AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

“I JUST DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH MYSELF”: SAUDI MARRIAGES AS SITES FOR COMPETING GOVERNMENTALITIES

by
NORA ALI BAKHSH

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
June 2020

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by

NORA ALI BAKHSH

Approved by:

S. Perdigon

Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, Assistant Professor of Anthropology — Advisor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

S. Perdigon (on behalf of Dr. Scheid)

Dr. Kirsten Scheid, Associate Professor of Anthropology — Member of Committee
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Livia C. Wick

Dr. Livia Wick, Associate Professor of Anthropology — Member of Committee
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Date of thesis defense: June 18, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, for his persistent belief in me and my project, and all his efforts to guide, inspire, and encourage me in completing this thesis and in my academic journey at AUB.

Second, I would like to thank Dr. Livia Wick and Dr. Kirsten Scheid for making my educational experience at AUB truly life changing, believing in me even when I struggled to believe in myself, and challenging me to explore my full potential with utmost care and compassion. I will forever be grateful to have had three amazing, passionate, and dedicated professors that never hesitated to go the extra mile with their students.

Third, I thank my family for their help in navigating fieldwork in Saudi Arabia: helping me with translation, accompanying me in fieldwork when needed, and providing me with the support, space, and care I needed to finish this thesis while I was there.

Fourth, I would like to thank my friends and chosen family for their endless motivation and encouragement for me to finish my thesis and allowing me to brainstorm out loud with them.

Last, but definitely not least, I thank my interlocutors who were brave enough to share their stories with me. Your trust is something I cherish and honor deeply, and I promise to respect it to the best of my ability. This work is dedicated to you.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Nora Ali Bakhsh for Masters of Arts
Major: Anthropology

Title: "I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself": Saudi Marriages as Sites for Competing Governmentalities

At this historical juncture, many unprecedented changes are happening in Saudi Arabia; from efforts to diversify the economy away from oil, to the introduction of new rights and opportunities for women, to significant reductions in the powers of religious authorities in public space and education, and the increased and widespread use of technology and social media tools by the population.

Accompanying these shifts are a sudden increase in divorce rates, which have become a concern for the state and individuals alike. In a February 2018 Saudi Gazette article described divorce as a force that "destabilizes families, the foundation of society" and "obstructs the Kingdom's march to greater progress." Quoting social consultant Mohammad Al-Amri, the article explains how rapid changes in recent years are altering the cultural landscape: "our families have been influenced by the new urban culture and modern information technology. Education and employment of women and the Kingdom's openness to foreign cultures were other factors that increased the divorce rate". This is just one of many articles on divorce in the kingdom, popularized by media in recent years. Other common factors cited for divorce are social media, immaturity, underestimating marital duties, and erosion of family values: in another article, family coach and consultant Mohammed Dhaifullah Al-Qurani is quoted saying, "Divorce has increased when women have become loose-tongued, they get in and out the house whenever they wish, spend long hours on their mobile phones neglecting their household, husband, and family duties."

My project builds on the assumption that these anxieties speak to a widespread crisis of governmentalities – it is as though Saudis felt that they no longer had a script by which to conduct themselves in their marriages. In defining "governmentality," I invoke Foucault and his commentators who define "governmentality" as the "conduct of conduct," or the practice of deliberately shaping different aspects of subject behavior to a particular set of norms. Governmentality can be exercised at different scales: state, institutions, family, and even the self, as its aim in modernity is to produce autonomous, self-governing individuals capable of regulating various aspects of their own conduct.

My research project seeks to understand how young, urbanized Saudi couples from the Eastern Province choose to conduct themselves as husbands and wives against this background of clashing governmentalities, and what anxieties and opportunities are created

in this context. I am also interested in how these individuals draw on material and symbolic resources in order to cope with, negotiate, challenge, or transform these anxieties and opportunities towards having more fulfilling marital lives.

My ethnographic fieldwork involved two main research activities: 1) participant observation at trainings and workshops given to soon-to-be-married or newly-weds on how to succeed at marital life, given by state-funded family development institutions, and 2) collection of life histories of 12 individuals (single and seeking marriage, divorced, or currently married; as well as marriage counsellors and professional matchmakers in Saudi Arabia).

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INTRODUCTION

Set in the early 2000s, the short film *The 27th of Shabaan* by Saudi filmmaker Mohammad al-Salman depicts a young Saudi man and woman as they attempt to go on their first date in Saudi Arabia. The events unfold as follows:

It is nighttime. The setting is a commercial street in a Saudi city, where men and fully veiled women are walking and shopping. The camera focuses on our two protagonists: Mohammad, an alert-looking young Saudi man walking alone, and Nouf, one of the fully veiled women also wandering the stores by herself. We cannot see her face at all, not even her eyes. Mohammad notices Nouf from a distance. He discreetly picks up his 2005 model Nokia phone to place a call. A few meters away, Nouf's phone begins to ring. She picks up without uttering a word and begins to walk away from the crowd of shoppers, into an empty alley. He follows her quietly from a distance. Minutes later, while behind her, he calls her again to confirm that the woman he is following is indeed his Nouf. At this point, Saudis watching the film can infer what is happening because the scenario is so familiar: the two young protagonists are probably unmarried lovers who had never met in real life before, probably only building their relationship over phone conversations or online chatting.

Mohammad and Nouf arrive at a restaurant. Mohammad requests a private room for them – not a strange request in a country that requires restaurants to have a "singles section" (for men only) and a "families section" (for mixed company), with some restaurants offering more private booths or rooms so that women can feel comfortable taking off their veils while eating without being privy to the eyes of other guests or

restaurant staff. As they wait for the booth to be ready in the reception area, Mohammad whispers “don’t be scared” to Nouf.

Almost as soon as they enter the private booth, Nouf tells Mohammad that she is anxious and wants to leave. She is still fully veiled. When the waiter knocks on the door to take their order, both our protagonists look completely panicked. Mohammad buys some time by telling the waiter they need a few more minutes, and that he will come to the reception area himself to order. He tries to placate Nouf: “we have been waiting so long for this moment, please don’t leave.”

Nouf nervously asks him “do you think I’m a slut? This situation is starting to make me feel like I am one… would you even marry someone like me?” After reassuring her that this is not the case, and that he plans to marry her in the future, Mohammad asks Nouf if he can see her face for the very first time. Her initial reaction is hesitation: “no… that would be hard for me to do.” He presses on, and she gives him a different reply, “but what if you don’t like the way I look?” He reassures her by telling her that her description of herself on the phone seemed promising: “you told me you have fair skin and long hair, what’s not to like?” After some convincing, she agrees, but asks him to leave the room first so she can put on some makeup. Mohammad agrees, and goes to the bathroom to freshen up.

While in the bathroom, Mohammad practices reciting a love poem that he wrote for Nouf in front of the mirror. The poem’s title is “The 27th of Shaaban” (Shaaban is one of the months in the Islamic Hijri calendar), which we learn is also today’s date. He had written a poem about how this date was extremely special to him, because it was the first day that he would get to see Nouf, his lover, in person, finally. Suddenly, a middle-aged man abruptly exits one of the bathroom stalls, causing Mohammad to halt reciting his love

poem in embarrassment. While the middle-aged man is washing his hands, he eyes Mohammad suspiciously before telling him that he recognizes him because he knows his father. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with your father for a while now, but I could not reach him. Is he with you right now?” the man asks. Mohammad nervously replies, “no, I am here with my mother.” The man narrows his eyes in skepticism.

Exiting the bathroom, Mohammad is excited to go back to his private booth and finally see Nouf’s face for the first time. He smiles and exhales with glee as he stands in front of the door of the private room, taking a breath before he goes in. He enters and sees a young woman with her face unveiled; but to his surprise, she yells at him “who are you? What are you doing here?!” he tries to calm her down before he quickly realizes that he had entered the wrong booth, and that this woman is not his lover Nouf, but a complete stranger. Of course, how could he know when he doesn’t even know what Nouf looks like? The movie ends with the male companion of the strange woman physically attacking Mohammad in anger as he believes that Mohammad is harassing her.

Like many other Saudis, I felt a wave of bittersweet nostalgia when I watched *The 27th of Shaaban* upon its release on Netflix in 2020. The 12-minute film presented a rather accurate and nuanced picture of what it was like for young Saudi men and women to date in the highly conservative kingdom before 2015: the anxiety of trying to find privacy away from the eyes of the religious authorities (who could demand to see a marriage certificate or proof of direct kinship) or family acquaintances, the extensive pre-planning required to set up this appointment, the selection of a venue that can provide protection and cover, the awkwardness of meeting a lover you had only known through the phone or online for the

first time, the fear that what one is doing is deeply shameful and wrong even in the eyes of their lover, the blunders involved in trying to identify which veiled woman is the one you're looking for, the thrill at the possibility of seeing your lover's face, holding her hand, or just sharing a meal with her for an hour.

The story of Mohammad and Nouf would probably have played out very differently if it was set in 2020. They would have definitely faced fewer barriers today, including the most imposing one: the religious police. Infamous for breaking up the dates of unmarried couples and arresting them if they could not present marriage certificates or proof of direct kinship, forbidding the playing of music in cafes and restaurants (including if guests sing Happy Birthday), banning the selling of flowers and wearing of red or pink on Valentine's Day, persecuting women for wearing nail polish or not veiling properly, and forcing men roaming public spaces during prayer times to go to the mosque… the religious police was the childhood boogeyman of every Saudi in my generation. In 2016, a royal decree stripped them of their power to arrest which opened up a myriad of possibilities, but also of questions, in how one can choose to practically conduct oneself in public spaces.

Of course, curtailing the powers of the religious authorities did not mean that Saudis suddenly threw caution to the wind and hungrily embraced their new freedoms. The watchful eyes of family members, neighbors, acquaintances were still deeply influential factors that shaped conduct. Many Saudis continued to subscribe to a strict interpretation of Islam which prohibits any unchaperoned interaction with the opposite sex or the unveiling of the face, and so did not find a reason to change their conduct at all, and maybe even resented the curtailing of the religious polices' powers. However, for many others, this same development opened up a space of possibilities for conducting one's self differently –

even if without family approval. There were many Saudi individuals and families who celebrated this change and embraced it openly, having felt suffocated by the strict surveillance of the religious police for many years.

Many things changed in Saudi Arabia besides the curtailing of the religious police's power after 2015. This country that once forbade even the playing of music in restaurants or retail stores because music was deemed *haram,* had now established the General Entertainment Authority, which organizes large-scale concerts, festivals, and entertainment events headlined by superstar international celebrities, which both men and women attend, alongside internationally famous travel bloggers and social media influencers (men and women alike) that get flown into the kingdom to boost Saudi Arabia's image for tourism. This transition, which I call the "shift," started almost overnight in 2015 when King Salman took to the throne after the death of his brother King Abdullah, and appointed his son Mohammad bin Salman as the crown prince and de facto leader of the kingdom.

How would Nouf and Mohammad's story unfold if it was set in 2020? Perhaps Nouf would be able to tell her family that she was seeing a male colleague for a work meeting, and not have to be so secretive. Perhaps her family might even be open to her having male friends, even a boyfriend. Perhaps Mohammad could have even picked her up from her home. Perhaps she would not have chosen to fully veil herself. Perhaps they would have decided against sitting in a private booth together. Perhaps Mohammad would not have been so anxious to run into a family friend, and that family friend wouldn't have necessarily eyed him with suspicion. Perhaps they would have still needed to be secretive from their families, but at least they did not run the risk of being arrested. Perhaps they

would have been less awkward with each other as they would have been used to interacting with unrelated members of the opposite sex through work or a volunteer project. Or perhaps the scenario would have played out exactly as it did in 2005. The point I am trying to make is precisely this one: the shift opened up *possibilities* that did not exist before. But with those possibilities also came confusion for Saudi people, who found themselves asking the question, "how should I and do I want to conduct myself?" in the context of these new freedoms, resources, and lifestyle options. In this research project, I was specifically interested in how this question presents itself when it comes to one's conduct in matters of intimacy.

My project attempts to study how the arena of marriage is impacted by the shift in Saudi Arabia. I explore a link between the economic, political, and social changes caused by the shift in Saudi Arabia and how they offer new possibilities, but also new anxieties, to young Saudis who are married, seeking marriage, or are divorced. I wanted to ethnographically capture how these changes affected intimate lives, in part to challenge the notion that "agency seems to pertain only to states, dictators, and the economy" that is so prevalent in studies on the Middle East (Scheid 2018, 433). In studying how these changes manifested in the intimate lives of married, divorced, or single individuals seeking marriage, I sought to put living people at the center and the emergent meanings and social relations they make as a result of "the shift" without relying on "clunky, hegemonic categories" (Scheid 2018, 438) that are assumed to be clearly bounded and defined such as government or religious institutions.

This project revolves around four key questions. First, how exactly did the "shift"

occur in Saudi Arabia, and how does it impact intimate lives? Second, why are there new heightened anxieties about marriage in the kingdom, and do these anxieties speak for something else besides marriage? Third, what efforts is the Saudi state investing in to pacify these new anxieties, and are they actually helpful? Lastly, how are some individuals conducting themselves in their marital lives in light of these new possibilities?

I argue that what is happening in Saudi Arabia right now, in the wake of this shift, is a crisis of governmentalities. We can see this reflected in the dramatically heightened divorce rates, alarmist media discourse about the erosion of family and Islamic values, and the proliferation of actors and institutions dedicated to saving the Saudi Arabian marriage. It is as though Saudis felt that they no longer had a script by which to conduct themselves in their marriages. Following Foucault and his commentators, I define "governmentality" as the "conduct of conduct," or the practice of deliberately shaping different aspects of a subject's behavior in relation to a particular set of norms (Foucault 2007, 192–93). Governmentality can be and is exercised at different scales: state, institutions, family, and even the self. According to Foucault, modern governmentality aims at producing autonomous, self-governing individuals capable of regulating various aspects of their own conduct. Governmentality works through the desires, needs, choices, and lifestyles of collectives and individuals, by shaping motivations, character, imaginaries, and self-esteem (Dean 2010). In Saudi Arabia, the norms that individuals follow and enact are changing and shifting rapidly, as different governmentalities come to be in apparent competition with one another. The manner by which to conduct oneself in all aspects of life is becoming an increasingly open, and sometimes disorienting, question.

The framework of governmentality allows us to investigate how discourses on marriage in Saudi Arabia are a key site of power relations. As Foucault taught us to see, attempts to gather knowledge and collect data about a certain subject are never a disinterested inquiry. I claim that discourses about intimate life, marriage, and sexuality in Saudi Arabia are also platforms to re-shape meanings and practices around what it means to be a good citizen, and how these citizens should conduct themselves. These discourses work hard in attempting to strike an awkward balance between the deeply religious ideologies that were one of the *raisons d'etre* of the country at its foundation, and a radically different present being created by new neoliberal policies under Mohammad bin Salman since 2015.

My claims that discourses about intimate life being a key site for power relations are grounded in the evidence I collected utilizing two main research activities in my fieldwork: participant observation and the collection of life histories. The participant observation took place in the form of attending free workshops and lectures for Saudi women with the intention to prepare them for marital life, given by family development institutions sponsored by the state. Although I liaised mostly with one particular institution called Walaa (meaning "loyalty"), I did not limit myself to their events and activities. I became interested in this kind of institution because of the prescriptive nature of their discourses, how they posited themselves as expert authority figures, and how widespread they were. The life histories were collected from people I met through these courses, or online (I set up Twitter and Instagram pages about my project in order to recruit research participants). It is important to note that it was difficult for me to access male interlocutors,

because as a woman I could not attend their courses; not to mention the fact that many were hesitant to meet with me in person in order not to raise suspicion. As a result, most of my interlocutors for this project are women. Another caveat is that all of my fieldwork interactions occurred in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where I was living for the duration of the data collection period (intermittently between the summer of 2018 until the summer of 2019). The Eastern Province includes the cities of Dammam, Khobar, and Dhahran which are major economic centers, especially for the oil and gas sector. As such, the reader should keep in mind that my interlocutors reside in highly urbanized areas and have much more in common with their counterparts in Jeddah or Riyadh than with Saudis who live in non-urbanized areas.

Although I have strived to include a variety of participants representing the diversity of the Saudi population in terms of class, education, and religiosity level, the reader should know that my project is not meant be representative beyond the scope of the research, and that the conclusions cannot be generalized in any controlled fashion. Instead, I invite the reader to follow me on a journey in exploring some of the ways that young Saudis attempted to grapple with, make meaning of, and get creative with the question of "how should I conduct myself in my intimate life?" at this historical juncture of newly opened possibilities in Saudi Arabia, amidst competing and contradictory governmentalities.

CHAPTER 1:
SHIFTING INTIMACIES

In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,* sociologist Eva Illouz writes that up until the 1960s, social scientists tended to avoid writing about intimacy and romantic love. They had a sense that "romantic love stands above the realm of commodity exchange, and even against the social order writ large" (Illouz 1997, 3). In other words, when we think of intimacy, we usually think of it as a private affair, rather than something that is related to the economy or political events. I challenge this private/public binary and claim that that meanings and practices of romantic love, marriage, and intimacy in Saudi Arabia constantly shift in tandem with economic and political developments. The framework of governmentality allows us to study how macro political and economic events open up new questions about the "conduct of conduct" on different scales: state, institutional, family, and individual. In this chapter, I will examine the economic and political developments of three eras in Saudi Arabia's history (the late 1970s, early 2000s, and post-2015), and the regimes of governmentality practiced in each of them. Some of these regimes of governmentality are not directly linked to marriage, but are relevant nonetheless, because they attempt to form a certain kind of Saudi citizen – and by extension a certain kind of Saudi wife or husband.

For the historical information in this chapter, I rely heavily on Saudi historian Madawi Al-Rasheed's books *A History of Saudi Arabia* (2002) and *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (2013), as her work pays special focus to gender. On

the unification of Saudi Arabia into a state by 1932, she writes: "the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a state imposed on people without a historical memory of unity or national heritage which would justify their inclusion in a single entity" (Al-Rasheed 2010, 3). She describes how Ibn Saud, considered the founder of the country, used a very distinct discourse in his quest to unify the different regions that would become Saudi Arabia. It was not the rhetoric of independence and self-rule that many other Arab countries were using around this time, but rather the rhetoric of what she calls *religious nationalism*: "a form of politicized collective representation, embedded in institutions, the purpose of which is to create a godly community." (Al-Rasheed 2013, 15–16). Ibn Saud and his supporters used the revival of Wahhabism as a puritanical ideological tool to justify their takeover of different regions, waging a *jihad* (holy war) against "infidels," which was a loose term defining anyone who was resistant to the leadership of Ibn Saud. As a result, the banner of religious nationalism became the country's *raison d'etre* since its inception.

Understanding how the discourse of religious nationalism was used in the founding of Saudi Arabia is important to keep in mind as we investigate how it gave way to an Islam-based governmentality that came to be continually in competition with other governmentalities as the country went through rapid economic modernization, opened itself up to participation in the world economy, and created strong relationships with key western allies such as the United States. This constantly evolving clash of governmentalities is also crucial in understanding how Saudi Arabia sought to shape its citizens' conduct under different historical periods and contexts – especially when it comes to gender, marriage, and intimate life.

The 1979 Mosque Siege and Discursive Production of Fatwas

In the 1970s, rapid oil wealth allowed Saudi Arabia to enjoy a level of affluence that was unprecedented in its history. This affluence led to internal modernization projects, more comprehensive government services, and increased revenue and resources spent on citizens. This new wealth also came with a strong, mutually beneficial partnership with the United States: the US needed Saudi Arabia to use its influence to keep oil prices low, and Saudi Arabia needed to buy security apparatus from the US to protect it against external and internal threats. These threats included anti-Zionist revolutionary regimes (such as Nasser's Egypt) and other Arab countries who saw Saudi Arabia's close relationship with the US as an insult to the Palestinian cause. Another threat was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which exaggerated Saudi fears of communism. Finally, the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 became perceived as a danger as well, as Iran regularly criticized the Saudi regime's close relationship with the US (Al-Rasheed 2010, 130–38).

Threats to the Saudi regime were present inside the kingdom too, as the discourse of religious nationalism invited "criticism whenever the Islamic ideal was perceived to have been violated" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 139). The tension between the Islamic rhetoric and the ever expanding materialism and affluence of Saudi society as a result of oil wealth came to a major crisis on November 20, 1979, when a group of armed insurgents led by a man named Juhayman al-Otaibi organized a siege of Islam's holiest site, the Grand Mosque in Makkah, during the busy annual pilgrimage season. Juhayman al-Otaibi was an active religious preacher who was openly critical of the Saudi regime's relationship with "infidel powers," which he believed translated into moral and religious laxity in Saudi Arabia. The siege lasted for two weeks before it was crushed.

The 1979 mosque siege was the outcome of a clash of governmentalities that reached a crisis point. Both the Saudi regime as well as the religious authorities saw the need to address the so-called moral corruption in the country: it "became an urgent matter at a time when globalization threatened the religious nation and undermined its imagined tradition, according to many of those debating the future of the country." This manifested in an intense campaign to police "the position of women, their appearance in the public sphere, and marriage" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 108). Women became symbols of piety needed in order to demonstrate the country's commitment to Islamic teachings at a time when this commitment was under scrutiny. As a result, the 1980s saw a privileged form of discourse production in the form of *fatwas* (Islamic rulings as a response to a real or hypothetical query) by the Higher Council of *Ulamas* (religious scholars), which "became an embodiment of religious nationalism, serving as a guardian of the piety of the nation" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 110).

The discursive production of *fatwas* also came under the shadow of an increasingly educated body of Saudi women who began participating in the labor force, as well as engaging more in the public sphere with the creation of shopping malls and modernized markets that "brought about new circumstances that required religious intervention to limit the prospect of situations development in an uncontrolled way" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 113). The religious authorities were given the power to shut down music shops, cinemas, and strictly segregate venues by gender (Lacey 2010, 46–53). With these new avenues of consumption, "pious" Saudi women were urged to distinguish themselves from *nisa al-gharb* (Western women) who were seen as morally corrupt. This manifested in the rejection of "Western" lifestyles and consumption patterns that were becoming increasingly available

in the kingdom. For example, wearing a black-colored abaya was elevated to an almost religious duty as marker of the pious Saudi woman even though there is no religious restriction in Islam about veil coloring.

New *fatwas* established new norms when it came to marriage, with the overarching purpose of encouraging marriage to happen as early and as easily as possible in order to prevent transgressions. The new fatwas posited marriage a religious and national duty for women (over education and employment), divorce as a highly discouraged outcome that should only be exercised under specific circumstances (because women were painted as too emotional and rash in their decision-making), and polygamy as a way to fix the problem of "spinsterhood." The *fatwas* also called on men to exercise their Islamic right to view a potential wife's face as a way to encourage marriage. They also urged families to be modest when setting the wife's *mahr* (dowry) and in planning wedding festivities, in order to make marriage accessible to those with lower incomes. It is also interesting to note that it was during this era that the infamous driving prohibition on women was announced in a *fatwa* in 1991, because of concerns that women's mobility and travel would become a threat to gender roles and a source of transgression (Al-Rasheed 2013, 120–29). This ban was not lifted until 2018.

The shocking seizure of the Grand Mosque in Makkah in 1979 and the discursive production of *fatwas* that came after it contributed to shape a new social reality for Saudis in the decades to come. As a child and then teenager in the 1990s and 2000s, I myself grew up in an environment where schools were gender-segregated after kindergarten, religious authorities harassed women in public spaces for not covering their hair or faces, chased down men who were not at a mosque during prayer time, and surveilled establishments

who played music or allowed unrelated men and women to socialize together. The ordering of space according to gender segregation extended to event halls, restaurants, banks, and even workplaces. However, in 2001, this regime of governmentality came to be challenged once again when Saudi Arabia came under scrutiny for its extremist interpretations of Islam after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon in the United States, of which most of the perpetrators were Saudi.

King Abdullah's Era: Reforming after 9/11

After 9/11, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah faced worldwide pressure to reform Saudi's image as a source of Islamic extremism. The urgency of this task was compounded by internal terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda sympathizers between 2003-2005, which killed more than 200 foreigners and Saudis. Target sites were expatriate residential compounds, the American consulate in in Jeddah, and petrochemical sites; as well as a number of foreign reporters and expats who were kidnapped and killed (Al-Rasheed 2010, 225). The rhetoric of reform involved the creation of quasi-independent civil society associations, the removal of some restrictions on press freedom, and the introduction of limited municipal elections (Al-Rasheed 2010, 242, 255). However, most relevant to this project were two important changes: heightened visibility of Saudi women in the public sphere and the containing of *ulama* power.

