

Exotic Paradox

The most interesting and informative news about Saudi Arabia lies beyond the pages of *Arab News* – in the blogs of foreign wives married to Saudi men.

By **Naima Rashid**

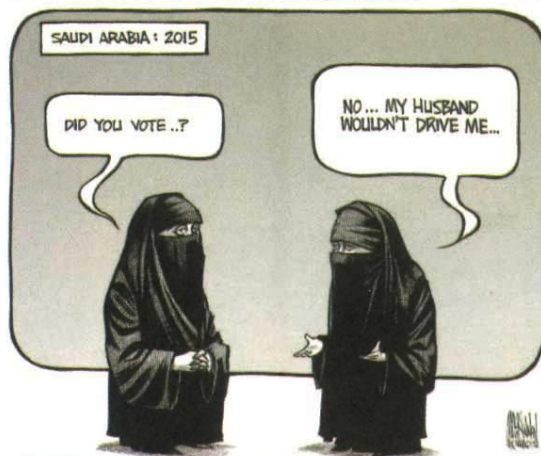
For several reasons, Saudi culture is impenetrable to the outsider. An almost sacred guardianship of private space makes access to it pretty near impossible. A large part of life in Saudi Arabia takes place indoors or in metaphorical 'chambers' accessible only to insiders. Because of the heavy control over speech in the public sphere, socio-cultural issues central to its core are practically impossible to broach in the realm of mainstream discourse and diffusion. This discourse naturally shifts to the fringes, and as in the case of most regions where expression is regulated in the public sphere, these peripheries become powerful repositories where sizeable and valuable deposits of information accumulate. In an interesting reversal common among all regimented regimes, the fringe media captures the interest and the legitimacy which is otherwise the prerogative of the mainstream. Both to outsiders and to the ones residing in the Kingdom, the Saudi blogosphere is an interesting alternative portal of entry.

A curious axis around which are clustered three of the most interesting blogs is matrimony. Foreign wives married to Saudis have long held the banner high for cultural chronicling in the form of blogs. Their initiative created a niche in a territory that was virgin when they started, but which has since thrived. The best known among them come from cultures diametrically opposed to the Saudi culture, namely American and Finnish. Once afoot in Saudi Arabia, they start blogging as a means to document their cultural transition for friends

and family several continents apart, but most importantly for an emotional catharsis and for documenting a journey alternately bitter and sweet. Cross-cultural marriages, particularly those between an occidental and oriental culture, have a certain aura of romantic barbarism, something like an exciting, dangerous and exotic rehash of *Arabian Nights*. These blogs are a great yardstick for seeing how reality measures up to these fantasies. They go by names seeped in a charge of orientalism

that comes from juxtaposing evocations of opposite cultures and to some extent, a sense of free-spiritedness and rebellion (*American Bedu*, *Susie's Big Adventure: An American Woman Moves to Saudi Arabia*, *Blue Abaya: A Scandinavian Princess in the Magic Kingdom*). The custom-designed banners for these blogs show images of flying carpets, lamps à la Aladdin and Arabian horses riding freely in deserts – the whole paraphernalia of clichés about the Orient. Often, though not always, in striking contrast to the naive assumptions behind the images, the words unfold graver truths.

As narratives of cultural experiences, this data is significant because the authors, coming from western cultures and with a background in western education, bring a natural ease of expression, documentary zest, outspokenness and an analytical bent of mind to bear upon the journey of their experiences in Saudi Arabia. Being married to Saudis, they have a direct canal to the culture they are tackling through the deep end – direct immersion. Where their clarity of observation, their willing embrace of a foreign culture, and the amusing contrasts between an eastern and a western culture meet, a thing of great value and beauty is created. These intimate culture journals are special because they soften the genre of cultural commentary with a sacred human glow. We cannot remain indifferent for long to personal stories of human joys and tragedies, and for this reason, these lived tales of transition narrated by women, serving equally as



Ongoing controversies: Voting and driving are still issues of debate in Saudi Arabia.

cultural commentaries, burn their way right into our heart and open doors to a side of a region otherwise shrouded in mystery and mystique.

