

COLUMN ONE

PURSUING HAPPINESS BEHIND THE VEIL

To be the American wife of a Saudi is to forsake familiar freedoms —or enjoy them secretly—in exchange for a secure, family-centered life.

By Jeffrey Fleishman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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OTHER HALF: Saudi women hang out at a mall in Riyadh. Under the strict Saudi interpretation of Islam, women must be fully covered in public and are not allowed to drive or vote. Wives need their husbands' permission to leave the country.

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Teresa Malof knew she wasn't in Kentucky anymore when a cleric issued a *fatwa* against her secret Santa gift exchange.

Malof proposed the idea at the King Fahad National Guard Hospital, where she has worked for more than a decade. It was supposed to be discreet, but rumors were whispered amid veils and *hijabs* that the lithe, blond nurse, raised on farmland at the edge of Appalachia, was planning to celebrate a Christian tradition in an Islamic kingdom that forbids the practicing of other religions.

“Even though I’m a Muslim too, I like to celebrate the holidays and have gift exchanges,” said Malof, a convert to Islam who is married to the son of a former Saudi ambassador. “But word got out and the religious people came with a *fatwa* [or edict] against the Santa party. My husband was having a heart attack. He was worried I’d be in a lot of trouble.”

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For American women married to Saudi men, such is life in this exotic, repressive and often beguiling society where tribal customs and religious fervor rub against oil wealth and the tinted-glass skyscrapers that rise Oz-like in the blurry desert heat. This is not a land of the 1st Amendment and voting rights; it is a kingdom run by the strict interpretation of *Wahhabi* Islam, where *abayas* hang in foyers, servants linger like ghosts, minarets glow in green neon and, as a recent court case showed, a woman who is raped can also be sentenced to 200 lashes for un-Islamic behavior.

“*Haram, haram*” (forbidden, forbidden). American wives know the phrase well. It is learned over years of peeking through veils at supermarkets or sitting in the back of SUVs while Filipinos behind the wheel glide through traffic. Their adopted Arab home is a traditionally close U.S. ally. But like much of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia’s relations with Washington have been strained since the rise of global jihad. Terrorist bombings, which have killed nearly 150 people here in recent years, have kept many American families in gated communities that have the aura of golf courses protected by small armies.

Most non-Muslim women convert to Islam as a prerequisite for marrying a Saudi and living in the kingdom. Many American women, including those who converted before they arrived, have embraced the Koran; for others, the adoption of Islam is a pantomime act, the disguise of a second self to hold them over until they peel off their head scarves and travel to the U.S. for summer vacations.

For both kinds of women, it is a life of sacrifices and measured victories: Women can’t drive or vote in Saudi Arabia, but their children are largely safe from street crime and drugs; a wife can’t leave the country without her husband’s written permission, but tribal and religious codes instill a strong sense of family.

Freedom lies behind courtyard walls, where private swimming pools glimmer and the eyes of the religious police, known as the *mutaween*, do not venture. Rock ‘n’ roll (*haram*) is played, smuggled whiskey (*haram*) is sipped, and Christianity (*haram*) sometimes is practiced. This sequestered, contradictory experience, a number of American wives noted, can turn an expat into an alcoholic or a born-again Christian, and sometimes both.

“American women get together and we talk,” said Lori Baker, a mother of two who met her Saudi husband at Ohio State University in 1982. “We ask one another, ‘Where are you on your curve now? Have you hit bottom yet?’ We all go through the highs and lows when it comes to moods and tolerance... When I first got here, I felt naked without my head scarf.

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“Then after the terrorist bombings in 2003, I even covered my face. Foreigners were a target then. I became very comfortable with my face covered. I felt safe. Nobody knows me. They can’t see me, and if you’re covered, they respect you. Sometimes without a covered face it’s like walking down Main Street wearing a bikini.”

Baker’s husband holds three master’s degrees, including one in architecture. Like many Saudi men of his generation, he left the kingdom to learn English and study in America. Baker converted to Islam in Ohio and moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia in 1992; both of her sons were born here.

As the wife of a Saudi living off a busy Riyadh street, she said she’s not completely embraced by Americans living in gated communities, but she also feels estranged within Saudi society.

“My mother and father were just devastated at my conversion,” said Baker, whose house was damaged in a 1995 bombing that targeted a U.S.–Saudi military office compound. “Neither family was receptive about our marriage. He was the oldest son, and after living for many years in America, it was time for him to come back. And the feeling was, ‘If you have to bring her with you, go ahead.’ ... With Saudi women there’s a politeness, an acceptance and a curiosity about American wives ... but there’s never long–lasting friendship.”

It is a strange place, she said, to live between two worlds, one of quilting clubs and cookouts, the other of prayers and isolation. “You have to do soul searching and really define who you are,” she said. “My husband is the man of my dreams, and I decided to go wherever that took us.”

Sally Kennedy has a quick wit and miles of Texas charm. A former heart surgery nurse, she married the Saudi president of a consulting and engineering company and raised four children in the kingdom. She is fluent in Arabic, owns a restaurant and runs the Good Ship Lollipop, a party retail business that provides balloons, candy and children’s rides to villas and palaces.

