Women & Words
In Saudi Arabia
The Politics of Literary Discourse

A review

Anthropology of Muslim Societies
End essay
Leiden University

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Introduction

Throughout autumn 2011 I have been reading ‘Women and Words in Saudi Arabia’, a book written by Saddeka Arebi in 1994. I very much appreciate this anthropological work on literature written by Saudi Arabian women. Arebi starts her book by explaining her methods and accounts for the choices she made. She sounds like a conscious researcher, bearing in mind discussions we also faced during the course ‘Anthropology of Muslim Societies’. After this, the actual research follows. It is composed of a translation of selections of literature; background information on the author; and a textual analysis, for each writer respectively. The background information and textual analyses are based on interviews with each writer, held in Saudi-Arabia. She ends with discussing and linking theories to her findings.

This paper starts with a thorough overview of the book and my opinion on it. In the second part, theories from the course ‘Anthropology of Muslim Societies’ will be linked to the book. Lastly, a personal review on the book and the course is given.

Before this is possible however, it is important to know a little bit more about the author. This appeared not an easy task. Unfortunately, Ms. Arebi died in 2007. The only information about her life can be found via Amazon, Wikipedia and her personal Facebook page. All these sources quote the same information:

Dr. Saddeka Mohammed Arabi (died July 2007) was a Libyan-American social anthropologist and author. Born in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, she immigrated with her family to the United States during the late 1970s, eventually settling in Northern California. After obtaining her doctorate, she subsequently served as a Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, San Francisco State University, and Saint Mary's College of California. She was also an active member of the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami), one of the largest Islamic non-governmental organizations in the world consisting of Muslim religious figures from twenty-two countries. She died in July 2007 while visiting relatives in Libya.

A personal summary

As we discussed during the lectures, an anthropological research teaches not only about the object of study, but also about the person who wrote it and his or her background. A summary of a text is also very personal: what does the author find important to highlight, and what not? I think it is almost impossible to give an objective summary, and therefore this is combined here with my personal opinion on the book. There is one exception: I will discuss my opinion on the methodology on page six in order to link it to the theories of Paul Rabinow.

The goal of the research is to “understand the extent to which these [Saudi Arabian] women contribute to the production of various forms of thought in their society by providing their own visions and revisions as they venture into interpretation and reinterpretation of religion, tradition, and history, as well as other major cultural institutions, values, ideas, and meaning formed in society”; and “the concern will be with relating text, context, and writer in such a way as to establish the connection between the meaning of the text and its function in relation to the more general

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1 For easy reading, the term author refers to Arebi. The term writer, in turn, refers to one of the nine women that were studied by Arebi.
After a short explanation on why she chose this topic, Arebi starts with the conceptual framework and her theoretical orientation. Her methodology is based on the literary texts, selected and translated by Arebi herself, functioning as ‘social documents’, and based on thorough interviews with the writers, thereby functioning as ‘key informants’. She explains the reasons for her choice of terminology, referring to Foucault, Giddens, Said, Geertz, and others. After some more background information on the position of literature and its relation to politics, she explains the selection of her writers. This is mainly based on their historical significance. This was established through a questionnaire distributed among regular female Saudi Arabian readers who ranked the importance of each writer. A dozen writers came up. After that, a few were not selected because they were less consequential, resulting in the interviewing of nine writers. Of these, three were chosen as essay writers (Juhayer Al-Musa’ed, Fatna Shaker, Sohaila Zain Al-Abедин), since until then they only wrote essays. Four were known, and wanted to be known, as short-story writers (Sharifa Ash-Shamlan, Khayriyya As-Saggaf, Ruqayya Ash-Shabib, and Najwa Hashim); one as a playwright (Rajaa ‘Alim); and one as a poet (Fowziyya Abu-Khalid). Arebi interviewed all of them, facing some rather small constraints which she discusses. For example, she had trouble in getting a visa for Saudi Arabia, and faced space and time constraints. More tough for her was to select and translate the literature. She mainly based her choice on giving representative articles of the writer. I am of the opinion that in translating the literature, she has done a great job: by making indigenous literature available in the West, Arebi clearly builds bridges between West and East, which is also one of her central themes that will be discussed later in the book. Unfortunately, I am not able to judge the quality of the translation itself. But the fact that she translated these texts, and made the topics and opinions of female writers from Saudi Arabia available, already teaches us much. Even if there would be flaws in translation, which I doubt, it is of high value.

