

## PREFACE

When I began my research in Riyadh in 2005, I knew little about the way in which postcolonial feminist scholars had deconstructed and problematized Western discourses on gender in the Middle East. I was already committed to the struggle against the occupation of Palestinian territories and felt concerned more broadly about issues of imperialism in the Middle East. I was deeply critical of the way the media dealt with the issue of women's position in Saudi Arabia—that is, treating them as necessarily oppressed and sequestered *as women*. The tone commentators adopted most often fell between victimization and irony, between romantic calls to save Saudi women from their fellow men and sarcasms about the “customs and bans” of this society, implicitly mocked as ridiculous, backward, bizarre. Such mockery also sometimes both sexualized them and showed them as deviant: in fall 2012, I was surprised by how caricatures in two French publications with very different political lines depicted the new Saudi “women-only city” (in fact, a business and working area [in the Eastern Province city of Hofuf]) whose creation had just been announced. In the first caricature, the women are fully veiled (even though the logic of women-only spaces is precisely to provide a space where they do not need to be veiled); in the second one, the women are naked. In both caricatures, allusions to sexuality suggest that men are lacking in this regard and that women among themselves are bored. The comments insist on the supposedly absurd project of creating a “women-only city,” comparing it to a Bantustan, or all-black enclave in apartheid South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Such press coverage signals the anxiety that the separation of men and women and homosociality provoke in France, where gender mixing is a central norm, a goal of public policy, and a sign of progress and modernity, according to public debates and official discourse. More generally, in the United States as in Europe, press articles often consider women's participation in society—to borrow a term used by such articles as well as by the Saudi government—as automatically limited because of

gender segregation, as if studying and working with other women meant nothing, and men were the only “real” society.<sup>2</sup>

This anxiety concerning homosociality is interlocked with anti-Muslim moral panic. In France (where I currently live and work), the Islamic veil has been at the center of debates in Parliament for the past decade. It was forbidden in public schools in 2004, and banning it from workplaces was discussed in 2013. The so-called integral veil was banned in public spaces in 2010. Women wearing the *niqab* (face cover with a slit for the eyes), as most Saudi women do in Riyadh,<sup>3</sup> have been used as a symbol of “Islamic invasion” on the covers of French magazines, and have been designated paradoxically both as victims and as threatening. While the history of islamophobia in the United States differs and there are no laws there forbidding headscarves, the anti-Muslim moral panic, especially after 9/11, has resulted in a slightly different paradoxical confusion: Afghanistan’s *burqa*-clad women (“women of cover,” in the words of former President G. W. Bush) were offered as one symbolic justification for bombing it.<sup>4</sup> Editorials published in American newspapers and magazines regularly condemn the Saudi ban on women driving as archaic. Such an assertion blatantly ignores that this ban was institutionalized relatively recently, and thus cannot be considered as the simple persistence of a tradition. In fact, it was institutionalized in 1990, in the specific context of the second Gulf war, at a time when large numbers of U.S. troops were present and visible on Saudi territory.<sup>5</sup> Arguments against women driving actually centered on the struggle against U.S. imperialism, which has a long history in Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup> In brief, there is a whole political and social history of why women don’t drive in Saudi cities, and it is not disconnected from the policies and media discourses of “Western” countries. If we ignore this dimension, it is impossible to understand why this debate is so vivid in Saudi Arabia.

Journalists’ prolific but politically problematic interest in Saudi women contrasts with the silence in France of many renowned specialists on the Middle East, who when I began my research did not recognize gender as a legitimate subject and mainly dealt with men in their own research. I had to defend my gender approach adamantly. A few academics told me that though they considered the gender approach irrelevant in general, they thought it was appropriate when dealing with Saudi Arabia. Here, I must make it clear that I am definitely opposed to this notion. I do not regard Saudi society as some kind of exception, or seek to “other” it as backward because of its sexism, a discourse that has problematic resonance with the colonial one. On the contrary, my conten-

tion is that it is high time to de-exceptionalize Saudi society and study it like any other society, marked by contradictions and tensions. I also strongly refute developmentalist perspectives that regard women's "condition" as the path of progress from "tradition" to "modernity," with some countries more advanced and others "backward." In this discourse, when applied to Saudi Arabia, it is often implied that the king is progressive and society is conservative. A far more complex picture emerges from a study of the contradictory policies concerning Saudi women's mobility and activities, the vivid debates around them, and the actual practices of the women themselves. One of my aims has been to understand the sociological, historical, and political conditions that have led to the spatial economy of gender that I have analyzed in Riyadh—that is, the organization of public spaces based on the segregation of men from women. Projects promoting Saudi women's "progress" away from "tradition" that can be justified by various normative references ("religion," "nation," "modernity," "women's rights in Islam") are *objects* of my analysis, rather than its guiding framework.

