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ARTICLE

What Life is Like for Creative Women from Saudi Arabia

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This paper is based on a unique experience I gained from teaching a research-based course at a university in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The course involved interviewing five Saudi women writers with the hope that the interactive conversation would help my class, all young women, write their term papers on different facets of modern Saudi literature. Initially, my idea started with grounded apprehensions, but what started as a challenge turned out to be a most rewarding exercise to the whole class. My students wrote their papers, each on her favorite topic; and I found myself writing this piece, resting it not only on the wealth of biographical information we all gleaned from the writers' modes of living and thinking, but also on my impression of what it meant to my class to be in touch with important creative women. This paper is a journey into the minds and lives of writers who managed to bridge the gap between worlds of conventions and modernity, which they straddled themselves and tried hard to make big dents on various barriers to fulfillment and freedom of speech.

Keywords: Freedom of expression; Conventions; Saudi Arabia; Women

This paper is based on a project I introduced when I was teaching an undergraduate research course, Senior Seminar, to a group of fourth-year students at Effat University, a new private university for women in Saudi Arabia, in 2013. My realization that many of my students were not well read in Saudi literature written by women (or men) prompted me to think of acquainting them with some of these writers in person. Luckily for me, five well-known writers accepted my invitation to meet with the class, as well as with other interested university students and faculty.¹ It was a whole

¹ The idea of inviting the writers to speak only to my students in ENGL 493, Senior Seminar, soon developed into the idea of having the writers speak to a much larger audience of faculty and students. Two lectures, conducted formally in two different campus auditoriums, were followed immediately

new experience for all when the meetings started in February 2013 with the writer Zainab Hifni gracing our campus with her presence. The rest of the lectures and/or interviews followed within five weeks, during which we received Maisah al-Sobaihi, Amal Shata, Laila al-Juhani, and Badriah Albeshr. Fascinated by the encounters, the class found rich material for their research papers in what the writers had to say. None of the interviews has been published, but the opportunity to look at what notable Saudi women writers, all Muslims, think of their lives and their work in a place where religion and tradition dominate almost every aspect of life, was ultimately intriguing. The impetus that drove me to introduce the five writers to my students has equally driven me to make them better known to the outside world.

The choice fell on these writers not just because of their reputation and availability but also for the fact that, as individuals, they introduced a variety of personal beliefs as well as literary output. Although the writers have all dealt with social, economic, and political issues, they have been differently perceived by the media and the reading public. Some of them have had their works banned in the country for being outspoken about religious, political, and sexual issues; others have been met with mild reactions or described as “non-abrasive.” In other words, the views expressed by the writers portrayed here stem from different positions and beliefs, ranging from outright opposition to moderate or total acceptance of traditional social values. Interestingly, even before the interviews had taken place, the writers’ reputation (as conformists or non-conformists) largely determined my students’ initial opinion of the writers and hence the questions they prepared.

The students were very much on their guard when **Zainab Hifni**, who has been known for flouting social conventions, came to meet them. Being young and receptive, however, they soon warmed up to Hifni’s views, which asserted individualism and resistance to outmoded ways of thinking. Similarly, their encounter with the

by the exclusive interviews carried out by my class with the writers Zainab Hifni and Amal Shata. In Maisah al-Sobaihi’s case, I took advantage of the fact that she was already coming to Effat University to perform her play *Head over Heels in Saudi Arabia* to arrange for her interview by my class after the performance. Neither Badriah Albeshr nor Laila al-Juhani could come to lecture at Effat University, but they graciously consented to be interviewed in Dubai and Medina, where they lived, respectively.

writer and actor Maisah al-Sobaihi occasioned major adjustments in their views. Not having ever seen a play performed live by a Saudi woman, many of the students did not know what to expect. But watching al-Sobaihi act on our university stage not only delighted them but also dissipated many notions they had formed about a profession so unconventional for Saudi women. On the other hand, they readily related to Amal Shata's religious sentiments, so obvious in everything she expressed. And yet others voiced the opinion that the writer's ideas on women and their roles were too conservative for their tastes. The project, when completed, brought out modes of being that would not have come to the surface without the five interviews and the discoveries made through the perceptions of a youthful audience.

Who are these writers? Zainab Hifni, now in her fifties,² has a degree in Islamic studies from King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah; yet she was the writer whose visit I was indeed cautious about. I did not advertise the invitation until the very last moment, fearing that some faculty or students might object to her visit. She herself started her lecture by reminding her audience that this was the first time she had ever addressed a public gathering in her own country. Even the few institutions that dared invite her in the past changed their minds at the very last minute. Hifni's 1996 collection of short stories, *Nisa 'ind Khatt al-Istiwa'* (Women at the Equator), had created such a storm that even well-educated people denounced it as a work that no parent would want to see a daughter read.³ The reason is that the book condemns political and religious hypocrisy and speaks about women's sexual expression out of wedlock as something natural. Although other Saudi writers have broken similar taboos in this century, writing about sex and criticizing religious men and politicians are still considered capital offenses punished by censorship and defamation campaigns, if not death threats. Zainab Hifni has continued to turn her back on what she calls stale conventions, much more boldly than ever before, almost recognizing no

² Ages are approximate here. Out of courtesy, the students refrained from asking the writers about their age, and the few published records that give a birthdate do not quite correspond.

³ In her work *Qad Nakhtalif* (We May Disagree, 1996), Saudi writer Intisar al-'Akil includes several articles written by male and female Saudi intellectuals who pronounce the work as going against social morals and religion.

authority other than her pen. At Effat University, she was the only female I had so far seen present to a mixed audience⁴ without wearing her *abaya* (black cloak) and/or headscarf. This was a first, I thought, and was glad none of my students said anything about it. But I was unprepared for the reception they showed the writer. The lecture hall was packed with people, some even sitting on the floor. How did they hear about the visit? The writer surely had her supporters, coming from different colleges and departments; but there were also those who were curious to meet the woman often maligned by the media. Reasons aside, both Hifni's lecture and interview held everyone. She spoke clearly and eloquently about issues that fascinated her audience, some of whom turned out to be aspiring writers.

Maisah al-Sobaihi, who is in her forties, came to perform her play "Head over Heels in Saudi Arabia," a one-woman show delivered in English and in Arabic. A holder of a Ph.D. in English, al-Sobaihi was born in Saudi Arabia but lived much of her youth in the States with her Saudi parents. However, she has been back in her country since her bachelor's years and has married and remarried, as she told her viewers. I have seen al-Sobaihi act for a mixed audience (with men separated on one side from the women), but her attire does not vary: a headscarf tied around her hair but not her neck, a pair of jeans and a shirt, and an *abaya*-like tunic to cover her shoulders and waist and hips. In the play's wedding scene, she came down to invite one or two female members of the audience to dance with her, Saudi style. The students were delighted, but the first question they asked al-Sobaihi was about why she chose to be an actress, a vocation which a woman would rarely consider out of fear for her reputation. Yet the person they watched act and assume a variety of social roles had quickly commanded their admiration and respect. Like Hifni, al-Sobaihi epitomized change, which has been subtly encroaching on long-revered traditional mores. The two women articulated a modern spirit, one that the country cannot easily ward off in an age of widespread technology and globalized knowledge. Seeing

⁴ The writer asked if it were going to be a mixed audience, and if so, would we consider one hundred women and four men (sitting in the back) as a mixed audience? But the presence of even one man is a cause for wearing hijab and/or *abaya*.

al-Sobaihi play diverse roles so skillfully right in front of their eyes seemed to remove the students' doubts about the relevance of acting to women's life in Saudi Arabia.