Chapter one starts with an overview of the history of female writers in Saudi Arabia. It shows how recent the phenomenon is: the start was in the 1950s. Arebi explains the causes of this phenomenon: education, the ideological functions of literature, family support and the role of literature in society. She further describes and explains the position of literature and the whole system of the written word in the Saudi Arabian society. She does this by analyzing writings of women in newspapers and other media, by analyzing today’s writers, and explaining the neglect of women writers. The reasons for this neglectance are related to the background of the writer, such as education, religion, and socio-cultural background; and the cultural status of the institution of literature. She takes cultural, social, religious and political aspects into account in this.

Chapter two represents and analyzes the writings of three female writers: Fowziyya Abu-Khalid, Ruqayya Ash-Shabib, and Rajaa ‘Alim. These were grouped together because of their shared use of modes of expression, among others historical allusions, and symbolic and allegorical representations of women’s experiences. Arebi already gives some more similarities in their writing style beforehand, which might cause presumptions about the writers before the actual reading of the texts.

5 Ibid., p.5
6 Ibid., p.21
7 Ibid., p.22
8 Ibid., p.24-5
9 Ibid., p.27
10 Ibid., p.32
11 Ibid., p.56-7
Fowziyya Abu-Khalid writes about several topics: the Janadiriyya Heritage Festival; a childbirth fever; love; and a short poem about women ‘abolishing the role of her breast’.\(^\text{12}\) Abu-Khalid appeared very cautious about Arebis’ research. She was concerned with the representation of history, heritage in particular, and the exclusion of some groups in this, and appealed for including the mass. Arebis’ background information on the role of heritage in the Saudi Arabian society helps understand the writings of Abu-Khalid. For example, when revealing that some parts refer to Palestine\(^\text{13}\), she shows aspects that I did not recognize myself. She shows multiple interpretations, which are interrelated: personal, as in the relationship between a man and a woman, and related to a country (Palestine). All suffer from pain and injustice. At first I found this second explanation farfetched, but after having read more on the Arab region, I believe she is right in placing this much emphasis on the Israel-Palestine conflict.\(^\text{14}\) It indeed plays an important role in the whole region, and people talk about it daily. Also, because the interpretations are based on her interviews, she does not fall in the ‘anthropologist’s trap’ where they interpret things that are not meant by the informants, and mainly mirror their own thoughts rather than those of their informants. That is what makes this book very strong. In the poem about childbirth fever the Palestinian aspect also comes across. Furthermore, Arebi explains the symbolical meaning of fever, as bringing mental confusion and causing hallucinations. She relates this, via a folk tale, to the lie that was told to Palestinian children about their position\(^\text{15}\).

Ruqayya Ash-Shabib writes about an appeal in court; the story of Sheherazade; and betrayal of time and space. These stories are more fiction like, mixing between dreams and reality. They show the strength of women and criticize men.

Rajaa ‘Alim wrote a play about an escaped character in a theatre. Arebi gives more information by explaining the names of the actors in the play, and by explaining the symbolic position of women, namely constantly being under vigilance and lacking an individual personality\(^\text{16}\).