A series of important and unprecedent developments started to take place in order to heighten the visibility of Saudi women in the public sphere: in 2002, girls' education was placed under the purview of the Ministry of Education to curb unchecked religious authority (it was previously under the control of the religious authorities). In 2004, the

National Dialogue Forum (a platform created in 2003 by the government that sought to enlist select intellectuals to engage in carefully moderated debates about social, cultural, and religious issues) included a session on women's employment with participation from women speakers. In 2008, the Princess Nura bint Abd al-Rahman University for Girls was inaugurated, in response to long-standing grievances that female university campuses, libraries, and computer labs were inferior to their male counterparts'. Anud al-Fayez became the first woman deputy minister of the Ministry of Education in 2009, in order to increase the visibility of the state's commitment to education and women. King Abdullah announced in late September 2011 that women would be appointed in the Consultative Council in 2015 and be able to participate in the future as voters/candidates, a promise that was indeed fulfilled ("Saudi Women Cast Their First Votes" 2015). There was a re-instatement of the scholarship fund, which offered 25% of its scholarships to women. Women appeared in international economic forums, diplomatic events, and academic conferences accompanied by state officials and princes (Al-Rasheed 2013, 147–51). In 2010-2011, the Saudi government launched *Ta'neeth Mahaal Bay' al-Mustalzamat al-Nisa'iya* or the "Feminization of Retail Shops with Women's Supplies" program which aimed to replace all retail workers in women's consumer goods stores with Saudi women, with the aim of increasing women's engagement in the public space and tackling female (and more generally, Saudi) unemployment (Burton 2016, 134–35).

At the same time, *ulamas* (religious scholars) were subjected to a new regime of governmentality. In order to ensure that *fatwas* adhered to a more moderate version of Islam, King Abdullah issued a royal decree in 2010 banning *fatwas* volunteered by religious scholars outside of the Higher Council of *Ulamas* and those designated by the

council. Members of the council who were critical of the state's policies or too extreme in their viewpoints were sacked. For example, a religious scholar called Sheikh Saad al Shithri was dismissed in 2010 after voicing his criticism of *ikhtilat* (intermingling of men and women in the same space) in regard to a new co-ed university (KAUST) (Al-Rasheed 2013, 149–50, 160, 163). This was the same council that had enormous discursive power in the 1980s, disseminating hundreds of *fatwas* seeking to shape the conduct of the Saudi woman and restrict her agency in her working and intimate life, as discussed previously.

The era of King Abdullah also featured the creation of a new kind of institution: the family development institution. These institutions are charitable organizations directly supported by the state, and specifically the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. The objective of such organizations is to produce knowledge on marital best practices to be disseminated in workshops and education initiatives, offer financial support to low-income individuals starting their marital journeys, and provide counselling and arbitration resources for couples experiencing conflict in their marriages. These family development institutions, created starting the mid-2000s, represented a new kind of governmentality for Saudi women; more subtle than the one of the 1980s *fatwas.* I argue that these institutions were created specifically to shield family and marital life from the changes happening in wider society, and preserve patriarchal arrangements even as Saudi women became tokens of progress and reform. In this way, the Saudi woman became the object of two somewhat contradictory regimes of governmentality seeking to shape her conduct: one seeking to present her as a symbol of progress to the outside world, and another seeking to suppress any desire she might have to challenge patriarchal structures at home. I will explore these

family development institutions more deeply in the coming chapters.

The Era of MBS

None of King Abdullah's reforms captured international attention quite as dramatically as the shift that followed his death and the ascension of his brother, King Salman, to the throne in 2015. The aging King Salman wasted no time appointing his son, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), as the crown prince of the country in an ambiguous and unprecedented transfer of power from father to son (instead of brother to brother). It quickly became very clear that this young, 30-something man was to become the de facto leader of the country, in sharp contrast to the decades of rule by kings in their 80s and 90s whose reign only ended when they died of old age. He quickly gained an almost celebrity status inside and outside the kingdom, heralded as the young reformer who will radically transform Saudi Arabia. Of course, this was not without the help of millions of dollars in PR spending: for example, in preparation for his visit to the UK in March 2018, a consultancy firm called Arabian Enterprise Incubators (founded by a former employee of weapons company BAE systems) purchased a plethora of billboards, advertisements, newspapers spaces featuring MBS's face upon them, with captions like "He is bringing change to Saudi Arabia," "He is empowering Saudi women," and "He is creating a new, vibrant Saudi Arabia" (Kedem 2018).

MBS's first challenge was to deal with the Saudi economy: given the fall of oil prices in 2014, it was no longer sustainable for Saudi Arabia to rely on the oil sector as its primary source of revenue. He wanted to diversify the Saudi economy by attracting foreign

investment and phasing out the rentier state that enabled the prosperity of the Saudi middle class. In 2016, these plans were put forth into an ambitious project entitled Vision 2030, which received worldwide attention after a huge internal and external media campaign to attract investors. Beyond the document itself, which focused mostly on economy, new state initiatives and programs were created and branded under the banner of Vision 2030 in the fields of entertainment, education, leisure, tourism, healthcare, governance, sports, foreign relations, and (of most relevance for this thesis) family life in the form of family development institutions.

American journalist Thomas Friedman was one of the first pundits to participate in the charm offensive launched by MBS. Here are some excerpts from an article he wrote for the New York Times interviewing MBS in November 2017, entitled "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last":

> "I never thought I'd live long enough to write this sentence: The most significant reform process underway anywhere in the Middle East today is in Saudi Arabia. Yes, you read that right. Though I came here at the start of Saudi winter, I found the country going through its own Arab Spring, Saudi style.
>
> Unlike the other Arab Springs — all of which emerged bottom up and failed miserably, except in Tunisia — this one is led from the top down by the country's 32-year-old crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and, if it succeeds, it will not only change the character of Saudi Arabia but the tone and tenor of Islam across the globe. Only a fool would predict its success — but only a fool would not root for it."

In the article, Friedman speaks about the shocking incident where Mohammad bin Salman ordered the arrest of prominent Saudi princes and businessmen, who were kept in the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, on an anti-corruption campaign. While the campaign was successful in recovering their "ill-gotten gains," Friedman never discusses that this

initiative happened in an arbitrary, ex-judicial process. In the same article, Friedman is seemingly fascinated by the crown prince's charms as he described his aim to bring Saudi Islam back to a "moderate, balanced Islam that is open to the world and to all religions and all traditions and peoples." According to MBS, this is the kind of moderate Islam that Saudi Arabia had lost in 1979. Friedman continues:

> "Then one of his ministers got out his cellphone and shared with me pictures and YouTube videos of Saudi Arabia in the 1950s — women without heads covered, wearing skirts and walking with men in public, as well as concerts and cinemas. It was still a traditional and modest place, but not one where fun had been outlawed, which is what happened after 1979."

One must take Thomas Friedman's sycophantic comments with a huge pinch of salt. He willingly misses the mark on the paradoxes of MBS' program of authoritarian neoliberalism, which attempts to paint the state as the sole agent pushing for new rights and freedoms, when in reality, the state has also crushed any grassroot efforts calling for those very same freedoms, evidenced by its arrest of many activists, opinion-shapers, religious scholars, and feminists who pushed for the abolishment of the guardianship system and lifting the driving ban on women. Friedman ignores all of this to herald MBS as some kind of revolutionary emancipator of Saudi women: "he has not only curbed the authority of the once feared Saudi religious police to berate a woman for not covering every inch of her skin, he has also let women drive."

Thomas Freidman is just one of many journalists with dubious loyalties to the Saudi regime contributing to the elevation of MBS's profile to that of a political celebrity and pushing a fantastical discourse of a dramatically transformed Saudi Arabia, liberated by

MBS from the backwardness of Islamic extremism and patriarchy. Although one should not take his sycophancy too seriously, Friedman was not wrong about Saudi Arabia undergoing dramatic socioeconomic changes as a result of MBS's policies. Although MBS continues to walk in King Abdullah's path to reform the kingdom's image, I argue that he attempts to do this more radically: by creating a new kind of Saudi citizen. This new Saudi citizen, seemingly liberated from the shackles of Wahhabism and patriarchy, is one that is compatible with the neoliberal future that MBS so desires. But this freedom comes with conditions: the Saudi citizen must become one that can interact with foreign investors and businesspeople, one that can find common ground with expats invited to live in the kingdom, and one whose Islam is moderate and non-threatening.

In the following section, I explore how the discourses produced around three major initiatives create a new imaginary of what it means to be a Saudi citizen. These initiatives are the Vision 2030, the General Entertainment Authority, and the NEOM project. After Foucault, I understand "discourse" broadly as "[speech] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Cameron and Kulick 2008, 16). In other words, discourses have the ability to provide imaginaries that shape the conduct of states and individuals. While these initiatives are not directly linked to my project on marriage in Saudi, they are important to highlight because they speak to an imaginary of a new Saudi citizen that is cosmopolitan, drastically reformed, and able to engage in international business interactions. This imaginary is directly relevant and operative in the governmentality of authoritarian neoliberalism, which seeks to posit the Saudi citizen (and Saudi woman especially) as markers of progress and freedom, while simultaneously

seeking to shield her intimate life from this same freedom she is being asked to perform.

The Saudi Vision 2030

In April 2016, MBS presented the Saudi Vision 2030 to a large press conference in the capital Riyadh. The Vision 2030 is an ambitious economic plan to diversify the economy away from oil drafted with the help of consulting company McKinsey & Co. based on three pillars: 1) to bolster the image of Saudi Arabia as the site for Islamic heritage, 2) to become a "global investment powerhouse," and 3) to become a worldwide hub connecting the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The Vision 2030 is a form of speech that seeks to address the foreign investor as well as the Saudi citizen. To the foreign investor, the Vision 2030 presents Saudi Arabia as a "tolerant country with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method." It relays Saudi Arabia's commitment to foster a conducive atmosphere for foreign business, such as transparency and anti-corruption, international standards, and a more attractive life for wealthy expatriate professionals (ability to buy real estate in certain areas, put their children in private schools, and have more exciting leisure options). The Vision 2030 also reminds the Saudi citizen that the real wealth of the country "lies in the ambition of our people and the potential of our younger generation," and speaks of providing more efficient government services, stronger education, job opportunities, and leisure options. And while the Vision 2030 outlines the state's wish to privatize certain sectors such as education and healthcare, it vaguely promises that it will take care of its vulnerable citizens and avoid taxation on incomes and basic goods.

A large focus of the Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's commitment to Islamic "moderation" as well as playing "a leading role as the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds" ("Saudi Vision 2030" 2016, 13). MBS pledges to further facilitate and expand visitation opportunities for religious pilgrims in Makkah with renovation plans for the holy mosques, the installation of a metro system, and the establishment of heritage museums. More notably, Saudi Arabia is now investing in the restoration of its non-Islamic historical sites, an act which was once considered forbidden by the country's religious authorities who saw these activities as encouraging the veneration of non-Islamic symbols. For example, the historical site of Madain Saleh (reminiscent of Petra in Jordan) has been recently promoted heavily as a pre-Islamic historical site previously inhabited by the ancient civilizations of the Nabateans, Maeneans, and Thamudians dating back to 1700 BC (Ministry of Tourism 2014). These efforts of restoration, and the promotional materials that come with them, offer Saudis new symbolic resources other than Islam to draw upon for the construction of their national identity.

I argue that the discourse of Islam is a powerful one in Saudi Arabia because it can easily shape-shift to serve different regimes of governmentality: it can be used for purposes as diverse as constructing an ideological basis by which to found the country through Wahhabism, to neo-liberalizing it with the language of "moderation." In tandem with Saudi Arabia's desire to be seen as the heart of Islamic heritage, the discourse of Islam in the Vision 2030 speaks to the potential foreign investor and expat, reminding them that Saudi Arabia is now freed from any extreme interpretations of Islam, but also to the Saudi citizen, instructing them to perform a version of Islam that is "moderate" and non-threatening, and

offering them new symbolic resources to do so by invoking a historical narrative that highlights the influences of different civilizations that passed through Saudi Arabia, even non-Islamic ones.

The language of "entrepreneurship" is another discursive tool used in the Vision 2030 to form the new Saudi citizen, who needs to be weaned off of the nanny state that she previously enjoyed and use her new freedom to cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit. The Vision 2030 attempts to set forth the foundations for a new social contract between state and citizen, moving away from the rentier state model that was facilitated by oil wealth up until the drop of oil prices in 2014. The document mentions the privatization of some sectors such as healthcare, education, municipal services, energy, and housing through public-private partnerships, limiting the scope of the state's responsibilities to supervision, monitoring, and catering only to vulnerable populations such as the elderly and disabled. Energy subsidies are also to be cut: the Vision 2030 states that "providing subsidies with no clear eligibility criteria is a substantial obstacle for the energy sector's competitiveness" and that the aim is to increase the private sector's contribution to the GDP from 40% to 65% ("Saudi Vision 2030" 2016, 51–53). Taxation on non-essential goods such as cigarettes has also been introduced. Alongside privatization, the Vision 2030 also outlines the kingdom's commitment to support small and medium businesses (SMEs), entrepreneurship initiatives, and investments into new industries via the newly established SME authority: "we will continue encouraging our young entrepreneurs with business-friendly regulations, easier access to funding, international partnerships and a greater share of national procurement and government bids" ("Saudi Vision 2030" 2016, 36).

The discourse of "entrepreneurship" imagines a new kind of Saudi citizen no longer reliant on the nanny state, but still loyal to it. The Vision 2030 does not offer any possibilities in imagining a new social contract between state and citizen that includes more political participation. In fact, as we have explored above, crackdown on dissent has become ever more aggressive since 2015, as the state attempts to posits itself as the sole agent of progress.

General Entertainment Authority

The year 2016 saw the creation of a new institution with a very telling name: The General Entertainment Authority, whose website describes its role as to "diversify and enrich entertainment experiences around the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," in line with the kingdom's 2030 Vision in "creating a vibrant society […] to contribute in improving and enriching the lifestyle and social cohesion among the community" ("Our Role – General Entertainment Authority" 2017). The authority staged its first large-scale concert in seven years in January 2017 in Jeddah, where the legendary Saudi singer Mohammad Abdo performed for six hours straight to an all-male audience (Reuters 2017). Suddenly, there was a proliferation of performances ranging from concerts, circuses, and comedy shows all over the kingdom, many of them famous acts from abroad; as well as festivals, street markets, and art exhibitions. In December 2019, The General Entertainment Authority organized MDL Beast (pronounced Middle Beast), described as the biggest regional music festival of its kind that "aims to pave the way to a whole new experience within the society it exists in." It was held over a period of 3 days and hosted big international acts such as David Guetta and DJ Tiesto, as well as many local musicians of all genres, to perform in

the 5-stage outdoor venue just outside of the capital Riyadh. The event was open to men and women, and globally famous travel bloggers were invited to attend the festival.

It is very interesting to note that in the same year (2016), a groundbreaking decree was passed stipulating new regulations for the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, or *hay'a,* the religious police that frequently roam in public spaces and malls. The *hay'a* were stripped of their arresting power, and were required instead to report violations to the police or anti-narcotic forces (Al Arabiya English 2016). The *hay'a* were infamous for harassing women (as well as men) on their attire, commenting on anything from their *abayas* to their nail polish or make up. They also looked for men who roamed around the mall during prayer times, calling on them to pray at the mosque; and cracked down on any couples or mixed-gender groups spending time together in malls, restaurants, or on the street.

I argue that the state's curtailing of the religious police's powers, in tandem with its creation of the General Entertainment Authority is part of its project to create the imaginary of a newly transformed, worldly, cosmopolitan Saudi citizen capable of exercising a wider range of freedoms and engaging in leisure options outside of the constraints of Wahhabist interpretations of Islam. Events like MDL Beast were the perfect vehicle to showcase the new Saudi Arabia and what it can offer its citizens and visitors: in an article about the festival in Al Arabiya, it is reported that "the MDL Beast Music Festival in Riyadh saw more than 130,000 visitors during its first day, outperforming other global festivals like Belgium's Tomorrowland and California's Coachella" (Naar 2019).

NEOM

Neom, standing for neo-*mustaqbal* (future), is a project by the Saudi government to establish the world's first independent international economic zone in the northwest of Saudi Arabia, with parts of Jordan and Egypt as well. But it also strives to be much more than that: the description of the project states that it "salutes the dawning of a new era. It captures a new future, unrivalled in concept and unmatched in imagination and intelligence. Neom is, in every conceivable sense, unprecedented – a new future on earth like nothing on earth" ("NEOM FAQs" n.d.) Neom plans to be a fully integrated technological smart-city that runs entirely on renewable energy, grows its own food, and provides an idyllic lifestyle for its inhabitants. It seeks to invite investors and creative minds from all over the world to be a hub of business, ideas, and innovation.

Neom's promotional video uses world-making stock footage to produce a holistic (if impressionistic) portrayal of what life would be like there. It features different shots of nature barely touched by humans: rocky mountain ranges, a pristine beach, a single asphalt road cutting through sparse shrubbery in the middle of the desert, divers in a clear ocean surrounded by fish and healthy coral reefs, smooth sand dunes where teenagers are cartwheeling freely, hot air balloons flying over a desert, and contemplative men sitting on isolated mountaintops. We also see shots of technological devices harnessed for renewable energy and convenience: long rows of solar panels and windmills, skyscrapers and building structures reminiscent of the Sydney Opera House or Singapore's Esplanade, futuristic parking lots where an elevator guides you to an available slot, scientists examining test tubes, greenhouses, or architectural models. Even more curious, the viewer sees images of

social settings and people that do not even look like they're in Saudi Arabia at all: young foreign men and women from all races and ethnicities socializing in business meetings or in casual settings, a shadow of lovers walking alone under natural rock arches on the beach, non-Saudi women in knee-length business skirts with male colleagues. Of course, there are also images of luxury and wealth: beach houses with tall glass windows overlooking the ocean with modern minimalist interior décor, people skydiving, important looking people on their smart phones. Over these images, a man's voice with a British accent and dramatic pausing narrates:

> *You can look at these ancient hills and see nothing…. Or, you could see nothing to hold you back. No set ways of thinking, no restrictions, no divisions, no excuses. Just endless potential. This is the blank page you need to write humanity's next chapter: Neom. Over 25,000 square kilometers of inspiration, with room for your biggest ideas. A part of the world set aside for those who want to change the world. A land created to free people from stress. A place where pioneers and thinkers and doers can exchange ideas and get things done. A start-up the size of a country, that will change the way we live and work forever. Healthier, happier, with more time for the things that really matter. A truly global culture from every place and background you can imagine, that can show the rest of the planet how it's done. With energy that flows from the sun and wind, neighborhoods that can feed and clean themselves, technologies that make life everything it can be. This is where we can prepare together for the next era of human progress. Some will look at these ancient hills and see nothing. But the rest of the world will know that this is where a new way of living began. Discover Neom* ("NEOM - Nothing To Hold You Back" 2017).

Neom promises that its social norms and governance will be distinct from the rest of the kingdom, making it more conducive for business, innovation, and the international community of expats it hopes to foster. It aims to develop sixteen key economic sectors, each of them preceded by the phrase "future of": energy, water, mobility, biotech, food, manufacturing, media, entertainment, culture and fashion, technology/digital, sport, tourism, design/construction, services, health and wellbeing, education, and livability. Investors, both individual and institutional, local and international, will finance the making

of Neom. Investors and business owners will also benefit from financial support to develop projects in line with Neom's economic sectors that aim for futuristic innovation ("NEOM FAQs" n.d.).

Neom's promotional materials put forward an imaginary of a new Saudi citizen that has a friendlier face, away from notions strict interpretations of Islam or a citizenry unwelcoming of foreign ways of life. We see this in the NEOM video that portrays Saudis in their national dress comfortably interacting and doing business with foreigners and Saudi women directly engaging with foreign men in business settings. If the foreign investor is not seduced enough by the promise of transformation in mainland Saudi Arabia, Neom is the offer he cannot refuse – separated from mainland Saudi Arabia by its geographical location, culture, and governance, Neom gives the illusion that it is indeed constrained by nothing.

It is not sufficient to analyze these new initiatives, policies, and freedoms at face value – they are also vehicles to the creation of a new kind of Saudi citizen. Another important example is the image of the driving Saudi woman and how it became a central symbol in advertisements, campaigns, and promotional material that participated in propagating a new imaginary of the new Saudi woman in two ways. Firstly, she is imagined as a productive member of the economy, grateful and loyal to the state for her new rights, and a token of progress to the outside world. But, in another way, the Saudi woman is also invited to re-imagine the kind of person she can and wants to be in this new neoliberal setting that has opened more possibilities for her. This imaginary is invoked by corporations as well: for

example, Cadillac Arabia tweeted “Show them what it means to drive the world forward #DareGreatly #SaudiWomenCanDrive,” and telecom company Mobily uploaded videos celebrating their women employees driving themselves to work.

The discourses invoked by major initiatives in Saudi Arabia since 2015 form the new Saudi citizen who is, in short, the perfect neoliberal subject: Muslim but not too Muslim, loyal to the state but not reliant on it, Saudi but also worldly and cosmopolitan.

Authoritarian neoliberalism

The need to create a new kind of citizen is a result of a shift in Saudi Arabia into a new governmentality that I call “authoritarian neoliberalism,” a term fraught with internal paradoxes. Mitchell Dean describes liberalism as a “form of government *through* rather than *of* the economy” — in other words, a form of government that seeks to protect the invisible hand of the market from external interference. At the same time, he also insists that liberalism can be conceived as an ethical project that “presents itself as a critique of excessive disciplinary power in the name of the rights and liberty of the individual” (Dean 2010, 133–34).

However, I use the term “neoliberalism” instead of “liberalism” because it is not sufficient to say, in the case of Saudi Arabia, that the state is only advocating non-interference in the economy. Elizabeth Povinelli summarizes Foucault’s definition of neoliberalism succinctly: “neoliberalism is not laissez-faire anymore. It is not about leaving the market alone. It is about aggressively expanding the logic of the market to all aspects of life so that market principles actually become human principles that organize life,

government, intimacy and so forth" (DiFruscia 2014). The liberty of individuals is also important for neoliberalism. Conceptions of freedom move away from "emancipation" and towards creating virtuous, responsible, autonomous, and self-disciplined subjects. Neoliberalism seeks to create a free subject that is able to participate in cultural critique and reform, but in a way that is shaped by and catered to the market's needs: it "attempts to construct a world of autonomous individuals, of 'free subjects'…this is a subject whose freedom is a condition of subjection. The exercise of authority presupposes the existence of a free subject of need, desire, rights, interests and choice. However, its subjection is also a condition of freedom: in order to act freely the subject must first be shaped, guided and molded into one capable of exercising that freedom" (Dean 2010, 193). This quote describes the blessing and the curse of the new Saudi citizen, who has more liberty than ever, but whose freedom is shaped to serve the needs of the market by molding him to be moderately Muslim, self-reliant, and cosmopolitan.

Neoliberalism requires careful attention to cultural critique and uses that critique in order to expand the realm of the market, bypassing the need for political or social reform. The paradox is that this push to create free subjects is done in an authoritarian manner in Saudi Arabia. What freedom looks like is narrowly controlled between what image the state under MBS wants to project to the outside world and what serves the market. Critical grassroots movements addressing the right for women to drive, the dismantling of the guardianship system, and the abolishment of the religious police and their intrusive control over public and private life have all been seemingly successful in that those objectives were achieved. But they have also been depoliticized and co-opted by the Saudi state who

presents itself as the sole author and benefactor of these new freedoms, while jailing feminists and activists who called for the very same things. Yet, and at the same time, the Saudi regime capitalizes on these critiques. By giving women new rights and reducing the power of the religious police, they satisfy important benchmarks to international investors and businesses wishing to work in Saudi Arabia, as well as successfully open up new markets for consumption and leisure like the purchasing of vehicles, the organizing of massive co-ed concerts and events, the establishment of cinemas and recreation centers, the promotion of internal and external tourism, and mega-projects like NEOM, to name a few.

Saudi Arabia is thus attempting to apply a new regime of authoritarian neoliberal governmentality, but without completely divesting from its old governmentality of religious nationalism in too drastic a fashion. Instead it tries to reform it: strict interpretations of Islam are replaced by "moderate" ones, the construction of the national identity is recreated to include non-Islamic symbolic resources such as "Saudiness," "Arabness," overarching folkloric tribalism devoid of nuances, or ancient civilizations such as the Nabateans.

In the coming chapters, I will argue that family and marriage are one area that the Saudi government is trying to shield from the possibilities opened by this clash of governmentalities. Putting it more bluntly, it is trying to limit the possibilities for women while pretending to expand them; or at the very least, it wants the economic and performative aspect of having women in the public and work sphere without risking uprooting current patriarchal arrangements. The Saudi citizen is pushed to be free and

invited to re-imagine the kind of person they can be, which is bound to have an impact on interpersonal relations in the realm of intimacy. Having opened the door to this new relation to oneself, the state then tries to deal with the fall out of this re-imagining of oneself by limiting its extension into the intimate sphere. Some Saudi women (such as the ambassador to the US) become tokens of progress, but it is not an actual invitation for the average Saudi woman to uproot her expected roles as a dutiful wife and mother. The heavy investment into family development institutions, courses, and services dedicated to saving the Saudi Arabian marriage are the sites for discursive production that attempts to balance between these two governmentalities. The Saudi state is trying to have its neoliberal cake and eat it too – paradoxically commanding the Saudi woman to be free, but demanding she shape her freedom in a way that is non-disruptive to the patriarchal status quo.

