

# Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



# Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

*Rights, Challenges and  
Achievements*

By

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To My Parents

&

My Children

Wejoud, Moteb, and Mishal



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## INTRODUCTION

This book aims at introducing the Saudi woman to readers in a neutral light. This woman has been a puzzle to many nations, even to most Arab countries, in which people have not come into direct contact with her. Many male Saudi writers and other Westerners advocate her rights, represent and express her views without any explicit approval from her, which has made her an enigma to the masses. There are two typical images of her in most parts of the world: the oppressed, ignorant woman, and the extravagant, luxurious woman who more closely matches the “Harem” idea than the reality. Saudi writers tend also to idealise the woman’s status and present her as a queen; both representations are wide of the mark.

The Saudi woman remained a mystery to many nations as she rarely participated in international delegations and events until the later years of the twentieth century, at which point in time she became very active both in and outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The outside world thinks of her as an ignorant, oppressed woman, while the truth is that she is not. Visitors to Saudi Arabia today will meet engineers, physicians, journalists, magazine editors, lawyers, teachers and females working in many other occupations. Yet, the Saudi woman is fighting and demanding the acquisition of more rights. One of her latest achievements is the right to vote and elect the Municipal Council, although it is only in its third round.

During my academic career I have attended many conferences and seminars. Almost every time I was faced with questions regarding the Saudi woman: ‘how does she dress?’ ‘Does she work?’ ‘What about her marriage rituals, or patriarchy?’ In my time I have heard many false notions. It has proven difficult to explain that most Saudi women are happy, and that the Saudi culture is very different from other cultures. The father’s authority, the healthy accepted and respected authority over his daughter, is not considered as oppression in Saudi Arabia. Yes, there are some traditions that are rooted deeply in the Saudi society which women are now revolting against, but at the same time there are others which continue to be embraced. The idea for this book came to me from these questions. No one understands the Saudi woman better than a woman, plus I am a Saudi citizen and have lived my entire life in Saudi Arabia, and

whilst I do acknowledge the differences between my society and other societies, at the same time I am the product of my society's culture, which makes it easier for me to explain this culture to others. Therefore, I believe this book will bridge the gap between the conservative Saudi society and those of the West or the East.

It has been difficult to find references on this subject as most books are optimistic, reporting only the bright side of the woman's journey, ignoring all the obstacles facing her. Also, there were many documentations of the Arabian peninsula during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but these were written by foreigners, and that was a large obstacle as usually Arab women neither communicate with, nor allow foreigners to mingle amongst them or have any contact except through trading.

However, although the Saudi woman has always had her status given within her home and among her family, a role outside it was not granted to many. Looking back on her history, the reader will notice in Chapter One that the woman was an active social member. The Bedouin woman lived a relatively free and mobile life. Even before the formation of the Kingdom, women had ridden to war alongside tribal men, and had even held such positions as an expert physician. They had carried familial responsibilities in the absence of men during the poverty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Being veiled in some regions did not exclude the woman from her society or her active role either in teaching, religion or literature (poetry). Some dedicated religious books for readers and made these books available for all at a time when illiteracy was the norm.

Today the Kingdom gives Saudi women many rights equal to those of men: the vote, the ability to become members of parliament, and at governmental offices they receive equal pay to men. Nowadays they fill all ranks of society within almost all professions. Higher education is open for all, although women are still denied access to some majors. In the field of education, the percentage of female students surpasses that of men. Vocational training is available, too, and for free.

This book takes the reader on a journey from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to today, it traces the woman's position within her family, immediate community and her country in general. Therefore, the book should be read chronologically starting with Chapter One, in order to understand where this woman comes from, what her background is, her culture, beliefs and how all these things have impacted the woman's progress and development. Each chapter will investigate an important era in the Saudi

woman's progress and formation, and will show how the woman began her journey. Chapter Five will take Saudi women's novels as its subject, selected novels will be analysed and connected with real life to bring to life the Saudi woman's real challenges and achievements. Saudi female literature is hardly discussed, and few novels have been translated into other languages. The novels analysed here have been selected to reflect Saudi female writers' developments and maturation. It also aims at filling the gap in Saudi literary criticism and to be a reference for researchers who are interested in the Saudi woman or Saudi culture and society. As life consists of ups and downs and the hard working person is always rewarded in his/her journey, so is the Saudi woman. The chapters ahead will investigate the woman's persistence to succeed in a patriarchal society and how she has overcome the challenges of tradition. The final chapter is dedicated to this brave woman's achievements over the course of fifty years, and the obstacles that she still faces.