Amal Shata's visit was announced in advance to all faculty and all students, and she had a large audience. Shata is a medical doctor, but she has published a number of novels, short stories, and children's plays, which have made her very well known in literary circles. My students were curious about the mixture of literature and medicine, but to the writer the two have coexisted harmoniously. As a student, she was determined to be a doctor, and she turned down one marriage proposal after another lest matrimony should interfere with her ambition. At the same time, she was a reader and literature lover who became a writer, not for fame, she asserts, but to affirm a side of her character that her career as a physician might submerge. Writing is venting, she also says, and a means to engage the imaginative faculty in creating other worlds where the writer can be the character of her choice.

This was all fascinating, but having met Zainab Hifni and Maisah al-Sobaihi, whose visits were photographed and videotaped, the students had to be reminded that the present writer did not want her picture to be taken or her voice to be recorded. She had intended to sing her children's songs and act some scenes from her plays; therefore, she didn't want any of that to be available outside the circle of female audience she came to address. "God has given me a singing voice, how could I disobey him by entertaining other [male] audiences?" Shata is referring here to the "temptation" involved in the singing voice of a woman. One must, however, clarify that Shata does not support the strict, conservative belief that a woman's speaking or writing voice should not be heard in public. In her fiction, she criticizes society's tendency to regard a female's voice as a source of embarrassment and shame.⁵ And during her lecture and interview, she urged students to express their opinion to the outside world. The students found comfort in Shata's familiar Islamic principles, and they happily joined her as she sang with a trained and melodious voice.

⁵ This subject has been widely dealt with in Saudi fiction and nonfiction. Badriah Albeshr, for instance, refers to it in her novel *Hend wa-l- Askar* (Hend and the Soldiers, 2006), where the main character has to battle with mother, brother and husband, to be a writer.

Laila al-Juhani could not come to Effat University, so I had to see her myself in Medina since my students could not obtain a formal guardian's permission to travel outside Jeddah. (Guardians were reluctant to let them travel without family members.) So I carried the students' questions to the writer and waited for her in the lobby of a hotel overlooking al-Haram (the Prophet's Holy Mosque). I had seen a lovely picture of al-Juhani on her website, but the person who walked towards me was all covered except for her eyes, as was expected of her locally. She lifted her veil when she sat to talk to me at a quiet corner of the hotel's café. Al-Juhani, who is in her forties, has a doctorate degree in learning technology and has been teaching at Taiba University (in Medina) for eleven years. Prior to her graduate work, she studied English literature, which has left its stamp on her fiction, especially *Al-Firdaws al-Yabab* (The Waste Paradise), a novel with many allusions to Milton's *Paradise Lost*—representing her view of modern Arab society as having fallen out of divine grace. Al-Juhani was not given to long speeches, but she had firm stands and spoke openly against the hypocrisy and pretensions prevalent, she said, in today's society. Money has distanced people from true Islamic principles, and brought to life many elements of distrust that had not been in existence when she was growing up. According to her, mercantile mentality has managed to pull down the ancient mountains around al-Haram, both in Medina and Mecca, covering them with big hotels and fast-food restaurants. Coming out of the Holy Mosque, one faces Kentucky Fried Chicken. "It feels like a hot iron rod! Our culture has been destroyed and traded with something foreign to us." Al-Juhani may not openly scoff at social conventions, but she encountered a few problems publishing her novel mentioned above because of its stance on social and political deception. Like other reputable Saudi writers, she draws the line between true Islam and insincere social conventions.

Badriah Albeshr, who is in her early fifties, has a Ph.D. in sociology, and her training in this field has made her especially alert to social issues and the changes taking place in Saudi society as a result of fast-paced globalization in the Gulf area.⁶

⁶ Albeshr wrote about her society before and after oil wealth. See, for example, her recent work *Najd Qabl al-Naft* (Najd before Oil, 2013). Albeshr wrote her Ph.D. thesis on globalization in the Gulf area, focusing on the effect of modern technology on people's lives.

Albeshr comes from a home where mother and father did not have the opportunity to go to school,⁷ but formal education for her, which had not been long in existence when she started it, broke the cycle of illiteracy at home and planted the love of reading and writing in the writer as a young girl. However, she traces her gift as a writer to the women in her household:

My family loved folktales and folksongs. My grandmother was a first-rate storyteller and reciter of poetry. And there are women in my family who love to sing, and when they get together, they chant all kinds of folksongs and recall the occasions for which they were composed. In other words, these women created an oral theater. Although I chose the written word, the folk memory in my family was so rich that it left its impact on me. I have inherited the gene of storytelling.

Albeshr is a staunch believer in women's rights, having dedicated many of her novels and short stories, as well as her journalistic articles, to this cause. However, as a sociologist, she also believes that it is not only women who are born with preconceived roles and duties; men, too, experience the same dilemma. When a male child comes to the world, he is expected to live by a prepackaged code of behavior that determines his manhood and view of the other sex. These social roles, Albeshr says, alienate both men and women from their real identities and hinder proper communication between them. The writer's insight into the inner dynamics of her society has influenced her fictional writings, where men come across as products of a social system that has made them dissatisfied with their lives and eager to escape the narrow spheres of patriarchy.⁸

All the five writers have straddled two worlds, one closer to their parents' and grandparents', the other being a world of rapid change, globalized information, and

⁷ Formal education did not start in Saudi Arabia until the 1960s. For more information, see Al-Rawwaf and Simmons.

⁸ This theme is most obvious in Albeshr's novel *Al-Urjuha* (The Swing, 2010), in which Mshari escapes wife and children, being unable to fulfill his role as husband and father.

crowded cities, in which emerging modernity is constantly met with resistance from earlier and deeply ingrained religious establishments with considerable political clout. One is the well-known religious awakening movement (called, briefly, al-Sahwa in Arabic), which sets out to control comparatively liberal groups by calling for and implementing puritanical modes of living and thinking.⁹ At the same time, oil wealth has also brought widespread education, foreign travels, satellite TV, and the rapidly developing social media. After a period of strict religious control, mostly between the mid 1980s and the onset of this century, Saudi authorities could not help but relax their vigil and open more doors to the outside world. Most Saudi writers, religious and secular, have recorded, in fiction and journalism, what they feel about the tension between tradition and modernity. Although the writers introduced here are somewhat reticent about religious matters, they all have something to say about the current forces in their lives and the influence these forces have on their work.