Chapter three is ordered differently: first all articles and the personal sketch of each writer are presented, followed by feedback on every topic. Sharifa Ash-Shamlan writes about crazy women, where their craziness forms an excuse for their actions that are not always tolerated under normal circumstances. Khayriyya As-Saggaf describes an unhappy family and divorce, and Najwa Hashim writes about a marriage proposal between a man and a divorced woman. Central in these writings is victim and victimizing; power; illness/death; and relations between men and women. It is not always about women being victimized by men, but also about women victimized by other women and men victimized by men, and, although rare, even about men victimized by women. The stories tell much about the position of women in Saudi Arabia. They mainly talk of the suppression and of the writers opposition to this. I did not know much about Saudi Arabia. Neither did I know that this form of resistance was allowed. The women are critical towards society. They criticize the view of society on divorce and arranged marriage, for example. Sharifa Ash-Shamlan even describes the abaya as a symbol of darkness and lack of air.\(^\text{17}\) They are challenging the ideas about sex-segregation by localizing the stories on women sometimes outside of the home. Although they do confirm the traditional ideas and patterns, because the women are only outside temporarily, and with a goal.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p.71  
\(^{14}\) For example, the Dutch former diplomat Petra Stienen also refers to this in her book ‘Dromen van een Arabische Lente’.  
\(^{15}\) Arebi, S. (1994). Women & Words in Saudi Arabia – the politics of literary discourse. New York: Colombia University Press. p.72-3. The Palestinian children realized they face extermination if they believed the lie that was told them, so they woke up and took stones as their weapons.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.116  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.162  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.178
This is one of the many examples showing that the resistance takes place ‘within a limited range’; the writers do not suggest a new structure for society\textsuperscript{19}, and they do not name the root causes of the suppression like the family institute, as Arebi also states later in the book (page 278). The writers criticize in a very subtle way, and as Arebi says: ‘allusion is more fruitful than evoking unnecessary apprehension and opposition’.\textsuperscript{20} I can imagine that this is true in Saudi Arabia. Still, I was surprised by this degree of resistance in an absolute monarchy, maybe because I was not familiar with the country yet. However, I do know that writing is a common form of resistance, as I know from Tibetan and Chinese writers and bloggers in China. On page 171, Arebi explains that although some characters are crazy, they are not stupid. So using mad women is a cover to express oneself. Alert readers, however, will know the hidden message.

Chapter four knows the same order as chapter two. These articles are also critical, but mainly about society in general, and worldwide. They show the position of Arab women in the world, and how they look at the West. Arebi describes this beautifully: “as women, they assert their differences from men; as intellectuals they provide a critique of cultural institutions; and as Arab Muslim women they speak of the forces that dominate them, without slipping into a Western garb of adopting a Western definition of their situation for which they mock other Arab women”.\textsuperscript{21}

Juhayer Al-Musa’ed criticizes literature and other published works on women, posing them as an ‘object of commercialization’\textsuperscript{22} and as having no other problems than girls clubs, women and driving, dowries, et cetera.\textsuperscript{23} She is annoyed that women are presented one-sided in media, always in the same way, only meant to sell more newspapers or magazines. The real discussions, about the role of women in society and politics for example, are not presented. She is also critical of the concept of liberation of the woman, and explains why women do not need to be liberated from men.\textsuperscript{24} As may be clear, she writes for regular readers, not only intellectuals.\textsuperscript{25} But again, even though she might be very critical, she respects the current situation. She accepts for instance the ‘ulama as having the last word.\textsuperscript{26}

Fatna Shaker writes about women rights, and the relation between men and women. She thinks that women need to be liberated from themselves, since they are their own oppressors. They made their own oppression, since men are all born from a mother, so women do have power, and because women leave others (men) to interpret religion for example.\textsuperscript{27} Also, women need to be liberated from man’s hegemony and discover their own identity.\textsuperscript{28} The problem affects the whole society, not only women.

