

Anna Odrowąż-Coates, *Fata Morgana of the Saudi women's cultural space*, Kraków 2015: Impuls Publishing House, pp. 302

The book by Anna Odrowąż-Coates is a unique work in the current Polish discourse about the situation of women in the modern world. The author introduces the Polish reader into the foreign world, exotic and known only fragmentarily. The reader's knowledge is based more on fiction or journalistic narratives in books and film than on science reflection – the world of Islamic women. It is a pioneer analysis in Polish literature, which includes such in-depth information of the socio-cultural situation of women living in Saudi Arabia – a specific country of the Middle East. The analyses conducted in the book are very well embedded in the net of various sociological, anthropological, cultural and pedagogic scientific opinions, concepts and conceptual constructs. This makes the socio-cultural depiction of the Saudi women's world – described in vivid tones and enchanting by almost literary, journalistic form – in fact a serious scientific work, a thought-out view on the topic. Very seldom one comes across such a thoughtful and perceptive analysis, moreover based on original research of the Saudis, conducted in natural conditions – in the culture characterized by specific social relations regarding the religious saturation as well as the prism of gender. The author used the opportunity to carry out such original study in a remarkable way while staying in the depicted world of Islamic women for a longer period of time. Thanks to the ethnographic approach and with the use of participant observation and interviews, the character of the investigator seems to continue good traditions of researchers revealing hidden cultures, such as Bronisław Malinowski does. The reader will find the book to be an extremely pleasing experience, even an educating adventure. The book contains a great amount of knowledge and understanding of the life and situation of the Islamic women. Moreover, the Islamic women's perspective, their sense of freedom and their limitations as well as the meanings they give to everyday errands is highlighted, along with the attributes of their functioning and the usual activities of common life. The book presents the world of socio-cultural space of the women and the mechanisms of its creation and maintenance, at the same time showing elements which modify that space, connected to the civilization progress and a slow process of opening Saudi Arabia to the world and to the changes currently observed in the previously strict traditional norms and life standards. The *Fata Morgana* mentioned in the title is an accurately chosen metaphor about fluidity of the socio-educational reality of Saudi women, that refers to the duality of the world that is being described and discovered, as the Author writes: "Their being and non-being", a metaphor of being and concurrent invisibility in many social aspects, beyond the walls of their houses. Thanks to the author, the reader faces a picture drenched with fluidity of the women's ways of

functioning and thinking – both in individual and collective perspective. Reading the book resembles taking a journey through the world of Islamic women that is unknown and misunderstood by the Europeans, immersing in their everyday life, customs, values, longings and limitations. It is a journey into the world marked by women's conflict between the dominant system of values imposed by the general culture of the country and education beyond the system, along with global opportunities that are being shown to Saudi women through the "digital window". The reader gets to know the world in which the fundamental adaptive mechanism is expressed mimicry; the woman, in order to survive, to "be", must "not be". For the reader, it is, without a doubt, an exclusive journey, because the only way to take it is with the author as a guide, who courteously rings up the curtain to reveal the common life of Saudi women, something kept well-hidden beyond a veil of uniformed dress-code and places that stay forbidden to the foreigners.

The scientific value of the book can be perceived in many dimensions. Firstly, it impresses with a very rich theoretical background of the conducted research. It draws attention to the vastness of references to concepts and theoretical approaches, to researchers and authors, to begin with such iconic persons in social and humanist sciences, as Durkheim, Mead, Bourdieu, Collins, Bauman, Goffman, Parsons, Kohlberg, Erickson, Luhman, Bernstein, through an array of feminist authors, to the lesser-known names in Poland, as British and American researchers and others. Familiarizing the reader with less famous authors is a particular added value of this book. An aspect that cannot be missed are the reconstructions of thematic discourses aiming to justify the use of particular trends and concepts to her own needs. In addition to these great reconstructions, many reflections can be found – the original ones and ones deriving from observation, presenting the Islamic women's situation in a reality full of paradoxes and fluidity of the habitus and behaviour. One might be impressed by an enormous amount of literature reference incorporated in the book, in a big part consisting of foreign works (mostly in English), whose presentation and quoting are by itself incredibly beneficial to the reader – especially to the "searching" one.

Secondly, the huge advantage of the book when it comes to its scientific value is the methodology. Both the selection, and the implementation of ambitious and interesting, ethnography-based research procedure and its competent representation and justification on the background of contemporary methodological approaches, are another value that the book offers. In a clear and objective manner, Anna Odrowąż-Coates shows the details of the conduction of the study, its location, duration, subject matter and circumstances. In a narrative that is detailed, yet interesting, one can find the nuances of her research work, the difficulties related to the limitations deriving from strict cultural and moral values that apply to Saudi Arabic women and to foreigners. The detailed methodological choices include the participant observation and interviewing (unstructured in-depth inter-

views) and the analysis of autobiographical messages (women of different origins: Saudi women, Muslim women, Somali and Australians). These methods combined create a very interesting methodological approach.

The analysis of the study results included in the second part of the book is a great find for the reader, especially for the one, who is unfamiliar with the oriental world of the Middle East. The author reveals to us what is hidden behind the veil – the world of Muslim women, first introducing the historico-political and cultural-religious background of the land that is the focus of her research. It is in fact a fascinating story about the Arab world, the Islam world shown through the prism of gender, the story that brings the reader into the nuances of Islam religion and political, social and cultural repercussions. In subsequent chapters, the author presents the results of the research by constructing a picture of the socio-cultural space of Saudi women. First, she shows their world and the meaning of its the visible attributes and symbols. The analyses contained in this part of the book revolve around several issues: the public image of women against the custom/obligation to comply to uniformed dress-code, the women's attitude towards their bodies, their sexuality, but also daily activities, habits and circumstances (including e.g. the ban on women driving), religious practices, forms of women's education and its components, the limitations of it that affect the Saudi women, and other types of barriers in different vital areas of life - their access to media and digital communication or their employment. The presented analyses are attractively illustrated with the responses of interviewed women and men and the fragments of ethnographic diary kept by the researcher.

The next chapters reveal the picture of the female Arabia, based on the accounts of "the outsiders" and from the perspective of the foreign, "strange" women living in the Kingdom, showing how that particular area is strongly influenced by discriminatory practices. Section 7.2 might be found especially interesting – the author speaks about upbringing and socialization in the social and cultural conditions of the Saudi Kingdom, by synthesizing the previous reflections, she presents the goals and the indoctrinative sense of them in a thorough way. This passage might offer some sort of a summary of observations and discussions carried out previously in the book. The author constructs the accurate statements about the importance of implementing an endemic upbringing in the world she describes, where the basic mechanism of the socio-cultural reproduction assures the functioning of socio-political system as a whole, guarantees the sustainability of the philosophy of community and the existing apotheosis of own religious and cultural values. The book ends with a very well written, factual conclusion, which presents the final outcome of the research, emotionally charged, where the author ultimately states that the creation and the persistence of gender and class differences based on the reality that she investigates. The conclusions are actually based on a process of social programming of child-

ren and is conducted in the form of purposeful and intense institutionalized indoctrination of cultural and religious kind. Religion, as the author concludes, is the most important factor in regulating and determining the position and the socio-cultural space of Saudi women.

The work is a good read book because of the style, which is abundant in details that create a suggestive picture and enrich the narrative with a vivid tone. The book as a whole gives an impression of a journalistic form. Enchanting for the reader, who in the course of reading immerses himself in the picture of “gender apartheid” and discovers the details of life that are secret and sometimes shocking for Western culture. The reader also discovers the importance of the secrets in the perspective of understanding the world and the Saudi women’s situation.

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