Zainab Hifni, who shows herself as a distinctly progressive writer, speaks favorably of change and turning one's back on conventions that cripple the writer's pen and dampen creativity. Coming from a family with a moderately liberal father, Hifni grew up to be a self-assured and aspiring teenager; and at the young age of twelve, she inscribed the phrase "Owned by the writer Zainab Hifni," on the inside of each book she possessed, hardly paying any attention to her sisters' open laughter at her "pretensions." Like many other writers, Hifni found in Scheherazade of *Alf Layla wa-Layla* a model of womanhood: "Thinking like a girl who has not yet discovered the hidden secrets of her life, I puzzled over how I could become a modern-day Scheherazade through the power of my words." It was then that Hifni decided to write down her "rebellious thoughts," and she learned early in life how to take responsibility for her own actions: "I believe that humans make their own successes, and that providence will always stand beside those who are faithful to their dreams. We shape our destiny when we believe in our abilities and hold on to our dreams." This is what Hifni emphasized in her pre-interview lecture, in which she ardently spoke of nursing

⁹ For a well-documented work on al-Sahwa and its activities, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, see Madawi Al-Rasheed's *Saudi Arabia: A Very Masculine State*, 2013.

one's dream to maturity through patience and perseverance and staring in the eye old conventions.

The private school Hifni went to, Dar al-Hanan in Jeddah (established by Queen Effat, wife of the late King Faisal Al-Saud), helped shape her dream of being a writer. At a time when girls in government schools were forbidden to read fiction and most other secular material because such readings were deemed corruptive to students' morals and Islamic upbringing, Hifni had the option to borrow various books from the school's "rich" library every weekend. She was also lucky, she said, to have had a Syrian teacher for her composition classes, a woman who encouraged reading and writing and saw in the young Zainab Hifni the signs of a future writer. Unlike many other writers who suffered from the austere curriculum of government schools, Hifni speaks fondly of Dar al-Hanan and the teachers who nurtured her mind during her formative years.

Hifni, however, reminded the students that they were lucky to be living in a world full of possibilities that were not there for her own generation. When she started to write articles and personal reflections in the 1980s, she had to work hard in order to have them published in a newspaper or a magazine. She would wait for many months for a response: "Today you have wider fields for self-expression. You have Facebook and Twitter, and all the on-line literary clubs." One person in the audience, a faculty member, reacted by saying that the Internet and social media have created a generation impatient with words and all extended reflective and creative writings, a generation that is also superficial and incapable of pursuing dreams entertained by earlier writers. Hifni disagrees, insisting that people brought up on on-line communication of ideas have better access to global knowledge. Life used to have many closed doors; information technology has made the youth more open-minded than ever before:

Why do we want the new generation to follow in our footsteps? Each generation must live its own time. I believe that today's youth should be encouraged to follow new lines of thinking and pursue new trends. Civilized societies have been built on innovation and renewal, not on imitation. As for

short expressions on Twitter, today we have the very short story, which may not go beyond three lines. I am fascinated by this genre and would like to try it; it is a short expression that imparts so much meaning. I think we are living in times of speed and of art that glows intensely though for a short time.

Hifni was asked whether there was anything called women's literature and if she could briefly describe it. Hopelessness and disappointment, Hifni says, drive the female to tread unfamiliar grounds, unique to her own experience, something which makes her literature a clear reflection of her society due to its literary truthfulness and the desire to confront naked reality though the framework is hedged with perils. Generally, it is a revolutionary literature since it aims at changing the status quo. "It is true that the distinctness of feminist writing will decline with the expansion of social awareness and the absence of discrimination; however, women today are still concerned with women's issues and there are many of these occupying the creative woman in Saudi Arabia."

Writing about women's struggles with political and religious systems, Hifni has been ostracized by Saudi authorities, who have banned many of her books and prevented her from travelling abroad for a few years. She agrees with Edward Said that the writer who, out of honesty, insists on introducing social change often lives on the periphery, while those who use their pen for personal goals and social climbing often manage to occupy the center. "It's a sickness, mental and economic, that has hit the innermost structure of the Arab World. I sincerely hope that the educated Saudi individual would follow and tell the truth," she said in our meeting. Hifni refuses to be intimidated by those who attack her writings as immoral, provocative, and aiming for fast fame. But as a woman who lives in a society that considers females of all ages as legal minors, Hifni cannot hide her anger and frustration:

I often asked myself during moments when I was in harmony with myself: Why did I decide to write? Is it because I insist on leading a life that respects my identity as a female? Is it because I want to unleash the anger smoldering inside me against all that my mind rejects and my heart abhors? I fondly

recall Virginia Woolf's assertion that anger is the companion of the gifted woman—Woolf herself lived in conflict with what she was and what she was expected to be.

Daring to say what other writers opted to be silent about out of fear of being censored or ostracized, or simply for being too shy to write about intimate scenes,¹⁰ Zainab Hifni has paved the way for a host of other writers, men and women, who have similarly sought to bust social taboos with narratives about private Saudi life.¹¹ Hifni repeats that she is unperturbed about negative opinions of her. She is content with the legacy she has built and would rather leave it to history, the just arbiter, to be her ultimate judge.

It is courage and the desire to break away from outmoded ways of thinking, especially about women, that brought Maisah al-Sobaihi to Effat University to perform her play *Head over Heels*. In a country where there are no public theaters (prohibited by religious authorities), and where women have generally edged away from a profession deemed unsuitable for their sex, al-Sobaihi has chosen to do her acting at our private university, a “liberal” place in comparison with government institutions. She has also found her niche as a comedian who holds the license to create light-hearted scenes out of such social issues as polygamy, *misyar* marriage,¹² and the ban on women's driving without offending her audience. The fact that she is the sole performer in her play, where she skillfully impersonates different characters, both male and female, comments on her way of dealing with the issue of segregation, as well as the scarcity of female performers. But al-Sobaihi describes her absolute reign in the play

¹⁰ The Saudi writer Nabila Mahjub told me during a gathering (14 September 2014) at the Cultural and Literary Club in Jeddah that she had stopped writing fiction because she felt uneasy about having her sons and brothers read about her “deeply felt” scenes, which would be shocking to their sensibilities. “Not being able to write freely and expand kills creativity,” she said.

¹¹ These writers include Samar al-Mugrin, Warda Abdulmalik, and Saba al-Hirz.

¹² Denoting “visiting” rather than living arrangements, the word *misyar* refers to a temporary marriage contracted between a man and a woman in the presence of witnesses. It is usually not publicized (to protect the privacy of the couple), and it involves no conditions that obligate either party, even when the union results in children. Although this marriage is practiced and considered legal in Saudi Arabia, it is widely frowned upon and often described as prostitution.

as her method of going by “what suits [her] talents best.” It was clear to the students as they watched her act her roles with so much ease that al-Sobaihi is an actress without the negative social connotations attached to the word. I don’t call myself an “actress,” she says, tongue-in-cheek, when one student asked her why she had chosen such a career. “It’s in the genes,” she adds, referring to her father, who was in media and who, too, thinks of her acting as hereditary. Al-Sobaihi was also asked whether her mother has been supportive of what she does: “My mother has seen me on TV and thinks that I can do it.” However, she would perform for nine hundred people, but not in front of her parents: “I am too nervous around them.”