The last writer, Sohaila Zain Al-Abedin, writes in a very conservative manner about female writers. She thinks women should not write about their emotions, since these should be private for her and her husband. Also, she thinks it is fine that women write from home, and that female writers face many problems due to their biological constraints.\textsuperscript{29} The real danger is not in the West, but in Muslims who imitate the West.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.164
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.184-5
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.185
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.186
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p.190-191
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.193
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p.199-201
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.213-4
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.217
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p.227
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.235
Chapter five gives more information on the arena of literary reviewing. This appears to be a field dominated by men.\(^{31}\) Old male writers tend to write about young female writers as if they are their daughter: very positive, and supporting. Young male writers criticize young female writers in a tough manner in order to prevent talks about them on having a relation. This says much about the gender relations in this society.\(^{32}\) The fact that women are not only criticized for their literature but also for the morality in it, for example idolatry\(^{33}\), also interests me for this reason. Arebi also adds a discussion of what female literature exactly is: literature about women, written by women, or on topics that interest women\(^{34}\)? From page 264 onwards, she speaks about the constraints on women as writers, and their methods of dealing with this. She mentions the example when women face attacks on their writings. For men it is socially risky to step up for them, so the women either ignore the attacks, resort to silence, or quit writing\(^{35}\).

Chapter six, the conclusion, reflects on the discoveries done before. Arebi explains the position of the Saudi Arabian women in relation to men. For example, she explains that the shift from a tribal society to a modern state has undermined the traditional role of men.\(^{36}\) From page 278, she discusses the relation between East and West, thereby also referring to Edward Said and other theories. She explains that because of Orientalism, Saudi women writers are very critical of the West and its ideals about women\(^{37}\). She then compares Western and Saudi Arabian feminism. Arebi does make generalizations, since she speaks of ‘Arabian women’, where she spoke before of Saudi Arabian women. Also, she does not define the term Arabian, nor why she does not use the term Arab women. These are weak points of her writing. I think her thoughts only apply to Saudi Arabian women, and not to Arabian women; at least, we don’t know anything about Arabian women. She ends, somewhat ironically in relation to this last argument, with some quotes about the fact that we should talk with the persons we study.

**Methodology and link to Rabinow**

Arebi is very clear in explaining her methodology. As stated above, she explains her methods at the start of the book. I think that is usual in science, and I also agree with this because then you know what you are reading, and what the possible shortcomings are.

Arebi started her research by holding a questionnaire among Saudi Arabian female students on which writers they found historically significant. This is something I very much appreciate: she makes her choice based on the preferences of Saudi Arabian women themselves. However, she only shortly mentioned why she left three writers out after the questionnaire: because they were less consequential, and that is that. Nothing more on it is stated, so the choice might have been influenced by personal or other reasons as well. Because her topic, female writers in Saudi Arabia, is rather narrow, it was possible for Arebi to interview all writers mentioned by the female students questioned by her, except the three she left out. This is obviously beneficial; in this way one can really make generalizations for all of the influential Saudi Arabian female writers. Arebi mentions her problems with the interviews. The most important of these was having time constraints. She does not say whether this really formed a problem, and it seems that in the end it did not, because she has held thorough interviews with all writers.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.249  
\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.260-1  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.254  
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p.263-4  
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p.272  
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 280
Also her choice of articles that are representative of the writers is not discussed in much detail. However, because she does describe everything (although it could have been more detailed sometimes) and she also shows the challenges of time, selection and translation, I am confident that she performed her research qualitatively well.

The research of Arebi has a different form from that of Paul Rabinow, for two reasons. Firstly, Arebis’ social documents are texts, not whole communities and human actions that can be ‘read’ only once, as was the case for Rabinow. Texts can be read and reread; occurrences in people’s lives can not. Secondly, her informants are different: before the actual research, she knew who she needed to speak to, and she had to interview these nine writers. Therefore, the lessons of Rabinow on what a good informant is do not apply here. These two differences make her research almost impossible to compare to the ethnographic research of Rabinow. However, every research will face the problem of returning something to the object of study which Rabinow mentions on page 78.\(^{38}\) As mentioned above, some of the writers were skeptic about Arebi’s research in first instance, afraid of being misrepresented by another foreign researcher. However she gained trust and they all participated. I believe that mastering the language helps a lot in this. This shows that one is really interested in the society one studies, and that at least a part of the cultural gap is filled. Compared to Rabinow’s research, the ‘informants’ had a better financial position, so returning something to society here meant giving back a good research product without any false interpretations or bias, I believe. That is always the goal, so it was only a matter of sending the book back to the writers, which I hope she has done.

