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Review. The Abaya Chronicles: An Abaya-Clad Perspective

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Abstract

As the final assignment in our journalism course at Zayed University, our professor, Tina Leshner, asked us, her “banaat” [Arabic for girls] as she often called us, to interview an Emirati woman at least a generation older. Briskly, I threw together a 4-page report about my oldest sister. Of course, knowing Professor Leshner was a Fulbright scholar who made no secret of her intentions of researching the lives of Emirati women, I was naturally suspicious and gave my sister an alias. The result: “Great work, Maitha. That lady you interviewed, Deema Abdalla ... it’s one of the best I’ve read so far.”

Review. The Abaya Chronicles: An Abaya-Clad Perspective

By Maitha Al-Mehairbi | maitha.almehairbi@twofour54.com

As the final assignment in our journalism course at Zayed University, our professor, Tina Leshner, asked us, her “banaat” [Arabic for girls] as she often called us, to interview an Emirati woman at least a generation older. Briskly, I threw together a 4-page report about my oldest sister. Of course, knowing Professor Leshner was a Fulbright scholar who made no secret of her intentions of researching the lives of Emirati women, I was naturally suspicious and gave my sister an alias. The result: “Great work, Maitha. That lady you interviewed, Deema Abdalla... it’s one of the best I’ve read so far.”

To hear a couple of years later that she had published a book was no surprise. My first instinct was let’s read the book and see if “Deema Abdulla” is in it. She wasn’t. In fact, “Deema’s” story was thinned down so much, there was hardly a trace of her. It was rather part of a collection of many accounts put together to form one or two of the story’s characters.

An Inside Joke

The Abaya Chronicles is the story of a college professor, Teresa Wilson, who teaches at the fictional Women’s University, or WU, in the United Arab Emirates, both obviously based on Leshner and her teaching experience at Zayed University or ZU. It also follows the lives of Wilson’s Emirati students, three generations of their families, a Filipina nail specialist, and an American ex-columnist who lost a daughter in 9/11. The book is best described as a fictional docudrama based on Leshner’s memories and observations while she worked at an all-girls school in Abu Dhabi.

It is her attempt - as she mentions in her introduction - at fiction mainly to avoid the legal issues that might be faced with writing non-fictional accounts of the women she observed. Filled with inside jokes that don’t necessarily alienate foreign readers, the book uses most aliases that are easily discoverable. They might be particularly familiar to those of us from Zayed University, who I suspect would let out a few giggles here and there and a guaranteed “OMG, that’s totally us!” from the private schools we attended to the social categories we automatically got thrown into our first year of college. Although the book did not make a direct and blinding reference to any specific real person, where she drew the inspiration from was clear; as I read the book, I could see images and faces of many people I knew she encountered.

The opening chapter didn’t do the story justice, but I quickly found myself dropping my preconceived prejudice. As the story slowly unfolded, it grew on me. The characters conjoined, became human, with interesting storylines. At many points, however, the dialogue seemed unnatural and lecture-like, perhaps to make events understandable to readers unfamiliar with the UAE. Maybe this could have been done more delicately, although, at most times, I liked Leshner’s direct, blunt, and raw style. She was able to draw inspiration from real-life stories into as many characters as she could possibly fit into the book - believably and tastefully - enough to portray a well-rounded image of many aspects of UAE society.

Although the book’s intent as Leshner explains in the introduction is to bridge understanding between Americans and the UAE, I find the book in many ways an autobiography, a candid look into the lives of UAE women, but in Leshner’s version, everyone loves golf, all Americans are from New Jersey, and any Catholics in the story are pointed out. With all the driving and putting, I contemplated opening this review with “If you’re a golf fan, this book’s for you.” To be fair, I can

state that the Emirati golf player character is strongly influenced by the real-life account from Eida, an Emirati female golfer whom Leshar once invited to speak to us in class. Many other influences are evident, some more strongly than others, but mostly Leshar's personal experience overwhelms them all.

Reality Check

The believable story slowly began at a point to morph into Leshar's fantasy of having high-ranking, socially and politically elite Emirati women, freely and acceptably able to choose non-Arab spouses. Both main characters of the storyline have foreign mothers and Emirati fathers, and seem to live blissfully with both sides of the family magically getting along. Another far-fetched delusion is having a sheikha fall in love with a British-Muslim with intentions to marry - with her brother's blessings. Another is an Emirati woman who marries an Irishman and soon-to-be-for-her-sake-Muslim convert, with her family's full support. Leshar seems to believe that if a man is a Muslim, where's the problem?

As much as Zayed University provided inside knowledge otherwise inaccessible to Leshar, the total of 18 months she spent here was enough to merely scratch the surface. "If sheikhas marry for love, others will follow," according to one character Leshar crafted in the book. Wrong again. A sheikha's status is highly regarded by others not as something to pursue, but as something to idolize, which is very much the case with royal families anywhere in the world.

The concept of how women bring honor or shame to the family is barely if at all mentioned. This obliviousness I concluded from Leshar's first chapter where she writes in a conversation between two grandmothers about a male relative: "He'd sell his wife for a piece of gold," something a Bedouin would consider borderline blasphemous. For a man to trade his honor for monetary value would mean he'd be stripped of all "manhood." The same thing applies to women marrying foreigners especially among tribal elite, a reality that currently cannot be escaped.

All is Fair

Overall, Leshar did Emirati women more justice than I initially expected, showing the range of mentalities, from the more westernized to the conservative. What is also refreshing is her unembellished portrayal of characters, avoiding overdramatizing cultural boundaries as many writers do when writing about the region, a cheap stunt that they hope will secure them a best seller. Leshar lays it bare: Nothing horrible happens to women who defy cultural norms; no "honor killing," no beating, no disowning. Rather side glances from relatives at best and harsh words at worst.

Although Leshar did not have the advantage like some foreigners of living in this country for long enough to understand and dissect the local culture, she managed to capture what they could not: The spirit of a young Emirati woman. With this fun and lighthearted read, Leshar has progressed far beyond her earliest perceptions of the Emirates, as she documented in 2001 during her first visit to the UAE. (I came across her online journals while Googling her name a few years back.) In a 2001 entry excerpt, she says: "[The girls] are truly sheltered... kind and modest [but] in many ways, they are immature."

Whether her perspective of us matured, or we matured instead, the fact is, Dr Leshar, immature or not, one of your "banaat" is now writing a book review.