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I WAS born in Cairo in 1956 at the height of the Suez crisis. My mother is an Iraqi from Mosul; my father is a Hijazi from Mecca in today's Saudi Arabia. As my name shows, my paternal grandfathers came from Yemen. They were *'ulema*, religious authorities, in Mecca. So I am a personification of the crisis in the Middle East born at the heart of Arab nationalism, of a Sunni Iraqi woman and a man from the sacred heart of Islam.

Early in my childhood, I was told that I was the *milkiyya*, which meant that I was owned by my paternal family. Every morning, I repeated my entire patrilineal descent before reciting verses from the Qur'an that I had memorised at the hands of my grandfather in his house overlooking the Great Mosque of Mecca. But as a young girl in Saudi Arabia, people pointed at me – the daughter of *al-iraqiyya*, the Iraqi woman. So I became conscious that I was of 'mixed blood'. I became aware of the diversity of the Arab Muslim world.

At the age of five, I left Saudi Arabia to go to school in Baghdad. At that time, there were no schools for girls in Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi religious establishment considered female education to be dangerous. So I had to be educated by nuns in Baghdad's School of The Virgin Mary, with boys and girls in the same class and from Muslim, Christian and Jewish backgrounds. To a young girl of five coming from a desert city, what was more amazing than the Tigris and the famed gardens of Baghdad was the fact that women could dress as they pleased. They were even allowed to work and drive cars.

A year later, I returned to my Meccan family with an altered Arabic dialect that the Saudis immediately found alien and a source of curiosity. By then, the religious establishment had been persuaded by the Al Saud rulers that educating girls would produce better mothers. Thus, the House of Tenderness school opened and I was enrolled as one of nine female students in the entire kingdom. But my family soon opted for a Swiss boarding school in Lausanne.

There, I was shocked to be told that I stood out as a dark-skinned Arab. In those days, the diversity that we now take for granted was unfamiliar. Nonetheless, I learned French, English and other European languages, as well as some of the manners of Western women.

When I returned to Saudi Arabia, my mastery of these languages and customs brought me a series of marriage proposals. My age was not an issue: in those days, the preferred marriage age for women was 15 to 17. But by that time, I had another ambition entirely: to go to university. Moreover, it had to be in the United States.

For a young Arab girl, the US represented glamour, vast avenues, skyscrapers and, most importantly, freedom. In 1975 I landed in New York and started my bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. The experience reshaped my identity. I could have been trapped in the golden cage of Saudi Arabia's patriarchal system, but instead I was set free on the campus, in the classrooms and in the debates. Understanding cultural diversity and the search for academic freedom became my passion and ambition.

But when I re-entered the real world upon my return home, I discovered that university education had made it unreal for me. I arrived with overflowing enthusiasm to introduce exotic ideas, but official censorship was stifling. I had to swap my blue jeans for the compulsory veil and my Chevrolet for a lifetime ban on driving. And if I needed to

leave the country, I had from now on to obtain the written permission of my male guardian.

However, university education had taught me that things are possible. So I became a lecturer at King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, and then the first Saudi woman to get a DPhil from Oxford. In 1992 I became a research fellow at SOAS. This institution represented a melting pot of the Eastern and Western worlds. At SOAS, we celebrate our differences. I moved on to work at international think tanks: Chatham House in London, Brookings in Washington DC and Carnegie in Beirut. I have published books on Arab and Muslim political and social identity, including *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (2000) and *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* (2004).

My research and writing began as a personal quest and an academic pursuit and developed into a deep conviction that it is only knowledge and respect for diversity that will offer us the harmony and dignity to live in our changing world.

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