

Mai Yamani:

A SAUDI ARABIAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

Myriam Sfeir

While in England I had the chance to meet Dr. Mai Yamani, a social anthropologist and editor of the **Feminism and Islam**. Dr. Yamani and I decided to meet in a hotel in Knightsbridge. Given that I had never met her before we started exchanging hints as to how we were going to recognize each other. She told me that she was a petite with dark hair and explained that she looked very Arab. I had difficulty recognizing her at first for I expected her to be much older. After chatting for a while I started my interview.

Mai Yamani was born in Cairo in 1956 during the Suez war at the height of Arab nationalism. Her father is Saudi Arabian from Mecca and her mother Iraqi originally from Musil and brought up in Basra. In terms of her sense of identity and belonging Yamani feels, and has always felt, strongly Saudi Arabian and especially Meccan. The Yamanis travelled between Baghdad, Cairo, and Jeddah, and Mai Yamani believes that this exposure was extremely beneficial in the shaping of her character: "I'm very content with our way of life. The kind of exposure I experienced was enriching, and it depends on how one benefits from it. In spite of their exposure, a lot of people settle for what is there and do exactly what has to be done. It was not the case with me, my life was a struggle and a constant search for identity..." In the 1960's there were very few schools in Saudi Arabia, and in Jeddah, specifically, there were no schools except al-Quttab for learning and memorizing the Quran and the Hadith. So, Mai Yamani started off with a French education where she attended a boarding school in Switzerland for 9 years. Immediately after Switzerland she left for the U.S.A where she spent four years at Bryn Mawr College for girls.

Yamani took her studies

very seriously and was adamant on becoming an anthropologist: "I have had this passion to observe and learn about other cultures, peoples, and patterns of behavior. I have always acted as an ethnographer and have been an anthropologist ever since I started at Bryn Mawr in 1975." She received her BA in cultural anthropology and attended Oxford University where she studied for a masters degree in the same field. She chose anthropology because it brings together the disciplines of sociology and psychology: the former looks at modern societies, while the latter focuses more on the individual's mind. She became immersed in her studies and learned about primitive societies, the aborigines in Australia, and the Africans.

Upon graduating she went back to Saudi Arabia in 1981 and taught sociology and social anthropology to female students at King Abd al-Aziz University. It turned out to be a very good experience for both Yamani and her female students given that she had personal contact with the girls unlike their previous male professors who used to give their lectures via television.

All along, her father supported her education though she faced a lot of external problems from society at large: "How can I explain or define the pressure, tension, and guilt people burden you with when you don't conform to the norm." Yamani knew that she would never fit in for she felt different from most of her friends and from most Saudi women as well. The pressure to marry and live a "normal" life was always there, and she recounts that when she was younger, she always wanted to marry and have six children. She explains that this has a lot to do with one's "upbringing, one's expectations of oneself as a woman, ..." Yamani admits that both her daughters, "the achievement of her life," and her husband have been very supportive of her work over the years. At the end of the day "you have to do it yourself and constantly push your way, for authority is not given but taken." According to her it is only with tenacity that one can succeed and get somewhere.

Yamani defines rebellion as departing from the norm and from what is traditional. She affirms that throughout her life, whether it was in her choice of education or marriage, in the fact that she didn't cover her hair or conform to the prevalent



dress code, that she considered herself rebellious. According to Yamani, "If you want to be an Arab you should know the boundaries, and from within you can have more flexibility. I've learned not to break the limits but to stretch them because when you do so you remain part of the system ... without being stigmatized. In this manner you achieve a balance between freedom and dignity."

After teaching for several years in Saudi Arabia, Yamani returned to Oxford University one more time to do her Ph.D. which dealt with Saudi society and questions of social identity in the Hijaz region. At that time she was already married with a daughter; however, a lot of people were shocked by her decision:

"What's wrong with this lady, how is she going to do a Ph.D. with a baby to care for?" Yet despite the criticism and complaints, she received

encouragement from others, particularly because she was to conduct field work in Saudi Arabia for a year and a half.

According to Mai Yamani her thesis "was a personal quest and an academic pursuit ... suddenly I was able to answer a lot of questions by observing and analyzing."