# CHAPTER ONE

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The current study focuses on the Saudi woman as she is today, and her history. It will embark on a journey beginning with 19<sup>th</sup> century social life. Unfortunately, the information regarding this woman is very rare, her role, lifestyle or social and economic contributions before 1950 are hardly documented. The researcher is faced by this obstacle when trying to explore the history of the Saudi woman, as mentioned by professor Nora Alshamlan when she attempted to search for information about Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman, one of the most prominent famous Saudi women: “I was shocked by the scarcity of information about this princess, someone about whom I thought I would find a wealth of information. After reading many books, unfortunately, I found very little”<sup>1</sup>. This sentiment is one that I share, I had to search many books and documents which did not contain much useful information. Most documentations from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were written by orientalist or explorers who were Westerners and spoke a different language to the natives, and they were also written by men. These are strong barriers when writing about women. The Arabic tradition is strict on gender mixing, especially with foreigners, and maybe that is one of the reasons why the early writings do not contain much information about the woman of the time.

Lady Ann Blunt’s ‘*A Pilgrimage to Najd: The Cradle of the Arab Race*’ gives an account of the woman, especially in the northern areas. As a woman she was able to mix with the women and to observe them closely, yet her accounts still lack a real understanding of the woman and her way of thinking, as she accuses some of being stupid for no obvious reason other than that the communication was difficult due to the language barrier<sup>2</sup>. Saudi historians such as Ibn Beshar were not interested in women’s issues and documented almost nothing regarding the woman. However, this lack of documentation led to the creation of a dim view of the Arabian Peninsula’s women, and consequently helped construct a stereotypical image of the woman as a submissive, marginalised being who has no societal role whatsoever.

This chapter will attempt to dive into the woman's history, starting with the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to explore the woman's status and contributions in different areas of social and economic life in the area which would become known as Saudi Arabia. It will also explore man and woman's relationship and why the woman did not receive the attention she deserved. On this issue, Madawi Al-Rasheed states that:

A persistent problem facing researchers is the limited historical knowledge about and current research on Saudi woman. Most of the academic literature on the country has focused on history, politics, oil, security, and Islamism. Compared to other Muslim women, who have been the subject of much serious academic research in history and social science, Saudi women's gender issues remain the least studied.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Rasheed is certainly correct in noting the absence of research in regard to the interest in the gender issues of the Saudi woman. However, that is not the only obscure area regarding this woman, and that is what this study tries to address, whilst simultaneously attempting to give the Saudi woman the credit and the comprehensive research that she deserves, as she has contributed greatly to her society and history. Even when articles or studies are published, they tend to be written by people who lived abroad most of their life even if they are Saudis themselves or by Westerners who are unaware of the culture and customs known to Saudis. Their accounts sometimes contradict the facts and surprise the Saudi reader who is more aware of the facts, and has perhaps even lived through them.

However, international interest in the Saudi woman has been growing since 9/11, but has not received the serious attention it deserves. As Al-Rasheed puts it:

the 'Saudi woman question' has not attracted sufficient academic attention due to difficulty accessing the country, which is only gradually being opened up for academic research. Gender remains an unexplored terrain that could benefit from further investigation.<sup>4</sup>

That is true to an extent, but as the reader should be aware, Saudi women are present in many institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, besides, there are many female foreigners working at Saudi universities who mix frequently with the Saudi woman either as a colleague or a student, and physicians also find themselves in a mixed environment (hospitals). The Saudi woman writer has opened up, and expresses herself and discusses the social issues that interest her. Anyone who is seriously interested in this woman will find a wealth of information in the modern era.



Understanding the status of the Saudi woman demands a knowledge of the region's demography, its culture and history. The inhabitants can be divided into two categories: Hader or Sedentary, and Bedouin or Nomadic. The majority in the north and central regions were Bedouins. As Lady Blunt mentions, their towns and villages were a long distance from each other, and each town or village was surrounded by a sea of sands. Such distances led to political individualism, with most towns being governed by themselves<sup>5</sup>. The Hader were those inhabiting towns and villages. They worked mostly in farming and trading. They were governed by a uniform tradition and custom and their lifestyles were more or less the same. The Hader people descended from well-known Arabic tribes who established themselves in towns for a long time and had either forsaken the nomadic life<sup>6</sup> or newly adopted the Hader lifestyle and settled in towns, meaning that Hader and Badu are descendants of tribes<sup>7</sup>. Bedouins (Badu) are pure Arabic tribes moving from one place to another depending on the presence of water or the prevalence of raids. They traditionally despise handcrafting and those performing it, thus, they bargain with Hader to buy those necessities which they cannot produce, such as grains. The Bedouins are considered the noblest species of human beings, and they do value themselves above the Hader. However, the Sheikh's (head of the tribe) blood is nobler than the rest, and he and his children marry only from their cousins or a top family of another tribe<sup>8</sup>. That does not mean that no marriage has existed between Bedouins and Hader, especially rich Hader families who were keen on keeping a bond with Bedouin lifestyle and also those that believe the son inherits the maternal genes. They go as far as sending their male children to the tribes to learn and experience the Arabian ethics. Also, there have been political motives behind Hader and Bedouin marriages, as exemplified by the Al-Rasheed monarchs when they married from all branches of the Shemer tribe to secure power and loyalty<sup>9</sup>.

