

## Riyadh: city of women

By Bissane El-Cheikh,  
Created 2008-03-07 03:40

Wafa'a is a very unusual Saudi woman. A character it would be difficult to come across in the streets and shopping-malls of Riyadh city. So I was lucky to have her as my guide during a two-week visit to Saudi Arabia's capital. The adventure started every day after work, when Wafa'a and I met and she gave me the opportunity to "uncover" her city. A different Riyadh than I had imagined, but as real as Wafa'a herself is.

A divorced mother of three in her mid-30s, Wafa'a is proud to introduce herself as "the first event planner in all the kingdom". She ends the sentence - enunciated, of course, in perfect English - with a smile, then pauses to allow the listeners to be impressed. She knows the curiosity it brings and takes pleasure in arousing it.

The reality of event planning in Saudi Arabia has its own flavour. Wafa'a's entourage and "fine clientele" are mainly foreign women who have moved to Riyadh with their husbands and seek entertainment and diversion to lighten their long, heavy days; this might be limited on occasion to an organised shopping-trip. Wafa'a concedes nothing to her western counterparts. She is the image of the perfect businesswoman [2] - with three mobile-phones, a shiny four-wheel-drive car and a full schedule.

For many in oil-rich Saudi Arabia - young urban professionals especially - having more than one mobile-phone is no big deal. Wafa'a explains: one is for work, one for family and one for friends. But if this gives the impression that the three-phone deal is about boring old efficiency, forget it.

In a deeply conservative, restricted, religious and segregated society like Saudi Arabia [3], the use of the mobile-phone is being reinvented both to fit and to test the limits of the local culture. In an environment where male-female interaction outside immediate family members is almost non-existent, it enables people to reach and be reached by others in unprecedented freedom. At the same time, the freedom is regulated informally by well-defined rules that define what individuals can do in given situations.

For teenagers and young adults [4], for example, the traffic-jam offers a safe haven to meet the "other", and eventually - the holy grail - date. It works like this: a boy (or girl) writes his (or her) phone number clearly on a large piece of paper and then pastes it against the window of the car, trying to catch the attention of the Riyadh belle in the neighbouring vehicle. If the sender is lucky, a call will soon follow and a "virtual" date is underway.

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Also by Bissane El-Cheikh in openDemocracy:  
"Lebanon and Israel: back seat, front line [1]"  
(1 August 2007)

I am stunned yet impressed by ruses such as this, used by young Saudis to overcome the obstacles [5] to live what others would regard as a normal life. "What did they do before mobiles were invented?" I ask Wafa'a naively. Her answer comes wrapped in a cynical tone "They relied on their mothers and sisters... now with all the technology and the bluetooth nothing is difficult anymore".

It was almost midnight in Tahlia Street, the fashionable district of Riyadh where the flavours of the world's cuisines mix and mingle in the crowded restaurants. yet each food court has two floors or sections - "single" (for men) and "family" (reserved either for a group of women or for actual families). It is after sunset, but the streets are bubbling as people enjoy relief from the burning heat of the day.

Also in **openDemocracy** about Saudi Arabia:  
Jane Kinninmont,  
"Saudi Arabia's women pioneers [5]" (8 May 2006)  
  
Mai Yamani, "Mecca: Islam's cosmopolitan heart [5]" (5 September 2006)

In the trendy branch of the Hard Rock Café or the elegant *L'Entrecote de Paris* you can order a glass of Saudi wine or champagne. It's a kind of sweet grape juice, made in France exclusively for Saudi Arabia. As for champagne, it's a mix of juice with fizzy water and a splash of lime.

### The talk of the town

Wafa'a was driving her new car. In theory, that is, for women are still not allowed to drive in the kingdom for fear that this mobility would bring them into contact with men (though pressure from women has led to the government's pledge to lift [6] this restriction). So Wafa'a "drives" by dictating every turn and reverse to "Hidaya", her Malaysian driver. "He doesn't know how to drive", Wafa'a whispered to me. "My brother managed to get him the license, and I promised to teach him how to drive. But he can't even read the signs... they're all written in Arabic". Many Saudi women [7] are taught how to drive by their brothers or husbands in the desert roads outside the city, and later pass this brief knowledge to their even less expert drivers.

