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Nicola Sutcliff, *Jestem Saudyjką. Świat oczami kobiet z Arabii Saudyjskiej* [I am Saudi. The world through the eyes of women from Saudi Arabia], Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2021, ss. 464.

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Saudi Arabia has been going through slow social and cultural changes since 2017. In my opinion, you can already observe significant transformation processes on many levels. For example, Saudi and foreign women were allowed to drive motor vehicles, bicycles, scooters. Some occupations were „opened” for women, which was impossible until 2017–2018. These include working as a security guard at the Mosque in Mecca, working at the airport, participating in court hearings, teaching in a primary school or kindergarten, and allowing women to enter sports games and stay in family sectors stadiums during sports events. Cinemas were also opened, many concerts of Western stars of mass culture were organised. It happened thanks to the *Saudi Vision 2030*, which Saudi King Salman announced at the

end of April 2016. One of his sons, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, carried out the coordination and control over its proper implementation. However, there are not many scientific works, studies on the contemporary history of Saudi Arabia just before and after the implementation of Vision 2030 in the Polish literature on the subject. However, this gap is filled by boldly, in my opinion, this peer-reviewed work by Nicola Sutcliff. This work was based on the research technique, which is a free interview. As the author points out, 50 interviews were recorded, and several dozen unofficial interviews were conducted. Initially, the intention was that the interviewees would be women, representatives of all social classes. Still, most of them came from a higher social class, more educated. The reason may be, and

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the author indicated the same, language barriers. It is worth noting that this book is placed in the academic, specialist and non-fiction categories. However, before proceeding to the rest of the book, the author suggested that the reader should read the glossary of terms. I believe that it is needed to understand particular phrases better. Usually, these are translations from an Arabic transcription. Moving on, we come across a statement that may not be controversial but one that opens a field for discussion.

Well, the author of the work compared Saudi Arabia to North Korea (p. 11). Madawi Al-Rasheed found a similar analogy. I would like to suggest gently that this term is not entirely appropriate because Saudi Arabia, after the announcement in 2017 of the Vision 2030 and lifting the ban on driving by women (foreigners and Saudi women), opening cinemas, organising events with the participation of foreign stars of mass culture, or car racing, where it was forbidden until now, puts the Saudi kingdom in a slightly different world. In North Korea, it is still prohibited to contact by mobile phone, especially with foreigners. Watching movies and series from outside North Korea and culture in North Korea favours only native arts, performances, and culture in general, and only Chinese. Several other aspects show that the comparison of the Saudi kingdom to North Korea is not entirely appropriate. The author presents her view of Saudi

culture and indicates that it had to adapt to Saudi life and realities. Not only did she want to be authentic in her research and not to stand out from the crowd with her being, but she also tried to be part of the Saudi community, especially the women's world.

As mentioned earlier, the work is based on free interviews. It can be briefly indicated that there is a picture of a Saudi woman, dependent on her husband and family, who is focused and devoted to her family and raising her children. These are especially women from small Saudi towns, e.g. from the Najj region (pp. 23–31), or Bedouin women (pp. 33–43), where the hierarchy, generally speaking, the system of values and traditions are different from Saudi Arabia. A similar analogy arises when we look at another Muslim country. In this case, it is about Tunisia - Tunisians and Berbers, where I had the opportunity to learn about Berbers' life, culture, and tradition living in the northern parts of Tunisia (Matmata in mid-2009). Also, a similar division into city-countryside and different ways of thinking about life are visible in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Mark Tessler (2020, p. 102), during his research, stated that: „Morocco is divided culturally, with divisions into Arabs and Berbers, and between the city and the village”. Native Tunisians, especially women Moroccans (women to be exact) and Berbers (women), behave differently and perceive the value system of Saudi women

living in larger Saudi cities, and are also educated and come from intellectual families. Such an example is Imam, the teacher from Ad-Dammam (p. 135–144).

Interestingly, both Imam and other women who spoke to Sutcliff and educated women show a longing for the Western way of life. They and point to the non-Saudi way of treating women, where in many interviews, the image of a Saudi man raised on the traditional model of family life, where the father is higher in the family hierarchy than his wife and decides on many issues from going for a walk with the whole family to the direction of travel, vacation planning. This aspect is mentioned in the text *Halal service provision - Understated but not undervalued. A view from Oman*, where it was noted that in the case of Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the main organiser and decision-maker of the holiday destination is the man/husband. In contrast, in the case of Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), women, wives and children play a significant role in deciding where to go on holiday (Wood, Al-Azri, 2019, p. 121). It is worth mentioning here, part 6 of this Sutcliff work.