The relationship between Hader and Badu, as mentioned above, has an economic side. During harvest season the Bedouins sell the produce from their cattle: milk, wool, oil and special homemade white biscuits called 'Iqt' made of lambs' milk. They buy or exchange (as currency was rare) their goods with dates, grains, clothes, and some handmade crafts<sup>10</sup>. Besides, the Hader used to leave their herds with the Bedouins to graze during the spring season based on agreement between both sides. However, the Hader were keen to be on good terms with Bedouins as they needed their camels to help in aggregation, as there was no way to keep the necessary number of camels within their towns so they borrowed them from Bedouins<sup>11</sup>. There was also a unique relationship between the two

peoples called “brotherhood” (Alkhawa) where the Hader paid the Bedouins for protecting them from other tribes, a source of valuable income for Bedouins. That demonstrates the Bedouins’ power and how they enforced their customs and lifestyle patterns on the inhabitants of the peninsula<sup>12</sup>. As raids prevailed all over the peninsula, the need for protection was often in demand.

Therefore, in such an environment where power and protection were received from the Bedouin fighters, it is to be expected that the superiority in the male/female relationship would lie with the man. Added to that is the fact that the Arabic societies are patriarchal. The woman was viewed as weak:

It was assumed that men were physically and mentally superior to women, who were assumed to be weak and emotional. Thus, women should be controlled and protected, remain at home to raise their children, obey their husbands, and perform domestic work<sup>13</sup>.

The woman in this milieu is a dependent being who depends upon the man for many things. Hence, the man’s decision regarding any member of the family or aspect of life is a law to be obeyed, especially by women. Worse is when a man does not consult his wife or share with her his resolutions, as many men believe that women are not to be trusted with secrets. According to Badriya al-Bishr they even go as far as preferring gender over age, which is usually respected and considered in the Arab world in general and in the Arabian Peninsula more specifically<sup>14</sup>. Based on that, the mother may kiss her son’s hand if he consents to something she asked while the Arabic custom is for the younger to show respect to the older. The eldest son is the guardian of his widowed mother and orphaned sisters. Nevertheless, Islamic and Arabic ethics stress the importance of helping and caring for women, and they do follow that to a certain point, as one sees the Bedouin man carrying the goatskin water container instead of the woman, in order to help her with her tasks. Not only the Bedouin man but also the men of the Hader who are very considerate with old ladies and widows, supporting them and providing them with grains and dates at the time of the harvest, as these were almost the only crops available<sup>15</sup>. Usually, the chief of the tribe sends annual gifts of clothes to the tribal women, and that shows how attentive the chief is to his female subjects, especially when the reader knows the poor circumstances they live in - in Najed in particular, with no rivers or existing vegetation.

The prevailing poverty is well demonstrated by their tents and habitats. The Bedouins lived and still live in tents made of goats’ wool, divided into

two or three sections with a curtain-like material (kadang) one for the man and his guests and the other for the woman, as well as the children and family life<sup>16</sup>. In towns and villages the situation was known to be a lot better, but still simple and poor. Al-Harbey states Barclay Raunkiaer's description of one of these houses in 1815:

We entered the guest room (living room) and the ground was covered with sand and handmade mats of palm trees, at one side there was a wejar (local type of fireplace) with coffee pots placed on it and on the wall there were mud shelves filled with more coffee pots. There were a few openings on the walls and in the roof for light and to release smoke<sup>17</sup>

This description of the houses in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century reflects the simple life and primitive towns. Houses were built of mud in the central and eastern regions, and of stone in the south. The houses in general consisted of two floors, as Raunkiaer also notes. In Hail, in the north, according to Lady Blunt some houses were surrounded with palm trees, as she describes houses disguised behind them. The roof was used for sleeping during the summer season in all provinces. The man has always been privileged with a special room for himself and his guests, unlike the woman who receives her guests in the family quarter.

The above raises a question: does this social division and marginalisation indicate a subordinate status in that society? One needs to dive deep in the Saudi culture to answer this question. The starting point is the family unit and the woman's role within that unit. The mother has a central status in the family, she is a source of psychological security and provides the family members with their daily needs. Badriya al-Bishr says that "the mother holds the internal affairs management until the male children reach adulthood, they follow the father's roles at that age<sup>18</sup>". But even at that age of adulthood the mother has a huge impact on her boys' life as she is entitled most of the time to choose the daughter-in-law. The son is also keen on a wife who is patient with his mother and attentive to his mother's needs, as Dr. Salwa Al-Khateeb stated:

From interviews I conducted with my respondents, I found that the relationship between mothers and daughters-in-law was an authoritarian one. As long as a woman was living with her husband's family, she was expected to follow her mother-in-law's orders. The household belonged to the mother-in-law not her<sup>19</sup>.

