A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia

Madawi Al-Rashid
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This book examines the "plight" of women and gender relations in an attempt to give voice to an excluded and marginalized group in the closed and conservative society of Saudi Arabia (pp. 1, 2). Al-Rashid problematizes the "woman question," designating it as both a state and a social problem that defies consensus regarding its causes and solutions, where giving voice becomes the first step toward reclaiming denied rights. She contextualizes her study by looking at the historical roots and "interconnection between gender, politics, and religion that shapes and perpetuates the persistent exclusion of Saudi women" (p. 3). By so doing, Al-Rashid essentially depicts the roots of this "extreme form of gender inequality" as structural and related to the complex relationship between the Saudi state and the Wahhabi religious establishment. This relationship, which takes the form of religious nationalism, provided for a narrow definition and interpretation of just who was entitled to belong to

the pious community. Narrow interpretations of rituals and jurisprudence, as well as how gender relations are to be conducted or acquire validity, both created and exacerbated the social and religious boundaries within Saudi society and between it and other Muslim cultural interpretations.

Structural problems of the kind inevitably reflected themselves on gender relations, particularly when contextualized in an anti-western discourse. Ironically, western discourse, which had singled out Muslim women as an oppressed group to be liberated from the "restrictions" of Islam, was perceived as another colonial endeavor to penetrate and subjugate Muslim societies. Such perceptions, in fact, reinforced patriarchal controls. And while the Saudi state had attempted to undermine the tribes' military and political autonomy, it nevertheless encouraged a tribal ethos that buttressed and maintained such controls (pp. 4-5).Under such circumstances, the author writes, women "were turned into symbols, representing anything but themselves" (p. 17).

The author nevertheless makes an interesting and perceptive observation when she states that Wahhabism cannot be taken as the sole reason for this misogynous condition. In fact, she points out that many of the Wahhabi rulings on women reflected more the conservative frustrations of the clerical class rather than impositions to be taken "literally." It is Wahhabism under the auspices of the state assuming the form of "religious nationalism" that has rendered women's condition so detrimental (pp. 15-16). The politicized religious tradition of such nationalism, which sought to create a homogeneous nation out of a fragmented tribal society, set women up as symbols of national identity and of the presumed "pious" community's authenticity (p. 16).

In other words, Wahhabism per se is not a sufficient condition to explain gender inequality. Rather, it is Wahhabism's transformation from a religious revivalist movement to a state project seeking to consolidate a political realm that both excluded and marginalized women under the guise of preserving the society's purity (p. 18). Thus, while Wahhabi religious scholars tended to propagate the discourse of the equality of believers, this discourse concealed an underlying and structural reality of inequality, exclusion, and discrimination (p. 71). Saudi women in this context became "hostages" to the project of a "masculine authoritarian state" that continues to stake its legitimacy and survival on the presumed faithfulness to such religious nationalism and to its alliance with the Wahhabi ulama cohort.

Ironically, Al-Rashid indicates, this may be changing as the Saudi state seeks new allies and international legitimacy, for it finds itself forced to find in women a certain level of support against radical masculinity, which is moving it toward becoming more of a "feminist" state (p. 22). This "masculine-

feminist" dynamic constitutes the focus of this work. The following seven chapters elaborate on this theme in an attempt to trace the historical trajectory of state policy and gender-related responses regarding the place and role of women in society (p. 35).

Chapter 1 focuses on Wahhabism's historical legacy as it incorporated women into its political project. The nascent Saudi state's (1932) religious nationalism and concomitant approach to religious interpretation of gender relations was strongly colored by the impositions of a narrow religious community located in southern Najd (p. 44). The latter was different from those who lived among nomadic tribes and non-elite women who participated in communal life through agriculture and commerce (p. 57). In the Wahhabi case, the chroniclers of the first state, established in the eighteenth century, emphasized the role of two morally opposed women, one an adulteress and the other the wife of Deriyya's ruler Muhammad ibn Saud, who conveyed to him the virtues of Muhammad ibn Abdel-Wahhab, a preacher who was seeking refuge under the umbrella of a political authority. According to this polarized depiction, one was perceived as threatening the Islamic state and the other one as making it possible. This "fear" of women's power, while common in various religious traditions, was unique in the Saudi case in as much as it actually shaped a state policy (pp. 48-49). Women were thus considered "fundamental symbols" in this religion-state fusion (p. 76).

Chapter 2 looks at initiatives to educate women in a society where education in general was quite rudimentary. State attempts in this direction were a source of great controversy. One justification for this policy was that educated Saudi men sought compatible women and were therefore attracted to non-Saudi (but still primarily Arab) women (p. 97). This logic worked for a while, but by the late 1970s a pattern had emerged: Marriage was sometimes being delayed beyond what was considered a suitable age (p. 106). Due to the ensuing backlash during the 1980s (chapter 3) the state, under pressure from the religious authorities, sought to reimpose restrictions that would limit women's opportunities to education, travel, employment, and movement in general. According to Al-Rashid, no area pertaining to women seemed to be outside the expertise of religious scholars and the state enforcement agencies (p. 39). From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the "exclusion" and control of women in order to reassert Islamic authenticity, particularly after the Islamic revolution in Iran and Juhayman al-Utaybi's 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque (p. 131), were quite noticeable.

The international terrorism crisis of the 2000s (chapter 4), however, brought about new winds of change and a new context. The 9/11 attacks made

it necessary for the Saudi state to ingratiate itself even further with the United States. For that purpose, educated women were called upon to serve the state's political, economic, social, and ideological needs. "Cosmopolitanism" became the catch word, to the extent that the state came to endorse only those religious scholars who justified a new "pious cosmopolitan modernity." As things were, it became impossible to uphold the masculine state without acquiring the support of sophisticated female faces and voices (p. 135). The change of discourse, however, was not accompanied by any real change in practical terms, for these women continued to be placed under state patronage (pp. 173-74). This patronage did, however, bring about more freedom from clerical- and family-imposed restrictions, which allowed educated women to contribute their own voices through fiction and "fictive spaces."

In chapter 5, Al-Rashid engages both in a sociological reading of selected novels as well as interviews with a number of novelists whom she describes as intellectuals (*muthāqafāt*) "waging 'war' against their own society" (p. 40). Chapter 6 proceeds to explore the literary productions of a further younger generation of female novelists who continue in their quest for more freedom and individuality (p. 143). Such "cosmopolitanism," however, produced a "counter-trend" (chapter 7) initiated and led by *multazimāt* (new religious women), who opposed what they perceived as they deterioration of Saudi society. They called for increased state intervention to stymie such negative developments and to limit the impact of the structural socioeconomic changes of earlier decades (p. 41). Ironically, the state's cooptation of both groups by means of providing them with support and protection has turned them into loyal subjects who, it can be fairly certain, will stay in their place. Consequently, as Al-Rashid envisages, the battle in the twenty-first century will not be between marginalized women and authoritarian misogynist policies, but between two groups of women with different visions of their own society (p. 279).

This highly informative book goes beyond the typical stereotyping of Saudi women to examine the deeper historical and sociopolitical factors that interacted and structured their marginalized position. Al-Rashid exhibits deep knowledge of Saudi gender policies and society, as well as their interactions with Wahhabi religious manifestations. This book is a necessary read for all of those interested in gender relations in general, but particularly as they pertain to the Saudi case.

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