The most senior blogger among these is Carol Fleming, a 52-year-old American ex-CIA agent with 20 years of experience in the course of which she has visited over a hundred countries and been involved in highly sensitive covert operations. She blogs at *American Bedu*. She met her husband Abdullah, then the head of the Saudi Consular Section to Pakistan in Islamabad. When they first met, as the legend goes, he laid eyes on (her) and said, "American girl, you are going to be my wife one day." Three years and five countries later, he kept his pledge. Once he saw the small Pennsylvania village where Carol came from, he quipped, "Only Bedus come from villages, so you must be my American Bedu." Trained as a diplomat and already initiated into the culture through meetings with her husband's relatives, Carol's cultural transition was fairly smooth. Her blog is not so much a personal journal as a digest-

ible and delectable encyclopaedia of curiosities about Saudi Arabia. Over the years, her blog has become a much-solicited and quoted portal, has built an impressive clout and to her credit, she has been posting every day since September 2006. The range of topics covered is random and eclectic, and therein lies the blog's character – there is anything and everything, and within this randomness and chaos is the spirit of the place she inhabits. She has interviewed Bangladeshi labourers to shed light on their work conditions, a sore human rights issue in Saudi Arabia, cheered a 17-year-old Saudi entrepreneur who invented the Saudi sandal, discussed Ramadan menus and traditions, ranted about young boys driving around openly while women cannot, addressed the quantifiable approach to heaven and hell through the logic of punishment and rewards, and discussed Saudi Arabia's paradox of plenty with concern. On a lighter note, she also has a regular string of farcical quizzes with sly, diagonal jibes related to taboo subjects, like the religious police and their limits of legitimacy and in-

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Encyclopaedia of curiosities: Carol Fleming with her husband Abdullah

the country but are conveniently swept under the carpet. One of these posts is called 'Letter to foreign women attracted to Saudi students', she signs it 'Mother hen Bedu' and light-heartedly, but maternally and cautiously, alerts unsuspecting foreigners to the lurking underside of what they perceive to be a liaison leading to a long-term commitment and a possible physical and cultural displacement but the reality of which might very well be a dream gone sour.

Alongside this regular spicy feed of cultural insights, sombre, sadder news from Carol's personal life mark darker moments in the blog's timeline. Like the time in February 2010, when her husband lost a battle to cancer. And like the periodic updates about her own chemotherapy which she braves with formidable courage, and despite which she keeps the blog's momentum going. Most recently, Carol is looking to fund a documentary made by an independent producer about her life in the CIA and her battle with cancer on two fronts, through the loss of her husband and through the personal battle she fights against the disease. In her mind, she connects the two, saying that cancer, the insidious enemy, puts her skills as a secret agent to the greatest test and is the hardest covert operation she has ever been involved in.

Another popular blog goes by the name *Susie's Big Adventure: An American Woman Moves to Saudi Arabia*. Sixty years of age, Susie Johnson, writing under the pseudonym 'Susie of Arabia,' moved to Saudi Arabia after 15 years of living in Florida, America with her Saudi husband, Adnan, who was working as an ESL professor at Broward Community College in Davie, Florida. When she moved to the Kingdom, apart from the person of her husband, she had no references leading into the Kingdom, neither linguistic nor cultural. In the wake of a rising personal discomfort post 9/11, and lured by the sweet pie of a furnished apartment, a brand new vehicle and enough money from the family heritage to live off without either of them having to work, Susie and her family moved to the Kingdom. She was returning a favour to her husband, who had lived in the States for 30 years, and now wished his family to experi-

ence his culture. At the time of the move, her son was 14 years old and the stress of a radical cultural transition added to teenage woes only compounded Susan's concerns as a mother. As readers, we live the journey with her, right until the point where she finally heaves a sigh of relief, feeling that he has struck the perfect balance between both ends of his cultural heritage, and seems to have grown up embodying the best of both worlds.