Al-Sobaihi seems cautious about what she says to those who probe her personal life and thinking. Has her play or performance been restricted by society’s expectations of what is “proper”? Her response is open-ended. Although she feels she is not controlled by society and she is doing what she wants to do, she cannot ignore the fact that she is performing at a place that supports what she does; for the situation may be different if she were to act outside these premises and amongst people who might see the need to limit what she does. “As you can see, if my training just opened up to the public, we will have people who think differently and might need to impose some control over me. But I haven’t had this experience, not yet.” She adds that theater art may demand different methods and more freedom, but “I don’t know.” In any case, al-Sobaihi seems content with what she has so far accomplished in a society where iconography and impersonation, whether in pictures or on the stage, has been outlawed by many religious groups on the premise that “creation” should be reserved for God alone. She appreciates the “trust” accorded to her by Effat University and by the encouragement she derives from the audience she meets there. She has managed to promote her career as a performer by attending available workshops and conventions in the field, but she is unsure about the future of her training in Saudi Arabia. “This is why I always have a security method involving another job, such as teaching. There is always that fear. But I think the more I discover myself, the more I feel confident that this is what I want to do.”

Al-Sobaihi maintains that although she is a comedian treating lightly certain facets of Saudi society, she would like to see her play raise awareness about existing

social problems. Yet she doesn't like to be judgmental; her mission is to share her ideas with the audience without dictating a certain behavior. What does she think of *misyar* marriage?

I think all types of marriage can probably work. In Islam, there is no doubt that the concept of *misyar* is there for a reason. I am a Muslim and I believe that. But I think there is a lot of misuse of *misyar* marriage (or marrying a second wife, for that matter). The way it happens can be harmful rather than beneficial, and I think it was intended to benefit women, to give them comfort and security, and I don't think this is what they are often getting. But if the marriage can offer women all that, then that is wonderful.

In the *misyar* scenes of the play, al-Sobaihi shows a woman who has lost hope of being married conventionally, so to speak; and in a society where male-female relationships outside wedlock are forbidden by law, and where the religious police are always hunting for unwed couples even in public places like libraries, malls, and restaurants, *misyar* is a legal option for this character. Yet the woman's joyful experience comes abruptly to an end when her *misyar* husband decides that, his adventure being over, he must attend fully to his "public" wife and children before his secret is fully out. There are no obligations on his part. The *misyar* contract is done and undone with no conditions even if the marriage results in children. This marital union is looked down upon by society and described by many religious authorities as no better than prostitution. But the play is non-judgmental; "Have fun with *misyar*," the character repeats in funny colloquial Arabic, which elicits so much laughter from the audience. The scenes, however, focus on the transient and physical "joys" of the marriage, in which the woman receives favors for her part in the contract: the lingerie, the foreign travels, the furtive visits. All is temporary, but if the woman is convinced that *misyar* is an option for her, "then that's fine," al-Sobaihi says.

However, her response was totally unequivocal when she was told her performing the play abroad (in New York) could easily give outsiders the wrong view of Saudi society. She completely disagreed. For one thing, she said, she is herself a full-fledged

Saudi woman, not half American or half British, performing on the stage and doing what comedians usually do: exaggerate to generate laughter. “We shouldn’t worry too much about trying to always show others a pleasant image.” Al-Sobaihi’s New York audience enjoyed and was even touched by her performance. One “Jewish” woman told al-Sobaihi that “the issues raised in the play are human and universal, very much about us in every society.” Cheating and lying are very human, al-Sobaihi adds, and she has no intention to either stereotype, as some think, or betray her society to “foreigners.” In fact, another member of her Western audience told her that she had no idea that Saudi women did resent having a co-wife. So her play, she asserts, helps to educate those who have erroneous notions about her Eastern world. In addition, al-Sobaihi reminds her audience, the anger and jealousy exhibited by one wife in the play have been acknowledged by Prophet Mohammed himself on the grounds that generally a man cannot be fair to both (or all) wives, and things of this nature have to come out; “We need not hide who we are: yes, religion is a big part of our society; yes, we are human; yes, we have feelings; yes we get angry; yes, we have this or that; but we are alive; we are not just sitting at home doing nothing, and I think this is the most important thing.”

“Do you label yourself a feminist? I hear feminist undertones in your play and I have fallen in love with them,” one student asked al-Sobaihi. Although the writer responded by saying that she did not label herself as anything but a Muslim, she surely believes in women’s rights. But one needs to understand what the word means in one’s own social context:

Women should have their right, but they also should know their rights, because a lot of us women don’t even know our rights. Somebody asked me to do an exercise a few weeks ago. Write your rights as a Muslim, they said. Where do I start? So I had to go read about my rights, of inheritance, for example. These things are very important and if that’s what you mean by feminism, then yes, I am a feminist.

To my students, al-Sobaihi was a fresh presence, someone whose ideas they readily espoused. When Amal Shata came to Effat University and firmly asked not be pho-

tographed or recorded, some students were disappointed, despite the fact that they themselves often object to having their pictures taken by others, even with hijab. Their disappointment did not last, and soon they were treading on familiar grounds with Amal Shata. They applauded her personal ethics, which affirmed the principles they grew up on and for which they seemed to seek confirmation through the example of a multi-talented woman: a medical doctor, a writer of more than one genre, a singer, and an actor, all within the framework of the dedicated Muslim woman. She writes out of a personal need for self-expression, not for fame, she asserts, fame being the offspring of pride. What primarily drives her to write plays and songs for young children is her desire that they know their heritage and develop their Arabic skills.

Shata insists that the writer's pen must be guided by "moral principles" despite all the restrictions this obedience to morality can impose on the freedom of expression: "A pen controlled by moral principles has a hard time gliding on the page; conversely, the "free" pen has the power and feasibility to express the writer's innermost thoughts." However, she adds, writing involves the communication of one's ideas to other people. "Writers, therefore, must bear responsibility for what they say, during their life and after their death. Reckless writers are those who write outside what decent people find acceptable." When she was asked to comment on the current tendency among Saudi writers to be explicit about sex, and whether this is an imitation of the "West" brought on by globalization, she expressed "zero tolerance" for this trend: "Sex and rubbish is not *adab* (literature), but "*qillat adab*" (the lack therefore), punning humorously on the word "*adab*," which in Arabic means both "literature" and "ethical behavior." She is amazed that "people receive prizes for it! Big prizes for saying the distasteful and objectionable." The audience, very amused, clapped for her. Shata spoke of her desire to title one of her novels *Al-'Ishq fi Zaman al-Kharif* (Infatuation in Autumn), but deciding in the end to replace the word "*ishq*," which has sexual overtones, with the less suggestive word "love." People, she said, may misjudge her intentions.

Perhaps it is Shata's opinion about the duties of women as wives that elicited some protests from two or three students. A woman with young children, the writer

said, ought to spend her evenings at home with the family, helping the children with their homework and seeing to her husband's needs. When her own children were young, her family was her priority in the evening, especially after she had gone back to work. Only when her youngest was older did she start attending cultural and literary gatherings. "I liked my home," she said, and I would like "to form a group to be called '*Wa Qurna fi Buyutikunna*'" (And reside in your homes), an induction taken from the Holy Quran (Al-Ahzab Sura). Shata explains why a woman's interaction with family members should be of utmost importance to her household, and she is critical of those who prefer the company of outsiders to that of their immediate family. "Some can't wait for their husband to come home so that they can leave the house: 'Do you want something? I am leaving.'" This she describes as the new trend among Saudi women, some of whom see no problem in leaving the children with the maid so that they can spend the evenings with their friends.