The mother's blessing is crucial in the young couple's life as the man can go as far as divorcing his wife if she offends his mother<sup>20</sup>.

The mother has the second say, after the father, in matters of the daughter's marriage. The reasons for such a strong influence are: both mother and daughter are females and understand each other's needs and points of view better than men. The mother also has a warmer and closer relationship with the children than the father, who usually has a formal relationship with them, as Al-Khateeb remarks:

The relationship between a mother and her children was always warm, affectionate, and intimate; but the one between a mother and her daughter was particularly strong, derived as it was from a sense of solidarity<sup>21</sup>.

Moreover, the management of the household duties were the mother's responsibility. As the extended family form was the most common kind and they all used to live in one house, she divided the tasks among her daughters and in-laws. These tasks included: milking animals, cooking, cleaning washing etc. Everyone had to obey her and follow her instructions. The son would never side with his wife against his mother or he would bring shame upon himself for all of his life, and that might even influence his children's reputation, especially if they were girls. Saudi society idealizes the mother, and folk stories represent the mother as a loving, considerate, sacrificing and honest woman and emphasize the suffering of the widow, hailing her for dedicating her life to her children<sup>22</sup>. In reality, widows did remarry in most cases due to prevailing poverty and the need for protection and support for herself and her children, more than for reasons of emotional satisfaction.

The Saudi woman has also had a political influence, as history tells us about the politicians' wives impact on their decisions, as was the case with the religious reformer Mohammed Bin Abdulwahab. As the historian Ibn Ghannam says, he was welcomed and supported thanks to a woman's efforts after being expelled from his town due to his religious reformed views; a woman carried the news of his message to the ruler's wife who in turn transmitted it to her husband, the ruler Imam Mohammed Bin Saud, and prepared the path for him to be welcomed. Of course, that was before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If it were not for those women who knows what might have happened to the message of Mohammed Bin Abdulwahab<sup>23</sup>. Women's influence even reached the extent of releasing prisoners, as exemplified in 1884 with Imam Abdullah Bin Faisal, whose mother sought the release of Alshaik Abdullah Bin Abdulatif's students and had her wish granted<sup>24</sup>. The high status of the mother is historically repeated on all levels, when the victorious Bedouin came back from a raid he would gift his mother the best of his spoil of camels. They were even very keen on choosing the

wife, as they believed that the genes of her family affected their children and were very proud of their ancestors on both sides. But that did not stop them from despising any man brought up by a woman, and it was and still a shame to call a man by his mother's name, even though they showed great respect for her. One of the most influential female figures in Saudi history up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, still remembered now (and as a matter of fact, her name was honoured recently by giving her name to the first female university in Saudi Arabia), is Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman (1875-1950). She is remembered by all Saudis as King Abdulaziz's nakhwa, Akhw Nora, Nora's brother. She is remembered as a supporter, social worker and as the first lady who supported her brother and managed the royal household receiving foreign visitors such as Violet Dickson, who was impressed by the Princess's grace and hospitality. She looked after every member in the family and opened her house for commoners to visit, dine, and even helped in solving their problems. History remembers her as the one who encouraged her brother after being defeated for the second time: "do not cry your luck, if you failed twice you will win the third time, look deeply where you failed and do not stay long with your mother and wife, men are not born to rest"<sup>25</sup>.

It is said that the woman's opinion was generally not taken seriously, many proverbs and folk tales stress that point, but historical incidents prove otherwise, and the counsel of women could be highly appreciated<sup>26</sup>. However, the relationship between husband and wife was a conservative one as love, especially on the man's side, was considered a weakness, and the man was not supposed to show his love for his wife. On the other hand, a woman might be divorced if she expressed her longing to her husband. That did not stop many men from writing elegies on their wives, and many famous poets immortalized their dead wives in poems, such as the famous poet Ibn Laboun<sup>27</sup>.

Polygamy prevailed more among Hader than Bedouins, but the power was always in the hands of the first wife if the mother was not around or deceased. She was the one who managed all the other females in the family, as Lady Blunt noted regarding Amsha, the first wife of prince Homoud Al-Rasheed:

Amsha, the prince's first wife, one can distinguish her from other women. She has a splendid appearance and her manners would expose her anywhere . . . the other two wives, Doushah and Luluah, dressed like her but Amsha was smart and entertaining and able to carry a conversation, while the other two were too intimidated . . . the prince came twice while

I was there and all the women stood up in his presence, except Amsha who just gave a gesture <sup>28</sup>.

