tête aux pieds, accompagnée d'un voile d'épaisseur variable n'autorisant parfois qu'une fente pour les yeux. Le port du seul hijab traditionnel, qui laisse le visage découvert, attire sans aucun doute nombre de femmes et beaucoup sont heureuses de l'arborer car il répond à une coutume dans laquelle elles se reconnaissent. Mais pour certaines, privées de la liberté de choisir, le hijab n'est pas toujours commode: il glisse de tous côtés s'il est en soie, et surtout s'il n'est pas maintenu à l'aide d'atta-

ches compliquées. De fait, le laisser glisser et le réordonner sur la tête d'un très rapide mouvement de la main, quasiment imperceptible au spectateur non averti, appartient à la gestualité féminine au quotidien. En définitive, ce qui importe à une Saoudienne est de ne jamais se montrer en public sans voile; aussi rebelle fût-elle, aucune ne s'y hasarderait, comme ne le ferait d'ailleurs aucune étrangère de passage, si tant est qu'elle ait un peu de sensibilité et soit attentive à cette solidarité entre femmes dont les hommes sont si jaloux.

Dans une nouvelle de Hana Abdallah al-Ghamadi (1965) intitulée «La rue», une femme tente d'échapper à la chaleur en écartant légèrement son voile: «Elle est tout enveloppée de tissu noir. Seuls sont visibles ses mains et ses pieds. Son visage est baigné de sueur. Elle lève le voile noir et s'éponge, quand elle entend soudain une voix provenant d'une face qui trahit une terrible irritation. Un homme la regarde avec indignation, droit dans les yeux, et lui ordonne de se recouvrir. Puis il crache et s'éloigne dans sa voiture, tout en secouant la tête et en jurant ».

La mante, le voile, toujours rigoureusement noirs, sont une présence constante et obligatoire dans presque tous les récits des Saoudiennes, qui sont d'ailleurs nombreuses à les considérer comme faisant partie de leur personne.

Voilà donc ce dont parlent en particulier les écrivaines saoudiennes que j'ai essayé de brièvement présenter plus haut, elles qui vivent dans un monde si complexe et «bizarre» aux yeux d'un occidental. Nous qui sommes influencés par un eurocentrisme diffus pouvons avoir tendance à juger leur écriture un peu simpliste, voire naïve, mais il ne faut pas oublier que ces écrivaines sont jeunes, souvent très jeunes, et que toute expression littéraire, même moins exercée que d'autres par des siècles d'expérience, mérite encouragement, surtout s'agissant d'œuvres qui exigent du lecteur une attention spéciale, centrée sur des aspects plus sociaux que proprement littéraires. Et bien sûr, tout doit être vu hors de notre habituelle vision truffée de stéréotypes. Tel est le message que, par la traduction de leurs récits, les Saoudiennes cherchent à faire parvenir à l'occident.

Traduction de Claude Krul

Note de lecture: Saudi-Arabia

Elham Manea

Too frustrated, too old, too competitive, and too risky: such are the main themes running through recent writings about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They draw a picture of a country whose population is frustrated, its leadership old, its monarchy divided into competing factions, and its future dangerously uncertain.

Mai Yamani, a prominent Saudi intellectual working for the Royal Institute of International Affairs in Britain, described the frustration of young Saudis in her book «Changed Identities: the Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia»¹. Noting that 50 percent of the Saudi population is under 20 years old and that the new generation will ultimately determine the future of the Saudi Kingdom, between 1997 and 1999 Yamani conducted a series of interviews with a representative sample of young Saudis. She recorded their views on a range of issues – i.e. political identity, religion, government performance, and the royal family.

Inserat

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Das Forschungskolloquium Islamwissenschaft trifft sich jedes Semester zwei bis drei Mal in Basel, Bern oder Zürich. In der offiziellen gemeinsamen Lehrveranstaltung der drei Seminare stehen Fragen der Methode im Zentrum. Fortgeschrittene Studierende bis zu Habilitierenden der Islamwissenschaften und benachbarter Fächer sind herzlich willkommen – auch solche, die ein Projekt vorstellen möchten.

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The typical young Saudi, whether male or female, says Yamani, is disoriented by the rapid deterioration of the welfare state, the high rate of unemployment, and the restrictions imposed on the life of every individual. Though religion plays an important role in all of their lives, and they may not have radical ideas about how to bring about political and economic reforms, one thing emerges: they have generally lost respect for the royal family.

Too old to change

Not without reason, as Yamani explains in her article «Die Saudis: Herrschaft alter Männer», translated from English into German in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*². She warns that time for embarking on political reforms may be running out. Why? Because those in political power who should be responsible for launching the process are too old to change: King Fahd is 84 years old, Crown Prince Abdullah is 79, Defense Minister Prince Sultan is 78, and Interior Minister Prince Naif is 75.

The challenge facing the royal family, she insists, is to end its alliance with the Wahhabi religious establishment, who has been in charge of affairs on the internal front since the creation of the Kingdom in 1932. She observes that Wahhabism's strict and narrow interpretation of Islam tends to perceive other sects and branches of Islam – not to mention other religions – as heretical or deviant.