"My feeling is that," one student said, "you encourage the traditional picture of women, but you put it in a positive way, and yet the outcome is the same: the woman whose life turns around her children and husband, and you make this the highest goal for woman as a human being." In a calm voice, Shata responds, "This may seem so, but my female characters are very strong and can shoulder their responsibilities singlehandedly, as mothers and breadwinners, in the absence of men." However, she adds, "a woman needs a man, a male companion, to satisfy her needs; and pleasing him is important if she is to live in harmony with him." Another student referred to a story short included in Shata's *Al-Hubb fi Zaman al-Kharif*, in which a middle-aged woman marries a man much younger than her, ignoring the fact that he might be after her money. However, she continues to write him checks even after she discovers that he is cheating on her with other women. The student had a hard time accepting what she called women's "submission" to situations that they should be able to reject. Shata's answer is grounded in reality. Women should not submit to social injustice; this is not her intention at all as a writer. The story's 50-year old woman is emotionally starved. Her first husband knew nothing about satisfying her, and this neglect left a hole in her needing to be filled. This younger man is able to fill it, and

she continues to share her money with him even after she learns about his infidelity. She feels bad, but what does it matter? Could she have what he offers outside wedlock? Our society, Shata concludes, is full of middle-aged starved women.

Shata may sound “traditional” to some young students who are anxious to see women reach a higher ceiling of freedom in an ostensibly patriarchal society, but she is quite a feminist within an Islamic framework. She emphatically supports women’s rights, and she faults society for not wanting to recognize them. It is true, she says, “a woman’s responsibility is to coddle her husband, to be close to him, and to do things that he loves, including cooking and cleaning; but the man, too, should serve himself and his household.” As a writer, she draws the line between social conventions and true Islamic principles, blaming both men and women for selfish behavior that masquerades as Islamic:

Prophet Mohamed had wives and a servant but he did his own chores around the house, something that we ought to follow instead. How can we forget that? It is good for the marriage that the woman establishes a good relationship with her husband, but it is her husband’s duty to aid her, comfort her, and lighten her burdens. Men choose what they think is religion to serve their interests. Women have been forced to do disagreeable things, not just nowadays but at all times when men don’t know the rights of women. For example, it is not right for a man to marry a woman just so that she can serve his mother, and this is what frequently happens in our society, thus turning the wife into a servant. Islam is not like that. A woman is not obligated to serve her mother-in-law, and she should ask for a divorce if she is forced to do that—despite all the emphasis the religion has placed on glorifying mothers.

Along with other women writing today in Saudi Arabia, Amal Shata has taken it as her mission to address the hardships women continue to face in her society, to point out their rights in Islam (which many women are not aware of, she says, echoing al-Sobaihi above), and to place her heroines in situations where they learn how to claim what is theirs from manipulative family members such as husbands and brothers. Financial independence is a major theme in her novel *Al-Hubb Da’iman* (Love for Always), in which the heroine forces both her husband and brother to hand back her

rights after she learns about her legal entitlements within property ownership and inheritance laws.

To bolster her endeavors to distinguish between the tenets of Islam and social conventions, Shata juxtaposes her male characters. Her upright, considerate man stands in sharp contrast to the oppressive father, brother, or husband often found in Saudi fiction. His piety shines through his leniency and open-mindedness, especially in matters that relate to women. In many ways, he is a vehicle for the writer's ideology about the genuine Muslim man. One student asked the writer if there are men as good as the father figure in *Al-Hubb Da'iman*. Although the answer was "yes," another student wanted to know whether a man like Rabah in *Rajul min al-Zaman al-Akhar* (A Man from Another World) has any existence beyond Shata's fictional work. Rabah is a simple Bedouin, Shata explains, brought up on nothing but true Islamic values. "He is capable of love in its purest forms and needs no education to teach him how to love his wife and children and how to dedicate himself to his household—unlike many young men nowadays, who seek diversion outside their homes." Rabah represents Shata's ideas of love as its own reward: "Love should never bring regret when it ends," she says. "The fact that it existed should continue to bring comfort. 'What a shame I gave him so much love,' some people would say, forgetting that they have lived and relished this love." According to Shata, these people behave as though love is a debt to be exacted from those they have loved, not an end in itself.

Shata's ideas left an impact on the students: "How healthy it is to feel that way about love that turns sour!" one student felt the need to say. Yet they all related to the anguish that follows frustrated love expressed in the works of the next writer to be interviewed, Laila al-Juhani. When asked if she thinks that love leads to destruction, al-Juhani denies entertaining such a belief. Love should never lead to heartache in normal circumstances; but she deals with conventions that do not give love the chance to be fruitful. When Saba, her female character in *Al-Firdaws al-Yabab* (The Waste Paradise) becomes pregnant after her love relationship with 'Amir, the man feels no obligation towards her. To rectify the situation by marriage in a society that severely punishes unwed pregnancies is not an option for him. She must look for the

real father of her fetus, he says, going by the well-known notion that a woman who gives so much before marriage can never be trusted and is, therefore, not marriageable. The “fallen” Saba decides to go through an abortion, but half way through the process, she refuses to let her fetus suffer death all alone. She must go down with it, for one false action, trusting ‘Amir, could not be made right by another. She has the option of terminating the pregnancy and then restoring her virginity through a simple operation, but the passionate, Romantic Saba would not accept “falling” twice. It is a narrative with so much anguish and passion; it prepared my students for an image of an equally high-strung and fervent writer. Al-Juhani, however, proved to be quite the opposite, being a reticent individual who stressed that all the speeches and thoughts in her books are the characters’ and must not be confused with hers. This complete dissociation from characters is common among Saudi writers, especially women, who have often been accused of having written their own lives in the form of fiction.¹³ When queried about her attitude to negative criticism, al-Juhani says she has no objection as long as the criticism is not directed to her person; it makes her sad that her readers fail to see the artistic distance between author and character and are ready to moralize about the writer.

My students have classified al-Juhani as “moderate” in her ideas and beliefs, except perhaps where she touches upon the subject of political and religious hypocrisy in her country. “We are a people who claim to believe in ideas we don’t follow and act in ways we preach against,” al-Juhani says, repeating a phrase often used to describe insincere and duplicitous leaders and corporations. Besides her belief that the current massive commercial enterprises have eroded the landmarks, the culture, and the holiness of her city, Medina (“all that expresses the city has been wiped out”), al-Juhani closely examines the racial and class discrimination in a country priding itself on following Islam, but forgetting that it is a religion that did away with the rigid and fanatical practices of pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* (ignorance). In her interview, as

¹³ So far, autobiography is not a common genre in Saudi literature. Writers fear social retribution and, therefore, writing fiction is a safer mode of expressing personal ideas.

well as in her fiction (especially her novel *Jahiliyya*), al-Juhani speaks about a racist society that judges people according to origin, color, and social standing: “Life here is very aggressive. We profess we are Muslims and we call others infidel, but what is taught and circulated as statements is very different from what is being applied. Wherever we look, we see evidence of that.”