Lady Blunt's description of this female gathering shows the distinction and influence of the first wife on the others and how this wife evaluated herself especially with regard to her husband and his household.

Although polygamy still exists in modern Saudi Arabia, wives do not share the same house like they did in 19<sup>th</sup> century life. The wives at that time all inhabited one house, as readers can see from the previous quote. It is true that the royalty had large houses and each wife may have had her own quarter, but in the case of the normal people the wives shared a simple house, as mentioned by Lady Blunt when talking about their guide's cousin's wives, whom Lady Blunt visited to choose a wife for her guide Mohammed:

Then appeared Turki's wives, one is beautiful, the other is simple and the only wife of Arabi is beautiful and recently married. They seem to be on good terms with each other better than other wives and in-laws. They were keen on pleasing me <sup>29</sup>.

The acceptance of sharing one man and one habitat on the woman's side is taken for granted, and the women arrange their lives accordingly. This tendency to have more than one wife extended into the newly born state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Princess Alice writes when she met two wives of King Abdulaziz: "he (King Abdulaziz) took me to a house with a nice garden to say good-bye to two of his wives: The lady doctor . . . introduced us to SA Majeste Um Manur et Sa Um Talat {1}"<sup>30</sup>. As the reader can see, in most cases the women lived together like roommates and the social milieu dealt with it as normal. Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman asked Violet Dickson "not to worry", comforting her as she was distressed by the idea of having more than one wife, "as all men do that, but we are used to it, it is nice to have many women around<sup>28</sup>". We know that this was not the case in all parts of Saudi Arabia, as Faiz Al-Shehry said, regarding the Beny Sheher tribe in the south, that it is rare that a man would marry more than one wife<sup>31</sup>.

Having more than one wife did not affect the man's respect for the woman, as one can see from the Bedouin raiding practices, where they might kill the men and take all the cattle and objects of value, but they would never touch a woman or her personal belongings like her jewellery<sup>32</sup>. For sure that was a sign of respect for the woman, but Madawi

Al-Rasheed gives another explanation for not harming women during raids:

While raiding parties felt free to cut down palm trees, steal camels, destroy agricultural fields and damage wells and watering canals, they hesitated before they inflicted any harm on women, even after defeating their menfolk. Abiding by this practice in the warfare of Arabia was cherished and respected, as no group wanted a violation of its women which would eventually lead to perpetual cycles of revenge<sup>33</sup>.

This explanation is not convincing, as revenge would not stop because the enemy did not harm women, as revenge would still be sought for raiding the land, stealing the animals or destroying wells. It was more about respect for the woman rather than preventing revenge. The woman's importance is highlighted in the wars in most parts of Saudi Arabia, where beautiful women were seated on camels on the front lines of the battle encouraging the fighters, as we can gather from Wallin's description of the battle between King Abdulaziz and the Ajman tribe in 1860<sup>34</sup>. Madawi Al-Rasheed also refers to the woman's important role in wars in her account of women's contributions:

Tribal women who encouraged their men before raids, composing songs and chanting them loudly, and contributed to the nomadic economy of herding, weaving, and trade with settlements<sup>35</sup>.

However, a witness account is very important here to emphasize this respect of the woman especially among her own tribe. Wallin states that he and his companion had to convince a woman from the Shamer tribe to accompany them in their trip from Aljoug to Jubah to ensure their safety from the Shamer tribe as they crossed their land<sup>36</sup>. This account explicates the tribal respect for their female members and those in their company.

By now the reader is familiar with the Saudi woman's status and environment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is important to give an account of this woman's characteristics. The most obvious feature of the Bedouin woman is patience and bearing as she consistently, due to the lifestyle of raids prevailing at that time as a part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century culture, loses the men in her life, be they father, husband, brother or son. Another suffering attributed to the Bedouins only is the non-stop traveling, as they travel in search of water and grazing land for their animals in the winter and then go back to their areas in the summer season. This trip is a sad and difficult one as it creates a sense of longing for the familiar places, as they stayed at the camps more than the men would, with a lack of security. This

travelling enriches the woman's knowledge of the area's geography due to their continuous travelling habit<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, this travelling gives the woman an unlimited freedom which is denied to her Hader sister. Many Bedouin women reject marriage proposals from Hader men, Dickson remarks that Bedouin women are happier and have a higher margin of freedom than Hader women in Najed<sup>38</sup>, but in the southern and western regions the Hadri women have more freedom, as the reader will see when we reach the male/female relationship. The patience of the Hader woman is clear in the case of Alouqilat. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Najed was very poor and men used to travel for business and work to the north in Syria and Iraq. They might stay there for years before they returned to their towns and families, mothers and wives waited patiently for their return, also in the coastal regions the wives and families of the divers for pearls (a popular job with good income) would wait as they go away for months diving in the Gulf, and in the meantime the women would bring up their children alone and work to be the breadwinners in the absence of the man. Not only that, but the young wives had to deny their emotional needs and sacrifice them for the sake of their families. The women and children celebrated the husbands' and fathers' return on the shore, as the poem goes:

Let us all welcome the returned and hail them brave men tiger-like and not  
intimidated by danger.