When she started blogging in 2008, the blogging landscape was clear, with American Bedu the only precedent. In an attitude, mood and outlook which can most

accurately be described as classically American – open-minded, naïve, positive and unsuspecting, Susie begins blogging about her journey into the Orient, mostly to document her experiences for curious friends and family, equally eager to learn about the magical Arabia of their imagining and how their friend fares in its midst. Her earliest blog posts are appreciably sunny and candid, recapitulating the saga of her fairy-tale romance and wedding, and the exotic overtones of the brush with what seems, in retrospect, only the frills of an oriental culture.

The quality that most prominently



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marks these earlier posts is the candour and the courage to share very personal pictures as well as narratives. Snapshots with her husband going straight back to the period of their courtship capture the nostalgia, romance and chemistry of a romance between people from diametrically opposed cultures. Backward-harkening, nostalgically tainted, these earlier posts of reminiscence are framed in the attitude that Susie had consciously adopted, one of complete open-hearted embrace. In a trajectory almost too familiar to most who encounter and experience Saudi culture even in the most positive manner possible, these sunny posts give way, over the years, to ones of cautious resignation, cynicism and overt disillusionment and criticism.

"The first year I spent in Saudi Arabia I almost felt like an excited wide-eyed child seeing and learning new things. Everything was amazing, exotic and really interesting. After that first year, however, the reality of the restricted ways in which I had to live my life as a woman in Saudi Arabia really began to annoy me. As an independent American woman I had always done everything for myself, and in KSA I am totally dependent on my husband for everything. It's very hard to accept living this way. I had reached a point where I felt that my blogging was very one-sided, presenting life in Saudi Arabia in glowing terms and avoiding the topics that bothered me. I felt I couldn't continue in this vein and retain my integrity. People need to realise there are both good and bad things about living anywhere in the world. I feel more comfortable that my blog now presents a more balanced view of life in KSA, although I get some hate mail that accuses me of Saudi-bashing and being too negative, and other hate mail that accuses me of pandering to Saudis and being blind to the realities of Saudi Arabia."

Expatriate wives frequently complain that Saudi husbands play the cultural card when in the Kingdom. In one of her posts, Susie declares in bemused frustration how her husband infantilises her in the Kingdom. "When we lived in the States for 30 years, not once did Adnan accompany me to the doctor or the dentist's, but now that I have the legal status of a child, he has to take

me."

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The third blog in the trio is called *Blue Abaya*. Much younger than the other two, Laylah, in her early thirties, is a Finnish nurse married to a Saudi, liv-

embodies them both to some extent.

After surviving the tragic-comical challenge of a wedding à la Saoudienne, it's been a mildly bumpy ride, to say the least, but her Finnish hardiness has helped her keep her feet firmly on the ground. Some unavoidable, amusing and enlightening comparisons between the Finnish and the Saudi way of life, whether they emerged unconsciously as survival tactics, or as a conscious reflection about the cultural polarity she embodies, make for some delightful traipsing for the culture vulture. Scandinavian ice and Arabian deserts are physical reliefs, but like all environments, they become landscapes of the mind at some point. In *Blue Abaya*, blue is the colour of the Finnish sky, and the abaya is a cultural norm of Saudi Arabia. In its name and its nature, the blog is defined by the richly opposed but co-existing worlds that the author is part of, and the best and worst of which pepper her real and



ing in Riyadh and blogging since 2009. Susie and Carol have openly divulged their identity, but Laylah blogs with more discretion, and while her blog is all about Saudi culture through the prism of her personal experiences, she doesn't always divulge her personal coordinates as openly. Her blog has a more distinct character than the other two, and her writing is detailed and diary-like. She has a very strong personality that comes across forcefully in her writings – witty, unforgiving in her sarcasm, sharp in her observations but aggressively positive in her conclusions. Between her spirit of forward motion and her signature bite is the spice that marks her writing. Reading her blog, one traverses two regions equally mysterious to many – Finland and Saudi Arabia – and her blog pierces the mystery of both lands to offer us a window into both cultures through the eyes of somebody who

virtual space.