Al-Juhani rails against other forms of bigotry and extremism, especially in religion. To the writer, the idea of the archetypal fall from God’s grace closely parallels the fall of the cities of Saudi Arabia from the former “innocence” they had. She speaks nostalgically of a past that is not so far away, a past that witnessed larger spaces of freedom, as compared with a present where modernity can often be just a façade camouflaging materialism, extremism, and spiritual destitution. One of the factors that contributed to this loss of innocence and spontaneity is the religious awakening movement (al-Sahwa), which became most active during the 1980s and 1990s, and which still exerts control over the lives of Saudi people:

I remember when I was young, the neighborhood boys used to come to our house to say hello, and it was a normal thing to be escorted by one of them as I went out to run an errand. We could also get together as neighbors to chat or watch a movie. My brothers loved movies, so they would rent a projector and we would have a movie night with the help of a white sheet draped on a wall. I watched all James Bond films when I was young. We girls sat in front and the boys sat in the back without creating any suspicion or distrust. This has all disappeared from our lives; the rule now is to suspect and doubt. Gone is the way of accepting life as it is. This extremism has brought out the worst in people [...] Fasting, praying, and the *abaya* placed on the head;¹⁴ and nothing inside but corruption. Under the banner ‘Islamic

¹⁴ Many religious women insist on wearing the traditional *abaya*, the type that covers the woman’s body from head to toe—as opposed to the shoulder *abaya*, which is worn like a long jacket and is more likely to show the upper outlines of a woman’s body.

ways' many things become holy and beyond argument. You must have heard of "halal fish"!¹⁵

Is it corruption to express sexual scenes explicitly? One student had asked. Al-Juhani didn't like, she said, "artless" depiction of sexuality, as in writings not meant to impart human truth but to create a scandal or to achieve personal goals. This kind of writing does not stem from real struggle or the desire to portray authentic situations. However, she says, to read Mohammed Shukri's *Al-Khubz al-Hafi* (translated into English as *For Bread Alone*) is to be appreciative and understanding despite all the graphically sexual scenes. "You feel that the writer is delivering an important message about humanity based on a genuine human experience, a message one can grasp and appreciate." Al-Juhani also admires Saba Al-Hirz' *Al-Akharun* (Translated into English as *The Others*), a very daring Saudi novel, especially as it depicts Lesbian love in a rather unrestrained language: "It's all done in such an artistic framework," al-Juhani says, reflecting on the novel's outspokenness about a number of social taboos. In her fiction, however, al-Juhani refrains from being graphic about human sexuality although she deals with freedoms unknown to women in the past, such as the freedom to be with the opposite sex in chalets overlooking the Red Sea. But freedom must be used responsibly, al-Juhani says.

My students were curious to know what the writer, now in her forties, thought about university students, whom she has been teaching for the last decade or so. Her response showed mostly admiration. Her students are new models of womanhood, and she feels hopeful about them. They are capable of discussing momentous issues and asking critical questions; they are much more receptive of new social trends and confident about the world than she had ever been at their age. Owing to them, society is becoming freer to question traditional values. However, she adds, because of their daily engrossment in the Internet and social media, some of them don't readily engage in extended arguments. "These young women are fully aware

¹⁵ This is a reference to fish vendors who capitalize on people's fear of consuming the flesh of animals not killed according the Islamic way (hence the word "halal" or lawful).

of impending social issues, but they tend to lack the depth that usually comes from more serious reading.” Speaking about her own experience with on-line social media, she confesses that she is lagging behind her students. She has a website, but it was built by her younger sister, Nada; and she rarely goes there, waiting for her sister to tell her whether there are any important messages she needs to look after: “To me these things may waste time, may take me away from other areas where I am more productive. I don’t have a Twitter account and I believe that if I am to go there I won’t succeed. But even if I have the time, I would like to spend it on reading and writing according to the ‘traditional’ way.” However, she cannot deny that her students have been able to use Twitter to their advantage in the field of the very short story and in poetry. It is a medium that suits their literary tastes and provides them with the means for self-expression.

Reflecting on self-expression, she speaks about the restrictions imposed on secular readings the girls of her generation had to face in school. Random searches in schoolbags for fictional and other non-religious books and individual reflective journals was something her high school performed on a regular basis, often exposing the students to humiliation if not suspension and dismissal.¹⁶

In high school, I went through a situation I will never forget. There was then an inspection campaign, and I had in my bag a red notebook in which I recorded my ideas and some stories and other things I’d thought about. The inspectors confiscated it. I went to complain to the principal, to say that the notebook was my possession; I wrote it, no one else did. But she was totally unmoved by what I said. She did not return the notebook even when my father asked her on my behalf. There was nothing embarrassing about my writings, or else I wouldn’t have taken the notebook with me to school. But it was believed that fiction had a negative effect on morality.

¹⁶ Government school education is a recurring theme in the works of Saudi women, whose heroines often suffer from campaigns targeting secular reading in school. Girls’ education was religiously oriented and geared towards the formation of the “ideal” Muslim girl. For a feminist Saudi work on girls’ education, see Al-Hishr.

Like Zainab Hifni and Amal Shata, al-Juhani stresses the importance of reading beyond school texts in forming her writing career. Being so much in love with books, she made her father buy her novels by Naguib Mahfouz at an age when the Nobel Prize winner was beyond her comprehension. Unable to go through these works, she gifted them to her teacher. A few years later, she found herself hooked on Mahfouz' works, to which she is indebted as a writer.

The series of interviews was concluded (temporarily at least) with a meeting with the writer Badriah Albeshr, whose reputation as a versatile author of novels, short stories, sociological books, and journalistic articles has secured her a place among the most important women writing today in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. Like Zainab Hifni and some other contemporary writers, Albeshr has been candid about social issues that curtail individual freedom and creativity, including the censorship imposed on literature and the media by the religious authorities in her country. Albeshr became especially voluble about religious policing when the famous Ramadan TV comedy series *Tash Matash*, which had run for fourteen seasons, fell under the adverse criticism and control of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (referred to briefly in Arabic as the *Hay'a*) in the earlier years of this century. *Tash Matash*, which starred Albeshr's husband, the comedian actor Nassir al-Qassabi, featured numbers that dealt with "sensitive" issues such as outmoded traditions, regional differences, and women's lack of freedom, the result mainly of their dependence on a *mahram* (a close male relative) to sign and authenticate their legal documents. What truly angered the authorities were some shows that focused on suicide bombing and on the Commission's interfering with people's private lives, including forced entry into houses, under the banner of enforcing virtuous behavior. Albeshr's disapproval of the Commission culminates in a sociological book, *Matrik Tash Matash* (The Battles of *Tash Matash*, 2007), in which she surveys with ample examples the history and practices of religious extremism in the country. The fact that this book was published around the same time as one of Albeshr's novels, *Hend wa-l-'Askar* (Hend and the Soldiers, 2006), in which Albeshr deals with Jihad, extremism, suicide bombing, and the Commission's relentless efforts to crack down on all "unlawful" male-female encounters even in public places, caused the

novel to be censored as a book that goes against orthodox religion and established moral principles. Undeterred, Albeshr comes down even harder on religious policing in her next work, *Al-'Urjuha* (The Swing, 2010), a novel in which her characters, male and female, lead a life disrupted by rigid rules and embittered by alienation. Diaspora or travelling in Western countries seems to be the only way to attain some sort of freedom for those who don't conform to prefigured social rules.