With time her interests changed, and instead of focusing on questions of social identity, symbols, colors, rituals, norms and patterns she adopted a more practical approach in her research: "Once you have a particular problem, you go out there in the field and test it in an attempt to come up with answers, and that's what I'm doing for I feel that I want to do something other than just sit and wait." Yamani believes that a great deal of discrimination is prevalent in the Arab world with very little equality between the sexes, and this discrimination is justified under the banner of the concept of honor and shame. According to Yamani, in

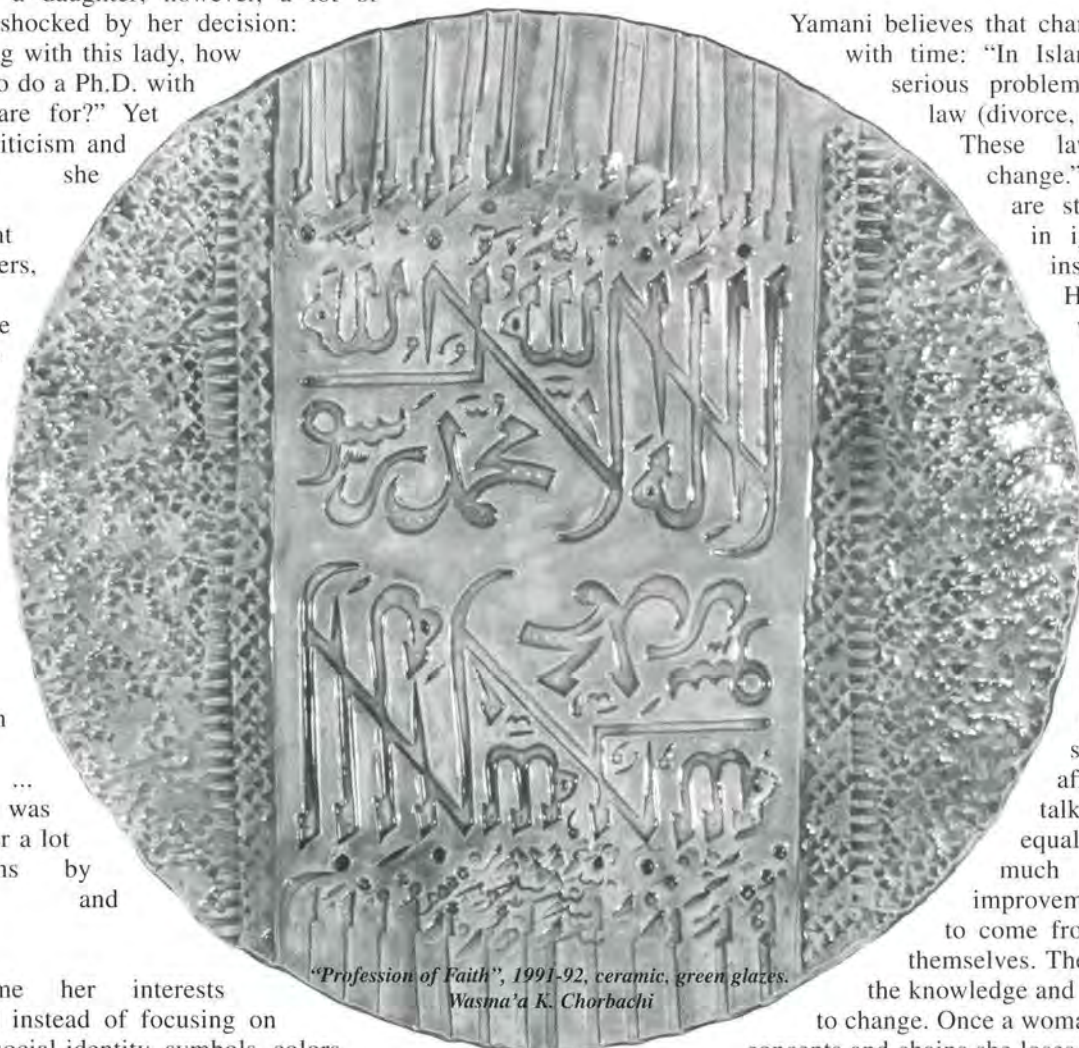
the name of 'ayb and shame we have been held back, and one of the major reasons is the economic situation which has a strong impact on the concept of honor and shame. In Saudi Arabia, women comfortably sit back and hire drivers to take their children to school, maids to do the housework, ... Although these women have been deprived of other avenues to power such as participation in the political process, they have access to money through inheritance where according to the law in the country and the *shari'ah*, women have rights in this respect. Yet what is the point of having so much money if women remain under the control of men: women cannot travel without their husband's approval and permission."

Yamani believes that change will come with time: "In Islam we have a serious problem with family law (divorce, custody, etc.).