One amusing comparison, between a Finnish and Saudi husband, in the form of a poem, lingers in the mind and is a telling cultural portrait of the role of spouses in both cultures. [See Box]

By any standards, Saudi weddings are a unique cultural chapter, especially the female side of them. They are completely segregated events, and while pictures of the male side of the event are readily available, the female side of the event is a complete secret for those who have never attended a wedding because the pictures never circulate outside an intimate circle of trust. For Saudis, a wedding is a rare form of entertainment. It usually lasts all night long and, because it's a social event, the ambience at a Saudi wedding is unique and hard to describe. Not the least difficult to describe is the way Saudi women go overboard while



Muttawa encounters: Laylah's favourite topic – the infamous muttawas or religious police – are often seen roaming malls and other public places.

dressing up on these occasions. Wedding make-up has its own rules of aesthetics, with several genres of choice available, ranging from punk to casual or Lebanese. However, across all these, an excess of enthusiasm, a confusion of style statements, a certain blend of exaggerated formality, decorum and ridiculousness are common. In one post that went on to become a hot favourite, Laylah is choosing her make-up style for a wedding. Before she settles for an understated European look, she runs her readers through some popular make-up styles, naming each one with her characteristic sly wit. The list includes the poison-ivy look, the herpes look, the raccoon look, the peacock look, the angry owl look, the Boy George look, the spider look and, last but not the least, the measles look.

As a general rule, nurses are great people to gossip with in Saudi Arabia. The nature of their work and the sheer range of exposure across all social classes that they have access to in the course of a working day make them great story-tellers. Perhaps, the best stories they have to narrate are those relating to royalty and its pomp and deco-

rum as they have witnessed in the corridors of the VIP wings in hospitals. Some of Laylah's most delicious anecdotes are about royalty and set in the King Faisal Hospital, Riyadh, where she works. 'The Princess and the Pimple' is a tale about a spoilt princess who wakes up one morning with a pimple on her face and throws a tantrum. As a result, her pimple is treated with more protocol than most human lives. 'The Royal Morgue' is an unforgettable Chekopian sketch of what happens when a member of the royal family is deceased in a hospital, the image of princesses in expensive abayas and smelling of high-priced attars accumulating like ravens around the body of the deceased and the nurses hiding in the corridors and making themselves scarce for fear of offending anyone from the royal family.

Unsurprisingly then, the most colourful yarns in Saudi Arabia, the most informative as well as the most entertaining, and the ones that rip open its cultural core, lie beyond the bland prose of newspapers, beyond the country's few bookshops and television channels, along yet another diagonal axis. ■

"The Saudi man is very romantic, sweet talk is what he knows. The Finnish man doesn't talk or kiss as the saying goes.

If the wife is in a bad mood the Saudi man sends her to her mother's house for pampering, while the Finnish man is stuck with the wife and her constant rambling.

When the Saudi man comes home he expects a hot meal. The Finnish man only can only dream of such a great deal.

When the wife is not home the Saudi man orders home delivered shwarma because he doesn't know how to cook. The Finnish man creates a nice dinner by looking in the cooking book.

If the Saudi's favorite football team loses, he heads for the shee-sha place to unwind.

The Finnish man is already in the bar watching ice hockey and getting drunk out of his mind.

If the team wins, the Saudi man calls his friends to celebrate. The Finnish man will stay in the bar until very late.

When the car needs the oils changed, the Saudi man sends the driver to get it fixed.

The Finnish man asks his wife to do it and not to forget the beer and chips.

When their child is born, the Saudi man goes to the souq to get his wife gold and diamonds.

The Finnish man heads to the bar to get drunk with his friends.

The Saudi husband leaves a trail of thobes and ghutras for the wife to launder, while his Finnish counterpart wears the same socks for a week then throws them on the floor for the wife to pick up and murnur.

As soon as he comes home, the Saudi man sits on the couch to watch football and wants his wife to bring tea, while the Finnish man sits watching ice hockey and asks for a beer or three.

If the pipes need plumbing the Saudi man calls an Indian plumber to do the job, while the Finnish man pours some vodka down the drain to flush out the clog.

The Saudi husband shows his love by giving his wife chocolate and a foot massage. The Finnish husband thinks it's enough he took out the garbage."