Different regimes of governmentalities were exercised in Saudi Arabia at different points in its history, to a variety of ends: after the late 1970s, it was a governmentality that returned to religious nationalism, and after 9/11 it was about softening the face of Saudi Arabia to the world. Under MBS, the new governmentality of authoritarian neoliberalism is attempting something much more ambitious: creating a new kind of cosmopolitan Saudi citizen that is compatible with the needs of the international market, but without sacrificing aspects of the old governmentality of religious nationalism that bolstered patriarchal arrangements in citizens' intimate lives. This is done by investing in family development institutions seeking to constantly reinforce these arrangements, which I will delve into more deeply in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE "PROBLEM" WITH MARRIAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

In a February 2018, the newspaper Saudi Gazette published an article about the dramatic increase of divorce in Saudi Arabia, and how it "destabilizes families, the foundation of society" and "obstructs the Kingdom's march to greater progress." Through an interview with social consultant Mohammad Al-Amri, the article explains how Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are undergoing rapid changes in recent years, altering the social and cultural landscape: "Our families have been influenced by the new urban culture and modern information technology. Education and employment of women and the Kingdom's openness to foreign cultures were other factors that increased the divorce rate." Al-Amri also points to "modern communication" and family interference into the lives of the couple as some of the top reasons for divorce ("A Rundown on Reasons for Rising Divorce Rate in Saudi Arabia" 2018). This is just one of many articles on divorce in the kingdom, popularized by media in recent years. Other common factors cited for divorce in such articles are social media, immaturity, underestimating marital duties, and erosion of family values. In a Middle East Monitor article written in August 2018, family coach and consultant Mohammed Dhaifullah Al-Qurani is quoted saying, "divorce has increased when women have become loose-tongued, they get in and out the house whenever they wish, spend long hours on their mobile phones neglecting their household, husband, and family duties, in addition to the interference of relatives and the surrounding people in the private

life of the couple" ("10,000 Marriages and 5,000 Divorces in Saudi Arabia in a Month" 2018).

In the months of my fieldwork, I saw that the concerns expressed in such articles were mirrored in my conversations with individuals telling me their life stories, family consultants sharing insights about the cases they encounter, and in workshops and trainings seeking to promote better marital lives. Everyone seemed to feel that there was indeed a crisis of marriage in the country at this historical juncture, even if they did not all agree on what the crisis is composed of. This chapter asks two questions: how do Saudis perceive the problem of marriage? Should we accept the terms of these anxieties at face value, or find out if they are speaking for something else, perhaps an overall shift of governmentality?

In my fieldwork, I found a discourse surrounding the problem of marriage organized around four main themes: the role of the Saudi woman as a wife and mother, changing perceptions around the importance of social groupings (such as tribes), confusion about where to seek expert guidance about marriage, and the role of social media. Below, I try to make these themes appear through a couple of vignettes or anecdotes from my fieldwork, each one speaking of the same problem from a different point of view.

The role of the Saudi wife

> ***Vignette 1: "Today, girls enter marriage as if it were a warzone"***
> *It was my first official day of fieldwork - I was meeting with two employees from Walaa, a government-supported non-profit institution that promotes marital and family stability through weekly workshops and trainings, free of charge, for men and women. Their names were Maram (head of programs and trainings) and*

Khawla (head of PR and fundraising). Before I left my house, I felt the need to look less like myself. I removed my eyebrow ring and wore minimal makeup and made sure that my clothes under my abaya were black and inconspicuous incase the abaya shifted and revealed what I was wearing underneath.

I think Maram was maybe in her late thirties or very early forties, and Khawla was maybe in her early-to-mid thirties. They were very friendly and welcoming. Their offices were smaller than I expected, it almost looked like a cozy apartment instead of a government charity office. It seemed intimate, and there weren't that many people there. These were the only two women present that I saw. We sat in a meeting room which was quite relaxed, it had a cute grey couch and an Ikea dresser.

We began by introductions and small talk. When I told them that I was doing my masters in Anthropology in AUB, they asked me about myself, where I'm from, if my mother was Saudi, and where I've lived before. I was a bit nervous about this, because I know that when I speak Arabic, I don't sound 100% Saudi. It shows that I am someone who lived aboard and whose accent has a weird mix. But it went smoothly, more smoothly than I expected. I gave them a quick sketch of what my life has looked like, moving to many different places growing up due to my parent's work. The atmosphere was warm and friendly, but still formal. After talking to me a bit about the different activities of the organization, Maram turned to the problem of what has changed about marriage in Saudi Arabia, and why she thinks institutions like Walaa are needed now more than ever.

"Today, girls enter marriage as if it were a warzone." Maram told me how she is noticing a new trend amongst Saudi women to be uncompromising and unwilling to make sacrifices for marriage, valuing their independence fiercely. "Like the west, they want equal rights as if they were men! Even if both spouses work, she has certain duties under Islam to obey her husband and provide for him in the home. But many women say, 'well, I work the same amount he does, so why should I do more work in the house?' Now, men are being bullied." She told me how many mothers approach Walaa afraid that their daughters are too demanding

and unsuited for marriage and family life. "It's good to be strong, but there shouldn't be a transactional tit-for-tat mentality, there should be balance."

Another trend she had noticed is that Saudi women are not fighting for their children after divorce, in contrast to "the past" where they would fight so hard to gain custody of them. This situation ends with the children being with the father who often doesn't care for them ("because the mother's nurture towards her children is more profound") and he just ends up "dumping them" on his parents or a domestic worker. She believes that many children who have problems with crime or behavior problems come from broken homes like this.

Vignette 2: "If you don't love yourself, you will have a miserable marriage"

I was attending a talk entitled "From a Different Perspective." It was a one-time talk organized by Walaa, featuring a famous family counsellor called Nadia al-Issawi. My mother excitedly accompanied me to this event, as she was a big fan of this counsellor and follows her on social media. It was an event she might have attended anyway, even if I was not going for fieldwork purposes. There were more than 70 attendees, all women, gathered in an event hall usually booked for weddings or parties. The women's ages ranged from the mid-twenties upwards to their 50s and 60s. I had already attended a few talks and workshops hosted by Walaa and was surprised to find that the message of this talk was quite different from other ones I've attended, at least initially. Usually, I feel the overall direction of these talks are about convincing the woman to cater to her husband by any means. But during this talk, Nadia spoke about self-love as a way foster happiness, even independently of the marriage, which was quite new. "First, before anything else, what is needed before love? Love for the self. Knowing yourself, your desires… no one will love you if you don't love yourself. The biggest victims are mothers. They sacrifice their time, youth, and bodies and give too much to the point of forgetting themselves. If you treat yourself like this, how will others? This is not selfishness or narcissism but putting yourself first." She spoke about how women often lose themselves in marriage, allowing their husbands to affect their emotions

all the time. "You mirror all his moods - if he's angry, you're angry. If he's happy, you're happy. He loses respect for her if she doesn't respect herself." She told us a story of a woman who married young and was practically a housekeeper for her husband and his family because this is what she thought marriage was. "For many of us this is the default. We lose our hobbies, education, friends… and maybe, just maybe, he might love us. This is the traditional way of doing things." She continued the story: "then this woman's husband became rich and successful and she even picked another wife for him! She praised him! He married 2 or 3 more… now she is on anti-depressants and has bad mental health. What did she benefit? If you don't love yourself, you will have a miserable marriage."

Maram, the head of programs at Walaa who was in the audience, asked the speaker a question: "but for some women, this kind of discourse can be used to avoid responsibility." Nadia answered her, "what you're describing isn't self-love, it is narcissism. We love ourselves to foster love from those around us who won't love us if we neglect ourselves."

Nadia insisted that one's husband should make up a small part of a woman's overall happiness. "Who is responsible for your happiness? [the audience replies "me!"] We hear so many women say 'before marriage I was golden, my husband destroyed me, I was a different person… we place our happiness in our husband's hands. We tell our girls, 'you can do this or that when you are married.' Expectations about marriage become so high for women. But the husband only represents 10% of your happiness, this is based on studies. You are responsible for 90% of it. Women ask me, 'well what if he cheats, or hits you, or is always out?' Some people say, live for yourself and let him be. But that's like what Maram described. But I say, better to think of him as dessert, not a full meal. I mean this to people who are unlucky with a bad husband." The audience murmured, inspired. "Girls enter marriage as if they were a block of ice that is constantly melting … their lives become all about his preferences: what he likes to eat, anxious about whether he liked this or that…" The audience, agitated and amazed by the refreshing contents of her speech, started chiming in with questions and

commentary: "but even kids are affected by a bad marriage," "but when I do things that make me happy, my husband acts up, because he is used to being the center of attention," "how long should one stay in marriage before considering divorce? Is a year enough?" and finally, one woman exclaimed, "I can't live my life if I'm in the same house as him and not connecting with him, he's in my face all the time…" "Take an uber!" Nadia exclaimed. "Many people deal with the husband as if he were a decorative vase sitting in the house."

During the short coffee break, my mother excitedly called her sister to tell her about the contents of the talk, and about how much it inspired her. She only hung up when the break was over, and the speaker was getting ready to talk again.

I chose to foreground these two moments in my fieldwork because they convey well, I believe, two discursive positions on one theme (the role of the Saudi wife) seen to be a problem in Saudi marriages. Maram's conception of the problem with marriage in Saudi Arabia was that Saudi women were starting to prioritize their individual lives over a shared life with a partner. Now that she had more avenues for a career, her own income, and increased rights, she had selfishly decided to enjoy them at the expense of her wifely and maternal duties. She wanted to marry only if the man would allow her to continue this kind of autonomy, which Maram found to be unrealistic when trying to build a marriage and family life that required continued compromise.

By contrast, for many in the audience, Nadia's talk was revolutionary. It was indeed from a different perspective, one that I have not encountered as directly expressed in my fieldwork with Walaa, even though her talk was also hosted by Walaa. In fact, most of the Walaa trainings I've attended seemed to stress the need for the wife to be hyper-aware of her disposition around her husband, how to cater to his preferences and emotional needs,

and how to win his love (I will go into more details about this in the next chapter). I have often left these trainings feeling overwhelmed at how much Walaa's methods for creating a good marriage seemed to depend on the woman changing her character to a more docile and catering one for her husband, even though their explicit goal was to create a successful marriage. There was also something different about this talk in that it did not use any Islamic resources in its prescriptions. Although later, I found that other workshops and talks I attended also used the discourse of pop psychology in talking about concepts such as self-love, self-sufficiency, and personal independence, this was one the only one that did utilize any Islamic sources or references.

It is interesting to note that both Maram and Nadia were representing the family development institution Walaa. However, they had very different approaches that initially seem contradictory. But I argue that this type of contradiction is at the very heart of the crisis of governmentalities that arise in discourses about marriage. Furthermore, this contradiction serves a purpose. Institutions like Walaa are trying to shield family and marital life from the new possibilities that are emerging as a result of what in the previous chapter I called “the shift”. Thus, to begin with, Maram’s perspective shows no consideration to the expansion of work opportunities for women and the effects this has had on marriages. Many of my interlocutors explained to me is no longer sufficient to have only one breadwinner in the house: women are working in order to contribute to the lifestyle they and their husbands both aspire to. In the case of wealthier young couples, the imaginary of the successful Saudi woman is only realized because of exploitative feminized domestic labor from Asian and African countries, who take on the fallout. There are no discussions about breadwinning lower-income Saudi women and how their careers affect

their energies and capacities for housework and childcare. Maram dismisses this by saying that working does not negate a woman's duty to her family as a wife and mother. But she does not discuss how these responsibilities could be arranged different and more equally, nor does she acknowledge that men are usually resistant to cede any powers in decision-making because there is no incentive or pressure to do so. Most Saudi men (and women) inherit ideas about marriage from their parents or grandparents who lived under an Islamic regime of governmentality that clearly delineated gender roles in marriage, and do not many have real-life examples of different and more flexible arrangements to be inspired by. It is also extremely difficult and dangerous to challenge a religious claim about "wifely duties" without one being perceived as someone who dares to doubt Islam, which is an absolute taboo in Saudi Arabia where renouncing Islam publicly is equal to social suicide (if not an accusation of apostasy). Today, women are being paraded by the state as pioneers in different sectors and celebrated as exciting new contributors to political and working life, but these government-sponsored family development institutions show us that despite these few token women, the average Saudi woman does not have much room to maneuver if she wants to be a thriving career woman, as she is discouraged from negotiating flexibility in her role as a wife and mother, even under the new banner of moderate Islam. Instead, she is encouraged by institutions like Walaa to either hire a housekeeper (if she can afford it) or shoulder many burdens on her shoulders without complaining.

Many women already anticipate the inequalities that come with marriage before they marry. Something Maram mentioned intrigued me: "Today, girls enter marriage as if it were a warzone." Since the popularization of social media in the country, especially Twitter, which provides a veil of anonymity and a focus on text rather than pictures, a

certain technologically mediated kind of discourse about marriage, societal change, and women has proliferated. Some notable examples are Twitter campaigns such as #IAmMyOwnGuardian and #Women2Drive centering around the abolishment of the guardianship system and the lifting of the driving ban. Both these campaigns opened up avenues for Saudi women to share stories, experiences, and advice about how these two policies affected their lives, and how they paved the way for financial, physical, sexual, or mental abuse by husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and other male kin. These new social media tools seemingly allowed many Saudi women to politicize what seemed like individual issues that lay within the confines of the family, and to interrogate previously unquestioned cultural scripts to "tolerate" and "be patient" in marriage, even if there is an egregious violation of respect or rights. It does not help that many young Saudi women also see how frequently new marriages around them fall apart because of these abuses of power. In this manner, social media is also a form of governmentality that allows for discourses outside of the hands of the state to circulate, influencing one to conduct themselves in a different manner, such as being on the defense when it comes to entering marriage with a man because of possible abuses of power, and preparing for that situation by fiercely protecting a sense of autonomy that seems under constant threat from marriage. This is another reason why Nadia's talk struck me: it was the first time I hear dialogue voicing the same concern for autonomy offline, and addressed to a large group of women, even though she did not reference the Twitter campaigns (as they are a direct challenge to the state).

Nadia's approach used a different kind of discourse than the rest of Walaa's talks and workshops, in that she used a form of speech that was secular, scientific, and expert. It encourages a reclaiming of the self's boundaries, and the idea that one has almost total

control over her happiness no matter what the situation is. She seemed rather quick to dismiss the very real concerns the attendees had about abuse, loneliness, and disconnection. Rather, she called on women to emotionally divest from marriage altogether (but not divorcing) and re-organize their internal makeup to be more self-sufficient in fulfilling their need for connection, minimizing the contribution of a marriage to one's overall happiness to a minimum.

I suggest that this "take charge of your own life" kind of messaging is illustrative of, and congruent with, a neoliberal governmentality that wants to extend market values into all aspects of life. Dean lists some of these values as "responsibility, initiative, competitiveness and risk-taking, and industrious effort" (Dean 2010, 189). I will explore this idea more in the next chapter, but for this specific example, I want to illustrate the absurdity of Nadia's talk and how it demands that women be able to be responsible for their happiness in a bad marriage even in the direst of conditions. This was just another way to re-inscribe old cultural scripts about the wife's job to always tolerate and be patient with her husband, no matter what he does.

These two somehow contradictory messages, both from so-called experts on marriage in the kingdom, beg the question of what a successful marriage actually means on their terms. Does it mean suppression of some aspects of the self for a greater good (the building of a family unit, the basic block of society)? Does it mean women killing off parts of themselves that crave love, connection, and affection with men (which is often painted as an unrealistic expectation or "fairytales") so that they can perpetuate the marriage by any means necessary before thinking of divorce? I never found a straightforward answer to these questions throughout my fieldwork – instead, it seemed that the goal posts were

constantly shifting in a manner that sets up women to blame themselves, either for their naivete or inability to detach emotionally from their real-life circumstances.

Erosion of some social bonds, persistence of others

Vignette 1: "No one knows her!"

My father set up a meeting with Imam Fahad, an imam that he knew at a mosque in Dhahran, Eastern Province. My father also accompanied me to this meeting, as it would've been quite awkward if I sat alone with him. We sat in Imam Fahad's spacious office on the ground floor of the large mosque. The imam also had a personal project aside from his work at the mosque: he established a website called Mawaddah in order to help people in the kingdom find their life partner. When a user visits the website, they can create a profile and fill out a questionnaire similar to the ones provided by professional matchmakers that ask information about age, height, weight, tribal affiliation, employment status, marital status, and other details. The user can browse existing profiles of the opposite sex and choose ones that they are interested in. That's when Imam Fahad intervenes -- he is the intermediary that then liaises between the two parties and their families to see if a match can be made. The highest percentage of users for this website are single women who have never been married before (33%), followed by single men (about 23%). The rest of the users are divided almost equally between men who are already married and seeking another marriage, divorced women, divorced men (about 8-9% of users). A small percentage (1-2%) are users who are widowed (men and women).

When we first sat together in his office in the mosque, with my father present, Imam Fahad did not look at me directly, and did not wait for me to introduce much about my project or listen to my questions. Instead, he launched into a long, and rather charismatic, monologue about what he saw as the problem of marriage in Saudi today: that there are a lot of people seeking marriage but unable to find it.

"We have a lot of girls that are educated, smart, good, religious… so why are they not married? Even in their late thirties? Because no one knows her! Women can't approach men, and if women don't go to weddings so that people can see her, she might not ever get married. Before, members of the neighborhood used to know each other… you knew that this house had these girls. Now no one knows anyone. Ironically, with all this social media, I swear I don't even know my neighbor and who is inside his house! I don't know if he has women in there! I don't know! I might say hello to him, but if I ask 'do you have girls for marriage?' he would reply, 'WHAT?' and I would be like 'Nevermind… nevermind.'"

He told me how he felt sorry for women whose families don't put in much effort into finding a husband for them. "These families have this attitude like, 'if marriage is your destiny, then it will come, and if it is not your destiny, then I guess

it's not meant to be.' Poor girl! Even if she ends up rejecting all her suitors, she still needs to feel like they are out there, that they exist, that she is desired. If no one comes to ask for her hand, she might feel inferior to her friends…"

He felt that these conditions left Saudi youth with little options for marriage, and that there is a danger of them choosing someone who is not very compatible just for the sake of getting married. "There are no choices! There is no one else but her! I didn't find anyone but her… I looked and looked and didn't find, so I guess I'll marry her." Making the right choice for a life partner is the foundation of a family, and women also would feel like they would lose the opportunity for marriage if they rejected a suitor. "They get the feeling of 'khalas [enough], I don't want this man to slip away! Bring him to me! I didn't find anyone but him… come on habibi*, let me marry you!"*

Vignette 2: "Divorce and spinsterhood are the two biggest problems in Saudi society today"

Through Imam Fahad, I met one of his wives, Mais, who is a family consultant and also works on the Mawaddah website. I was at her house having tea and cookies, discussing her work with her and asking her about patterns she's noticed in marital problems. She told me that she thinks two of the major problems in Saudi society are spinsterhood and divorce. I asked her why she thought divorce was such a bad thing - I told her the perspective I got from another interlocutor I've had that said, that the more divorces a society has, the better it is. I told her how maybe it's a sign of freedom for many women, being able to walk away from situations they're unhappy in. She agreed with me but also pointed that many women now, especially city women (Mais comes from a small town in the south of the kingdom where early marriage is encouraged for both men and women), are not mature enough for marriage. It was a little vague to me as to why she felt this way, and she didn't elaborate further when I asked her what she meant. I suggested that maybe she meant that they were not mature enough to run a household, and she said that was a big part of it. She told me how there are many women on the Mawaddah website who are in their late thirties and forties and who are not able to find a husband because they or their families are very picky about the man, especially on the issue of tribes (many wanted the husband to be part of the same tribe or have some kind of tribal lineage). But more than that, she found it concerning how many of these women also immediately ruled out previously married men or men with lower incomes. Mais lamented the fact that many would miss out on marriage because of their unrealistic and high expectations. She also mentioned, more about her daughter's age generation (her daughter is 23), that romance has become a more significant demand. I asked why that can't coexist alongside other things that make a good marriage… and she said it can, and that's when she told me that she loved Imam Fahad profoundly, but it first started out as deep mutual respect.

These two vignettes from my fieldwork represent two opinions on the same theme: the importance assigned to certain social groupings like tribes or neighborhood communities. For Imam Fahad, the erosion of certain social ties such as those with neighbors (which Islam places a high value on) and the heightened focus on individuality and the nuclear family as a locus for social relations is what prevents marriages from taking place. Families are happy to provide their daughters with higher education and encourage them to start a career but might not put in the same effort to find her a husband, leaving it up to destiny or chance instead. He nostalgically remembers as a time where one could easily ask his neighbors or acquaintances about women of a marriageable age in their households. Now, this suddenly becomes a topic that seems intrusive to others and causes embarrassment. He does not believe that social media usage has replaced these ties or re-oriented them in a different way, but rather that it serves as an ironic deterrent to these meaningful social relations. Saudi men and women are left with unstable prospects for marriage as they divest from an old mode of social relating through neighborhoodlike community, perhaps making their options wider but also more confusing as they might find less and less in common with one another. Combined with the pressure to get married before it is too late, Imam Fahad is afraid that many are skipping the process of assessing whether their mate is compatible with them or not out of desperation. In between the lines of what he says, I felt that he sensed a shift in governmentality that lies in things like the architecture of his neighborhood, which with time has featured more and more houses with walls around them, not to mention the creation of a huge shopping mall in that same neighborhood in the early 2000s, which decreased the neighborly interaction that characterized much of Islam's vision of localized communities of support.

By contrast, his wife Mais had a different opinion: it was exactly because women were too choosey about the man's marital status and social class that they often fail to find a life partner. More than that, it was also the persistence of some Saudi families in continuing to invest in tribalism (which she saw as an outdated mode of the social) that hindered marriage for many men and women. Mais seemed to believe that a successful society looks like more people being in a marriage, and less divorcees or single people -- spinsterhood caused by choosiness and tribalism posed a threat to that vision. The shift in governmentality that emerges in Mais's account saw some people still wanting to hold on to the meanings these kind of social groupings offer, and possibly denying themselves the opportunity for marriage if this condition is not met – something she did not understand, as for her the shift in governmentality means divesting from meanings that these communities hold.

Expert guidance is needed, but does it work for everyone?

> ***Vignette 1: "There is a flaw in the make-up of the family"***
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> *For the duration of my fieldwork, I attended a workshop entitled* Ta'heel lal Muqbilat Ala Al-Zawaj *or "Training for Future Spouses" (which I will call "Muqbilat" for short). I attended these workshops as often as they were held as often as I could – averaging about twice a month (in addition to any other one-time talks or workshops. One time, while we were waiting for the instructor to arrive, the Walaa employee responsible for the Muqbilat trainings, Sarah, came to chit chat with me and the rest of the women in attendance. She was friendly and smiled as she told us that she got married a year ago. She seemed to want to be warm and relatable to the girls and assure them that the training is indeed effective. "The training helps you learn the mentality of men, and of women too. This way, you won't freak out when you see your husband acting in a certain way or feel alone in that experience."*
>
> *The instructor, who was a family consultant educated in Islamic studies (as most of the instructors on the first day which focuses on the Islamic aspect are), arrived. She began by telling us that we were strong for doing this (getting married). She asked us to introduce ourselves and asked if we were all in* milka

(i.e., having signed the marriage contract, but not yet living with the spouse). I told her that I'm actually a researcher; she was just like "ah" and didn't have much of a reaction.

Similar to most of the other trainings I've attended, she told us that divorce rates are very high in the kingdom, and even in the GCC and Egypt. "There is a flaw in the make-up of the family. This program offers protection from divorce and problems. In 1429 (in the Hijri Islamic calendar which Saudi Arabia uses - equivalent to 2008 in the Gregorian calendar) there wasn't much acceptance for these kinds of programs here, but now there is a much higher acceptance. Internet and books have information about Islamic stuff, but this program will give you the correct information."

In another one of these trainings a couple of weeks later, the instructor on the first day told us that this program has been introduced to combat divorce rates because "spouses are unable to understand each other," and that divorce rates went down by 92% (not sure where or how valid this statistic is) after the introduction of this program in the country by Khalid el Hleibi - the founder of the program. When I looked him up, I learned that he is a family consultant and was the director/on the boards of several family development institutions in the Eastern province).