As a result, the Shia in the Northern Province, the Sufis in Hijaz, and the Ismaili and Zaydi in Asir have been all excluded from the Saudi political system to the benefit of Nejd Province – the stronghold of Wahhabism.

Yamani's tone grows bolder as she says that the inclusion of these groups is no longer a matter of choice, but has become essential for the long term survival of the whole political system. Yet including them has proved difficult because the royal family is divided on the issue of reform.

Family division on this issue was described in rather stark terms by Michael Scott Doran in his article «The Saudi Paradox», published in the January/February edition of *Foreign Affairs*³.

Doran claims that the «Saudi state is a fragmented entity, divided between the fiefdoms of the royal family. Among the four or five most powerful princes, two stand out: Crown Prince Abdullah and his half brother Prince Nayef (Naif), the interior minister. Relations between the two leaders are visibly tense».

Doran, an assistant professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University and adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that the two princes have taken opposite sides in the debate of reform: Abdullah tilts towards the liberals, whereas Naif sides with the clerics.

He explains the dispute between the two camps in religious terms. Abdullah's camp, which represents the left end of the Saudi political spectrum, believes in the Islamic doctrine of *Taqarub* (rapprochement). This principle calls for peaceful coexistence with nonbelievers, and seeks to expand the political community by including the groups that the Wahhabis consider

non-Muslim (Shia, secularists, feminists...etc).

Naif's camp, on the other hand, is at the right end of the Saudi spectrum, which takes its stand on the principle of *Tawhid* (monotheism), as defined by Mohammed ibn Adb al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. In their view, many people who claim to be monotheists (i.e. Christian, Jews, Shia, and even insufficiently devout Sunnis) are actually polytheists and idolaters. These groups are involved in a grand conspiracy to destroy true Islam – a conspiracy that should be faced with a holy war.

Lack of rational mechanism

Be that as it may, the division within the royal family is compounded by a fierce sense of competitiveness. Joseph A. Kechichian described this problem in his book «Succession in Saudi Arabia».⁴ Based on extensive interviews with members of the Saudi family, government officials, intellectuals, and foreign diplomats, the book is a first hand document that meticulously describes the different clans and competing factions of the Saudi Dynasty.

Kechichian argues that the question of succession in the kingdom has never been resolved because of the lack of a rational mechanism that could set the criteria for who should be the next king. As a result, the family has been torn by political disputes, with each eligible prince attempting to strengthen his position through alliances with different factions of the ruling establishment. How does this issue affect the Kingdom's future political stability? Rather badly as Kechichian warns.

¹ The book was published in English and Arabic: Yamani, Mai, *Changed Identities: the Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, London: the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000; in Arabic, Beirut: Dar Riad El Rayyes Books, 2001.

² Yamani, Mai, *Die Saudis: Herrschaft alter Männer*, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 30.06.2003.

³ Doran, Michael Scot, *The Saudi Paradox*, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004.

⁴ The book was published in English and Arabic: Kechichian, A. Joseph, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001; or Kechichian, A. Joseph, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, in Arabic, London: Dar Al Saqi, 2002.

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CIMERA is a Geneva-based non-profit organisation that conducts research, provides advice and implements projects in the fields of media, governance, and education in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans where civil wars and ethnic conflicts have aggravated the difficulties inherent in social and economic change.

In the field of media development, CIMERA (civic development media support research & analysis) implements regional media programs to support the access to and raise the quality of public information and debate through the media. After the collapse of the Soviet-Union, journalism has witnessed radical change due to political changes and technological innovations, requiring the development of a new consciousness about the role and professional standards of the profession. To address this need, CIMERA proposes differentiated training programmes based on the needs of the local journalistic and media community; this can be in the form of on-site trainings within editorial offices in Central Asian newspapers, seminars for Central Asian media experts on media monitoring and content analysis, or vocational training for journalists, which we offer through the Yerevan based Caucasus Media Institute. CIMERA completes its training programs with the organization of regional conferences in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, bringing together experts, policy makers, and journalists from the post-Soviet countries to address current issues at stake. These conferences serve to upgrade the knowledge base of the participants, to encourage informal debates between governmental representatives, experts and media representatives and to create networks and cross-border cooperation. For example, CIMERA has organized in April 2002 a conference on «Islam and Society in Central Asia» (Dushanbe, Tajikistan) published in both English and Russian in our Conference Proceedings

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In Tajikistan, CIMERA has also initiated a political dialogue about the role of regions in the process of state building. The project gave a group of top and mid level Tajik officials, parliament members and opinion makers engaged in the formation of the country's internal national policy the opportunity to discuss in depth the questions related to the relationship between the central government and the regions.

CIMERA collaborates with a wide network of organizations and institutions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, such as newspapers, journalistic associations, schools and universities, NGO's, and various ministries. CIMERA's projects are funded by a variety of agencies, such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the Dutch Foreign Ministry, the Eurasia Foundation, the OSCE and others.