**Link to Monaghan and Just**

The questions that were posed by dr. Harmsen proved very useful in analyzing ‘Women and Words’. The questions will be answered, to give more background information on the book, and the message it is carrying on Islam in Saudi Arabia.

1. Does Arebi describe Muslim society in Saudi Arabia in a static or in a dynamic sense? In other words, does she describe those societies and the role of Islam in them in terms of equilibrium, stability and integration, or rather in terms of political, socioeconomic and cultural change?

   This question shows that ‘Women and Words’ is describing the Saudi Arabian society in a rather static way, but Arebi acknowledges this herself as well. This was probably done intentionally: it is a snapshot of the 1980s in Saudi Arabia. The historical overview in the introduction shows the changes in society. Arebi therefore shows that she is aware of the deep transformations in society. She mentions for example that before the 1950s there were almost no female writers and that since then, more and better skilled female writers have arisen. However, her research deals with writers from the 1980s. By now, a new generation might have already arisen, which might write in a totally different way. Arebi is also aware of this, stating that, briefly put, Western influences “will certainly make of the 1990s an era totally distinguishable from what preceded it. My hope is that this study (...) will furnish a basis for future comparative research”\(^{39}\). So although it is a problem, she acknowledges it and deals with it.

2. To what extent does Arebi describe the Saudi Arabian society as homogeneous or as diverse?

   Arebi describes Saudi Arabian society as being very diverse. She often speaks of the different social layers of society: the elite, the middle class, and the lower, often less educated class. Of some female


writers she does not explicitly mention for which group they write. It might be that they also don’t have a target group in mind. But some are explicitly described as writing for the mass, like Abu-Khalid. All writers are themselves from the middle class. Besides this spectrum, Arebi also describes the Saudi Arabian society along the religious spectrum: those who follow the Islam strictly, and those who do this to a more limited extent. The translations show that the society is very much divided in this respect; there are profound differences between the people living at both ends of the spectrum. This can already be seen when comparing the conservative writings of Sohaila Zain Al-Abedin and writers like Fowziyya Abu-Khalid. This question is important, because in first instance one would probably pay less attention to it. By discovering that there are at least two aspects that show the heterogeneity (social and religious), one will see the Saudi Arabian society as a diverse one, and not as homogeneous.

3. How are the Islamic institutions Arebi is describing functioning? Are they still mainly focused on creating and maintaining social ties and traditions, or do they display a degree of “rationalization”, in the sense of becoming increasingly focused on efficiently performing tasks?
This question cannot be answered after reading ‘Women and Words’. She is not focusing on the social relations or the religious institutions, but on the writers and they are not writing on this topic either.

4. How does Arebi describe the relationship between a universal scriptural religion and local culture and belief systems?
Arebi does not mention this relationship.

5. How does Islam, according to Arebi, function as a model for society (in the sense of prescribing for society the “right” kind of sociopolitical and cultural order) and a model of those societies (reflecting the existing power relations in them)?
The research of Arebi is mainly focused on Islam being a model for society. She shows that there are groups in society that strictly comply with the Islamic laws, and groups who do so less. Islam probably also is a model of the society, maybe even more than in other Islamic countries, because the religion has its origin here. However, in this book this topic is not discussed, and I find it hard to answer the question. I do not have enough information on the structure of Saudi Arabia and its history (a.k.a. what was earlier: Islam or the structure of the Saudi Arabian society; and following this, whether today’s society is the same as it was at the time of Mohammed, because it probably is not!).

6. Arebi does not describe any millenarian movements, so question six does not apply in this regard.

7. How, according to Arebi, does Islam shape the place of the human individual within the societal context?
Arebi is mainly showing how Islam determines the place of the woman in society. However, this will also depend on who ones parents are and how strictly they apply Islam. This might determine whether one will go to college or not for example.