I was reminded of my conversation with Imam Fahad, who talked to me at length about the urgent need to foster a culture that is accepting of having a family consultant. He told me that every couple needs a family consultant to be an objective, external party to work through problems and point out solutions. Couples should be taught how to have an honest conversation with each other about how the marriage is going at regular intervals. "Evaluation of marital life should happen every three months. First, one should express the positives and what they appreciate: 'my love, I never came home, and the house was dirty, it is always tidy and clean.' With compliments like this, it encourages positive behavior and one will do more of it. Negatives should also be discussed so that they may be improved." Without this kind of honest exchange, there is a danger of talaq badani *or "physical divorce" -- where the couple stay married but are not connecting to each other.*

Vignette 2: "The old Saudi traditional style"

I met Halima through an interlocutor that I befriended during one of the Walaa Muqbilat workshops. She is a divorced woman in her late twenties, who does not really trust institutions like Walaa or religious scholars to have the expert knowledge she felt she needed in order to understand marriage better. She told me about how in her nikah ceremony (where she signed the marriage contract with her husband), the sheikh that facilitated the contract gave them a CD with advice about marital life. "He gives you a CD that you're supposed to watch but honestly, I never watched it. Neither did my ex-husband. But I think since its mandatory in Saudi to go get a blood test, why is it not mandatory for you to get some course on marriage? Or I don't know, around the world, there should be. But especially marriage here because its different than around the world." I asked her why she didn't take a look at the CD -- was it maybe because she felt it would be too religious for her? "I think it would be too religious. Because in religion, for

example, let's be specific… in religion, having sex with your partner, if your husband wants it, and you don't want it, its haram to refuse him. You don't have to refuse him by being mean, you can say you're tired today, but this is considered haram. So, I felt like these kind of CDs would have these kind of things, not something gentle. I still believe in religion and everything but not with this kind of rigidness." I asked her if she would ever attend a course given by an organization such as Walaa, and what she might imagine they're like -- especially that they're not necessarily religious organizations. "I still think these kinds of courses are not things I would go to. They're still subscribing to the old Saudi traditional style of things. I don't think that they would address love marriages, for example. Do they address something like that?" I told her that they don't really discuss the process of meeting the husband or how that's supposed to look like, and that most people who were there were already engaged or had written their marriage contracts. "But I think it's very important to know the difference between marrying someone traditionally and marrying someone for love… when you marry someone traditionally you go in with no expectations. When you marry someone through love you have expectations, and all these expectations will go down the drain by the way, because he's not going be the same person you are with before you got married. But when the woman enters the marriage in a traditional way, she doesn't know… she's not expecting anything."

In my fieldwork, I got the sense from almost all my interlocutors that they wished they had some kind of expert guidance to teach them about the trials and tribulations of marriage, as well as what to expect. But not everyone agreed on the best source for such guidance. Institutions like Walaa view themselves as capable of sorting out through different sources of information, whether religious or produced by foreign expertise, to develop a program suitable for the Saudi context. But for many, like Halima, the association of these kind of institutions to the government automatically invokes for them a type of governmentality based mostly on Islam.

In all the Muqiblat sessions and talks I've attended around marriage (mostly organized by Walaa, but also other similar institutions), presenters and participants tended to talk as if marriage is not something that two people can figure out together through trial and error, but rather a project that needs expertise knowledge and guidance from specific

institutions (such as Walaa) and actors (such as family consultants), especially because Saudi society was changing at a fast rate. It was not rare to hear various attendees voice a desire for a reliable institutionalized, state-supported source of knowledge to refer to when navigating the complicated waters of building a marriage.

Walaa promoted these trainings as the correct way to learn about marriage, a body of knowledge that they have expertly compiled using carefully studied religious material as well as foreign academic and scientific studies about male and female characteristics and strategies for what makes a successful and harmonious marriage -- woven together specifically for the Saudi context. Instructors in these trainings would often warn us about what information we consume, as it might be produced for a Western audience and is not be suitable for our society. This could be in minute details: in one of the sessions on sexual health, the instructor (who was a gynecologist) recommended the IUD as an effective birth control method specifically for Saudi woman "because we live in a conservative society. In other countries where people have a lot of sexual relations, the IUD can lead to infection." When one of the attendees asked about the menstrual cup, the instructor said it is something foreign women use for swimming or dancing, but "for us we don't need it and we don't recommend it. It can cause infection. Once, we had a non-Arab non-Muslim patient come in who had forgotten it there and the smell was terrible, and it can get pushed up during sex if one forgets it." There was a desire to emulate "the West" in the production and consumption of expert knowledge, but at the same time there was a claim that we should tailor this expertise to our own context. Another talk I attended organized by Walaa (not related to the 3-day Muqbilat course) was on the theme of how to navigate a "distraught" gender identity in one's child. The instructor was well versed on "western" ideas on gender:

"the conversation in the West around gender is reaching a point where they just want to abolish gender altogether. But that is not applicable for us in the Saudi society." Instead, her mission seemed to be to challenge the audience to widen their ideas of the "male" and "female" gender, arguing that being too rigid in our ideas of femininity and masculinity might drive our children to want to escape their assigned gender, which would cause them harm and social isolation. She was aware of Western gender studies' ideas on the separation of sex as a biological fact and gender as socially constructed. However, instead of arguing against this binary, she used this same knowledge to advocate that gender identity is not something we should take for granted and expect to naturally develop in our children. Rather, it is something we need to continually strive to implant in them as parents so that they don't suffer social isolation in Saudi society if they refuse to subscribe to the gender binary. In this way, institutions like Walaa posited themselves as authorities that were equipped to filter many different sources of knowledge and handpick components that were specifically appropriate for Saudis, and attendees trusted them with this authority. In other words, they were institutions that recognized that there was a clash of governmentalities, of different ways to conduct conduct. They tried to pick and choose between these different languages, mode of communication, and resources in a way that supported their agenda: to shield the Saudi marriage from getting lost in the clash or confusion of governmentalities. They use this same clash to pick and choose ideas that still support the marital institution and gender roles in a patriarchal manner – whether it uses discourses from Islam, pop psychology, or romantic love.

Yet, someone like Halima, who fashions herself as separate from the "old Saudi traditional style" and moderately religious in comparison to the rest of Saudi society, could

not imagine herself trusting a state-sponsored institution like Walaa. For her, anything state-sponsored meant an extension of the strict religious nationalist project prevalent before 2015, before MBS institutionalized "moderate Islam" in the Vision 2030. Knowledge production on marriage before that era would mostly come from state-backed Islamic scholars who produced *fatwas* on the topic, often adhering to a strict, Wahhabist interpretation of Islam. During her own marital troubles, as we shall see in Chapter 4, she chose instead to seek the online help of a psychotherapist based in the United States and read books by American authors such as *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, a 1992 book by Gary Chapman, or read English-language articles online about relationships. We can also consider these kinds of books as a form of governmentality that is outside of the state, as it is a force that influences conduct, expectations, and behavior for the Saudis who choose to read them.

Social media: disrupting marriages or helping them?

> ***Vignette 1: "I did a social media detox"***
> *In the second day of one of the Muqbilat workshop, which focused on the social and personal aspect of marriage, the instructor who was a marriage counsellor discussed how social media was a force that was causing marital strain in an unprecedented way. "Now people take pictures even if they're not having fun in the outing. It can increase expectations too much and lead to frustration." A girl in the audience said, "I know a girl who used to get very affected by social media and would go to her husband and complain after seeing celebrities' lives. Her husband told her to remove Snapchat and it really helped." Someone else said, "I did a social media detox and my outlook changed. I deleted all the celebrities too. My self-confidence improved a lot." The instructor continued, "you have to protect yourself from envy. Don't put pictures of gifts you receive from your husband and inspire jealousy and comparison. Someone else added: "now girls are snapchatting videos of them driving, forgetting that other girls may not have permission to do so." Later in the session, someone asked a question: "what if he doesn't talk about his goals/what he likes? How can I know what he likes?" the trainer advised her to talk to his sisters or examine his social media for clues.*

Vignette 2: "If anyone saw my social media, they would think I was the happiest girl on the planet"

Me and Halima would often talk in a mix of Arabic and English whenever we met. One day, were sitting in her room, nostalgically reminiscing and laughing about how many obstacles we would have to overcome in order to go on a date or even talk to a boy on the phone when we were growing up. Things are much less difficult now. She thinks that social media has opened up avenues for men and women in Saudi Arabia to talk to each other more easily. When I asked her about its effect on marriage, she told me that she thinks it ruined a lot of marriages. "I'm one of those people who… if anyone saw my social media, they would think I was the happiest girl on the planet. I used to post so many things that are so like "I'm in this best life! I love this man so much!" and at the same time that I'm posting this post, I'm not even speaking to my husband. But not everyone gets that chance to know …to see what's happening behind the screen. So a lot of people look at Instagram and couples online and they think, 'oh I want a lifestyle like this, that is full of love, I want someone to love me this way' because they write a comment or something and start comparing their lives and their marriages... with this social media marriage. Which is kind of bullshit. All that is bullshit, not everyone is on social media is as extremely happy as they seem to be.

Most if not all the conversations I have had in my fieldwork about marriage touched on social media at some point. It was recognized as a force that can shape conduct in different ways, whether to exhibit a certain image or invite envy and extramarital affairs. In my very first meeting with Walaa, Maram told me that there was a higher rate of infidelity than before because it became easier to talk to the opposite sex through social media. She also said that the culture of putting celebrities on a pedestal, and what celebrities share on social media, has given people unrealistic expectations about life in general, including marriage, and that people are easy to give up on marriages for this reason and divorce quickly. She used the example of men who have unrealistic beauty standards for women because they are exposed to celebrities' social media feeds. Men I've spoken to during my fieldwork have also expressed how they can also fall into the trap of social media, causing them to question whether they could've gotten a more beautiful or easygoing wife. In a society like

Saudi Arabia where public space was heavily regulated and gender segregated before 2015, social media was for a time the only way many people could interact with the opposite sex.

However, or perhaps for this reason, social media is also a tool heavily invested and used by institutions like Walaa and actors such as family consultants in order to educate people about marriage. In fact, in August 2019, Walaa tweeted out a link to an extensive survey they wanted their followers to fill out on how social media could better improve family and marriage stability in the kingdom. Some of the questions in the survey were "how much do you depend on social media to learn information about family life?" "How can social media better support the case of empowering families in Saudi society?" (options to tick were to raise awareness about the link between a healthy family and a healthy society, to talk about common challenges that Saudi families face, to fight the trend of "westernization" and warn families against it)". Some family consultants have become famous on social media, tweeting tips on self-development or tips on improving marital life and connection regularly, often with thousands of followers on Twitter. I even learned from one of my interlocutors that some family consultants even conduct workshops online, on chatting platforms such as Telegram or Whatsapp. She sent me links to join these Whatsapp or Telegram groups which had members in the hundreds, waiting for the time the online training will be given. The family consultant acts as an administrator and disables members of the group from chatting while he or she gives the training. The training usually entails the consultant sending a collection of voice notes, pictures/diagrams, and text to her audience. They sometimes accept and answer questions after the training is officially done, but this is often difficult because of the large number of people present in the group. Matchmakers or *khattabas* who used to work by drawing on their social networks in the

neighborhood, city, or tribe now have social media accounts too, with some famous ones having thousands of followers, helping many find a life partner.

Social media comes up often in discourses about difficulties experienced in marriage. It is key site by which we can directly observe the clash of governmentalities happening. It can be harnessed in many different ways, whether it is to interact differently with the opposite sex, politicize the personal, or as a tool to distribute messaging on the "correct" way to conduct marriage. It is a place where we can witness how governmentality can be deployed both from a top-down or bottom-up approach (as in, not always in reference to state projects) depending on who is using it. Some, like Halima, use it to construct an imaginary of a love marriage that has offered her the autonomy of travel or of dressing a certain way. Others see it as a site where one has to be careful of the content they post as it could expose them to envy and jealousy.

In this chapter, I have discussed the four main axis along which Saudis invoke different discourses about difficulties in marriage: the role of the Saudi woman as a wife/mother, the contested meanings regarding some types of social groupings (like tribes), the confusion about what kind of expert guidance to seek in order to have better marriages, and the popularization of social media and its effects. However, it is important to not take these anxieties at face value, but instead curiously ask what bigger thing they represent: a crisis of governmentalities that has opened up possibilities that did not exist before when it comes to how one should conduct oneself in their intimate life, and which threated to uproot patriarchal arrangements that have been in place for generations. In the next chapter, I delve

more into how the Saudi state is trying to navigate the crisis of governmentalities through its family development institutions and educational programs.

CHAPTER 3

HOW TO BE A GOOD SAUDI WIFE

This chapter examines the programs designed to save the Saudi marriage from divorce, established by government-sponsored family development institutions. In previous chapters, I've mentioned how these kinds of institutions first started appearing in the mid-2000s, in tandem with the kingdom's efforts to reform its image to the international community (a lot of times by using Saudi women as tokens of progress). First, I give some background information about how these courses are structured. Second, I lay out three key messages that these courses seek to push: that men are not the enemy, that men and women are inherently different, and that concessions are needed for a successful marriage. This chapter is mostly ethnographic and uses many anecdotes I have gathered from attending these courses during my fieldwork. Analysis is done on two levels: the content and its contradictions, and the discursive strategy that is used. Finally, I reflect on how these courses partake in a regime of authoritarian neoliberal governmentality by applying a "rational" approach to marriage.

General information about the course

A significant part of the work of some of institutions geared towards promoting family development and stable marriages like Walaa is offering a 3-day course entitled *Ta'heel lal Muqbilat Ala Al-Zawaj* or "Training for Future Spouses" (referred to from here on as the Muqbilat program). It is interesting to note that the word "ta'heel" has a range of meanings,

amongst them “rehabilitation,” “socialization,” and “making fit.” The training is offered for free and is available every week for men and every two weeks for women. The reason it is more frequently available for men is that men are eligible to apply for funds from these institutions to help them start their marital lives, which they can secure after taking this course. However, most women attend out of their own will and in much higher numbers than men, usually because they heard about it online or were recommended to attend by someone they know. Because women are not permitted to attend the training for men and the entire offices of Walaa are split into male and female offices, I could not attend the men's training in person, although I managed to find similar trainings online for men given by other family development institutions or social workers/marriage counsellors.

The course is mostly attended by women who have recently gotten married (one year or less), women who are in the engagement period, or women who have signed their Islamic marital contracts but are waiting until after their wedding to start living with their spouse. Typically, their ages range from their early to mid-twenties, but sometimes there are women who are in their last years of high school (around 18 years of age), and even women who take the course in preparation for a second marriage (in their late 30s or early 40s). Sometimes, their husbands take the course as well, even if they are not looking for the financial support, at the request of their partner. Most of the women I encountered in this course during my fieldwork were currently enrolled in a local university or had graduated from one. The content of the training is divided over the 3-day period: the legal/Islamic aspect (first day), the personal/social aspect (second day), and the economic/health aspect (third day). Many of the themes discussed blur into one another and are repeated

throughout different days of the training, but each aspect or theme is presented by a different instructor.

The instructors are not employed by Walaa, but are part of a large network of family consultants, religious experts, and health experts that Walaa works with frequently. Sometimes, I have encountered the same instructor twice, but it is usually a different instructor every time.

When I first attended these trainings in the summer of 2018, the instructors invited by Walaa would present their own content to attendees. But by the time I did my second round of fieldwork in the summer of 2019, there had been a new unified syllabus issued specifically for these courses by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. Most of the course content, however, remained the same as I had first observed it. The 48-page syllabus was also forwarded to attendees ahead of time via WhatsApp, after they had registered for the course on Walaa's website. However, trainers also enjoyed quite a bit of autonomy during these sessions -- they would sometimes omit sections from the syllabus, offer their own personal advice and "golden rules" for successful marriages, and illustrate insights using relatable examples they had personally encountered, usually stories from their own lives, or the lives of friends and/or clients.

The trainings were usually given in Walaa's offices used by its women employees, which is in a different part of town than the main headquarters run by men. They used a medium-sized room with three tables that seated six people each. The trainings would run from 4 to 8pm, although they frequently started late, around 5.30pm. Attendance could be anywhere between 20 women to sometimes only 4 women (especially when Saudi schools had their summer vacation, and when many Saudi families would travel). Sometimes the

training would occur elsewhere, for example at the offices of another institution similar to Walaa, or at an Islamic youth center.

The atmosphere of these trainings is usually informal -- the women would joke around and be friendly with one another, and the instructor would speak in the vernacular and would put effort in capturing and keeping the attention of the attendees with jokes, personal stories, and an animated speaking style. Very frequently, attendees would ask the instructor questions during the session, and sometimes the session wouldn't be very structured, and the instructor wouldn't be able to cover all that she wanted to because the session started later than the advertised time and found herself instead relaying what she found to be most important in her experience rather than what is in the syllabus. There is a 20-30 minute break for Maghrib prayers, where attendees have a chance to pray and also grab coffee and snacks that Walaa provides, mingle with each other, or ask the instructor's advice on a specific issue in her marriage in private (they can also do this after the session has ended).

In all the sessions I have attended, I have noticed that all of the attendees seemed to be fascinated by the instructors and the content, and hardly ever questioned any of it. In the few cases where an attendee had doubts about something, a discussion with the instructor would always lead to her clearing these doubts and agreeing with the instructor. The women were not there because they were obliged to be, but rather because of a genuine curiosity and thirst for knowledge on how to have a successful marriage. In the beginning of the program, the first instructor would usually ask the attendees what they hoped to learn. Most of these responses revolved around the desire for institutionalized guidance on how to navigate the seemingly confusing and complicated arena of marriage: "I want to

learn from experts, because as individuals we do not innately know these things," "I want to relieve the anxiety I have about getting married," "I want to correct any wrong ideas about marriage that I have absorbed from people around me -- I want to learn it the right way," "I want to learn whether other women face the same kind of problems I do, or am I the problem? I want to make peace with myself!" Here is an introduction of what is discussed in each of the aspects:

- The legal/Islamic aspect (first day): this section is the most comprehensive and touches on many subjects. Because Saudi Arabia runs on Sharia law, the legal and Islamic aspects of marriage overlap greatly with each other. Although instructors can change during every cycle of the workshop, the first day always features an instructor who has received higher education in Islamic law from a local university. Because the first instructor also introduces the whole program, she often gives an introduction to the attendees about why this program is important and needed, and starts a discussion on what each of the attendees wants out of marriage. Topics covered during this day's training always start with a discussion of the following verse from the Quran: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect" (30:21). This is referenced again and again during the session. Other topics always covered in this section of the course include: the mechanics of the Islamic marriage contract *or nikah* (consent process, how to include conditions for the marriage in the

contract, who needs to be present), the Islamic rights and responsibilities of the husband and wife (for example, the wife has the right for her husband to provide her with a home and spending money, and the husband has the right to sex whenever he wants – probably the most contentious and emotionally-charged discussion point during these courses), an overview of the government-mandated medical screenings before marriage, and religious rituals around sex (saying a *dua* before consummation, *ghusul* or when and how to wash after sexual intercourse in order to be spiritually purified for prayer). However, the contents of this day's training often go beyond Islamic laws and teachings around marriage. There is also much advice given by the instructor on day-to-day marital life, sometimes backed up by a verse from the Quran or a hadith, but more often it is a foreshadowing of the next day's training on the personal/social aspect of marriage. This advice can be "golden rules" the instructor compiled from what she has observed from her own life or that of clients/friends, how to get to know your partner well (especially before living together), how to manage one's expectations for marriage, gendered characteristics to keep in mind when dealing with husbands, and what to expect sexually.

- The personal/social aspect (second day): in this section the instructor, who is usually a marriage counsellor, relies much less on religious sources. Instead, she uses the discourses of science (although I argue that it is more like pseudo-science, because the information given paints gender as a stagnant, uncomplex category; not to mention that the information is carefully

selected to serve a heteronormative agenda), pop psychology, and expert knowledge on marital happiness as the knowledge base for the content. Most of the discussion is dedicated to learning what is presented as the vastly different characters of men and women; and how their communication styles, emotional needs, and verbal expressions are colored by these differences. Tactics and strategies are emphasized in this session: how to converse with your spouse in different situations, how to make requests in a way that best guarantees their fulfillment, how to earn the spouse's love and affection, and how to work through conflicts. There are also discussions on the different stages of love that occur before and during marriage. The goal of this section is rather explicitly stated by the instructor: for the women to manage their expectations and avoid disappointment in their marital lives. By knowing the gendered differences between her and her husband, the woman can then re-orient her attitude to be more prepared for possible gaps in connection, understanding, and communicating. The "social" aspect of this session deals mostly around interactions with in-laws and how to maintain a good relationship with them, while protecting the marriage from their possible intrusion.

- Economic aspect (first half of third day): all of the instructors for the economic aspect training that I have attended start the session by stating that many marriages fall apart because of financial difficulties and tension. Yet this training takes part for only the first two hours of the last day. The instructor trains attendees on how to create and manage a financial budget

on a weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. She also provides practical tips on how to cut costs when shopping for groceries, clothes, or even in travel planning. The training includes a discussion of how to talk to one's husband about sensitive financial matters, and why it is important for the woman to also be involved in financial planning even though the man is the financial head of the household and the provider as per Islamic teachings.

- Health aspect (second half of third day): The instructor present in this module is a gynecologist, and so covers medical information relating to common sexual infections such as urinary tract infections or yeast infections, birth control options, and the stages of arousal. However, there is also much non strictly medical advice given about sex: the dynamics of who should initiates sex and when, how to talk about sexual needs, how to ease into sexual activity when first getting married, the importance of foreplay, and sexual activities to avoid as they are Islamically prohibited (such as anal sex or sex while a woman is menstruating). At the end, there is also a shorter discussion of the importance of a balanced diet and exercise for the woman and her family, so as to prevent widespread health issues in the kingdom such as diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure.

It is important to note that outside of the Muqiblat training that happens at regular intervals, Walaa (and other similar organizations) also organize one-time events and talks quite prolifically (around once a week or so). Many of these are directly related to honing one's femininity or learning relationship skills in order to create better marriages and families,

with titles and descriptions such as "Soft Power and its role in creating a happy family: types of femininity, traits of masculine women, how to hone feminine skills, how to reclaim inner femininity," "Feminine Maturity: defining feminine maturity, types of feminine maturity, elements of feminine maturity, how to know how you've reached the correct kind of feminine maturity, stages in personal feminine development and charismatic femininity," "Acceptance is the key to familial harmony: what is acceptance? How do we practice it in positive ways in our families? How to achieve familial harmony," "Love languages: defining love, love's place in our religion, the difference between romantic love and real love, what love needs to survive, the five love languages, how to apply the love languages to your own life." (I have not attended all of these because I was away from the country). Some have to do with children, for example "Our children and the process of gendering: what is gendering? Disturbances in gender identity, the importance of gendering in childhood, common mistakes during the gendering process of children, gender equality." Some talks revolve around more general self-development and are not necessarily related to marriage and family, such as an event I attended entitled "The Ghosts of Our Thoughts: How to deal with Negative Thoughts" that was given by a famous psychologist in Saudi Arabia.

The Muqbilat course was designed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development with input from institutions like Walaa and family consultants who claim to have identified threats to the Saudi marriage and strategies for ameliorating them, with the purpose of decreasing the divorce rate and creating long-lasting marriages. In my analysis of these trainings, I observed how the combined usage of Islamic and pseudo-scientific discourses work together to perpetuate three key messages underlying the contents of these

courses (and other trainings that Walaa organizes): 1) men are not the enemy – marriage is a relationship of complementarity, not domination 2) men and women are and need to be different for a successful marriage 3) Islam gives the woman rights which protects her, but sometimes making concessions is necessary for the overall harmony of the marriage. These messages overlap and intersect with each other: unlearning the idea that men are the enemy is coupled with learning the specific mental, emotional, and linguistic characteristics of each gender. This understanding of the other gender is painted as useful when developing tactics in order to fulfill certain desires, such as the desire for more connection, the desire to travel, the desire to take a certain decision regarding the household, or the desire to obtain permission for something. With regards to the last key message, the hope seems to be that attendees learn what their non-negotiable Islamic rights are, but still allow the marriage some flexibility by learning when to make or not make concessions. These messages are pervaded with contradictions and paradoxes. At the end of the chapter, I will suggest that these contradictions and paradoxes serve a purpose for the regime of governmentality that produced them.

Key message 1: Men are not the enemy

An often-repeated message by both the attendees and the instructors in the Muqbilat training is that this training will help individuals planning for marriage to learn the "correct" mindset about marriage and dispel myths about it despite what they might have observed or heard throughout their lifetime. Instructors assume that women attendees either enter marriages with overly romantic ideas and then get disappointed, or enter it “as if it were a warzone”, as we saw in a previous chapter. Hence, a re-framing or unlearning is

required: a successful marriage is possible and can be cultivated, but it needs work and a rational spirit, and the journey might take a long time and isn't always smooth. There are resources to help do this: following Islamic guidelines, empowering oneself with knowledge about the other gender's characteristics, and using clever tactics and negotiation skills when it comes to demanding one's rights or making concessions -- all covered in the Muqbilat training. This key message is introduced from the first day's module, entitled The Islamic Aspect, although it is repeated in different ways and in different discursive strategies in the following modules. Here is an example from my fieldnotes on a session I attended.

