

*A Most Masculine State:  
Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*  
by Madawi Al-Rasheed

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A casual thought of Saudi women conjures up two stereotypical images in the mind – a woman in a black *abaya* (veil) who is a victim of Islam and *Sharia*; or a wealthy woman enjoying the luxuries of oil wealth. Madawi Al-Rasheed, Professor of Anthropology of Religion at King’s College, University of London, set straight these and other such stereotypes about Saudi women in her new book – *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*. She argues that rather than Islam itself, it is the tacit partnership between the ruling Al-Saud family and Wahhabiyya (a strict version of Islam) which has manipulated the image of women for religious and political interests. She provides a detailed account of how, in the process of creating a Saudi nation-state based on a pious Islamic nationalist identity, ‘[w]omen become boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish this pious nation from other ungodly polities’ (p.16).

The book is distinctive in its theoretical and methodological approaches. Its combination of feminist theory with anthropology and history and its use of a wide range of sources (textual documents, interviews, and even internet sources) are well suited to the nature of investigation. This has enabled the author to situate the ‘women’s question’ in the evolution of Saudi state to explain how the state turned Wahhabiyya from a ‘religious revivalist movement’ into a ‘religious nationalist movement’ in order to unify the different tribal groups into one ‘pious nation’. Like most nationalist movements, Saudi religious nationalism appropriated women, unified them under one black *abaya*, and then continued to present these publically invisible women as the most visible symbols of religio-national identity of Saudi Arabia.

The State-Wahhabiyya partnership is most clearly visible in the form of girls’ education and *Mutawween* (a religious police working under the doctrine of

‘Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Vice’). By putting these two institutions under the guidance of *Ulemas* (religious scholars), the state endeavoured to produce obedient, pious and docile women educated ‘in proper Islamic way ... to do her jobs suitable to her nature’ (p.90), while the *Mutawween* ensured the punishment of women if they dare to break the ‘proper Islamic’ and ‘natural’ way.

Internal and external socio-political changes influenced Saudi women in different ways. Al-Rasheed explains that the oil boom in the 1970s presented a mixed blessing for women. The surplus wealth allowed women education and welfare services, but also added to their marginalization as the state could afford to establish gender-segregated schools, hospitals, and other social services. In other words, the oil-wealth proved both a carrot and a stick for Saudi women: it benefited individual women but delayed their emancipation from patriarchy. Regional and international factors have even more crucial impacts on women. To halt the spill-over effect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the state imposed severe restrictions on women to promote an image of Saudi Arabia as a pious Islamic country. The opposite happened after 9/11 when the West criticised Saudi Arabia for its alleged role in breeding and sponsoring terrorism and extremism. In order to improve its image to the West and to promote itself as a modern society, the state suddenly started encouraging successful and educated Saudi women to participate in international forums, to appear in media, and to participate in business. Here, women were used as symbols of progress and modernity.

In an interesting section of the book, Al-Rashid debunks the myth that Saudi women are passive victims of religion or state. The author shows that beneath the black *abaya*, Saudi women differ greatly: ranging from religious fundamentalists to young cosmopolitan sex-novelists. The ‘Islamic feminists’ and ‘liberal feminists’, as the author calls them, are both active in negotiating a bargain with the state and society for their rights in Saudi Arabia. However, the two groups of women have fundamental differences on what they consider the cause of their plight. For the liberals, the cause of women’s plight is the ‘strict’ interpretation of Islam; for the Islamists, it is the ‘wrong’ interpretation of true Islam. Some are critical of *Wahhabiyya*, some attack old tribal customs, but none of them criticise the state. In fact, Al-Rasheed explains that both groups see the state as a saviour and the King as a benevolent father to rescue them from societal exploitations. The state, in response, is

using this division among women to avoid any substantial change in the status of women.

While admiring the author's awareness of a multiplicity of factors in explaining the current state of Saudi women, I feel that the author has completely ignored an important political project of Saudi Arabia which may be called 'religious imperialism'. Saudi Arabia has tried to exert its influence on other Muslim states through its control on the holy cities of Mecca and Madina, and by supporting a large number of *madrassas* (religious seminaries) in Muslim countries (such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan) as tools for expanding *Wahhabi* ideology in Muslim countries (see Commins, 2006). In my view, the '*Wahhabiyyization* of the Muslim states' project of Saudi Arabia has also contributed to the suppression of Saudi women. Women were entrusted with the additional burden of becoming the role models of pious Muslim women to be followed by women around the world. However, a recent change in state policy, which the author has not amply engaged with, is the escalating tension in the state-Wahhabiyya partnerships and its impact on gender issues. Numerous commentators have observed the emergence of a 'post-wahhabism' in Saudi Arabia in which the state has actually taken steps to undermine and marginalize Wahhabism (see Lacroix, 2004).

Despite presenting a rather bleak picture of gender in Saudi Arabia, Al-Rasheed clearly sees a rising feminist consciousness among Saudi women and believes that the journey to female emancipation has slowly but certainly started. The book has been written in accessible English language and its primary audience comprises academics. The book's translation to Arabic is highly recommended so that its message can reach Arabic speakers, in general, and Saudis in particular. Scholars and students in other Muslim countries would find the book interesting, as a model for the analysis of gender, politics, and religion in Muslim countries.

#### Bibliography:

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Lacroix, Stephane. 2004. Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New 'Islam Liberal' Reformists. In *Middle East Journal*, 55(3). 345-365.