Link to Clifford Geertz
As stated before, Arebis’ research is not focused on Islam, which makes it difficult to apply Clifford Geertz’ ideas on this work. Arebi has shown that there does not exist one way of being Muslim, and that Islam can be practiced in many ways; more conservative or more liberal. The theories of Geertz

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do not help in understanding the book better. Also, because of the many criticism on Geertz’ work, it has limited value, so I would rather study the book on its own.

**Link to Varisco and ethnocentrism**

There are several points of Varisco’s critique that come to mind when reading ‘Women and Words’.

The first is that Varisco points out that little attention has been paid to analyses from Muslims themselves⁴¹. Arebi has lived up to this critique by using indigenous literature: literature that says something about the society that is being studied. The literature already shows the opinion of female Saudi Arabian inhabitants on their society, and Arebi further elaborates on this through her interviews.

Secondly, Varisco states that Muslims are often represented in an essentialized and homogenized manner⁴². Arebi did not do this. As explained above, she showed the diversity within Saudi Arabia.

Thirdly, he points to checking the sources used. For example, he blames Geertz for basing himself mainly on secondary texts.⁴³ The majority of Arebis’ research however is based on interviews and primary texts (in Arabic!). It is only in the introductory and concluding chapters that she connects these to existing literature. This only provides to theoretical insight into the interviews.

Fourthly, Varisco explains that ‘being there’ is not enough.⁴⁴ In history, anthropologists were respected because they went to remote areas and subsequently explained what the world looks like to the people back home. This, however, is not enough; one has to perform decent ethnographic research, and check one’s observations with the people whom the observations are about in order to say something correct about the society studied. An example of this is the misunderstanding of Geertz of the cockfights in Indonesia. Fortunately, this has changed through the years, and Arebi also has performed good research as I have argued in this paper.

There are of course many more criticisms but Varisco. However, I think that most of these do not apply, and sometimes do not even relate to the book of Arebi. Therefore only one last critique will be discussed. This can be summarized in the following quote:

“ethnography as a textual genre of representation has come under fire for fixing a very Western image of the non-Western other⁴⁵, adding that Western scholars have brought “the baggage of ethnocentric and racist biases”⁴⁶.

First, Arebi was born in Libya and therefore is not totally ‘Western’. It is not clear when she moved to the United States, but one can assume that she has well been influenced by this new culture, since she spent at least ten years there before performing this research. Still, her background is non-Western which may decrease the likelihood of giving a Western image of the non-Western other. However, ethnocentrism could still be well possible, although the differences between the Libyan society and the Saudi Arabian society might be smaller than that of Saudi Arabia and the United States for example. Therefore this is not enough and additional arguments will be discussed.

Secondly, Arebi herself proves that she is absolutely not Eurocentric, western-centric, or ethnocentric. She herself is irritated by these phenomena of Westerners claiming to know the truth about others, and tries to fill this gap. There are several aspects that prove this:

Already on page 8, Arebi mentions the anthropologists’ neglect of indigenous literature, and her irritation about the Western tendency to monopolize the representation of the East.

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⁴² Ibid., p.20
⁴³ Ibid., p.24
⁴⁴ Ibid., p.26
⁴⁵ Ibid., p.12
⁴⁶ Ibid., p.21
On page 280, she praises Edward Said’s critique on former anthropological research that neglected the ‘Other’ that was studied, and also includes Laura Nader who elaborated on his argument. Also, she shows the different attitudes of the female writers towards the West. For example, she explains the several definitions of liberation: the liberalization from men, the liberalization from women’s own internal constraints, and the liberalization from the West.\textsuperscript{47} By showing the many definitions and views towards the West, she shows that she understands them all, and does not choose one side.

**Personal reflection on the book and the course**

Some topics that were important in the book have not yet been discussed in this paper. These also relate to the more general lessons that I have learned from the course ‘Anthropology of Muslim societies’. Therefore I think it is important to give a personal reflection on this.