> *The instructor then went on to talk about rights and duties for both parties of the marriage. She said that both men and women have the same Islamic duties to God in worship, but because they are different in bodies and mind, they have different tasks in life. She described how no women fought in* jihad *during the Prophet's time for this reason, and insisted that "not equal" does not mean that one is better than the other, but that they are complementary and complete each other (*takamul). *She stressed that although men have more power, that power comes with responsibility that they should not abuse, and that is why they have the responsibilities of guardianship and financial provision.*

Recall the head of programs at Walaa who perceives the problem of marriage in Saudi Arabia as stemming from the trend of women holding on to their individuality more fiercely than ever, hindering their ability to share their lives with a husband ("today, Saudi women enter a marriage as if they were entering a warzone"). It is interesting, on this background, that the idea of *takamul* is introduced on the first day of the training, and that a great amount of time is spent on it -- from explaining the different roles of the husband and wife Islamically, to the employment of scientific knowledge that characterizes different female and male brain as opposites, to outlining differences in emotional and sexual needs.

With the careful selection of a mix of Islamic sources of knowledge and *dirasat ajnabiyya* (foreign studies), the training seeks to disarm women attendees from "entering marriage as if it were a warzone" by reaffirming that there is not only a divine designer who knows best that gender complementarity is needed for a marriage to work, but also scientific studies that prove that men and women are indeed different, in a way that is essential and natural and cannot be escaped. The rather explicit solution is to accept these differences and work with them or around them by cultivating femininity as a wife, and masculinity as a husband, and sticking to assigned roles and responsibilities prescribed for each.

Another powerful sub-message pushed to “disarm” women before entering a marriage is convincing them that as women, they are not easy to deal with. Their demands are overly complicated, and sometimes they even get in the way of their own happiness by focusing too much on little details. Here again, let me quote from my fieldnotes:

> *"Marriage is a form of worship," the instructor said. It is easier to tolerate hard times when you have an intention - a niyya* [intention]. *She compared it to fasting and how difficult that can be, but it is tolerable because there is a purpose behind it. "We women aren't easy to deal with you know, el rijjal masakeen!* [poor men]. *Men are straightforward - give him sex and don't emasculate him. That’s it!"* (Muqbilat training, July 15, 2019).
>
> *The instructor was telling us how we should practice generosity in helping the husband with his tasks, even if they're not part of our responsibilities. "You can pick up the task of bringing groceries sometimes, that way, that hour that he spends getting groceries after work, he can spend it with you if he works long hours." One of the attendee's mothers who decided to join the training asked, "what if the girl is the one working long hours?" The trainer replied: "it depends what he says. If he has no problem with it, great. But as a woman you should practice generosity, she should do some things to make up for that - cook a couple of days of the week and weekends, since she's lacking. But don’t develop a tit-for-tat kind of mentality. Women are the ones more likely to keep tabs on this stuff. Women criticize more than men, even if she puts in a lot of effort. He may not even mention something that is bothering him"* (Muqbilat training, July 16, 2019).

> *The instructor was telling us how men have a higher percentage of colorblindness than women, and a husband may not notice small details like the wife changing her hair color, which can frustrate her. "Your female friends would notice even if you change the drawing of your eyebrow… but men simply don't notice these things." She gave us another example of how one of her friends got upset when her husband, who had travelled overseas, brought her back a Louis Vuitton bag as a gift, only she had the exact same bag at home. "Miskeen [poor soul]… men don't care about details. We women are the ones who tire them out with this thing. We are not satisfied with simple things"* (Muqbilat training, July 16, 2019).

Instructors teach the attendees that women are inherently difficult and may even create problems for themselves out of nothing, and that this quality or rather flaw is something to be monitored and overcome in order to have a successful marriage. This message paints marriage as an easy project if the woman just gets out of her own way and implement the correct strategy and tactics: men are simple and don't need much. Women are the ones that have overly complicated needs and perhaps unrealistic demands that confuse men, frustrating both the woman and her husband. The word "*miskeen*" (poor soul) was uttered about men's characteristics so often, portraying them simply as usually having good intentions but falling short of the execution because of their limited capacity to pay attention to details only the woman deems important. This word was used in discussions about how men sometimes fall short of offering a listening ear when the woman is venting about her problems and rush instead to suggest solutions, when he doesn't notice details, when he's unable to have more than one discussion about a marital or household problem in any one sitting, or when he fails to be emotionally intelligent. Even the discussion on keeping tabs (tit-for-tat) to ensure equality in household labor is criticized as a difficult trait, rather than a tool that women could use to reveal the sometimes hidden labor of

housework, which many women are expected to pick up even while working the same or longer hours than their husbands.

Sometimes, instructors express the idea that women create problems for themselves in a different way. In the same "From a Different Perspective" lecture discussed in the previous chapter, the instructor also talked to us about common mistakes women commit in marriage with long-lasting effects.

> *"We as women often make mistakes that stay in the shadows of the whole marriage - dopamine lets us believe and ignore the flags. We think that he'll change after marriage. We might think, before marriage, 'oh my god, it's cute when he gets jealous!'" She gave us a hypothetical example of how believing that jealousy is cute may lead to the husband showing up at her house if he calls her and her phone line is busy because she is talking to a friend. "He asked her to talk to her friend in front of him. She was happy to do so. She got married and he was horrible, constant cheating." She gave another example of how some women might ignore red flags like him slapping her in the engagement period, justifying the action by saying "I provoked him" and subscribing to the dominant mentality that "*el-zawj yi'gal*" [the husband behaves] after marriage, only for him to become even more violent after marriage. Another common mistake she described was comparing one's husband to the husbands of friends. "We women only talk about negative things. When we women are sitting together… I never heard a woman praise her husband unless he did something big." She cited her personal experience. "All day at work people vent about their husbands and then go home angry. In my new job, it's not like that. It changed my relationship with my husband by 180 degrees. Venting to others and comparing husbands…it's like cheating."*

It was interesting to me how many of these "common mistakes" would be confusing for Saudi women to navigate. The instructor acknowledged that there was a dominant view that men become better partners after marriage, yet still described these events as "mistakes" that should have been avoided, re-affirming the underlying assumption that marital affairs are entirely controllable if one plans rationally, and the way to learn how to do that "correctly" is to attend events like the ones organized by Walaa. The woman is seen as the architect of her own demise, even though these supposedly rational pieces of advice seemed

to be moving targets that recommended contradictory things at times. Even when the information is coming from the same source, that the line for what was acceptable to tolerate and not tolerate in a marriage seemed to be an ever-moving target.

Key message 2: Men and women are different

Following the message that men are not the enemy and sometimes the woman is her own obstacle to a happy marriage, instructors focuses on educating attendees about each gender and its characteristics. They explicitly states that one of the Islamic goals of marriage is for one to realize the full potential of their femininity (for women) and masculinity (for men). In the course, I observed how instructors sought to teach women not only to learn about men and women's differences so that they may understand their partner better and develop successful strategies of interaction towards them, but to also to strive towards maximum femininity themselves. Not only are women and men painted as different, there was also this underlying assumption that they *needed* to be different in order for complementarity (*takamul)* to work. This difference is achieved by each spouse striving towards the prescribed imaginaries of femininity and masculinity offered in these courses. Instructors outlined these differences in three rubrics: 1) personality, characteristics, and cognitive abilities, 2) emotional needs, and 3) sexual needs. In the following sections, I attempt to talk about each of these rubrics, along with the call to safeguard and cultivate maximum femininity. It is important to keep in mind that these rubrics intersect with, justified, and reinforced each other constantly, and as such, they overlap significantly.

The bulk of content around the differences of men and women can be found on the second day of the Muqbilat training, which is entitled "The Personal and Social Aspect."

However, they appear in different forms throughout the entire 3-day training and through different lenses: Islamic (relevant especially to the different rights and duties of each spouse and sexual needs) and pseudo-scientific/pop psychology (which cover cognitive differences and different sexual/emotional needs for each spouse). On the second day, there is a larger focus on the pop psychology and seemingly scientific lens, as the information relayed to the attendees is presented as based on expert knowledge about the differences between male and female brains that cause them to have different thinking styles, emotional make ups, linguistic skills, ways of expression, and emotional/sexual needs. This information kept being repeated in one way or another throughout the entire training in discussions about sex, household duties, conflict resolution, communication breakdowns. The instructors were not shy about stating the explicit purpose in conveying all this information: for the attendees to manage their expectations around marriage and men, and to avoid disappointment and disillusionment in the future. In one of the sessions I have attended on "The Personal and Social Aspect," the instructor told us from the very beginning why this section was important: "is it useful to know the differences between men and women because it makes life easier, we have fewer problems, and we can justify and understand his actions. It's not that he's cruel, he's just different, or sometimes he doesn't mean it." Instructors would say variations of this statement at every Muqbilat session, along with utterances of "*subhanallah,* look how differently Allah created us" or even a "*miskeen* [poor guy]…he just simply doesn't know!"

The information we received in this module about the different genders' "characteristics" is reminiscent of popularized pseudo-scientific and pop psychology

discourses in best-selling self-help books such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* or *Why Men Love Bitches.* Speaking about women, the instructors teach the idea that women are better communicators, better multi-taskers, and better at emotional labor. Regarding emotions, they speak of how women are more emotional in their decision-making process and need more emotional validation. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as being better at things like math, calculation, and sports. He is not a good multi-tasker, in fact he compartmentalizes different aspects of life in his mind and can only think about one thing at a time, a "fact" that the woman must work around. As he is less versed in non-verbal communication (lack of melody in the speaking voice, little to no body language), it is hard to tell what his emotional state might be. The trainer said we must keep in mind these differences so that we don't get upset: "What makes us upset is expecting him to be the way we are, but this disappoints us. With time he will adapt to what you like in order to make you happy. Make sure you give positive reinforcement to give him a feeling of accomplishment."

All this information is synthesized by the instructors to then teach us what is most relevant for marriage: the identification and fulfillment of different emotional needs for each spouse. The instructor identified the woman's needs as respect (that her husband does not shout at her and treats her with gentleness), attention and sweet words ("especially when she is on her period"), reassurance of love, feeling cared for, and loyalty. The last point, loyalty, was interesting. The instructor told us that for men, the wife's loyalty is an Islamic right. But for women, his loyalty to her isn't a right, but it is an act of love (as Islam permits him to marry up to four wives). One of the attendees said, "it should be a right for both!" The instructor reminded her that the man has the Islamic right to marry others, but

she doesn't. "It becomes a problem if she's too friendly with a colleague, for example. But he may choose to be loyal to her out of love, for example if he finds out that she cannot conceive and decides to stay married to her anyway." In this example, we see a shift in the discursive strategy – suddenly the language of romantic love is used as a way to manage anxieties and fears around the husband marrying another wife, even though it is the husband's Islamic right. In the coming examples, we see this discursive strategy of shifts between different registers of argumentation (Sharia, science, psychology, romance…) comes up again and again in order to resolve irreconcilable tensions at the same time as they contribute to re-generate them.

The list of men's emotional needs included: trust ("he needs to feel like you trust him enough to handle responsibilities"), acceptance of his looks and habits, encouragement ("make sure you praise him if he says or does something nice"), and admiration. The attendees were surprised by "admiration," as they thought maybe the woman would need this more. The instructor told us, "he wants her to feel lucky that she married him. It's a mistake to tell him that many people approached her for marriage. He must think he is the best, even if you need to change some things in his personality." Fatin asked, "but they want you to feel below them. It's a superiority complex. Not just to women, but everyone. Men are like that." Ghadeer replied, "not all men are like that, my brothers, most of them are not like that." The instructor closed the discussion by saying that this is a bad trait that can be found in any individual regardless of gender. This was a rhetorical strategy that was common in these sessions whenever one of the attendees challenged the notion that women and men operate in these stereotypical gendered ways. Whenever they would bring up examples from their own lives that illustrated that personalities are in fact complex,

nuanced, and not always reflective of gendered categories of character, the point was dismissed by the instructor telling us that these categories are just "general guidelines," and that of course we need to take them with a pinch of salt. This was quite ironic given that much effort was taken in order to disseminate the key message that men and women are very different and need to be so.

As I briefly stated above, the discussion about differences between men and women always elicits some controversy when it came to talking about sex, especially around the Islamic right of the man to have his sexual needs fulfilled whenever he wants to. In the following examples, I show how the usage of some discursive strategies such as using the language of romantic love, or using a shocking rhetorical device, help the instructor resolve the tensions that arise when speaking about this subject.

> *In one of the first days of the Muqbilat training, in a discussion on the Islamic rights of spouses towards each other, the instructor was talking about how sex is an Islamic right for a man. A woman in attendance, Manar, asked "why not for both?" The instructor replied, "because if he's tired and can't perform, it's not a sin. But it is for her." Here the girls started protesting a bit. The instructor continued: "if she is sick or tired, then she should say it with gentleness." Another woman, Ghadeer, exclaimed "it's not supposed to be based on coercion!" The trainer tried to reassure them, "again, you can say it gently. Him demanding his right is not something that happens every single day. Sometimes the girl wants it and initiates." Ghadeer, refusing to buy into what the instructor was saying, replied "our religion doesn't insult us. It holds us dear. I heard once a story about a girl having sex and crying because she didn't want to sin..." The instructor replied, "those were very old times. If he loves you, he won't force you." Ghadeer seemed to be satisfied with this answer and smiled.*
>
> *The trainer continued: "the man can get sick if he doesn't have sex. He needs to ejaculate or else he experiences retention and it can affect his prostate. Women only need hugs and kisses. This is why it's his Islamic right. You will learn about this more on the third day of the training, what happens when he doesn't ejaculate and the problems that can come with that." From her facial expression, Manar did not seem convinced, but didn't say anything. I found it interesting that masturbation was never mentioned as an option.*

Then the instructor told a story that settled all the attendees down, which I at the time found was very strange. She told us a story about a woman who got all dressed up to go to a gathering with her sisters, and she had her hair and make-up done. Her husband asked her for sex, but she refused because she was dressed to go out and didn't want to ruin her hair and make-up. While she was out, she received a call and found out that her husband had died in a car accident. All of the girls gasped with shock and said "ok, ok khalas *[enough], we get your point…" They all seemed terrified at the idea that their last interaction with their husband would be related to them committing a sin by refusing him his Islamic right.*

Here is another example of another interaction around the same topic during another Muqbilat training:

We talked a little bit more about the right to sexual pleasure for the man. The trainer explained that men have higher sex drives than women do, and that sometimes we have to satisfy him even if we're not in the mood. She warned, "Do you want him to go to someone else? Or do something else?" She did say that we should be able to negotiate this if we are sick or not feeling well, but that ultimately, it's his right. She explained that God gets very angry if this right is refused, and she is fully aware that it seems "extreme," but it is important. Later on, she told us the story of one of the early converts of Islam, Umm Sulayym, whose son had died while her husband was away for travel. When he came back, he did not know that his son was dead, and requested to have sex with his wife. She obliged, not telling him that the son was dead until after, so that she may fulfill his right. The girls gasped in shock, and the trainer nodded her head sadly. "Yes… I know. But it is his right."

On the third day of the training about sexual health, the same idea is repeated by a gynecologist:

The trainer who came was an ob-gyn doctor in her mid-forties it seemed. She wanted to focus on two things: the differences between men and women in sex, and dispelling myths. We did a matchmaking exercise about the genders, things such as "who is more visual?" "who is better at separating sex and emotions?" She also presented us with questions more directly related to sexuality: who initiates more? Who needs more foreplay? Who has a cyclical sex drive? Who needs affection after sex? Who likes sex when they are stressed? Then she started talking about how men usually initiate sex because women are usually shy (I wondered here, why there was an assumption that a Saudi man would be less shy in such a sexual situation) and also because of hormones. Men can separate sex and emotions – so don't be surprised if he "asks for his wife" and then goes back to whatever he was doing, as women can multi-task and he cannot. Women can be satisfied with love and cuddles. Sex is presented as something she

> *"gives" after he has successfully shown affection, which she needs. During ovulation, she becomes more "ready" and more "attractive" to him. There was a lack of mention about her own sex drive.*

In all the trainings I attended, the discussion on sex always hit a wall -- there is only so much debate to be had before the women in attendance reluctantly accept (or pretend to accept) the right for the husband to have his sexual needs fulfilled as Islamic command that cannot be avoided. It is precisely because it is painted as an Islamic command that the conversation cannot carry on: challenging Islamic understandings would be a grave transgression in a country built on religious Islamic nationalism. When Manar asks why this right is exclusive to men, she is met with a non-answer that essentially says, "because it is a sin for her to refuse him." We can imagine many ways in which this line of questioning is prolonged: why would it not be a sin if he refuses her? What if she also has sexual needs that she wants fulfilled? Why did God create men and women to be so different in their sexual needs in a way that may cause distress to the woman because she has to oblige every time? What is the purpose behind this design? But it was not. During these discussions, instructors would very often utter *subhanallah* ("Glory be to Allah," a phrase used to marvel in wonder at God's wisdom and abilities). I hear it as an oblique reminder of the authoritative nature of Islamic teachings, and that God knows best and has used his wisdom to design men and women in such a way for some kind of purpose, even if we do not understand it or it does not make sense to us.

Note how, in the vignettes outlined above, the languages of medicine and science are also utilized authoritatively in order to present this part of male physiology as a fact that must be reckoned with. Physiologically, it is unfair to refuse a man sex, because he can get

sick -- even though he spent most of his life, up until the point of marriage, supposedly not having any kind of sexual outlet, including masturbation, all of which is never brought up, let alone discussed. Apparently, men can easily alternate between and separate a sexual act from the rest of his daily activities because his brain is wired to do so, as he is able to compartmentalize different areas of his life.

In the anecdotes I provided above, whenever the discussion got too rowdy, the instructor would shut it down by either using the language of romantic love or rhetorically resort to provoke a shock reaction to her attendees in order to resolve the tension. The instructor, when saying things like “if he loves you, he won’t force you”, seems to seek to paint romantic love as some kind of force that can subvert the power relations within the relationship, to the point that a husband would even give up his rights under Islam. Using the rhetorical device of shock, the instructor tells the girls that he might go to someone else, that her refusal of his Islamic right might be the last interaction she might ever have with him, that he might fall sick; or as per the example about Um Sulayym, one of the earliest converts to Islam, that sacrificing one's own comfort in order to fulfill this Islamic right is an act of deep piety that we should all strive for.

The differences between men and women are not only explained and bolstered by Islamic and scientific language. Femininity is also presented as something that must be actively monitored, protected, and safeguarded. Here is another anecdote from another talk organized by Walaa given by a famous life coach and marriage counsellor in Saudi Arabia entitled "From Another Perspective."

> *She told us a story about a woman she knows whose father passed away when she was very young. Her mother did all the household chores, even those that required physical strength, and the daughter witnessed this. When the woman grew up and got married,*

she assumed this role as a wife, because it was what she saw and knew from her mother. She told her husband that she has no need for a housekeeper: she would do all the household chords and caretaking for their children. She let herself and her femininity go: "she would even go lift the gas canister by herself." As such, her testosterone increased, leading to a decrease of testosterone in her husband. He started taking more care in his appearance, especially when going out and socializing with his friends, like a woman would. But the couple were not happy because they went against their innate masculinity and femininity. "Don't practice a role that isn't yours." She continued to tell us about how our daily behaviors can influence our hormonal make-up, and cited a study that concluded that women in managerial positions have more testosterone than other women. "Smart women go home and change roles in order to reduce their testosterone, they pretend to need him. In Islam, Khadija was a rich businesswoman but she didn't extend this part of her personality into her marriage. She was feminine in her care when the prophet got the revelation. When a man doesn't know how to manage the household budget and ruins things, and you decide that it's better for you to take on that role, your testosterone increases and you become less attractive to him. Do it subtly, without him noticing." She also presented to us ways to safeguard our femininity by not raising our voices, taking extra care of our outward appearance, and beautify ourselves with manicures and spas. "Make yourself stupid, but with cleverness. Ask him to explain things, even if you know the answer."

Here, the instructor (who is not a medical expert) uses scientific and biomedical language to posit femininity as something that can be measured hormonally with levels of testosterone changing throughout the day and depending on the activity: if a woman has a managerial job which would increase her testosterone levels, she must actively manage that once she leaves work by playing up her feminine qualities, such as beautifying herself and asking her husband questions she already knows the answers to, in order to decrease her testosterone levels and maintain her femininity. The instructor also acknowledges that sometimes the wife might be better at planning the household budget, but she should not be explicit about her knowledge to do so or take over this task in an overt way, as it is supposed to be the husband's task. She advises instead to do this indirectly, perhaps with gentle suggestions, or with hidden labor that he is not aware of. In the story about the woman who mirrored her mother's actions in taking on all the household tasks without a

housekeeper, the femininity of the housekeeper she could have hired to do physically demanding tasks is not considered, as the housekeeper would most likely not be living with any partner in the house. It is also another reminder that for Saudi women who can afford it, having a housekeeper is useful (or maybe even essential) for realizing the ideal form of femininity required for the success of her marriage – not to mention her ideal image as a working woman who is exercising her new autonomy thanks to the state. The instructor posits that because of the woman's heightened testosterone levels, her husband's physiology also reacted in response by lowering his own testosterone levels, causing changes in his behavior in ways that are more "feminine" such as taking greater care of his appearance. Not discussed is why this dynamic caused unhappiness in that marriage, and exactly what negative consequences occurred because of these supposedly altered hormonal states in both the husband and the wife. The audience is left with the message that femininity needs to be carefully and actively monitored and managed in order to create and maintain the right kind of gender balance in the marital relationship. In a Muqbilat training I attended, one of the instructors covering the first day (the Islamic aspect) also told us that doing tasks meant for the husband will lower his testosterone, even causing his testicles to retract in extreme cases, and he might start looking for another wife to re-stimulate his male hormones.

Key message 3: You have rights – but sometimes you need to make concessions

In all of the events I attended at Walaa, especially the Muqbilat workshops, I observed a strange tension between two prescriptions: the instructors would encourage the women to become comfortable with making concessions in their marital lives (even if they were

important ones regarding their Islamic rights), but at the same time insist that a smart woman would not make concessions on important matters (sometimes even on the same matters). The second strand of this advice carried with it an assumption that if the woman strategically plays all her cards right given the information she receives in the training, she can get what she wants, that it is entirely possible and controllable — and that if she fails at that, she might be responsible for it. This tension/contradiction was never explicitly challenged by attendees, or if it was, the commentary would be dismissed. The line between what are reasonable and unreasonable concessions to make was always shifting and blurry. The word *tanazul* (making concessions) was often repeated throughout these sessions by the attendees as well as the instructors and was portrayed as an inevitable component of marriage.

First, I want to give the reader a brief overview of the Islamic guidelines regarding the rights and responsibilities of each spouse promoted by these institutions. The husband has the right to have obedience from his wife (the instructor offered us the following hadith: "Umm Salamah reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, 'Whoever among women dies while her husband is pleased with her, then she will enter Paradise.' Source: Sunan At-Tirmidhi 1078). He also has the right to discipline her. To make this sound less severe than it is, the instructor would say something along the lines of "the intention is not humiliation but to add order to the institution of marriage." Other times, she might invoke a verse from the Quran, for example the one about the husband's right to hitting his wife: "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah

would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand." (Qur'an 4:34). She explained that this male right should be only used in very specific circumstances when all other options have been exhausted, and should not be an open policy but only relevant to specific cases. She did not try to explain it from other perspectives, such as feminist readings of the Qur'an which debate the linguistic origins of the Arabic word "to strike" (*daraba)* and suggest that it should not be taken literally (Lamptey 2018, 80–81). The husband also has the right to forbid his wife from socializing with someone if he deems them a bad influence, and has *qawama* (guardianship) over her: in the words of one instructor, "it's like the husband has a job. He is responsible over the family to make their life easier." Moreover, he has the right to be asked for permission. The most prominent example was related to asking for permission before leaving the house. The instructor would sometimes advise the attendees to try to obtain an "open permission": as in, for him to waive her responsibility to ask him every time about certain things, like visiting her family. Other relevant examples that featured in the discussions around seeking permission were the wife's desire to work, pursue an education, or see her friends. Lastly, and most controversially, there is the husband's right to have his sexual needs fulfilled, which we have already discussed above.