The Bedouin wife suffers more as a mother if she is married to a man from a different tribe than her own. In divorce the woman goes back to her tribe and the children stay under their father's custody and she might never see them again. Children have been important and considered as a continuation of a person's existence after he ceases to live, that is why a woman would not hesitate to marry a dying man so she can bear his children.

Economically speaking, the woman was a major factor. Most people think the Saudi women only dived into the labour market recently, but that is not fair to her history. True, the woman in that historical society was a housewife and mother in essence, but that did not stop her from helping her husband earn a living. Women were working in different jobs according to their environment. The Bedouin woman weaved wool for tents and covers, gathered wood for cooking and fires<sup>39</sup> and watered the animals. The watering of animals is not so easy a job as it seems, pulling water from wells requires strength and the help of other women, and it takes time for all of them to pull up their requisite water and carry it to



their houses or tents and then give it to the animals. The task was easier for the Hadri woman as most houses had their own wells. Other duties included milking cattle and using the milk in making Iqt (still poplar today, and in markets nowadays), butter and yogurt. Painting was one of the most famous activities of Aseer women in the south, and they used to decorate the walls of their houses with beautiful murals like the one which can be seen at the Abha palace hotel, where the entrance is adorned with a beautiful mural painted by an old lady (76 years old) called Fatemah Abu Gahas.

The woman's job in the south extended to guarding the farms from the Turkish soldiers before the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, when those soldiers tried to throw stones at the palm trees to knock the dates down. These women would start shouting so that the husbands were alerted and could come to help. In the towns and villages women raised animals and poultry and benefited from the produce such as milk and eggs, either by consuming it within the family or selling it in the market, tanning (animal skin processing) was also a successful business for women. Household tasks were divided among the women of the house and supervised by the mother or the eldest. Hader women were also in charge of feeding the animals, and also of the farms, where they would supervise the irrigation of crops and help in ploughing using camels or oxen. Sometimes, women would grow certain herbs and plants for their own use, either as ingredients in remedies or to sell for their own benefit, as most women were keen on having a separate income from sewing or weaving, areas which Bedouins excelled in.

There were famous towns with women's markets like Aein Aljwa and Unayza where clothes were available for buyers, especially Bedouin customers, and there were a variety of clothes for all ages<sup>40</sup>. In Najed women were known for sewing and decorating Baiz (Pot holders). There was a lot of merchandise handled by women containing raw materials from the environment: mats, baskets, hand fans, plates, ropes, and in the south umbrellas and many other things. Spices had a flourishing market, too. Women were also traders within female surroundings, a woman might allocate a room in her house for trade and keep all merchandise in it, female customers would then come and buy goods, or leave some of their own products to be sold there for a certain amount, from which the merchant woman would take a percentage of the price. Such stores were also social gathering places, like cafés. The other kind of female traders were peddlers: Dallala, where the woman carried the goods in a bundle over her head and went around the rich houses. This was done in two

shifts, early morning till noon and from afternoon till sunset<sup>41</sup>. However, women in some towns had their own shops, as Ibn Beshher mentioned that women were selling on one side of the market square and men on the other<sup>42</sup>, such public activity of women continued up to 1927, according to Ameen Al-Rehany<sup>43</sup>. The number of women working in the market in Riyadh, as William Palgrave describes, was large, and their goods varied from food to firewood<sup>44</sup>, but his statement indicates that women did not have stores but just sat on the floor with their goods in front of them, ironically this tradition continues up to today in all big cities in the traditional mixed gender markets. Al-Rasheed gives an account of women's economic participation:

Many women in the pre-oil era made a valuable economic contribution to their households. In the heartland of Arabia, vegetable markets were predominantly run by women in towns like Unayza and Burayda. Many women made important clothing for men . . . which they sold either as peddlers or in markets. Other women traders, known as Dallala, visited households to sell traditional make-up for women, for example hina (hair color) . . . In Mecca and Medina, women traded in the streets, selling food and other items to pilgrims<sup>45</sup>.

Another job that the poor women practiced was acting as a 'house helper', where they served in some houses helping with cooking, cleaning and washing during the daytime. Saudi women have always been interested in perfume and incense, and some were famous for their mixtures. It is still popular today, although modern stores provide different kinds of all types of perfume. Najed specialised in an occupation, one usually practiced by middle-aged, experienced women, it was to accompany the bride on her wedding night and stay with her for a few days to take care of her room and clothing, and to help her settle in to her new life. Such women also practiced a pre-marriage task where families depended upon them to choose a bride for their sons, as they were usually very social and knew most of the girls around the age for marriage.

