Book Reviews

Disfigured: A Saudi Woman's Story of Triumph over Violence

Rania Al-Baz (tr. Catherine Spencer)
Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009. 160 pages.

Rania Al-Baz's ten-chapter book touches on a sore point found all over the globe and among people of all socioeconomic classes. Written in the first person, she intersperses her story with reports on the laws and customs in Islam and in Saudi society that shed light on the events in her life. The reader becomes acquainted with her life philosophy, which helped her overcome the difficulties she faced and the physical and mental pain she endured. Through her personal story we learn how Arabs perceive relations between the sexes, Saudi women's place in society and the home, women's absolute submission to their husbands and their desires, and the Qur'anic law concerning such crimes as murder (p. 8) and the physical abuse of women.

In chapter 1, "Death on the Horizon," the author describes her life with her second husband, especially in the period before the assault. We learn about their relationship, which eventually ended in a bout of great physical and mental violence, the terror she experienced under his despotic domination, and the causes of the jealousy that drove him to assault her and disfigure her face.

Chapter 2, "Everyone Rallies Around," relates her hospitalization and convalescence, the treatments and operations, the ensuing worldwide attention, and her decision to devote her life to helping abused women around the world. According to her, a husband who physically injures his wife can expect a sentence of ten years in prison and 300 lashes in public (p. 22). But if a wife asks the court for mercy, her request is taken into account and the sentence may be milder. Wives usually pursue this route to spare their children the trauma of the father's absence and the humiliation of a public lashing. This reality prompted her to help beaten women everywhere by appearing before television cameras, despite the state she was in, and insist that abusing women was not due to religion, but to blind fanaticism.

In chapter 3, "A Submissive Woman," Rania relates the story of her family from her rich grandfather's encounter with her beautiful grandmother, who, while still a child, had been kidnapped and sold to her grandfather as a slave. From her stories about her grandparents' marriage and relationship, we learn about life in Arabia at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the slave trade; the status of women dominated by men; contemporaneous customs, some of which are still in effect (e.g., marrying underage girls and the conditions under which they live); children who grow up mentally immature; decisions that girls must take; divorce laws concerning minors (children remain with their father, so that many women are willing to endure suffering to remain with their children); bigamy; the behavior of Saudi men and women abroad; and more.

In chapter 4, "A Marriage Proposal at Eleven," the reader learns how daughters are married off, especially the beautiful and very young; relations between parents and children; children's education, especially that of the daughters; women working outside the home; daughters' tasks at home when the mother works outside; changes in Saudi education since the ascension of King Faisal (p. 64); the age of marriage for girls; courtship and asking the father for his daughter's hand; and negotiations between the father and the groom's family.

Chapter 5, "A Very Desirable Girl," uses the story of Jamal, the suitor who asked Rania's father for her hand, to explain Saudi customs concerning "relations" between the prospective spouses before their marriage (in many cases, the only contact they have before the wedding is the glances they give each other); the obstacles put in the suitor's way if the bride's father does not like him or if the suitor cannot meet his demands; and how the engagement is carried out to ensure the couple's marriage. The author points out that the daughter's agreement is not always obtained, despite the hadith's injunction against marrying a girl against her will.

In chapter 6, "A Bride at Sixteen," Rania describes the wedding ceremony and its attendant customs; relations between spouses who did not know each other before the wedding; the young bride's attempts to be a woman, although her feelings were still those of a child; her sense of being a stranger to both her spouse and her new home; village versus city life; her husband's habit of abruptly returning her to her parents' home for the slightest perceived misbehavior; and her feeling of helplessness.

In chapter 7, "My Mother, My Friend," we learn about the status of rejected or divorced wives in Saudi society. Such women live under suspicion, rejection, and hatred, despite their protective families, and their status

affects her parents and other family members; for the husband, however, life goes on without any change. Women are divorced without their consent and, in consequence, suffer both physically and mentally. This leads to a close bond developing between mother and daughter, who share the same fate of male domination and repression.

In chapter 8, "A Television Star," the reader gains further insight into the situation of divorced women in Saudi society. She needs her father's consent for anything she wants to do (e.g., to take a job) and can leave home only if accompanied by a male relative (p. 119). A working woman who needs to speak to men as part of her job faces special problems. To her surprise, the author found that as an attractive and prominent divorcee she was courted by men.

Chapter 9, "Married Again," consists of Rania's account of the problems a divorced woman can face when being courted and the sanctions a father can use if he suspects that his divorced daughter is seeing a man without his permission (he can forbid her to go to work). We learn of the racist attitude toward suitors of African origin (who are unwanted because "Africa," in Saudi eyes, is where slaves come from). The author tells of the wedding ceremony for her second marriage (in her case it was a religious ceremony that lasted only a few minutes).

In chapter 10, "A Woman in Saudi Arabia," the author returns to some of the topics in chapter 2: the punishment an abusive husband can expect and the reasons why leniency is often shown. Rania notes that in Kuwait and Bahrain women have made some progress (e.g., they can vote and Kuwait even has a woman cabinet minister), while in Saudi Arabia a woman cannot get a visa without her father's signature or go outside her home without a male chaperone. Women in Saudi Arabia are still treated as if they are nothing, a body without a brain.

The "Epilogue" tells of the events in the author's family after she moved to Lebanon: her longing for her daughter Rahaf from her first marriage, her parents' divorce, her break with her father, and her relations with her brothers and sisters.

The book is eminently readable and can be read at a single sitting. It is meant for the general public and can be enjoyed by all, whatever their nationality, religion, gender, or age.

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