By comparison, the list of rights for the wife is much shorter and a lot vaguer. Her concrete rights include receiving a dowry (*mahr*), to be housed (*sakana)*, and to be provided for financially (*nafaqa).* Regarding *nafaqa*, in some sessions I have attended, the instructor as well as the attendees stressed the Islamic right of the wife to demand the same

standard of living she had in her natal home from her husband (although this point is debatable in Islam and varies across different schools of interpretation, but those other perspectives were not discussed in the sessions). She also has the right to equal time and resources in case the husband is married to other wives. There are some other rights formulated in such a way that their meaning is uncertain, such as "the right not to be harmed" *al-muaashara bil maarouf* (to be treated kindly, but sometimes refers to sexual satisfaction).

Finally, there is also a list of "shared rights," although those can be quite vague as well. Among them is the right to share decisions regarding children, respect, mercy, respect for privacy, secret keeping, forgiveness and leniency, cooperation, and sexual pleasure.

Now that I have briefly summed up the Islamic rights for each spouse as they are presented in the Muqbilat course, I want to share some examples from my fieldwork that reveal how certain contradictions and tensions are generated when these abstract rights are spoken about in the context of everyday marital life.

> *Basma stood out to me right away. She was one the most outspoken attendees, not afraid to challenge some of the material, and had a sociable personality. She joked here and there about husbands and how annoying they can be and threw around rather cynical jokes about marriage. She also offered unsolicited advice about how to deal with men to those sitting next to her at various points, with a lot of confidence and humor, as if she had it all figured out. She had been married for six months. When the instructor asked what marriage meant to us, Basma's answer was different from the rest of the women, who mentioned things like "affection and love," "cooperation," "having children," "fulfillment of Islamic duties," or "stability." Basma, commanding her large presence in the room, firmly said: "*el zawaj idafa *[marriage is an addendum]." She was insistent that marriage is a "life project," not the end goal of all life itself. She said: "it is a project I intend to succeed in, but it is not the end of the world if it fails." She told us that she had shared these sentiments with her husband. She also said that marriage can be something that broadens one's horizons, contributes to character building, fosters independence (away from the natal family), and gives one skills in running a household and being an adult.*

Later on, Basma asked a question. She had noticed that all of her cousins were provided with a housekeeper for the home by the husband upon marriage. However, her husband did not want that, because he wanted to see her apply herself in the household (not because he could not afford it or was against the idea of hiring a domestic worker). Basma pointed out to us that it is actually her right, as Islam stipulates, that the husband reproduce the same standard of living that his wife enjoyed at her natal family's home before marriage (upon further research, I have learned that different Islamic schools differ on this issue, but in this context everyone agreed with Basma's chosen interpretation).

The instructor responded by advising her not to negotiate things that he is stubborn about and gave assurances that he would change his mind down the line. She did not elaborate on how or why this might happen. She then spoke about how at the start of love and marriage, there is adoration, or the feeling of having a crush. She said that in this stage, the priority should be fostering love between her and her husband: "your needs and rights can wait until a later stage." She gave the example of Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet who was married to Ali, whose economic circumstances were tough and her work with the hand mill was physically demanding on her body. She asked the Prophet to provide her with a servant, to which he replied to her "shall I tell you a thing which is better than what you asked me for? When you go to your beds, say: 'Allahu Akbar (i.e. Allah is Greater)' for 34 times, and 'Alhamdu Lillah (i.e. all the praises are for Allah)' for 33 times, and Subhan Allah (i.e. Glorified be Allah) for 33 times. This is better for you than what you have requested" (Hadith 4:344).

The trainer concluded that although it was Basma's Islamic right to ask her husband to reproduce the same standards of living she was used to in her family home, her rights should not be prioritized over love-building: "it takes time to build a home." She finished her answer by telling us this is why it is often easier to marry someone from a similar background with similar values and lifestyle, so that such decisions can be agreed upon more easily (quite an ironic and perhaps useless things to say, because the course is targeted towards women who have already chosen a partner). Basma nodded, seeming to accept this difficult but apt advice.

Towards the end of this discussion, the instructor said to all of us, "if you keep letting him get his way, eventually you'll get tired." She was trying to say that there should be a limit to how much we should concede, so that resentment doesn't build up. She then asked us to summarize what we think of marriage in one word, and some of the answers were quite shocking to me. A lot of them were to somewhat predictable, such as "appreciation," "love," ... but the extreme ones (to me) I thought, were "making concessions," (Basma said this, which surprised me given her outspoken demeanor before) "sacrifice," and "changing one's mind" (Muqbilat training, July 2, 2018).

Here are two scenes in which women discuss *nafaqa* or the husband's responsibility to spend on his family and the household, a year apart from each other:

On the third day of the training on the economic aspect, the trainer was a very animated woman in her early to mid-forties. She started by telling us that money problems were the second most common reason for divorce in the kingdom, which is why we would benefit from participating in planning the household budget. She began with an anecdote about a woman called Alya: Alya made a fuss about her husband mismanaging the finances, so he gave her control over the budget for a period of one month. "Alya went shopping for groceries, but on the way she stopped to get make-up and then spent way too much and panicked." In quite a patronizing way, the trainer asked us if Alya handled the budget correctly or not. We had a group exercise to see where she went wrong and what she could do better in the future, and how to manage money between family and personal expenses (Muqbilat training, July 4, 2018).

Since the training that day started late, the instructor didn't follow the syllabus too closely to save on time. She wanted to tell us what she thought were the most important things to keep in mind about marriage. First, she insisted that it was important for the wife to demand independent housing (as opposed to living with her in-laws). She warned us to be careful and not make concessions on our Islamic rights, which the husband is responsible to honor. And lastly, she told us to keep our money to ourselves, especially if we are employed: "keep your rights." This occurred on the first day of the training, on the Islamic aspect of marriage. On the third day when we covered the economic aspect, there was a different instructor, who made similar points. When she was explaining how to manage the monthly household expenses, she insisted on the importance of prioritizing the payment of important things like rent as soon as salaries are received: "as soon as the salary comes, one should pay rent right away. Go with him to the office, because some men take that money and spend it. But don't do it in a way that makes him feel you're taking over. Your usloob *[manner/style of speaking] matters." Most notably, the instructor advised us not to tell our husbands the truth about our salary: "don't tell your husband your salary. My husband still thinks my salary is 6000 riyals, from years ago. Don't tell him about promotions or salary increases. Why tell him? Then he'll start asking you for money." But in the very same session, she told us that although* nafaqa *is the responsibility of the man, "you make your own life easier when you also contribute, but don't let him depend on it. Don't let him know all of your salary, and don't put yourself in a situation where you spent money on something he should have paid for, and then you have to go through the embarrassment of asking him for that money back later, and he doesn't give it back." On the PowerPoint slide for her presentation one could read the following text: "Adam is a 27-year-old man and is employed. He gets 5000 Saudi Riyals a month and has a passion for getting the latest models of mobile phones, pleasing his family with gifts, consuming fast food, buying luxurious clothes, and looking for the latest deals/discounts on different products. Now Adam is 50 years old and he still lives in a rented apartment and has a problem with the bank as he owes them*

> *money, and his car is about to get taken away. Now, he makes 13,000 Saudi Riyals at his job." The instructor asked us how we would help Adam if he were our husband. I thought it was strange to assume that the wife would be willing to do that, after much talk about* nafaqa *and keeping your money to yourself. But the girls participated anyway and basically said they need to make a plan for him to pay off his debts* (Muqbilat training, July 15-17, 2019).

These vignettes capture the contradictions and paradoxes generated when discussing this key message. In Basma's story, we observe yet again how the discourse of romantic love is introduced in order to resolve a tension between the prescription to make concessions and that to hold on to one's rights fiercely. The woman in the latest anecdote, Alya, is presented as a wife who learned an important lesson about her role in the marriage. When she suspected that her husband was not managing the finances well, she challenged him that she could do a better job. However, she fails at it, spending most of the money on "make-up," reinforcing the idea that women are not good at calculations and make emotional and impulsive purchasing decisions (which the instructors discuss on the second day of the workshop, where men and women's differences were outlined). Yet another example I witnessed the following year revolved around the woman as having sometimes to do the work of pushing her husband to stick to his responsibilities in paying essentials like rent (even though during the same course cycle, the instructor also stated that one of the man's greatest emotional needs is "trust" in carrying out important affairs). The idea that Islam would safeguard each partner's rights starts to fall apart. For all the instructors' insistence on asking for an independent home away from in-laws, not spending on things the husband is supposed to spend on, avoiding tasks that should be the husband's (like the example of carrying the gas canister); the woman in all these examples is still expected to not only ensure that her husband sticks to his responsibilities ("go with him to the office, because

some men take that money and spend it"), but also to contribute to the household financially ("you make your own life easier when you contribute") if she wants a standard of living she is comfortable with (again, presented before as the responsibility of the husband). She is expected to help him financially or with her intellectual labor or money if he misuses his money (contrary to the previous claim that men are better at calculation), as evidenced by the example about Adam. The features of the wife's role (to be provided for) and the husband's (to provide), as well as their characteristics (the man good at calculations and rational) burst at the seams when translated into realistic examples or real-life problems that the attendees seek advice on. Even worse, attendees receive the advice given not to hold the man accountable for the things he is supposed to provide as per Islamic guidelines, but to to make some kind of compromise or even sacrifice: her Islamic right, her free time (to ensure he goes to pay the rent/helping him plan finances), or a part of her salary.

The notion of *tanazul* (conceding) was often brought up in other circumstances, independently from *nafaqa* or other Islamic rights, but in a manner that seemed to generate the same contradictions:

> *In the very first Muqbilat training I attended, the instructor shared a personal story with us about how she and her husband hadn't really discussed when to have children before marriage. She married him and they moved to America right away for his studies, and she was excited about this so that she can also continue her studies abroad. However, she met her first challenge when her husband wanted to have kids right away, and she wanted to prioritize her education. She opted to go with what he wanted. Someone asked "What about what you wanted?" and she said that it was her decision too, and that it is ok to compromise, change priorities, and concede to keep the harmony. The discussion ended there* (Muqbilat training, July 2, 2018).

By sharing her own personal story with the attendees, the instructor sought to convey to them that *tanazul* does not necessarily breed resentment or discontent but instead "keeps the harmony." The instructor's own timeline regarding childrearing, career, and education took a backseat to the husband's desires. In this way, she paints *tanazul* that should be practiced in general, unless it is an extreme situation (they had to draw the line somewhere). This is illustrated in the following anecdote.

> *The instructor told us the story of a young girl (in grade 10) who got married to a doctor. He had his eye on her specifically and did not want to wait until she was older. He had a scholarship to study abroad, and did not take her with him. They gave up their independent marital home in Saudi since he was away most of the time, which the instructor called "the first mistake." The girl lived with her natal family while he was gone. When he came back during vacations, they would stay in his natal family's home, or in his grandmother's extra home. "Tnazalat ktheer [she conceded so much]… this is al-tanazul al-shadeed or al-sukoot [conceding in an extreme way / staying silent instead of defending one's self]. Things went bad and he eventually dropped her off at her family home with not even a thank you. "It was wrong of him and her family, and she should not have made so many concessions." Later in the session, the instructor said "correcting mistakes is a duty. Don't let your frustrations build up until the straw breaks the camel's back. Don't make too many concessions and then explode. For example, if he talks to you disrespectfully or if he's rude to you in front of his family. Address these issues later when you are alone. If he says "inti ma tfhami shay! [you don't understand anything!]" in front of his family, next time he will call you 'stupid'". One of the attendees commented, "men value themselves more than women do… they stand up for themselves"* (Muqbilat training, July 15, 2019).

Enjoying independent housing was always discussed as a highly desired outcome of marriage. This was the woman's chance to live without her natal family, run her own household, decorate her home the way she likes, and share her space and life decisions with only one other person. We were continually advised to insist on having a housing unit independent from in-laws. Giving that up was framed as an extreme concession, as well as tolerating blatant disrespect in front of others. I see such advice as an attempt to draw some

kind of line as to when *tanazul* would become too much. It seemed reasonable, until I considered how these were the only examples where *tanazul* was considered too extreme. In previous stories and examples that had to do with the woman's time, rights, duties, and roles, *tanazul* was tolerated, expected, and even encouraged (at some point during this session, the instructor told us that *tanazul* should always be exercised because it is *"mahsoob"* [calculated], implying that anything we concede on will not be in vain, as the scales would rebalance themselves eventually between the husband and wife). The inequalities of housework, finances, childrearing, and emotional/intellectual labor, which so frequently sowed the seeds of unhappy marriages in Saudi Arabia, were presented as things where *tanazul* was acceptable, and only extreme examples of blatant disrespect were given of when *tanazul* was not appropriate.

I often left these workshops feeling overwhelmed and confused. The moving goalposts on when *tanazul* was acceptable, the boundaries between female and male characteristics, and the roles of each spouse generate contradictions and paradoxes arising out of a complex interaction of different governmentalities and different authoritative languages (science, romance, Islamic) that are not always easy to resolve. In the end, it became clear that these courses are not really helpful at all.

Governmentality

In this section, I want to elaborate more on an argument I introduced in the last chapter regarding neoliberal governmentality and the extension of market values into all aspects of life. I now want to suggest that the kind of rationality that permeates the Muqbilat courses also partakes of this governmentality. Following Dean, I understand rationality as “any

form of thinking which strives to be relatively, clear, systematic and explicit about aspects of 'external' or 'internal' existence, about how things are or how they ought to be" (Dean 2010, 18–19). This kind of rationality is bolstered by advanced liberal practices of rule that "set norms, standards, benchmarks, performance indicators, quality controls and best practice standards" to monitor and render calculable the impacts of its programs (Dean 2010, 193).

The spirit of rationality permeates the Muqbilat courses: in them, marriage overall is presented as a social relation that can be actively controlled, planned for, maintained, and troubleshooted, and with a variety of measurable short- and long-term end-goals that can be shared by both partners or individually. The courses also lay out clear-cut notions of "roles," "characteristics," and "needs." In in the previous chapter, I wrote of how the instructors in these courses can also preach a "take charge" attitude that advocate that happiness lies within one's own hands. Marriage in this context should also have "benchmarks" and "performance indicators" that seep into prescriptions to perform, safeguard, or maximize femininity (such as monitoring one's own testosterone level by carefully selecting which activities to engage in, and how much).

Two main types of discourses are used by the instructors in the Muqbilat course: the discourse of Islam and the discourse of pseudo-science and pop psychology. Institutions like Walaa seem to implicitly recognize that the clash of governmentalities has offered the Saudi people multiple resources by which to reflect on and conduct their intimate lives, whether that be Islam, self-help books from American authors, or debates on social media. They take advantage of this by re-inscribing patriarchal ideas about gender roles in different languages. If Islam is not convincing enough, then pseudo-science can do the

trick. And if those two fails, there is always the language of romantic love or the use of shock tactics as additional rhetorical strategies to resolve tensions during discussions or dismiss valid concerns. Positing themselves as institutional authorities, as these family development organizations present themselves as gatekeepers of knowledge on best marital practices, having done the work of sifting through a mountain of Islamic material, "scientific" academic research, and pop psychology sources in order to present a solution tailor-made for the Saudi problem of marriage.

What this mix of governmentalities ends up producing is ever-moving targets of what it means to have a successful marriage, visible in the paradoxes and contradictions that eventually pervade the course content: you have Islamic rights that you should insist on, but maybe you should not exercise them too much. The man is responsible for money and household matters, but maybe you need to step in, on top of your own duties. Men are like this and women are like that, and examples of ones who don't fit the mold are dismissed. You should be loving and praiseful even for the smallest thing, but also make sure not to suffocate him. Both the man and woman should enjoy sex, but don't be too eager about it.

With all these moving targets on how a wife should conduct herself, contradictions, and paradoxes, can we even say that these courses are helpful at all? Consider the following situation I encountered in fieldwork.

The instructor was telling us: "you cannot have two captains in a ship. What is more important, your marriage or being right? Be careful with your words and attitude. Use al-silah al-unthawi *[your feminine weapons]! Smart girls do this. If you're a smart girl, you'll get whatever you want using your feminine weapons." The attendees started murmuring excitedly, several of them desperately asking her "what are these feminine weapons?!" in a pressing manner. She laughed and said, "this needs a whole other course. But, just quickly: use a feminine voice, wear a nice scent, sweet talk him, things like that... This femininity*

has a place for your husband, not for Snapchat! Preserve this gentle part of yourself. Dua [supplication] *is also a powerful weapon. Sex is no doubt a weapon as well."*

In this example, the instructor presents "feminine weapons" as some kind of magical life-hack that can get your husband to do whatever you want, even though officially he is the "captain" of the ship. I can't speak for the other attendees, but I was quite disappointed by what these magical "feminine weapons" turned out to be, especially after that huge build-up of expectations around it that left the attendees practically begging the instructor to share her secret life-hacks. This anecdote speaks to the ultimate failure of applying "rationality" to a social relation as complex as marriage. If every woman in Saudi Arabia could use her "feminine weapons", and those were as easy as sweet talking and being cute, would there be a problem of marriage in Saudi Arabia?

I want to suggest that these courses are eventually not helpful because they have misdiagnosed the common problems that plague Saudi marriages: physical, mental, legal, or financial abuse; inequality in household and childcare labor; and inflexibility on men's part to reorganize gender roles in a way that is compatible with the new reality of Saudi women being ever more present in the workforce. I did not identify these problems out of nowhere, but through many conversations with individuals who shared their stories with me and meetings with marriage counsellors who told me about what themes come up most in their work. If it is so, what then would be the actual purpose of this course that does not even begin to tackle any of these very real problems?

The Saudi family, and the Saudi woman in particular, was always seen by the religious *ulama* as a vessel to reproduce national consciousness and religious purity. They also

regard her as a vulnerable site for "Westernization" or "corruption," and as such needs to be surveilled and managed (Al-Rasheed 2013, 93). I want to suggest that the institutions delivering Muqbilat courses are attempting to practice a type of governmentality that absorbs different resources from a variety of forms of governmentalities with the purpose of protecting the Saudi marriage and family from the "Westernization" and "corruption" of Islamic and family values that is so readily extended to the economy in creating markets, lifestyle options, and recreational activities that speak to an imaginary of a transformed and liberated Saudi Arabia, as discussed in Chapter 1.

In this respect, the Muqbilat courses may also remind us of a lesson from Foucault: talking about something does not necessarily liberate us from it, *au contraire* (Foucault 1978). In a deeply conservative country like Saudi Arabia, it may seem that having open conversations about intimacy, love, and sex in a government-sponsored institution is revolutionary. But is it actually the case? When we examine critically the discourses around marriage and ask who does the talking, to whom, and for what purpose, a different picture starts to emerge. Marital life is no longer a matter of the private sphere. It is not that adultery and sodomy are being punished by law. It is discourses on what a healthy marriage looks like, with the intent to form a particular kind of subject that is capable of governing herself, or in other words, a Saudi woman who is capable of participating in the world economy without challenging current patriarchal arrangements in her household. The Saudi woman is thus used as a symbol of progressive politics while being offered very little actual liberation in return.

In this chapter, I have highlighted how marriage preparation trainings in Saudi Arabia present marriage as a project that first requires the creation of a certain kind of mindset for

the individual, especially the woman, about to enter this social relation. These efforts include highlighting common incorrect preconceived ideas about marriage and seeking to reform these ideas. This is pursued by laying out a set of key learnings that the individual desirous to enter this relation must incorporate: that marriage is not relation of domination but of complementarity, that women are difficult in their overly complicated demands, that one is capable of cultivating a happy marriage by using certain resources, that marriage is not a fairy tale but rather requires the making of concessions, and that Islam protects women in marriages. By doing this, these courses do not challenge structures that reproduce inequalities in marriage, but rather individualize these problems in a manner that suggests that marriage is a project apt to be managed and controlled using a rational mentality, with every solution having a problem. The woman finds herself further confused and paralyzed by the moving targets of what the roles and responsibilities of each spouse are, what concessions should or should not be made, and what feminine and masculine qualities are, all of which go largely unquestioned. These trainings left me wondering about whether this course was actually helpful to people seeking marriage, or whether institutions like Walaa had any interest in actually ameliorating problems of inequality that breed grievances within marriages. I suggest that the family development institutions teaching these courses were not interested in any large-scale efforts to combat problems in marriages. Rather, they seek to reproduce dominant cultural narratives about men and women's different roles and responsibilities in marriage against a clash of governmentalities that threaten them. Their message was more about convincing individuals to stick to this existing cultural framework rather than reform or overthrow it, and that failed marriages occurred when one did not do so. Of course, they also do

challenge important parts of this dominant cultural framework (which tells woman *tahamali, usburi, tnazali* [tolerate, be patient, make concessions]), but only in very superficial ways such as when it comes to blatant disrespect. However, they are not challenged when it comes to women face hidden forms of abuse or inequalities in their marital lives, such as in childrearing, career, education, financial management, or even Islamic rights.

CHAPTER 4

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: INDIVIDUAL EXPERIMENTS IN INTIMACY

Early in my fieldwork, I visited a woman that I met through one of the Muqbilat workshops, who said she would be interested in telling me her life story. When I got to her apartment, the focus somehow turned on me: why didn't I live in Saudi? Why does my accent sound mixed? Was my family okay with me living in Beirut by myself? Why am I not wearing a *niqab?* I found myself answering all these questions thoroughly and honestly. But when it came time to ask about her life, the conversation was dry – she seemed uninterested in telling me any details. She gave superficial answers to my questions, and I did not push, because I was afraid I would make her uncomfortable. We stayed in the realm of small talk. When I was getting ready to leave after a couple of hours, I was surprised to hear her say "that's it? I thought you were going to ask me much more personal stuff!" This was the most dreaded part of fieldwork for me – the awkwardness of me entering a stranger's house in Saudi Arabia and asking her about her private life, even if she was open to talking about it. I felt like an intrusive stranger that was just about ready to become an armchair anthropologist. Eventually, I learned how to ask my interlocutors more engaging questions and guide such conversations in a more productive manner, and I even made a few friends along the way. This was the most rewarding part of my fieldwork: the opportunity to center living people, rather than only institutions, in my ethnography. I'm

very glad I broke this awkwardness barrier because it allowed me to write a chapter like this one, which offers us an up close and personal look at individual experiments in intimacy and the question "how should I conduct myself?"

In previous chapters, I have discussed how family development institutes such as Walaa are attempting to do the work of promoting and preserving the Saudi heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family unit in the face of new anxieties that the Saudi marriage is in crisis. They do this by attempting to find a balance amidst the clash of different governmentalities, and use the different languages of Islam, pseudo-science, and pop psychology to prescribe best practices for marriage. These attempts, I argue, do not really diagnose the problems correctly. In my conversations with matchmakers, marriage counselors, and individual interlocutors revealed that most women worry about potential financial, emotional, or physical abuse when thinking about seeking marriage, as well as labor inequalities when it comes to housework and childcare. So why do family development institutions not address these worries instead of side-stepping them, pretending that they can be resolved with romantic love, or avoiding it by saying "women have become too independent"? In this chapter, we will have a closer look at some of the actual problems that are widespread in Saudi marriages through the stories of a few interlocutors, and how these individuals used what I call the clash of governmentalities (which provide Islamic resources and guidelines by which to conduct one's life, but also include an invitation to become a new kind of Saudi citizen - the perfect neoliberal subject) to come up with new solutions or coping mechanisms.

I want to introduce another analytical framework besides governmentality that will be useful in thinking about some of the stories I will be sharing below. In her book *The*

Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli theorizes that liberalism posits a false dichotomy between individual freedom and social constraint when it comes to practices of intimacy. She uses the term "autological subject" to describe a subject who is born out of discourses and practices emphasizing a fantasy of self-making and freedom. By contrast, she uses the term "genealogical society" to refer to factors of social determination that constrain the autological subject, such as culture, religion, race, tribe, or other factors that make up what she calls the subject's "social skin." She reminds us that these terms shape-shift quite a bit in themselves and in different contexts, but the dichotomy is always maintained. Her main argument challenges liberalism's notion that true love requires the shedding of the "social skin," that it works against the social (which is seen as a hinderance to the true self). Liberalism privileges this form of love as ethically superior and a path towards equality that does away with differences of the "social skin," allowing the two lovers to develop their own individual contract of freedom. She calls this type of love "the intimate event" and defines it as "love at the intersection/crisis of the genealogical society and autological subject." In other words, the purest and morally superior type of love is the kind of love where lovers abandon their social constraints for the sake of love itself. But in reality, "the autological subject" and the "genealogical society" are not always polar opposites. A lot of people want to be with someone who can satisfy both things; running off with a lover to live completely secluded from a hostile society that will reject your love isn't always the most appealing idea for people who look to marriage and love as a means to expand their social world by merging two social networks together. The decision about who to marry and love is also about seeking to organize life in a way that is capable of capturing public

resources and legal rights. And for all the insistence on the fantasy of freeing the self from the genealogical society, liberal states cannot escape the constraints of things like citizenship, which is also a socially determining factor born out of the modern nation state. The fantasy of the intimate event, Povinelli argues, is elevated so much that it construes other types of intimacy born out of polygamy, arranged marriages, or endogamy as savage passions and nightmares of the unfree. In other words, the intimate event is such a powerful imaginary only because it is juxtaposed against ideas of illiberal, tribal, and ancestral intimacies. Povinelli traces the dichotomy of the autological subject/genealogical society back to European enlightenment and a colonial history that created a discursive "dialectic of occidental freedom and oriental bondage" (Povinelli 2006, 175–236).