However, the woman's economic activities did not mean or indicate that gender mixing was allowed in all regions, especially in Najad, and perhaps Madawi Al-Rasheed's comment is the closest to reality. This economic participation on the woman's side was performed within roles or traditions governing such interaction:

Only women of humble origins and market traders would be seen in the markets of the oases . . . Oasis women of the learned religious families and

the settlements' amirs were confined to their large houses, as can be glimpsed from the accounts of Lady Ann Blunt and Gertrude Bell<sup>46</sup>.

Of course Al-Rasheed is speaking about Najed mostly, while other parts were more flexible in that aspect. That takes the reader to a related issue. Face covering, or wearing a Niqab (a black face cover with two holes for eyes), is a fundamental issue for most Saudis both male and female, and the Saudi woman is known all over the world for covering her face or wearing a Niqab, although it is nowadays a choice and not a requirement. Surprisingly, and against the prevailing idea regarding facial covering, this study discovered a variety of customs differing according to region. Some areas were very strict about it, such as the conservative Najed region, while others were more flexible about it. Philippe Lippens says that John Philby warned them that Najed's inhabitants were more strict and conservative than Najran's<sup>47</sup>. This comment explains the differences among regions and also the flexibility of male/female relationships when the face cover becomes a choice.

In western and northern regions there was a certain flexibility in a woman's covering of her face, as the reader can see from Burckhardt's remarks; he goes as far as describing hairstyles: "the hair styling differs among tribes. In Hijaz and Yemen, the women arrange their hair in a braided style like Nubian women<sup>48</sup>". Burckhardt's comment indicates that he has seen them without them even covering their heads, which is religiously speaking a must for Muslim women, and therefore I consider this incident a rare one and thus do not build any assumptions from it. There is, though, another incident with two females who might have been very young, as Euting writes in his trip account from the north that he met two women outside the walls of the village Kaf, and he recognized them: "once I met Lahood (the name of a woman) with another one setting out of the gates of Kaf and their braids set free<sup>49</sup>". In another region in the west near Alfao, at Kashem Dashlah, Lippens took pictures of ladies with full black covers on their faces, wearing bright red dresses and without the traditional black cloaks<sup>50</sup>. He continued documenting his observations at the town of Jofaifah. He noticed that some women were on the houses' roofs without head covers, but he did not mention the faces which I assume were uncovered<sup>51</sup>.

To the south in Beeshah town, Burckhardt wrote an account on trader women's jewellery as he watched them buy and sell in the market. They wore zimam, a piece of jewellery worn on one side of the nose as the contemporary piercing<sup>52</sup>, it is impossible to notice that with a covered

face, and that enforces the assumption that face covering was not an absolute must until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Burckhardt advanced on his journey to the south, Najran, the picture changes, and he stated that women wear the niqab. In Aseer in the south, Maurice Tamisier, who accompanied the Egyptian army to Aseer, wrote in his description of the women that they were “dark skinned and do not cover their faces”, and this observation might come from a comparison between the Egyptian Yashmek and the differences in Aseer<sup>53</sup>. On his trip from Taif to Aseer he met Bedouin women, some of whom did not cover their faces, while others were covering half of their faces with blue material, which suggests that the black niqab is newer, and not as traditional as it is thought to be nowadays<sup>54</sup>. In Alqateef, in the eastern region, the unmarried girls were supposed to hide even from women, not just cover their faces<sup>55</sup>.

The previous accounts and testimony indicate that interaction between male and female was always there, and even accepted socially, but still within defined roles. The Bedouins were more flexible on this issue as Hussain Husney, a Turkish officer in Najed, describes the male/female relationship as familiar, and that a Bedouin woman would not hesitate to talk to the man and does not retreat at his sight<sup>56</sup>. This comment raises a question: are there other areas where she does just that? In another town, Afeef, on the northwestern side, Burckhardt witnessed an incident where the guide's wife served them, and describes a tent where the female quarter was not completely segregated, and was within his sight<sup>57</sup>.