Wafa'a is frustrated at not being able [8] to drive her own car. But she also admits "being more comfortable" this way: she doesn't live on her nerves on the road or worry about finding a parking spot. This luxurious form of travel tempts me, until I recall the feeling of driving my car alone in Beirut along the seashore after a stressful day of work.

Riyadh's echoes of tradition [9] alongside the skyscrapers make it seem postmodern to me, much more so than Dubai. But for Wafa'a it's the modern that counts. She tries to impress by showing me every glitzy mall [10] in town, each containing the most lavish branches of international boutiques and brand names. Yet here too it is impossible to avoid the reality of segregation - as well as steps to recuperate it for women's benefit [11]. For here is a giant shopping-mall and a new hotel that proudly proclaim: "for women only". Inside, all shopkeepers and security-guards are women. The talk of the town!

These two feminine "shrines" are considered by many Saudis as a major step towards women emancipation [12]. I couldn't understand how an additional wall between genders can be considered a tool of liberation. "Women can have all the freedom they want while shopping... especially for underwear", I heard many times.

But the separation of the sexes is qualified here too: for since women are restricted in their ability to work in public spaces, the shopkeepers are men - usually non-Saudis [13]. This makes the point about buying underwear (or clothes in general) even more piquant. In the "mixed" malls, the underwear shops are the only ones where men are forbidden to enter. So a woman can't buy items in front of her husband but she can discuss her intimate size with a stranger!

The faces and shy eyes of these foreign male workers suggest to me they are the new generation of castrated *ghulams* in the *harem* [14]. Wafa'a laughs: she never even thinks of them as "men". In the fancy lingerie stores, men are not allowed even if they accompanying their wives, sisters or mothers. The space is left for shoppers and... vendors.

At the entrance to the "mixed" malls stand other male figures: religious police [15], bearded, in pairs or groups. They make sure that women are properly covered and men are escorted by at least one female family member. To my great surprise, this is the only public place where men must have an escort if they wish to enter. The logic behind it, I was told, is to keep single men from flirting around!

As we wander the women-only aisles in the new mall, the passing figures look like they are floating on water with their black *Abaya* (gowns) trailing behind small but confident steps. They whisper rather than speak, yet their sharp eyes tell [16] much more than the veil can hide.

You can estimate their age by looking at their shoes: trainers or classy high heels? Here, every detail counts. The handbag, the sunglasses and even the watch take on huge dimensions. Most women are very trendily dressed under their gowns. I realise how clumsy we "modern" women are by comparison. Since blue jeans are my favourite outfit, it takes me a while to learn how to walk with the gown and fix the headscarf. Since I am a foreigner, it is OK to show my face. Wafa'a too disdains the face-veil, though her heavily made-up face is another kind of covering. It's true, the amount of make-up and perfume women from the Gulf region wear has always intrigued me. But two days into my Riyadh trip, in my enveloping black gown, I find myself drawing a thick layer of kohl to my eyelids and a shadow of red to my lips. Anything to add some colour to my day...

### **Men? Oh yes, them**

In Saudi Arabia, elegance is not only for women. Men too pay great attention to their leather handmade shoes and personally tailored white robes, where a small broidery is immediately noticed.

In the streets it's very common to see two young men holding hands and walking side by side in a charmingly natural intimacy. Such through-the-looking-glass moments are a reminder that Saudi Arabia is a country where sexuality is ever present and even dominant in all social behaviour, yet where sexual identity itself is vague and elusive.

My male Saudi colleague Abed wears a feminine perfume. He couldn't understand why I was astonished. He asked me if this was not "in your culture". I told him that much of what I saw in Riyadh is not in "any" culture... it is so surprising and unique that it can't take you back to anything you knew before.

This didn't seem to take things any further. The day I left, I hugged Wafa'a and in the same mood of spontaneity hugged Abed. He turned red...his first "kiss"!

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