I was brought up with the thought that women can and should do anything they want, regardless of whether this is supposed to be ‘allowed’ or ‘decent’ for women. Therefore, I have always been interested in gender issues. However, already during my time in India I realized that my ideas about the position of women in society are radically different from others, and I came to understand one other view. This was a vision from an imam, who explained the position of Islam towards women. At that time, I tried to understand his point and I did to some extent. However I thoroughly understand it since this course. I learned that one Islamic view, which I think is largely spread, and was also present in Arebi’s book, is that Islam is not limiting for women and does not entail their inferiority. This view entails that women are precious and should be protected by men. They can have access to everything, but the man has to take care of this. Arebi’s book also explained this to me in a very clear way. The issue of driving for women is a good example in this regard. In the Western view, every individual should be able to do anything he/she wants. But Juhayer Al-Musa’ed shows a totally different perspective: “For if every guardian faced his responsibilities and every man practiced his qiwama caretaker role, and drove women to work and every other place, then absolutely no problem would exist”.\textsuperscript{48} That is true: women in this way can go wherever they wanted, as is also the case in the West. It is just a different approach, not anything more or less than the Western approach. Of course, there are also other views present in Islam. There will be more conservative and more progressive groups of people that think of this differently. Still, I think the presented view is largely spread. This view can bridge East and West, for example in living with fellow citizens in the Netherlands, who are Muslim. For more conservative views it will be more difficult to still live together and understand and respect each other. In this course, and by understanding the driving-case, I realized my own Eurocentric perspective. I had read parts of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’. Since then I am better able to recognize this perspective in literature (like Geertz) and also in my own thinking. Before, I knew about Orientalism, but now I gained a profounder understanding of it. Therefore I value this course, and this book, very highly. Even after thirty years of vivid critique on the Muslim East Orientalism is present. This is understandable, since it is difficult to change one’s view, especially when it is present in many sources that relate to ‘the East’. Therefore it is very important to learn about this, and truly understand it. Not only when one is studying Eastern societies, but also in multicultural societies like The Netherlands, or societies that are preoccupied with Western influences, like Saudi Arabia.

Also, I learned much about anthropology, Islam, literature, and Saudi Arabia. I realized that when I usually read a text, I tent to mark the ‘facts’ in order to remember this. However, for this course, the facts hardly mattered. The clue was to look behind them and find


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.189
different ways in which one can look at these facts. This is very important in reading texts, since, as we have seen, almost no text can be value-free.

I also gained much insight in Islam. One aspect that is still in my mind is the article of Combs-Schilling on sacrifice. This is a very anthropological subject: something we in the West know little of, and think it is barbaric. However through anthropological studies we learn to see the other side of these acts. Combs-Schilling presented a very detailed ethnographic work, which was good. However it was presented in a very Western view, and was in my view over focused on gender. This made me write an almost anti gender essay that week, which I never held possible a few years ago. Also, Muslims would have seen the sacrifice in a different manner than myself, and even Muslims from other countries or regions or ages will give a different meaning to it. This was already shown by the difference between the sacrifice ritual in Indonesia and Morocco.

From Arebis’ book I learned how much symbolism is hidden in literature. I do not read a lot, but I can totally understand that when somebody looks at a photo-album or mirror, it symbolizes the past and self-reflection. I did not know this before, and it will help me in understanding books I will be reading in the future.

Last but not least, I learned much on Saudi Arabia and its female writers. I was very much surprised by the manner in which the topic of women is discussed in Saudi Arabia. As said, I did not know it could be done in this relatively free manner. Also, I did not know that there were so many diverse opinions within the country, and to be honest, that women think so critically about their position and express this. It was a nice surprise though; they critically think about their society, but do this in their own manner. Some writers who are progressive are this in their own way, and explicitly do this in a manner different from Western women. They also challenge the Western way of emancipation, and I really like this, because it makes you look critically to your own society and your own position. I start to see Orientalist views implicitly present in literature, but also in daily life, discussions, television, and so on. But I never felt offended or insulted by Arebis’ book. Therefore, Arebi is very good in building bridges between the West and East: we both understand resistance, but do this in our own manner.

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