One of the first questions the students asked Albeshr was about the storm her novel *Hend wa-l-'Askar* had raised and if she had intended to create it. Albeshr denies this allegation, which she must have heard before. "No serious writer would deliberately choose to clash with the reader," she said. He/she expresses a point of view. Yet, she adds, the true creative writer would not be willing to sacrifice his/her beliefs just to avoid clashing with either the readers or the authorities. She goes on to say that the so-called "provocative" material she introduced in this novel

was no more than a small percentage of what other writers have published; but this novel was picked to be maligned by some groups who believed that it was to their advantage to silence me. They chose to attack me in a very noisy way, using different methods to stir the emotions of those who don't use their minds but only submit to what is being said. I think what happened had more to do with a political game than with honest literary criticism. We can't judge literature in a legal court; we can't say this is halal and this haram ... It seems that attacking novels in the Arab world is a most successful way to have free advertisement for certain ideologies, and it works.

Like al-Juhani, Albeshr makes it clear to the students that the critic must differentiate between the writer and the character, for the latter may be saying things that do not necessarily reflect the writer's beliefs.

The students, however, were not done with the question. They wanted to know why preachers, both men and women, still exert considerable influence on people's minds through oral discourse. Albeshr explained that oral discourse, to deliver knowledge or to entertain, was the norm in her society; it was a means of instruction

during times when many people did not know how to read. "At the cafes one heard about Bani Hilal¹⁷ and at the mosque one had homilies." Nowadays, people are mostly literate, but the oral tradition continues to be appealing to many sectors of our society. One reason is that the educational system, which students have received for several decades, has not encouraged them to read, thus perpetuating the oral aspect of education. During the last three or four decades, too, "Preaching has turned into a business and produced people who have financially thrived on it." In addition, "preaching has become a political game in which the preacher seeks to tame the public and mold their ideas, just to keep them the way they are, since by pouring info into their listeners' ears, preachers create followers and obedient subjects." All these factors have given preaching a longer life, Albeshr says, "and the *da'i* and the *da'ya* [male and female preacher, respectively] are still having their regular sessions." Reluctant to be pessimistic about the situation, Albeshr adds that in every generation there are those who resist being robbed of independent thinking and those who challenge the oral method. People are steadily contributing to this circle, "the circle of freedom, knowledge, and growth." These people have started to read, and "even if they don't read printed books, they go to Google, Twitter, and Facebook." Reading, Albeshr emphasizes, "nurtures the critical faculty and the ability to understand and criticize." Pictures, too, "enhance taste and enliven memory."

Albeshr developed her talent for social criticism early in life, in the 1980s, when she started working as a columnist for the *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper. She deliberately wrote about funny situations, with the intention to grab her readers' interest. She looked around for stories. For example, when she noticed the presence of so many buildings labeled "*Istiraha*" (Resting Areas) in Riyadh's outskirts, she thought that an outsider might assume that this is a very "tired" nation. Her investigations, however, taught her that these were places where men ran away from their wives, where women escaped their children and household problems. "It was a critical spirit

¹⁷ Albeshr here is referring to the annals of the Hilalians, Bedouin tribes from Najd and Hijaz known for their adventures but also bad reputation before and after their emigration to Maghreb in the tenth century.

that had sent me to examine social issues, nurtured my taste, and developed my vision, especially in the field of the journalistic article." In this regard, she was asked if Saudi women have a sharper sense of society's "shortcomings" than Saudi men. Albeshr has her reservation about the word "shortcomings," especially when some students referred to her literary works as emphasizing the negative aspects of society, including the grievances of women. Literature is a human vision, she said, and writers everywhere commonly record what impinges on their mind and memory, such as war, misery, starvation, and the like. Women have gone through difficult periods in this world and in Saudi Arabia as a part of it. "Relentless conventions have alienated Saudi woman from their own identities and prevented them from making free choices." She adds that presenting issues like these is one way to lobby for a better existence. But basically, women and men are alike in spotting issues that need to be addressed and made public.

What are the social conventions Badriah Albeshr finds most oppressive? "Most conventions," she says, especially the ones "dedicated to seeing women as incomplete, with a mind and abilities less than those of a man." This kind of thinking "does not seem to be influenced by the fact that women assume high positions in the world and they did undertake leadership roles in our history." Underrating women's abilities deprives them of having choices—of education and career, of husband and number of children. "It is against the humanity of a woman." Albeshr proceeds to speak about a short narrative, "Al-Shabah" (The Ghost) in which she tells the story of a girl who is about to marry a young man according to the traditional way:

Throughout the engagement period she keeps thinking about what [her fiancé] would look like: her father? Her brother? Or someone on TV who works, like him, in the airlines? On her wedding day, when he enters the field of her vision, she sees first with downcast eyes his brown shoes, then his socks, then his *thobe*; and when her eyes fall on his face, she finds that he resembles no one she knows. He is a stranger.

This is not a marriage but a “kidnapping operation,” Albeshr concludes; “And in one night this man becomes the person most intimate with her.”

Conventions can be so relentless, Albeshr adds, that they have turned society into a military ground, and the army may not be necessarily men. Many women have adopted the very views that combat and restrain their sex. These women turn into soldiers, like Hend’s mother (in *Hend wa-l-Askar*), for instance, who obey orders and execute them without questioning. “This military system may be suitable for a warfront, not for daily life, especially in family settings and among siblings and parents.” Militarizing society, Albeshr believes, leads to emotional deprivation and turns life into a desert; it prevents individuals from realizing or distinguishing themselves because it doesn’t allow differences. Although Albeshr’s own mother was a little more flexible than Hend’s mother, the two share the tendency to worship traditions, she says. As a character, Hend’s mother was germinated when Albeshr saw a woman in Lebanon beating her daughter near the threshold of her house and cursing her in a loud voice. This woke up her memories of her mother’s anger when she was late coming home. She felt that most mothers were alike in their faithfulness to strict, draconian rules, which make the daughter unable to understand her mother and find her to blame for almost everything. In her novels, Albeshr says, she judges the mother rather harshly; as a female this character has tasted so much bitterness, but she repeats the very cycle of suffering in her upbringing of her daughter:

It’s a training that breeds women’s oppression. But perhaps mothers have no knowledge that this is cruelty. What do they know behind their closed doors? They think that safety is in their staying inside the house. They find it hard to adventure or give their daughters the chance to even open the door because what lies behind it is a scary world, which a mother should not expose her daughter to. A woman’s surrender to this massive amount of fear makes her cruel towards her daughter; those who see her think that she is a monster, but she is a human being terrified of what lies beyond her closed

door. Even today many women don't have choices. They have become frozen in time, for they must silence pain and questions and rebellion. In today's world, their insistence on being faithful to tradition makes them lose their identity as mothers.