However, the previous examples show that the two genders do know each other, although in most cases their interaction is limited, and it was the norm not to cover the face among common people. In Mecca it was even smoother. If we may describe it in such a way, Christiaan Hurgronje gives an account of a more flexible relationship between women and men that with common people, especially the middle class, the man received his guests in the living room and the woman could be seated in the next room. Sometimes, by chance, the dividing door between the two rooms may not be closed well, and if closed there may be holes in the door's dry wood due to the weather and heat, and one could see through them. If the host trusted his guest enough, the woman could participate in the conversation from where she was seated or through a curtain, at other times the husband may do away with all the partitions altogether<sup>58</sup>. This account regards Hader, the Bedouin case was different; as Euting's description of women's jewellery, especially that worn on the face like zimam, proves they did not cover their faces<sup>59</sup>. Also, Al-Rasheed emphasises this: “Images of

Bedouin women that Bell took during her journeys in Arabia in 1914 reflected greater flexibility, as the Bedouin women who posed in front of her camera sometimes had their faces exposed<sup>60</sup>. It was normal for women to meet men for work or help and was not a strange thing to do, as Al-Harbey<sup>61</sup> states; the woman was hosting men if her husband was away, but she was keen on her reputation, and that adds to the Bedouin woman's sphere of freedom. Al-Rasheed says:

Where tribal women enjoyed greater freedom of movement within their group, their settled counterparts, especially those belonging to the upper classes of society, were not to be seen moving between houses unless fully covered . . . The confinement of elite women was an exception, as commoners and slave women continued to appear in markets and fields.<sup>62</sup>

What Husney noticed in the male/female relationship<sup>63</sup> supports the above.

This relationship between man and woman takes the reader to the traditions of marriage, and how the choice of the bride is made, and on what basis with such limited interaction, especially in the Hader milieu. In some regions men were mixing with women or at least women did not cover up, so it was easier to choose based on looks. The Turkish governor in Aseer, Suliman Kamaly Pasha, 1908-1912, describes a public occasion of boys' circumcisions: "usually the circumcised boys would be around the age of 15 and people gather, young, old, men and women to witness the occasion"<sup>64</sup>. Kamaly's account describes a mixed congregation which seems to be accepted socially. However, most of the southern tribes confirm, although nothing is documented except the Westerners' journeys, that facial covering is not part of their tradition. Al-Khateeb states:

The wearing of veils and female seclusion were not common in all parts of the peninsula. Bedouin women used to participate in public activities and enjoyed more freedom in their movements. Rural women in the South and West of Saudi Arabia such as Abha, Ghammed, Asser, Nijran, and Jazan, who used to participate in public activities, were not accustomed to the veil. The veil was almost exclusively an urban phenomenon<sup>65</sup>.

Nevertheless, in the far south near Yemeni borders, Burckhardt gives a different observation which contradicts his first regarding face covering<sup>66</sup>: "in the corner, there were old ladies dressed in black and glancing furtively at us through their half face cover"<sup>67</sup>. Although Burckhardt considers the presence of the women among them as unusual, he also gives an extraordinary piece of information, some of these women went as far as shaking hands with them in their own strange tradition of pressing the thumb. Burckhardt mentions these women's names, which indicates

engagement in conversation with them: Nora, Guzail, and Snooh. The mixing between the two genders captured Burckhardt's attention in Najran, as he wrote that there was a young, beautiful girl with no cover<sup>68</sup>. Burckhardt's observation about the covering traditions in some parts of the south goes hand in hand with a native writer's documentation of his region's traditions:

In the south, the woman does not cover her face but she does wear the hijab. She mixes with foreigners and has a confidence and pride in herself and replies to men's conversation. She also socializes with her relatives, neighbours and village people, and she may invite whoever she might meet accidentally on the road as part of the southern generosity, but she invites along with this person some men of her village<sup>69</sup>.

In such diverse communities marriage traditions differ too from one region to another. Girls were expected to marry their cousin, on the father's side, as a certainty, and the girl's consent was not important among Bedouin tribes. The preference of cousins is explained by Al-Khateeb as follows:

Endogamous marriage was preferable, especially a father's brother's daughter's marriage. Several reasons could be given for the preference . . . It is believed that the girl would be well treated by her cousin, who would not disgrace or mistreat her because of the blood tie in their relationship. Since, in this case, husband and wife belong to the same family, they tend to keep the unity of that family. . . it helps to keep the property under the supervision of the eldest male in the family<sup>70</sup>.

The girl could be set free of such an arranged marriage only if the cousin rejected the engagement, otherwise she would spend her life a spinster waiting for him. On the other hand, each man had every right to marry any girl he chose, within the roles of the tribe<sup>71</sup>. The Hader were more flexible of course than Bedouins, but they too preferred marriages to be within the family, on either, but with the preference going to the father's side. The conservative Najed generally did not marry-off their daughters to regional outsiders due to their respect for the purity of Arabic blood in Najed<sup>72</sup>. Also, in Najed the marriage of young girls to older men prevailed. The motivation of such marriages were a man's wealth or his social status, but it was not welcomed by the girls. One of those unlucky young wives expressed her disappointment in this poem addressing a man called Rasheed, perhaps a relative:

Rasheed my family sold me cheaply to an old man I do not know why his mouth is toothless, is it because he is very young or have his teeth fallen out with age<sup>73</sup>.