As I was conducting this research, the reactions of different persons to the themes I dealt with revealed the extreme stereotypes circulating about Saudi society. I often had the feeling that people who would never express generalities about racial minorities, and who define themselves as nonracists, did not hesitate to formulate very general negative statements about Saudis. Against stereotypes, ethnographic description opens perspectives on diverse and complex moments and interactions, personal situations and subjectivities. As with any other place, Riyadh's inhabitants are situated in multiple ways, face dilemmas, and experience contradictions. Religion or culture do not in themselves define them, nor do they determine their behavior. Likewise, being a woman is never an isolated status: while the category of gender is necessary to analyze any society, Saudi women are also the subjects of an authoritarian and repressive monarchy. Their lives are deeply impacted, in ambivalent ways, by the rapid transformations of Saudi capitalism. For instance, while shopping malls have become highly popular spots for women's sociability, some experience consumerism as a constraint that limits their mobility by excluding them, because they cannot, for example, purchase designer-brand clothing or do not want to wear makeup. They occupy specific positions, not only in the power relations of gender, class, and age, but also in rural/urban, sedentary/bedouin, and national/nonnational hierarchies. Although Saudi Arabia is often described as "a closed society," the population includes many nonnational men and women (one-third of the big cities' inhabitants), and most Saudi households actually employ

and house nonnational maids. Non-Saudis are not a focus of this book, but it is impossible to understand the status and situations of Saudi women without taking into account this enormous group of nonnationals living in proximity to Saudis. Notwithstanding the minority status of Saudi women, as women, vis-à-vis Saudi men, they are relatively privileged, as subjects of the monarchy, compared with most non-Saudi female residents, who experience different expectations, constraints, and limits. Recent employment policies promote the replacement of nonnationals by Saudi citizens. In order to understand why Saudi society is often represented as “closed” in spite of the huge numbers of nonnational residents, we must look at the politics of multiple spatial segregations and rituals of noninteraction.

My focus on shifting norms, hierarchies, groupings, and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion implies a questioning of categories, episodic identifications, performances, disciplines, power relations, and governmentalities. These perspectives have been much inspired by what has been called queer studies, rooted in Foucauldian thought on power and increasingly used by scholars studying the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, my approach is inspired by works in feminist postcolonial studies of Middle Eastern societies, notably as developed in U.S. universities, while it is also inscribed in fields such as francophone urban sociology and political sociology. In this regard, my use of references, including some originally in French, and way of constructing an argument might appear somewhat unfamiliar to American readers. Originally, I had envisaged an English translation of my 2011 book *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* (Women and Public Spaces in Saudi Arabia), but I eventually decided to publish a different book in English, though based on almost the same ethnographic material. In working with Kate Rose on the translation, I came to realize how very different French and American methods of building and presenting arguments are, and I have tried to state my points more strongly in this book to conform to the American style. *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* is much shorter than its French original, with ethnographic passages now made central to the narrative.

Conducting ethnographical fieldwork in a context so different from my society of origin led me to a particularly strong personal engagement and a questioning of elements that had previously seemed obvious to me. My ethnographic experience of women-only spaces questioned many of my subconscious assumptions on how society should be organized. It led me to denat-

uralize my ideas about femininity, masculinity, and gender norms profoundly. Putting on and taking off my *tarha* (scarf) and *abaya*,<sup>8</sup> while the young women I hung out with commented on my body, dress, and gestures, made this an embodied experience, so to speak. I began wearing clothes I had never worn before, not only an abaya but also high heels. The way I was categorized changed in time—during my last visits, since I cut my hair short, some women regarded me as a *buya*, or masculine woman (see further chapter 5), while men still interacted with me in the same way as before, as a “lady,” because I was veiled in front of them.

However, although I socialized with various groups in Riyadh, I am not Saudi and I do not pretend to speak in the name of Saudi women or Saudi feminists. Neither do I seek to participate in the Western discourse on women’s oppression in Saudi Arabia, which I think does not help the cause, is imperialistic, and selects its victims accordingly. It rarely, for example, speaks of the regular flash protests by groups of Saudi women since 2011, especially against the detention without trial of thousands of people suspected of being linked to “terrorist networks.” It also ignores, in general, nonnational women living in Saudi Arabia, excluding them from its scope. I hope that my analysis of transforming Saudi femininities, which explores complex processes in terms of changing norms, hierarchies, and power relations, will help point out the flaws in the assumptions on which this Western discourse is based.

I have visited Saudi Arabia every year since 2005, including after I finished the fieldwork on which this book is based, while also pursuing projects in gender studies in other contexts (including France). In part because I still find my position as a “Westerner” studying a “non-Western society” difficult, I decided to broaden the transnational perspective, conduct interviews with non-Saudi residents in Riyadh, and focus on the forms of international hegemony that affect the daily lives of its inhabitants. To better identify the specificities of Saudi women’s access to public spaces in comparison, I interviewed female Filipino and North American nurses working in Riyadh, and I got more and more interested in the articulations between forms of international hegemony and transforming gender norms. This led me to begin a new research project on masculinities in competition and discourses on femininities among highly qualified (European, American, Saudi, Pakistani . . . ) male and female professionals working in multinationals in the Gulf.

An Arabic translation of *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* was published in 2013. Although not sold in bookshops in Saudi Arabia, it was

available at the Riyadh Book Fair, and during my last visit I had the opportunity to speak about it with a few academics who had read the book. They were interested, in general positive about it, and a bit surprised that I had been able to conduct ethnographic research in Riyadh. One comment was that I had said little in the text about my background and intentions. I hope this preface has clarified these.