Yet reflecting on the present situation of women in her country, Albeshr is simultaneously optimistic, attributing the improvement in women's conditions to several factors—one of which is the establishment of progressive private universities for women, “such as Effat, Dar Al-Hekma, Prince Sultan, and Al-Yamama, whose programs are noticeably more advanced than the ones run by many governmental universities.” It is something to cheer about, she says, that the Saudi woman is no longer the submissive individual who accepts what others plan for her; for now she can choose her education and career, and even her husband and the number of children she wants to have. Change is a universal phenomenon, says Albeshr, who did her PhD on globalism in the Gulf countries, examining the roles played by the Internet, mobile phone, and satellite TV in connecting these countries to the outside world. “I thought about this generation, which has been brought up on Turkish and Latin American soap operas. These young people know about other worlds, much more open and flexible and indulgent than theirs. They cannot escape change.” In addition, she says, financial well-being has enabled people to travel, to Bahrain and Dubai, if not to the States and Europe. Scholarship programs, too, send thousands of female students abroad to get their education. All these influences, Albeshr concludes, have created a generation of women that is not only more progressive but better able to communicate and negotiate, and bring solid change to society.

As a young woman going to university herself, Albeshr was forward looking, embracing social change and making decisions that were considered unconventional for a woman of her generation. “How did you meet your husband, the comedy star, Nassir al-Qassabi?” asked one student, marking the first question directed to the writer in the interview. Her response charmed the students, who live in a world where arranged marriages are still the norm. She was involved in an amateur college

theatrical dealing with women's issues, and she decided to make it a hit by asking al-Qassabi to help her write one of the scenes:

When I phoned him, he was obliging, but not prompt. He wanted to know more about the problems that we faced as students, and the time it took to go over the details gave us the chance to get to know each other. I was surprised a month later when he said that he was ready to write the scene if I consented to marry him. I thought at first he was joking, so I said, "Fine, finish the scene and I'll marry you." I never thought this was going to be real. I took some time to think about this proposal because I thought it might not be easy to become an actor's wife. Then I thought why not, and the whole thing turned out to be much more simple than I had expected.

Judging by what Al-Qassabi and his team have given the public in *Tash Matash*, Albeshr must have valued the liberal-mindedness manifested by the comedy star, as well as his knack for social criticism, which she shares. Having both been defamed by the same religious groups, the couple and their three children moved in 2006 to Dubai, for the "freedom the city offers and the peaceful coexistence of a multiethnic, multinational population." The café where Albeshr habitually does her writing in the early morning away from all interruptions has been important to her career as a writer. Such a freedom, she remarks, is not attainable in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

What have my students and I learned from this interaction with five distinguished Saudi writers? A great deal, one can readily say. The students' term papers showed pride, appreciation, and acceptance of ideas they could not have easily accepted in the past. Reading some of the writers' works prior to the interviews, the students could ill-afford to hide their judgment: "But Hifni is too bold! I don't think the bedroom scenes she depicts give a good image of our society? Is this the best language to use?" Towards the end of the project, Badriah Albeshr's daring language, as well as content, may not have fallen so vehemently on the untrained sensibilities of the

students, but some members of the class found the writer's "transgression" against religion hard to take. I had my fears for the interviews; something might happen to unhinge "my project." I had to wait to see my fears eventually allayed and to be pleasantly surprised when the girls gradually exchanged their earlier conclusions for a better understanding of what "freedom of expression" means to the writer. "We can't take literature to court," one student said, quoting Albeshr; "We can't take a character to jail just because he or she has killed another." They are indeed the target audience for whom Albeshr says she writes, the audience not yet set in their own ways.

Needless to say, this development in my students was the result of "exposure" to what they had not known before. And much of the influence was occasioned by the writers themselves, their being far above what the press had made of them, far above stale conventions. Perhaps the glamor of being a writer, which the women all too well radiated, has something to do with this readiness to discard preconceived notions of what is "proper" and what is not. At the end, I was left to wonder whether Amal Shata's sincere piety, so winsome and easy to relate to, fared much better than the "sacrilege" some of the girls found so shocking in Zainab Hifni or Badriah Albeshr.

In their essays, which came at the end of the project, my students thought more in terms of what the writers have in common than of their different views. They noted that all the writers encouraged reading, thinking, sensitivity to social issues, and awareness of women's rights. They marked the difference between the writers as individuals and their characters and highlighted al-Juhani's insistence that what she presents in her fiction is simply the characters' ideas, their vision of the human condition, which may not be her own views. Maisah al-Sobaihi, acting live so many roles, drew a very clear line between the writer and the world she creates. In addition, Shata's portrayal of emotionally and sexually starved middle-aged women shocked at first the romantic sensibilities of my students, but these women do exist and are, therefore, legitimate literary subjects.

What other highlights? I asked the students in an effort to have them sum up the conclusion of their thinking about the whole experience. Their responses have helped me conclude this article. Zainab Hifni's unqualified admiration for today's

youth left fond memories: “I am one hundred percent on the side of the youth,” Hifni said, having assured the young women that the new communication technologies and other sources of knowledge available nowadays have created a more informed, more knowledgeable generation. Amal Shata may not share Hifni’s optimism in this matter, but her sentiments equally appealed to some students: “The new generation is living a time harder than ours. Our life was clearly figured out for us, and we didn’t have the options girls nowadays have.” She explained that although she spent her formative years in Cairo during the 1960s (a much freer world than Makkah or Jeddah), the world then didn’t have the Internet or satellite TV, and the government supervised media sources. “The clash, therefore, was minimal between the youth and the authorities. There were limits. People nowadays do not believe that talking with boys and walking without hijab are haram. We did then and had no problem with it. We didn’t have the conflict young girls have nowadays.” Maisah al-Sobaihi sang and danced in a scene celebrating *misyar* marriage. “How refreshing,” students said, withholding judgment, although they knew that a video camera was recording al-Sobaihi as well as those who joined her in her dance. Badriah Albeshr amused everyone when she said that her being conscious in the past about the illiteracy of her parents drove her to form a “literary family” of her own, with Isabel Allende as her mother, Kazantzakis as her father, Garcia Marquez as her uncle, and Virginia Woolf as her aunt; it is a family that kept growing with all the siblings and cousins she adopted out of love and a true sense of belonging. Equally amusing was al-Juhani’s response when she was asked why she called the Red Sea “Abu Khalid” (Khalid’s father) in one of her works. She related a story about the Qur’anic/biblical Moses. When the prophet ordered the Red Sea to divide so that he and his followers could cross to the other side, the sea refused adamantly and wouldn’t budge. Yet when Moses pleadingly said, “Divide, Abu Khalid,” the sea obliged him right away. Why is that? Because the Red Sea, like the Arabs, who created this story, insisted on being addressed by its title, not by its first name. At this point, the students were roaring with laughter, accepting the myth, as well as what they knew as the truth—that there was no such thing according to the Qur’an. I could never have hoped for more tolerance and more awareness. I had achieved my course objectives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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