In this chapter, we are going to explore some of the creative, flexible, and resourceful ways that some individuals used to navigate their intimate lives – away from the guidance of family development institutions discussed in the previous chapter. These are individual experiments to the question "how should I conduct myself?" that harness different combinations of the symbolic and material resources that the clash of governmentalities offers them. I will also explore how the shift to a governmentality of authoritarian neoliberalism has opened up questions around what intimacy really means, as different meanings of choice, autonomy, and freedom start to shapeshift due to the clash of governmentalities.

The story of Hanan: "I felt indirect pressure from my family, and so I pressured myself"

I met Hanan online after I had made a post about my research project stating my desire to meet interlocutors willing to share their life story with me. The post did not get some traction, and in fact, many mistook me for a professional matchmaker or *khattaba.* I started to think that maybe this recruitment strategy was not going to work, until Hanan sent me a private message simply saying, "I am ready to talk." We then had a few phone calls where I told her more about the project, and we started meeting at a coffee shop in a mall close to her house. She is a 33-year-old woman who has two children, who she brought along with her to all of our meetings. When I met her, I was surprised to see that she did not cover her face, which is more common than not in Saudi Arabia (at least in the Eastern Province). When she saw that I didn't do that either she was immediately more relaxed. When I asked her why she responded to the call for interlocutors, she told me "I really needed to talk to someone… someone who was a stranger."

Hanan told me how she was raised in a wealthy home as a result of her father's successful trading in gold and real estate: growing up, she lived in a huge two-story house, had two housekeepers, and a father who provided each of his sons with a car and a house upon their marriages. She describes her parent's marriage as "not exactly lovey-dovey, but full of respect." She told me that she was surrounded by positive examples of marriage throughout her lifetime, not only from her parents but her older brothers also who were all good providers to their wives and present fathers to their children. In her childhood, everyone participated in chores like cooking and cleaning, even her brothers and father, and they never expected her or her sisters to give them special treatment in this regard. Before getting married, Hanan obtained her bachelor's in Special Education from a prestigious

university in the capital, Riyadh. She thought about obtaining a master's degree but missed her family in the Eastern Province too much and decided to go home.

Hanan told me that she was 19 years old when a suitor first asked for her hand in marriage from her family. It was a very brief engagement period which did not even result in a marriage contract; there was no emotional attachment and so when it fell apart, it did not affect her too much. Nevertheless, she told me about how her sisters were so upset that it fell through and started crying and hugging her.

Ten years passed before another suiter would ask for Hanan's hand. But when she was 29, a friend of her cousin's husband, Saqr, approached her family for marriage. When Hanan's cousin's husband learned that Saqr was seeking marriage, he had recommended Hanan as a suitable potential wife to him, citing her "good morals." This time, her family was so anxious about getting her married, fearing that another suitor would never come because of her age. They forbade the future couple from even talking on the phone and getting to know each other until they performed a ceremony to sign the Islamic marriage contract or *milka*. Saudis usually use this term interchangeably with *khutba*, which means "engagement." Many Saudi families only allow the couple to engage with each other and spend time together after they have performed a *milka*, to ensure that the couple's interactions are completely *halal*. The period after the *milka* is when the couple can get to know each other, usually not setting a date for the wedding right away or scheduling it months or even a year in advance. It is highly discouraged to have sexual relations before the wedding date, even though it is technically Islamically permissible, because of the high emphasis on female virginity on *lailat el dakhla* or the first night the couple consummate

their marriage. In this way, the *milka* acts as a *halal* engagement/dating period, and the discouragement of consummating the marriage acts as a contingency plan in case the couple decide to break up.

Hanan relayed to me that even though her brothers had told her that they had asked around about Saqr's character in their social circles and reassured her that he was a suitable match, she now suspects that they had not in fact done so because they and her parents were anxious to get her married off as soon as possible. Very quickly after the *milka*, she learned things that made her uncomfortable about her future husband: even though her family told Saqr he could pay whatever he wanted for the *mahr* (a dower that a man is Islamically required to give to his future wife, in the form of money or possessions, which can be paid in installments), he could not even manage to gather 30,000 riyals (approximately $8000), which she thought was a reasonable minimum amount. He was a high school-educated salesman in a retail shop and had absolutely no savings to start marital life. He said the reason for that was because he financially supports his divorced mother and his sister in place of his father who did not contribute anything to them. After marriage, Hanan discovered this wasn't the case at all, and in fact, his mother who owned quite a bit of property was the one supporting Saqr and his sister.

Hanan told me she liked Saqr at first because he "always used to talk about reading novels and religious books," and she liked to read books as well. "It was clear that he studied my personality well and was putting on a personality to impress me. I admit I fell for it. After marriage, I discovered that he doesn't even crack open the Quran!" Saqr's excuse is that he doesn't have time. She admits that his hours at work are long, but when he

comes back home from work, he would only be on his phone playing games "like a child." Then she discovered he doesn't even pray - which she is not okay with; even though she admits to not being too religious herself, she believes that praying five times a day is important because it "organizes one's life."

When I asked her why she still continued to pursue the marriage in the face of all these doubts, Hanan told me that she felt embarrassed and afraid to upset her family once again with a failed prospect of marriage, especially given their dramatic reaction when her previous engagement fell through. She also was afraid of the label *aanis* (spinster) and being perceived as a reject or an undesirable person by her family. "I started getting anxious about getting too old to attract any suitors, even though I never really had this insecurity. It was created in me because of my family, the people around me. With regret, I think about how happy I would have been now if I had followed my instincts and said no to my current husband. My advice to girls is don't agree to any potential match unless you're convinced by it 200%, even for the smallest reason, because the smallest things can become really big things later on."

Life after marriage didn't get any easier for Hanan. Within her first year of marriage, both of her parents passed away. Her father's death was a result of a sudden illness, but her mother had been gravely ill for some time. She told me how their deaths, especially her mother's whom she was very close to, plunged her into a deep grief that she felt her husband was not sensitive around. "He didn't take this thing into account. He pretended to be supportive, but he wasn't. He was fussing about the smallest thing. He wanted his rights, he wanted to exercise his masculinity over me, without any meaning…" I

inferred from his conversation that by his "rights" she meant that he expected her to still cater to his sexual needs.

Hanan also got pregnant very soon after the wedding and worked long hours for low pay with a human resources agency, even after the birth of her first child. Meanwhile, Saqr was not able to maintain a steady job as a retail salesman as his temper would cause him to quit as a result of any workplace conflict and spent whatever money he had on "meaningless things." She admitted that when he did have money, he would not be stingy about it, but his financial mismanagement often meant that he spent most of his money on weekend trips to Bahrain with his friends or on ordering food, as he did not like home cooked food. She told me that the house was not well equipped: sometimes they didn't even have money to get diapers for the baby, they lacked essential furniture, and the apartment was full of plumbing and lighting issues that went unfixed for a long time. It was hard to discuss these issues with him, he would angrily dismiss her and saying that he would work on the house, but never did. Upon her father's death, she had quite a bit of land in her name as inheritance, which was managed by her brothers who also worked with her father in the real estate business. Because they were hesitant to sell this land due to low market prices at the time, she could only rely on her meager salary to cover the expenses. She told me she felt abandoned by her brothers, who were leading comfortable financial lives with their own families; and was doubtful of how much they were actually willing to support her. She also felt that Saqr took her for granted financially – he did not worry about a long-term solution regarding finances because he knew his wife was able to cover the essentials, even if barely so.

After two years of marriage, things got so hard that Hanan decided to separate from Saqr and move out of her marital home, when her son was a year and a half old. The separation lasted around one year. She stayed with one of her brothers who had a little studio apartment attached to his main house, where he lived with his wife and children (it is common for Saudi homes to have a structure separate from the main house called a *mulhag*, resembling a studio apartment, usually for male members of the family to socialize with their friends so as not to subject the women in the house to the gaze of male strangers). Because the purpose of a *mulhag* is to host social gatherings, the kitchen and bathrooms in them are not usually fully equipped for full-time living (for example, lack of a shower or a fridge/stove). Despite her brothers not having a good relationship with Saqr themselves and being aware of all the marital troubles she'd been through, Hanan felt abandoned by her brother who could've provided a much better situation for her and her son, given his comfortable financial status. She told me that her brother also pressured her to stay at her stressful job even though her son was suffering from some health issues, implying that he did not want to spend any money on her.

The separation period was difficult in other ways as well. Her social life was also affected – she told me how acquaintances were suddenly hesitant to invite her to social gatherings at their homes: "between me and you, some of my acquaintances didn't want me to enter their houses. They're afraid I would start a relationship with their husbands, or that I was now a threat. They didn't want their husbands seeing me as I entered and left their houses." Some of her colleagues were critical towards her decision to separate from her husband, bitterly telling her that she should've "stuck it out" despite not knowing many

details about her marital troubles. She also noticed an immediate relief and relaxation of tension from their side once she informed them that she had moved back into her marital home, and she was once again invited to social gatherings like before. Her close friends had some idea about her marital problems – she was very vocal about wanting to get a divorce – but they did not know the details. When I asked her why she was reserved with them, she told me that her friends who had marital problems usually had it much worse: their husbands would have problems with substance abuse or be blatant about their infidelity and affairs with other women. "My friends who ended up getting a divorce, their ex-husbands had much bigger, more straightforward problems. They were improper. When I talked to my friends about my husband's issues, they would tell me 'his flaws are fixable.' But I don't feel obligated to fix them. When I first got married, they would tell me that their husbands had the same flaws, that they became better and fixed themselves with time. But this is old people's talk. I don't want to grow up with high blood pressure and diabetes. I had diabetes while pregnant, because of how bad I felt. I don't want diseases. My hair greyed. I never had that before."

When Saqr eventually came around to apologizing and trying to win Hanan back, she accepted giving him another chance, despite his still not having a financial plan: "I wanted to see what he would do now that I wasn't employed, maybe he would get his act together," she told me. She told me that Saqr did apply for state welfare assistance which granted him 900 riyals monthly (around $240), got short-term jobs, and borrowed money frequently from his friends; and Hanan's brothers assisted her with a monthly stipend of 1000 riyals to cover her essential expenses (around $265). But Saqr still couldn't keep a job

for more than a few months due to his temper, which was frustrating to Hanan: “he'd tell me, I'm going to apply to this job that has an amazing good salary and I’m sure they will hire me… but he’s not even doing anything. Why doesn’t he apply? Why doesn’t he have a CV? When the application deadline passes, he’s just like 'oh, it passed.’" She was even more frustrated and embarrassed because she felt that her family environment was full of *tabahi* (boasting/self-importance). "The woman is not socially accepted unless she has a husband and always talks about him and his accomplishments." When I asked how her and Saqr were paying rent for their apartment, she told me that they had managed to pay a big installment of the rent a few months in advance back when her husband was still employed, but they only had about 5 months left before they had to pay another installment, with no idea of how they would be able to get this money.

Once Hanan moved back into her marital home, not much had changed financially, but he responded to her requests to be a more present father. "To be fair to him, he started to try a little bit… sometimes. He always used to be playing games on his phone, while the kids were running around. He started to strengthen his relationship with his son. He loves his children, but he doesn’t connect with them often. So now, every 2-3 days he plays with them for 15-30 minutes.” He also changed his disposition towards her to a sweeter one, especially when he felt like she was at the end of her rope. “He’s not too proud to admit when he’s made a mistake or say sorry. But he would repeat the mistake even after a few hours!”

In the meantime, Hanan is coping in the best ways she knows. She takes advantage of the fact that her husband offers her a great deal of autonomy: he doesn’t restrict her

movements, doesn't mind if she spends a lot of time with her friends or stays out late, allows her to travel if she can, and doesn't mind that she chooses to forgo the niqab. She also doesn't restrict his movements or discourage him from spending time with his friends, as she's more comfortable when he's not home. Although she has found some questionable texts from other women on his phone and suspects that he flirts with other women and drinks alcohol with his friends, she told me that she doesn't mind at all because she doesn't love him or care for him. On a day to day basis, she tries to conserve her emotional energy by avoiding altercations: "at home, I act. I perform. He gets angry too quickly, it's hard to have a discussion with him. He's like an idiotic dictator… there can be no discussion. So, I just let things go." Food is another coping strategy: "my sedative is food. My weight before was 47 kilograms, now its 70. I don't like to go to social occasions because everyone asks why my looks changed so much. I'm just existing… I am letting the currents of life bring me and take me… I don't discuss. I let him do what he wants."

When Hanan and I spoke of her plans moving forward, she told me that she is doing everything she can to gain new employment so that she can save up some money to end this marriage and live independently with her children. With time, it also seemed like her brothers had a change of heart and were more supportive in helping her find her own suitable housing and getting a divorce, "probably because they heard some bad gossip about my husband." She hopes to one day get the money from the lands she has inherited, and plans to buy an apartment building complex where she can gain a steady stream of income by renting out units, or buying an apartment for herself to settle in. She does not want to marry again and told me that a love story was never really part of her life

aspirations even as a young girl. She had dreamt instead of an intellectually stimulating husband who would "increase her social status" and provide for her materially, insisting that "there is no shame in that." But she describes Saqr as being in love with her, "in his own way." He sometimes asks her to tell him that she loves him: "but I can't even say it. I stay quiet. He knows I don't love him. But he pressures me to stay with him."

Ending Hanan's marriage would not be easy, however, especially when it comes to co-parenting. Whenever she brought up the issue of divorce to Saqr or her brothers, they insist that she should not maintain contact with him afterwards even for co-parenting. "Because Saqr's mentality is very 'Saudi,' he thinks that divorced people should hate each other. But just because we didn't work out as a couple doesn't mean I hate him. I actually don't hate him, just his behaviors. I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that when I divorce him our interactions would be civil. But my brothers are not ok with that, no one in my family has ever gotten a divorce before. They're afraid of *kalam el nas* (gossip and judgment from wider society). But he's the father of my children… it should be normal! Everyone tells me to be patient and stay put, but I'm ignoring this advice. We only live once, it's not right that I'm sitting at home feeling so suffocated all the time."

Almost every interlocutor I spoke to during my fieldwork had experienced some kind of pressure from their family to marry. I chose to highlight Hanan's story in this section because it represents an extreme case in that she faced pressure not only to marry, but also to stay married despite an increasingly miserable situation; and not only from her family, but also from her acquaintances, and sometimes even herself.

Arranged marriages in Saudi usually put a high emphasis on some combination of elements of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the "social skin" (Povinelli 2006, 175): class, tribe, age, lifestyle, education level, religiosity level, and reputation. Until very recently, the institution of the "chance" encounter at the heart of romantic love that strips people from their social skin was not really possible – although there was still an expectation that romantic love should be cultivated for a successful marriage, even if arranged. But in Hanan's case, her nuclear family viewed her age (29) as a ticking time bomb, so much so that they were willing to disregard all these other elements that usually play a role in the decision-making process. Despite their wealthy status and home culture of treating their sons and daughters somewhat equally growing up, their anxieties about her age produced enormous pressure on her to accept a marriage that she felt uncomfortable with from the very beginning. This manifested in several ways before and during the engagement period: dramatically mourning the withdrawal of Hanan's first fiancé's request for her hand, forgoing asking about Saqr's reputation (or maybe ignoring whatever negative things they've heard), disallowing her from getting to know him outside of the context of an Islamic marriage contract (even though this is no longer considered a universal taboo in Saudi Arabia), accepting a very low *mahr* from Saqr and his family (according to Hanan's social class), and disregarding his obvious inability to financially provide for her, knowing that she would have the means to do so.

Even when Hanan's marriage proved to be a miserable one to the point that even her family deeply disliked him, her brothers continued to exert pressure on her to stay married by refusing to sell the land she inherited from her late father, failing to provide her

with a comfortable living situation during her separation from Saqr as well as discouraging her from quitting her demanding job even while her son was struggling with health issues, offering her limited monthly financial support to support herself and her children, and showing their disapproval at her wish to get a divorce and still co-parent with Saqr because of the gossip that could ensue from extended family and neighbors.

When it came to her colleagues, acquaintances, and friends, Hanan noticed an immediate difference in the way she was treated when she separated from Saqr for a period of one year – suddenly outcasted, deemed as a threat to marriages and a potential homewrecker, even though she was still legally married. Her suspicions were confirmed when, upon moving back into her marital home, she was welcomed back into the homes of the same people who had shunned her. In this way, her female acquaintances and colleagues acted as agents of the patriarchy who push women to "tolerate" and "be patient with" the husband, no matter what the circumstance; for being married is better than being divorced.

Hanan also exerted pressure on herself after internalizing her family's worries that she would end up a "spinster" – censoring herself during the engagement process and suppressing her discomfort. The self-censorship continued around her friends, who felt that her husband's flaws were typical and would be organically fixed with time. Hanan felt that her misery was downplayed because of the ordinariness, as opposed to problems of a more sensationalist kind like substance abuse and rampant extramarital affairs.

Hanan's story revealed to me even more the shortcomings of the family development institutions' courses and their shallow diagnosis of Saudi marital problems, not to mention what should be done about them. Neither Islamic rights of housing and provision, her husband's declarations of romantic love, nor performing the "feminine weapons" protected Hanan from a miserable marriage filled with labor inequalities, communication breakdowns, and even instances of sexual coercion. The Muqbilat courses do not equip women for what to do in such a situation and tend to dismiss their concerns over this possibility of sexual coercion with vague notions that romantic love can protect against such things, or that a husband wouldn't usually abuse his power in this area. These courses draw upon the idea that romantic love can be a great equalizer, a container where two lovers can shed their social skin and create a more democratic arrangement between them. But as Povinelli reminds us, this notion that socially unrooted romantic love is an ethical self-making project is but a "phantom of liberalism" (Povinelli 2006, 181). What is potent about this phantom is not the actual "intimate event" itself, but the powerful idea it carries that liberalism is exceptional and different from the savage other. In the era of authoritarian neoliberal governmentality in Saudi Arabia, it makes sense why the discourse of romantic love is used in family development institutions as some sort of "life-hack" for the patriarchy. However, Hanan was one of the very few interlocutors I spoke to who were not seduced by the promise of freedom via the intimate event. Her vision of emancipation in the future did not even include marriage at all, nor did she ever desire a love story in her life anyway, even in her younger years. Like I explained before, the clash of governmentalities opened up possibilities to conduct one's life differently and offer different symbolic resources on which to draw. In Hanan's case, she chose to draw upon

new possibilities that a Saudi divorced woman can perhaps be the head of her own household, live without male kin, and run her own affairs independently; but not the discourse of romantic love.

The courses also do not advise on what to do if the husband is in fact not doing even his basic duties of provision and how to hold him accountable to that, or what to do in case a divorce is needed. What she said reminded me again of how out of touch the courses at family development institutions like Walaa are, and how they seem to push the same message of the need to be tolerant and patient until the husband reaches full maturity – downplaying the emotional and even physical toll this can take, like in Hanan's case when she suffered from pregnancy diabetes and high blood pressure due to her marital stress.

The story of Yara: A Crisis of Masculinity and Gender Roles

I became friends with Yara a couple of years ago when I met her at a musical event in the Eastern Province. When I told her about my project, she was very eager to participate. Yara told me that she married her husband, Rakan, when she was 19 and he was 24 years old. They both come from middle class backgrounds, are college-educated, and have demanding but financially comfortable jobs in the healthcare sector. They have one son, which they conceived quite late in the marriage, after a years-long grueling battle with fertility problems that required medical intervention. Several times during this process, Yara wanted to give up on having a biological child altogether, but Rakan really wanted them to conceive. Eventually, when Yara was 30 years old, they had a son, who is now 3.

Yara told me that the way she got married was not romantic. “It was an arranged marriage and I wanted to get out of my parent’s house. Rakan studied in the states, I thought his family seemed a bit liberal… it was an escape route more than anything else.” I asked her if love ever grew in their relationship, and she told me that she doesn’t think one needs romantic love to sustain a marriage. “It can be based on mutual respect or understanding, companionship rather than romance… not like sweep me off my feet and butterflies, but more like ‘I respect your values and you respect mine.’ But I do believe we as humans have an innate need for romantic love.” I was confused at this point, and asked her, “so where is the romantic love in your life if not in your marriage?” She replied, “you want the truth? In other people. I don’t think it’s right, but I do allow myself to fall in love with people all the time. Not necessarily acting on it, but just to get a kick. Crushes, flirtations, things like that… but at the same time you have that person at home you’re building a life with, you get the best of both worlds. If my husband cheated on me, I would be upset about it but a part of me would completely understand. Even if you have a love-based marriage rather than an arranged marriage, cheating can happen. Love is not guaranteed to always be there.” I asked her if she was happy, and she said no. “If I were to repeat this experience, I would choose someone I love.”

Before having their son, Yara told me that there was a little bit of tension between Rakan and her about how to divide household chores. She admitted that she really does not enjoy cleaning, but she enjoyed cooking and tidying up the space. They had a housekeeper who would visit the house a few times a week to clean it, although according to her, Rakan

felt that this was an unnecessary expense, even though he did not contribute to the upkeep of the home despite both of them working the same number of hours.

After having their son, the unequal division of labor regarding household chores started to become more prominent and bothersome to Yara, as new responsibilities relating to childcare entered the picture. After her maternity leave, Yara continued to work the same number of hours, although her work allowed her to leave one hour early as she was entitled to "breastfeeding leave." But because her job is demanding, she couldn't always take advantage of this hour, and sometimes had to stay behind at work for extra hours in the evening. Although Rakan's job was also demanding and required the same of him from time to time, she told me that he had an issue with Yara working beyond her official working hours. Yara had a great support network to help her care for her son, including her in-laws and relatives she's close to, who would watch over the baby when needed, or support her in dropping and picking up her son from the nursery during Yara's working hours. But she told me that her husband was not happy with Yara soliciting this support and expected her to do most of the childcare herself. Yara tells me, "I don't think it's a big deal, and sometimes I really have to stay late in the hospital. I don't worry when I ask someone else to pick him up or feel guilty about it. But I worry about the headache my husband will give me about it. The people I request support from are our close relatives, like the baby's aunt. They're trustworthy people." Yara thinks that the person who has more free time on any given day should take care of the baby after work hours, or take him to doctor appointments. "When my son is sick for example, and I have a long day at work and my

husband doesn't, he should take him to the doctor, no? Its only logical. But when I stay late at work, he thinks that I am not prioritizing my family enough."

Yara relayed to me how she was always the one who prepared the baby's bag to take to the nursery, prepares his food, showers him, and feeds him. She described to me how she had a whole schedule and routine around the baby that she felt that Rakan wasn't really aware of or invested in. Housework continued to fall mostly on her shoulders: sometimes he would help her with tasks, but only begrudgingly so and after some negotiation. "If he helps, he does it with a lot of grunting, and then he makes it seem like he's doing me a favor. Even him watching the baby… he's his dad! And he is a human reminder that we need to do the laundry! But he's starting to help me with that, and with showering the baby sometimes."

Yara told me that what frustrated her about this arrangement is that Rakan expects her to do housework "from a place of love" even though he knows that she doesn't like doing it and is busy with the baby. "He thinks I should be happy to do it. I get the thought, but no! I would get a butler if I could afford it, or take-out every single night! It doesn't bother me. Even when we had a helper, he would fuss about little things and wouldn't talk to her directly but instead tell me to talk to her. He tells me, 'you're the mother, you're the wife, you're the house manager.'" She also told me how she gets annoyed that he contributes very little to chores despite being the one who is picky about small things: "why do I need to be the one? I'm not bothered by these things. For instance, I walk into the house and there's a sock on the floor. I will not see the sock. He walks in, he sees the sock. Logically, the person who sees the sock should remove the sock from the floor! For him it's

like ‘I saw the sock on the floor, how did you not see the sock on the floor, remove the sock on the floor!’ It pisses me off because he’s so good at detecting these things, so why doesn’t he do it! But he says he's too tired from work. Which is ironic for me because, I come home from work and I’m doing all these things with the baby, it’s like another job, I go to his parents’ house so they can see the baby and socialize with them… I have to speak with my mom and my brothers on the phone… there’s a lot of emotional labor. And he’s too tired to pick up the sock? I’m up all night with the baby by the way. I operate on 4 hours of sleep, maximum.”