Among other things, the history of the creation of the Saudi kingdom was dealt with. It looks back and recalls the circumstances in which Saudi Arabia came into being and the fate of its first ruler, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, and his sister. They also played a considerable role in the

creation of the Saudi kingdom. The future of its first ruler, Abdulaziz ibn Saud and his sister, who also played a substantial role in creating the Saudi kingdom, was mentioned. Nora, Abdulaziz's sister, supported her brother in exile. In Kuwait, he instigated the struggle for unification and creating a strictly Arab state on the Arabian Peninsula. The author of the work cites stories of older Saudi women who remember the times before the Saudi kingdom appeared on the world map that there was no obligation for women to cover their faces, whether they could receive guests, including men, in their homes and could freely have a conversation on the street with men. Only Abdulaziz introduced massive changes. He based his principles of the kingdom's existence on Islamic law, and more specifically, on the ideas of Wahhabism, which his ancestors allied with in 1744 with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It has rightly been noted that Saudi Wahhabism resulted in a conservative way of thinking on many issues - from everyday life to religious practice and the treatment of non-Muslims, and even Muslims, who are not Wahhabis. In this context, it was aptly mentioned that this fact made Saudi Arabia isolated and closed itself on many levels, from local to foreign policy, without entering any alliances with other countries for an extended time, establishing diplomatic relations. It was also recalled about an event that took place in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s. At the

same time, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this event changed the course of the Islamic world and the history of the Saudi kingdom. This event was the seizure of the Holy Mosque in Mecca in December 1979 by the former military officer Jhaiman Al-Otajbi. Demands were then made to overthrow the Saudi monarchy and diminish the role of Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world, and to point to Iran as a defender of Islam and Muslims, not the Saudi kingdom. It was also recalled that despite the Saudi kingdom's unity, each region has different realities. Riyadh, Hijaz and the Eastern Province (EaP) are cited in this context. The south of Saudi Arabia, including the EaP, makes you feel like you are in Yemen. Many Shiites live abroad and immigrants who deal mainly with trade (p. 66–67).

It is also worth pointing to the next, 7<sup>th</sup> part. It has been dedicated to a formation upholding the rule of law and morality in Saudi Arabia, the *mutawwah* (Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtues and Prevention of Evil). In this part, the statement is „religious police”, but one woman, Khadiya, 38 years old, was then residing in Riyadh, who agreed to be interviewed by the author of the book, denied that the *mutawwah* was „religious police” (p. 83). Khadiya points out that the policemen have guns and follow specific procedures. In turn, *mutawwah* members advise and guide people who, in their opinion, misbehave (e.g. dancing in the

street, listening to music loudly) or are dressed inappropriately in a public place (tank top, lack of upper clothing - both of these cases). they also apply to men). In my opinion, this is only Khadiya's opinion because the *mutawwah* is called in many publications, scientific articles and the public view is seen as religious police. In my view, this is only Khadiya's personal opinion, for *Mutawwah* is referred to in many publications, academic articles and in public opinion as a religious police force which, in my opinion, guards moral safety and order on Saudi streets without using firearms, but which has powerful legal instruments to impose a punishment on an unruly person or to refer a case to the appropriate services to socialise a person who has committed a moral offence following Saudi standards. For example, it is worth recalling that in the *Historical Dictionary of Saudi Arabia* (2003, p.100–101), *mutawwah* is referred to as „moral police”, and the use of the „religious police” version is indicated.

Proceeding to the end, it should therefore be stated that the book in question can be regarded as a publication of a scientific nature. This is indicated using several scientific publications that are difficult to access (?) As noted in the place of publication, for example, Saudi Riyadh or Lebanese Beirut. The research technique mentioned in the initial part of this review was also used, i.e. a free interview with Saudi women, because they

were the main topic. So, reading this reads like a story that genuinely introduces us to the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. It not only shows what the conditions of Saudi women are but also women from outside the Saudi kingdom who come to this kingdom for many reasons, e.g. a contract with a given company, a delegation of a native company to that kingdom or as an accompanying person/family member of a husband who came to Saudi Arabia, to work for the Saudis. It is worth pointing out that the discussed publication is not a novelty in the Polish literature on the subject because a similar scientific publication was published in 2015 by Anna Odrowąż-Coates. A. Odrowąż-Coates, like the author of the publication in question, proposed that the core of her work should be interviews, mainly with Saudi women, with whom she met during her visit to Saudi Arabia in the period from July 2010 to July 2012. Nevertheless, the discussed publication is a valuable source on the case of women in this kingdom. It shows visible and occurring changes in the treat-

ment of women throughout history and a slow evolution taking place in social and cultural life in Saudi Arabia. It is evident since Salman took over the royal throne, with the enormous support and participation in changes taking place on one of his sons, Mohammed, who is the company and showcase of the Saudi Vision 2030.

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