These laws have to change." Arab women are still submerged in ignorance. For instance, in the Hanbali law a woman can ask for her right to divorce, yet, many women are still unaware of their rights and are obsessed with *al-'ayb* and what people would say. Yamani affirms that in

talking about equality there is so much room for improvement, but it has to come from the women themselves. They should have the knowledge and then the desire to change. Once a woman breaks these concepts and chains she loses the fear and in

turn feels free. Yamani states that although 65% of university graduates in Saudi Arabia are women, only 5% are part of the work force: "I am not saying that all of them should start working, yet some women should be involved at the decision making level." Yamani holds that as far as her generation is concerned there is no possibility of envisaging any drastic changes. Yamani asserts that through her research she is hoping to make a difference "by sharing and publishing my works. At the same time I want to be able to communicate



"Profession of Faith", 1991-92, ceramic, green glazes.
Wasma'a K. Chorbachi

with other women. There is no point in having a few elitist educated women from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, etc. who speak English and French and are conscious of their rights and their writing, but unable to help the poorer and less fortunate women."

Yamani defines her feminism as an awareness and conviction that the position of women in Arab societies and other societies should be improved. She asserts that one should not sit back but should play an active role in consciousness raising: "My feminism is not a mission, I don't walk around saying oh yes I'm a feminist, but when a situation arises I react to it immediately... we have to question and challenge the prevalent discourse." Yamani asserts that being a feminist depends on the person you are and on the circumstances. In countries where Islam legitimizes all political, social, and economic activities, women can only demand their rights from within the shari'a and the primary sources (the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*). Yamani believes in moderation and would "read the *Qur'an* and interpret it in a more modern and moderate way." Yamani affirms that interpretation is a very complex manner and holds that the fundamentalists exploit religion for their own purposes.

Yamani is a possitive person; she believes in positive thinking and advocates accepting people the way they are. Concerning the hijab Yamani explains that wearing the hijab is a matter of choice: "I used to watch the heavily veiled female students at the university. I understood and respected them for they are seeking to understand, define and preserve their identity. They are trying to make a statement. I don't mind if people want to wear it, but I don't want them to impose it or to pronounce judgement on me (I have been constantly criticized) because I don't wear it."

Yamani asserts that living in London has been a happy, successful, and productive experience for the freedom of expression and the possibilities it offers. She explains that London nowadays is the capital of the Arab intellectuals who are in self imposed exile. Most of the Arab academics, intellectuals and journalists have chosen to live there: "I'm not saying that I'm one of them for I go back to my country all the time. Yet, so many intellectuals in London who cannot go back to their countries or to Beirut have remained here." Although she enjoys her life in England, however, Yamani explains that she has faced a great deal of discrimination: "Westerners have preconceived notions about Arabs. You are labeled immediately, and being Saudi you must be as a consequence, very rich and stupid." Yet, she affirms, on the whole, that racism and preconceived ideas prevail on both sides, Arabs as well as Westerners.

Mai Yamani maintains that Westerners are interested in Saudi women because an aura of mystery surrounds them.

They are also interested in Arab women, Islam, and the veil. Yamani explains that the idea of organizing a conference on feminism and Islam came about after she gave a lecture entitled "Feminism Behind the Veil" on the situation of Saudi Women today at The Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies at Whitehall. Shibly al-Mallat attended the lecture and suggested organizing a conference and in fact that's what they did. It was not one conference, but a two year series of lectures that went on and on and resulted in a network among Arab women. They had speakers from all around the Arab world, academicians and scholars such as Tujan al-Faisal, Leila Ahmad (whose contributions do not appear in the book entitled **Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives**, 1996), and many others.

Yamani is currently heading a project entitled "The New Generation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)" for her area of interest is the Arab world and more specifically the Arab Gulf states: "I'm interested in these countries which have similar characteristics. They are overpopulated and they are very rich in oil." Yamani explained that in the Arab Gulf states namely Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qattar, U.A.E, Bahrain and Kuwait, over 40 % of the population is under fifteen years of age and only 4% are over sixty. Given that not enough is known about the values, motivations, and aspirations of young people to assess how they might respond to the challenges ahead, the project aims to meet the need for more information and to find out from members of the new generation themselves what they have to say about who they are. The questions are

related to their education and training, their vocational aspirations, their access and exposure to different sources of information, their values, ..."

Yamani is very eager to start working on this project which will begin in September 1997. As a woman, Yamani's task will be easier than that of a male researcher for she will be allowed to interview both men and women. Also the fact that she is an Arab who speaks the native Arabic language and has had previous experience of conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, (where she conducted interviews for her doctoral thesis), will facilitate her endeavor. The findings of this research will serve as a valuable contribution enriching Arab libraries.

IDENTIFICATION CARD

A Bryn Mawr College graduate, received her MA and Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Oxford University, taught at King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia. She was a research fellow at the Center for Cross Cultural Research on Women at Oxford and served as an academic adviser to the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, Washington DC. She is currently Associate Fellow at The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Middle East Programme, Chatham House, London.