“When I first arrived here in 1981, there were dogs and sheep walking around the streets and one TV channel,” she said, sitting in a living room of floor–to–ceiling windows. “There were no fax machines. We used to listen to the BBC on shortwave. There was no skyline. They opened a ‘Pizza Riyadh,’ and everyone thought that was a big deal.

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“It was much more liberal back then. Non–Saudi women could wear short *abayas*, but now they’ve grown long and closed. Things changed and I sensed a separation of cultures after the first Gulf War in 1991. Then you had 9/11 and terrorist bombings. Americans withdrew to their compounds, and you had Osama bin Laden, and many Saudis didn’t want to be friendly with the infidel. Saudi society became more conservative.”

Kennedy navigates this sensitive landscape with humor and shrewd observation, a Dorothy Parker with a fading Dallas drawl. “My magician at the Good Ship Lollipop spent three weeks in jail for being a magician. They think that’s black magic. He could have his head chopped off,” she said, before easing into another vignette. “If you go to the south of France and sit on the terrace of the Carlton, you’ll see your Saudi neighbors. But you can’t compete with the rich people here. They’re off the charts.”

Sometimes, amid the pleasantries and courtyard diplomacy, American wives tighten with flashes of anger and frustration. Kennedy manages the Good Ship Lollipop, for example, but she doesn’t go into the store for fear of coming into contact with men other than her husband, which is *haram* and could result in an arrest by the religious police. Such patriarchal attitudes, she said, “are things you never get used to.”

One American wife, who asked not to be named, said the country’s repression of women led her to counseling sessions with a psychiatrist. When she was contacted for an interview, she said she was worried that her husband would object; she struggled with the decision for an hour before finally agreeing. She was agitated during the meeting in a hotel lobby and said she felt lost between two cultures.

“I told my husband I’m coming to this interview. I’m trying to be respectful, but I’m going to go. Is that *haram*?” she said, wearing a black *abaya*. “It’s only women who have to be perfect here. A woman. A woman. A woman. They’re always making an issue of it. It’s a sick pastime. I feel like I’m being bullied. This is not Islam. Where in Islam does it say this? This is tribal.”

She paused and sipped a cappuccino. She grew up in Pittsburgh, the latchkey daughter of a working mother and a laid–off steelworker who abandoned his family and ended up homeless. She was 16 when she met a 27–year–old Saudi who was studying English at the University of Pittsburgh. He offered her stability and religion. They married two years later, first in a mosque and then before a justice of the peace. She said she hasn’t spoken to her husband’s family in six years.

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“I don’t miss the U.S., though,” she said. “I think most Americans are living in a bubble and they believe in whatever the media feeds them. They’re so focused on their jobs and their lives that they don’t put the international pieces of the puzzle together. America is too fast. When my son was 9 years old, he learned about oral sex while we were visiting the U.S. That’s one of the things I like about here. The conservative society helps you in being a parent.”

Teresa Malof has the quiet grace of a diplomat. Tall, fair-skinned, she can’t hide her American self even beneath an *abaya*. She and her first husband divorced and she moved to the kingdom in 1996, after seeing an ad for nurses in a magazine. She lived single for a while and then met her Saudi husband, Mazen, a USC grad and banking consultant, at a Japanese restaurant. The couple have two children.

“I never really thought about cultural differences when I married Teresa,” Mazen said. “I lived in America. I knew both cultures, so those differences did not come into the equation. We got married because we loved one another. Teresa is good at understanding where she is. She respects others’ beliefs. Nothing has been forced on her... I told her that any time she feels the need to visit the States, a plane ticket is always ready.”

He said he worried about his wife several years ago when Americans and other Westerners were targeted by militants in a number of bombings and shootings. “We took special precautions,” Mazen said. “But things have gotten calmer and have become more normal.”

Malof said her husband’s family has been very accepting. But it took her a while to adjust to the religious police and the brazen boys in their buffed cars. The police patrol stores and sidewalks looking to fine or arrest women deemed to be improperly veiled. And the boys and young men, living in a country where the only contact with women is arranged through families, are bored and seek titillation by leering and driving alongside cars carrying women, sometimes boxing them in on highways.

“The religious police can spot a [partially veiled] blond head from a mile away. We’d run and hide from them in the shopping malls,” she said. “Then there’s the guys holding up signs in their cars, pressing them against the windshields and windows. ‘Don’t call 911, call this number.’ Most of the time, these guys are harmless. They’re just out cruising.”

She said it’s been difficult being an American in the kingdom since the Iraq war. She’s received fewer invitations from Saudis and has been startled at how the U.S.

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is reviled in much of the Muslim world. This political chill is sobering and reminds her of other things so different from the farm country where she was raised. The desert is harsh and men believe children should be raised by wives and hired help. The call to prayer can be lulling, but it's hard to make friends with the neighbors, and her children have few places to play outdoors.

"It can be tough here," Malof said. "There was a time I was a very angry person. Once Mazen asked me, 'Why are you upset? When you're here, just expect the worst.' You can't change this society single-handedly. To live here you have to make peace with it. One day I committed, I'm never going back to the U.S. There is no Plan B. Sometimes it's easy to forget the problems I had in America too. A single, working mother with no maids.

"Would I really be happy back in Cincinnati, joining the PTA? I don't think so after having lived an international life. I think the people back home think I'm married to a rich prince and I'm the trophy wife."

jeffrey.fleishman@latimes.com