Yara told me that when she tries to talk to her husband about having a more equal partnership, he cites a mixture of Islamic ideas and essentialist notions about each gender’s capabilities and responsibilities. “He would say things like ‘God created us like this.’ There was one conversation we had recently, I was going to lose my mind. He cited religion while holding a bottle of beer in his hand. He was telling me, 'I’m not saying anything but just so you know, the Prophet said that if women should prostrate to anyone else besides Allah, she should do it to her husband. Inside I was screaming, but my reaction on the outside was dismissive, like, whatever…” In fact, controlling her emotions in this calm manner was something she frequently exercised around her husband. “I’m good at *mujamala*,” she tells me. *Mujamala* is a bit of a difficult word to translate: in context, it means the art of conversing with courtesy or sweetness in a difficult or awkward circumstance, in a way that can appease the other person and diffuse the tension (for example, being extra sweet to a police officer to get out of getting a speeding ticket; or being a charming conversationalist in extended family events). “He doesn’t like it though; he thinks I do *mujamala* too much.

But I feel like he puts me in a situation where I have to do that. He complains that I am not genuine, or that I have a hidden agenda."

Another area of trouble for Yara and Rakan is the managing of finances. Although both of their salaries are comfortable, he earns a significant amount more than her, having more years in work experience in the healthcare sector. At the beginning of the marriage, Yara told me how Rakan insisted that, as per Islamic guidelines and what he observed in his own family growing up, Yara's money should be hers only; and that he would take care of the household and childcare finances. He also gave her an "allowance" every month, even though she had her own salary. She relayed to me how when she saw that he was anxious about finances, paying loans, and forgoing things like vacations, she tried to convince him that she wanted to contribute more to expenses in order to "elevate their lifestyle," he refused. I asked her if her desire to contribute to expenses was also conflated with the desire to have more of a say in household and chores management. "It wasn't like that in the beginning. It was more about, going on a vacation, or buying nice things for the house, it was practical. It never crossed my mind that contribution equals a bigger say. But since I started contributing, I'm wondering why I don't have a bigger say…"

The financial troubles started, she told me, when Rakan stopped giving Yara her monthly allowance because of circumstantial financial constraints. Although he initially refused, she eventually started to take care of the groceries, home renovations, and paying for half of any vacation expenses. She told me how she also started to lend him money, practically on a monthly basis, to pay their son's nursery bills, salaries of the housekeeper and driver, and electricity and water bills. He would immediately pay her back when he

received his salary. It became clear to Yara that Rakan wanted to feel like he was the sole contributor to the household expenses, but wasn't able to do so, so she lends him money every month and he pays her back immediately in a circular manner.

Yara told me that her and Rakan never really formalized this agreement, and it was spoken of as if it was on a case-by-case basis, but it became the de facto standing arrangement for the past two years. "This is why it bothers me that he puts my job as secondary when in reality, every month, I do contribute. He's grateful for it, but he doesn't like it, and will never admit that I'm contributing. It never became a policy. We'll just pretend this isn't happening!" When I asked if she's ever tried to have a conversation with him about clearly delineating who should pay for what, he dismisses the conversation. "His ego can't handle that conversation. I actually don't know exactly how much I'm contributing, because it's not really broken down."

Still, Yara can somewhat sympathize with her husband. "He's still trying to navigate the old mindset versus the new one. Women are raised to be more independent, and men are still raised the same way without accommodating for social changes. There is a disconnect between men and women…you're dealing with someone who has seen his mom be there for her kids every waking moment, be submissive in the relationship, be less of a voice and more of a presence. The stress is on both sides. It is stressful for women because they have to balance between things, and it is stressful for the man who feels like he lost something… there is the loss of an idealistic vision he had for himself and his family."

The case of Yara and Rakan is an exemplary one when it comes to a crisis in gender roles and specifically of masculinity. Although they both have demanding jobs that require the same number of hours, the inequalities of housework and childcare remain. Even though Rakan tries his best to stick to what the patriarchal script demands of him in terms of provision, he cannot fully integrate that she has also become a provider, which should probably require re-thinking other things like childcare and housework. Instead, he falls back on drawing upon essentialist ideas of gender and citing Islamic *hadith*s in order to avoid thinking about it. Yara, like many women who have faced similar issues, is frustrated by her husband's inability to assess her capacities empathetically (and even logically): he does not seem to want to understand that she has just as many hours in the day as he does, and that taking on the demands of childcare alone is bound to exhaust and enervate her. An action that is done by him, for example, staying at work late, takes on a different meaning when she does it. When he does it, he interprets it as part of his obligations to provide for his family; but when she does, it is interpreted as neglecting her duties of motherhood in favor of work – even though they both end up contributing to the finances of the household.

Yara was happy to be flexible about their roles and responsibilities as husband and wife when Rakan found himself unable to commit to the financial arrangement they had initially agreed upon at the beginning of their marriage. By never seriously revisiting the financial arrangement they had agreed upon in the beginning of the marriage, he continues to enable himself to imagine that he is sole provider of the family. However, this flexibility is not reciprocated to her when it comes to the demands of childcare and household management.

It becomes clear that this situation revolves around a crisis of masculinity when thinking about how Rakan expects Yara to embody certain characteristics and attitudes even in their unequal arrangements, such as for her to have a loving and happy disposition in taking on more household and childcare responsibilities. At the same time, ironically, he tells her that he does not like it when she practices too much *mujamala* – perhaps aware that beneath it lies resentment. In this way, Rakan finds himself between "a rock and a hard place" in trying to enact his idealistic vision of a family with clear gender roles rooted in essentialism but knowing that doing so causes resentment and disconnect in this marriage. He is, until now, unable to reconcile a vision of provision-based masculinity with the reality that his wife works just as much as he does and can be an equal contributor to the household – and finds himself unable to imagine anything else, or is too afraid of the consequence of losing a sense of power and authority that comes with alternative imaginaries of gender roles. Men like him lack alternative models of how a marriage could look like outside of inherited ideas about gender roles, as the rapid social changes in Saudi Arabia render those inherited ideas as outdated and incompatible with the current socioeconomic reality. Saudi women, on the other hand, have plenty of representation in local and international media as the state tries to offer a more progressive and feminized face – from athletes, ministers, to even ambassadors — to important allied countries like the US.

I believe that Yara's story also points to how the courses at family development institutions are designed in such a way that cannot be very helpful because of flaws internal to them. When she tries to use the "feminine weapons" (putting on performances of sweet-

talking and praise), the performance arouses suspicion and accusations that she has a hidden agenda, an outcome that the courses seem never to anticipate despite all their "expertise." Their discourses of how men and women are essentially different, not only from an Islamic perspective but also a "scientific" one, ends up being used by husbands as a weapon to avoid any part of the responsibility. The courses are also tone-deaf to real problems plaguing Saudi marriages in that they don't discuss the fact that many Saudi women have jobs and careers, and how this changes the dynamics of *nafaqa* (the husband's Islamic responsibility to provide) and the meanings attached to it.

Unlike Elizabeth Povinelli, Yara continues to believe in a dichotomy between the genealogical society and autological subject. Her ways of coping with her situation (by having crushes), as well as her vow to marry someone she'd love if she had to repeat the experience, privilege romantic love as a phantasmagorical site for freedom and self-realization. For her, the way her marriage panned out (arranged), even if it bore with it the promise of a "liberal" husband, did not provide her with emancipation from the inequalities of childcare, housework, and finances in the absence of romantic love.

The story of Halima: To Choose Love or Compatibility?

I met Halima through an interlocutor that I knew from the Walaa courses, who then introduced me to her as she thought her story would be interesting. Halima herself had not attended any of the courses but had heard about them. After a few conversations on the phone, we met at her house several times.

Omar (31 years of age) approached Halima (27 years of age) through Instagram, and they started developing a rapport. He was interested in her romantically from the beginning but was still completing his higher education in the UK. When he visited the region, she told me that they went out for dinner once in Dubai where they both happened to be for a short holiday with friends, after which Halima told him that she was not interested in dating: if he was serious about her, then he should ask for her hand in marriage. Halima explained to me that this was her first time trying out a non-dating approach to finding a life partner – in fact, developing dating fatigue after a string of disappointing relationships since her teenage years is exactly what drove her to consider getting to know a potential future partner within the framework of engagement with both of their families' knowledge. She also considered herself too old to date and felt ready for marriage. To her surprise, Omar readily agreed, and asked for her family's contact details.

Halima told me that both families were happy with their children's' choices: both she and Omar come from upper middle-class, reputable families with strong tribal lineages. "On paper, the essential things were there. He was open-minded, from a good family, had a good job and salary. And he's nice and respectful, a decent guy. In the beginning, we were getting to know each other… of course anyone is going to seem interesting when you first get to know them. But I never fell in love with him."

After three months of Halima and Omar developing a friendship online and meeting once, their families got involved. Within six months, they were engaged, and after another six months they had signed their Islamic marriage contract and performed the *milka* ceremony. Halima told me that she started to have doubts about whether Omar was the

right partner for her because her romantic feelings for him remained stagnant throughout all these stages, but she didn't confide to anyone about her feelings, in part because there wasn't anything concretely off-putting about him. Aside from his attractive "on paper" qualities, she also appreciated her husband's good looks and similar relaxed level of religiosity and lifestyle, offering her a lot of autonomy in socializing with male and female friends, travelling whenever she pleased, wearing whatever she wanted, and drinking alcohol when travelling. She also told me that he had no jealousy issues or insecurities about her past dating life, which she was open about. These elements seemed especially auspicious, given dominant perceptions that most Saudi men would not tolerate this kind of autonomy for their wives. Coming from a family environment where this kind of autonomy was somewhat already present for her (her parents did not mind her travelling with friends, studying abroad and working in Dubai, forgoing wearing the *hijab*, or working in a gender-mixed work environment), Halima felt it was important to have a life partner who would not try to limit it.

Halima now feels like encouraging him to ask for her hand before having a chance to date him outside of the families' gaze was "a big mistake." The engagement and post-*milka* periods did not give her much time to get to know him deeply: she told me that most of their conversations revolved around the future wedding, the *milka* ceremony, the future apartment and furniture, and the honeymoon planning. She said that she mostly ignored her own fears that perhaps she could not love him in a romantic way. She was afraid of the reaction of the people around her, especially because she had landed such a "catch," and also admitted to me that the euphoric sensation of being a soon-to-be bride "took over" and

allowed her to suppress these concerns. When I asked her why she didn't confide in anybody, she told me that she felt a responsibility to protect his reputation: "being in a relationship is different than marriage or engagement… I felt like it was more serious. Whatever problems he has reflect back on me as well. If I talked badly about him, at the end of the day he's my husband, my fiancé… I didn't want to distort his reputation in front of anyone."

Halima did try to address some practical concerns. One of the things that she told me worried her deeply was the difference in their personalities: she is a very gregarious person who loves social gatherings and being around people, while he was quite introverted and socially awkward. Her family and friends reassured her that this problem would be fixed with time, and in her discussion with him about these anxieties, he pledged to work on becoming more sociable. "He did try to change, I have to admit that, but I never fell in love."

Her fear manifested more and more during their marriage of 1.5 years: she told me that his introverted personality and awkwardness made her feel neglected as he would play video games after work instead of spending quality time with her, she felt that she needed to "babysit" him during social gatherings with friends and couldn't really enjoy her time with them, felt like she didn't have much in common with him even in day-to-day chit-chat, and she faced embarrassing situations where he would blurt out private things about their relationships to their friends. On the other hand, she believes that he also felt rejected by her, because he frequently asked her to be more affectionate with him verbally, physically, and sexually – which was hard for her to do as she did not feel in love with him or attracted

to him, despite admitting that he is a good-looking man. She told me that he also frequently felt that she was overly critical of his mannerisms: “sometimes I would tell him to change his clothes because they were dirty or his pants were ripped, or like one time we were sitting with friends and he would blurt out something personal between me and him. It is like he doesn’t know what is appropriate to be said in front of people and what is not. Once, one of our friends was talking about how dogs can get jealous if they see their owner be overly affectionate with someone else, and he just blurts out, ‘well actually me and Halima don’t cuddle or kiss’ and it was really awkward. It’s not something to say. Things like this… sometimes there are traditional things, like the way he eats. He eats dates with a fork in front of people! I mean maybe its ok at home, but what if he does that in a male gathering? I know everyone would look at him as if he’s not a man. I even asked the opinion of a non-Saudi friend on this issue specifically, I asked her, ‘what message do you think eating a date with a fork sends?’ she agreed with me and said to him, ‘it would seem like you are a sissy.’ He takes everything I say as criticism, even if it is a joke. Once I came up to him and told him, ‘what is this cute little belly you’ve grown?’ and he was so offended. I was joking, he’s not overweight, he gets offended by so many things…” when I asked her whether she was saying comments like this passive-aggressively, she admitted that maybe that was the case. “I guess I would care if a partner kept saying things like that to me.”

Many of Halima and Omar’s interactions turned into arguments and fights. She felt that he especially had a hard time communicating his being upset and would bottle up his feelings and then blurt them out randomly during arguments about something else. One

issue that came up this way was finances. Omar had a stable and well-paying job in the construction sector, while Halima worked mostly from home (and was also responsible for all cooking and cleaning) on her small trading business that offered her just enough money for her own personal spending. In the beginning of their marriage, Halima told me how Omar had consulted her family as well as his own about how to split up finances. Both families advised him that as per Islamic guidelines, he should be the sole provider for the household and that her money should be hers (with him also giving her a monthly allowance for personal spending). This arrangement was also the one adopted by both sets of parents, and the ones Halima and Omar observed growing up. "My whole life I thought that this kind of arrangement is the norm. This is how it is… this is how my mom was, how my brother is with his wife. Everyone, really. I did not spend one dime on the house or anything. Even my phone bill was on him, and our groceries. I spent my own money only on clothes and shopping, stuff for me. But then we socialized with other couples and I noticed that a lot of them do split their expenses." She admitted to me that in retrospect, she was never incentivized to try out a different financial arrangement and was maybe wrong not to do so, because she enjoyed the financial ability to shop and travel; seeing it as her coping mechanism for her rapidly failing marriage. "I was very depressed. The only happiness I had, to be honest, was from my money. If I'm angry today, I can go buy something. If I'm bored today because he didn't pay attention to me, I go shop. If I'm bothered and feeling suffocated, I tell him 'let's travel.' It was a coping mechanism for me. I wasn't ready to let go of that… I would've felt like I had nothing. No money, no happy marriage, no happy home. If I loved him, maybe I would've tried things differently" In fights that entailed a different topic, Omar would sometimes suddenly bring up the issue of

finances, telling her that she was selfish for "taking all his money," which blind sighted Halima. "Towards the end I realized he was resentful about this. I didn't know, because I was married to someone who never speaks! He would blurt out his being upset about this while I was trying to bring up an entirely different issue. But we never had a conversation about the financial stuff. He just asked my family their advice in the beginning. He also comes from a family where his mom never had an income and was always taking care of her husband. So, this was his mentality as well."

Halima tried to work on her marital problems in several ways. Early in her marriage, she told me that she had signed up for an online counselling service that allowed her to liaise with a therapist based in the United States. She specifically chose this service because she was skeptical that Saudi therapists could offer help without resorting to judgement on her and her husbands' lifestyle (for example, drinking alcohol and socializing with men and women together). She was also skeptical that institutions like Walaa could help her: "I think these kinds of courses are not courses I would go to. They're still operating on the old traditional Saudi style. I don't think for example that they would address marriages based on love, not arranged marriages." I told her that institutions like Walaa did not really focus on how the couples met, as most of the people who attend the course have already chosen someone. "I think it's very important to know how you meet the husband. When you marry someone traditionally you have no expectations. But when you marry someone through love you have expectations, and all these expectations are going to go down the drain by the way, because he's not going to be the same person after marriage. But when a woman enters a traditional marriage, she doesn't have expectations."

She did not feel that the counsellor from the online service was very helpful. “You can’t tell a white woman that you married someone because he seemed good on paper or that it is kind of a traditional marriage. She wouldn’t understand. I felt like she kept imagining that I was still living in the desert and that I was forced into this... but that’s not how it is! I had the choice to marry him or not. That wasn’t the point of what I wanted to talk about. But she kept asking me why I married him in the first place, asking if my family forced me into it. Then she said ‘well, if you don’t feel happy then just get out of the marriage.’ It wasn’t very helpful at all. I also tried reading books like *The Five Love Languages* and articles online about relationships.”

Eventually, Halima found an Egyptian therapist in nearby Bahrain who offered couples therapy and came highly recommended by her friends. She was comfortable with the therapist being Arab and also accepting of their lifestyle. “It was good in the beginning, but by the end we just couldn’t apply her recommendations. She would give us tasks to do throughout the week, for example spending quality time together, refraining from criticism and negative comments… things like that. We had homework to do. But then we stopped doing it.” Eventually, their therapist went on a long vacation, during which they filed for divorce.

Halima also developed what perhaps should be seen as coping strategies, among them shopping, traveling, and creating an Instagram account in order to celebrate married life which garnered over 12 thousand followers. “I think social media ruined a lot of marriages. I’m one of those people who, if anyone saw my social media, they would think I was the happiest girl on the planet. I used to post so many things like ‘I’m living my best

life! I love this man so much!' but in reality, I'm not even speaking to my husband because we're in a fight. I think a lot of people look at Instagram couples and think, 'I want a lifestyle like this, full of love.' They would write comments and start comparing their lives with the social media marriage. Which is kind of bullshit." When I asked her why she created the account in the first place, Halima told me that at first it was supposed to be a platform to help new couples adjust to married life. "It was supposed to be tips of like, what fun things you can do in Saudi, or how to cook simple meals if you don't know how to cook, how to do laundry… The first time I washed my husband's clothes, they shrank! So, I think these things are nice. That was the point of the account in the beginning. But after getting depressed, it shifted to just posting pictures of us travelling together and things like that… By then, the only person who knew how bad my marriage was were my mother and two of my friends. Everyone else in the whole world thought I had the best marriage ever. It gave me a good feeling to make people think I am having a happy life. Even when I sit with people, I pretend my husband is the best husband ever and that I have the best life ever." When I asked how her husband felt about this account at the time, she told me that his only concern was *ayn* or people's envious eyes that might ruin their marriage. In retrospect, she agrees that that might have been a factor.

Halima told me that she started thinking about divorce only two months into the marriage but started voicing it as an option to Omar at the six-month mark. He initially refused, but eventually, after several attempts at reconciliation after the advice of the marriage counsellor, he agreed. Halima only confided in a few friends about her desire to divorce but felt misunderstood: "I got a lot of backlash. Everyone, literally everyone I told

was like, ‘why would you get a divorce? He’s giving you a nice home, he’s letting you live your own life, he lets you travel, he buys you things, he lets you do this and that… what more do you want?! Love is nothing, love goes away!’ but I don’t know... I strongly believe that love is important.”

After a year and a half of marriage, Halima and Omar finally ended their marriage on less than amicable terms from his side, while she felt quite neutral. “Each of us had their own way… he tried to listen more, I tried to listen more… I tried to be more affectionate like he wanted. I don’t think that either of us failed in our roles as husband and wife. As a husband, he provided everything a husband should. He gave me a house, he provided for me; as a wife I fed him, I cleaned our house. But together, as two people, we failed. But we tried. We really did. I didn’t love him. I couldn’t give him the things he wanted, and the things any man would want. But I was supportive and decent, I didn’t disrespect him. But he wanted affection. I couldn’t give that.” When I asked her whether being in love would be an important factor if she gets married again, she answered firmly in the positive. “When I got married, I thought about the same things other people think about. Status, his work, his family name, his mentality. But after living that, I realized that doesn’t really work. I just couldn’t. I realized what’s more important for me is being compatible and falling in love. This is what can keep me in a relationship. Even if the person is good and nice and respectable, I cannot. If I can’t love him, I don’t think I can be married to that person. Not a lot of people care about love, even amongst my friends. People care about financial stability, respect, similar values, having independence and freedom… that’s more important for them than love. People either choose to be married to someone they love or choose the

other things – money and status and these kinds of things. Of course, if you get both, you're lucky. But it's very rare to find all of these things together."

When Halima and I spoke about the differences between marriages in our parent's generation versus ours, she highlighted the emerging element of choice when it came to deciding on a life partner. "What happened with our moms' generation is that they used to get married just by seeing the guy. The girl and guy see each other, and the families too. Right? Like *el-shofa el-shar'iyya* [a loose translation of this term is "the permitted gaze," which refers to a man's Islamic right to see his potential bride unveiled before asking for her hand, in a family setting]. If they like what they see, then you get married and that's it. But now, even a lot of traditional and close-minded families allow you to get to know the guy, sometimes after the *milka*, or before. We didn't have this option before. We didn't have a thing called 'getting to know the guy' in Saudi." When talking about her own generation, she told me "I think a lot of young people now want to know what they're getting into before they marry. Before, there wasn't much chance to interact with the opposite sex, even in work environments everything was segregated. They don't know that women have different personalities – men would think that all women had one personality they all shared. Then they realized with more interactions that in fact they can choose someone who is a good fit, personality wise. A lot of people started to demand that from their families. Women are now in the workplace, in stores, in offices, in banks, in the check-in at the airport… Before, even friendship between the sexes seemed impossible. Now it's somewhat normal to say, 'I met this guy on a project, or a volunteering

initiative…' also let's not forget social media. People started demanding a chance to get to know the other. To have a choice."

Halima's story is an appropriate example of how what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "social imaginaries" of choice, autonomy, and individuality have weaved themselves into the arena of marriage and partner-choosing in her generation.

Frequently during my fieldwork, and in my own observations as a Saudi, marriage has been presented as a path to autonomy. Women especially are used to hearing the famous phrase "you can do it after you get married" when it comes to certain desires they might have such as travelling, working in a mixed gender environment, or even styling themselves a certain way (for example, cutting her hair short). During my participant observation at Walaa's seminars, I noticed how "autonomy" as a result of marriage is highly valued when instructors urged attendees to push their husbands to provide them with an "independent home" (not cohabitating with in-laws), and how this arrangement can provide her opportunities to run the household as she pleases, decorate it the way she likes, and care only for herself and one other person. Autonomy also came up when instructors gave tips on how to convince the husband to allow her to continue her education/employment before marriage, secure his open-ended permission to visit her family or friends, and engage in travelling experiences. But this opportunity for autonomy was not necessarily linked to the idea of romantic love as being the agent that brings it forth.

The advent of social media and increased interactions between unrelated men and women outside of the household gave rise to practices such as dating, which many Saudi youth engage in, whether inside the kingdom or by planning short holidays to neighboring Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates where they can meet their love interest away from the watchful gaze of their communities. But the problem with dating in a society that is facing a crisis of governmentalities is that very often, one dates outside of their social class, tribal affiliation, age group, marital status (dating people who are divorced/have children), sect, or even nationality – often leading to a painful ending when they introduce the idea of marriage to each other or their families, or to ending the relationship before even getting to that point after a careful consideration of all the obstacles that lie ahead. As such, even as dating became more and more widely practiced, it is still a deeply frowned upon activity by the most of the older generation and ambivalent to many of the current generation – not only does it violate the strict Islamic prohibitions against gender-mixing in non-familial settings, but it also removes the gatekeeping mechanisms that arranged marriages provide. On the other hand, the availability of choice brings with it the possibility of the shaping and structuring of intimate life in a kind of contractual manner between the partners, away from expectations of family, religion, and society. As such, dating as a practice still remains an attractive option for those who to seek to exercise their individual choice in partnering up with someone and creating a personal love-based contract that offers them, especially the woman, more autonomy than an arranged marriage would.

In her description of her experience, Halima's marriage to Omar was a reasonable compromise that provided her with the promise of autonomy while still remaining within

the confines of her social class, sect, nationality, and tribe. But the way the relationship started was through dating – a practice imbued with ideas (or ideals) of romantic love and active choice. Halima struggles to classify her marriage: in some contexts, such as when she spoke about how she distrusts courses from institutions like Walaa because they do not pay attention to whether the marriage is love-based or not, she implies that her marriage is a love-based specimen. But in other contexts, such as when she speaks of her will to pursue a love marriage in the future, she implies that her marriage was closer to one that subscribed to the genealogical society ("good on paper") rather than strictly to the pursuit of individual autonomy. For her, a love-based marriage is one where autonomy is present, surely, but also one where the intimate sphere can subvert hierarchies, roles, and arrangements that the genealogical society imposes. For example, she admits that if romantic love was present between them, she would have been more open to trying out a different financial arrangement than him being the provider and her being the recipient of these provisions as per Islamic guidelines. She also admits that both of them fulfilled their duties as husband and wife successfully as per Islamic guidelines, but in the end, this was not enough in the absence of romantic love.

Halima's marriage is emblematic of the crisis of governmentalities at the interface of fantasies of individual sovereignty (and romantic love) and of the genealogical society. Both frameworks comes with their own imaginaries and expectations: marriages that are made by individual choice and that are love-based are thought to be gateways to democratizing (or even subverting) scripts of the genealogical society, while marriage based on the demands of the genealogical society offer a stability of clear roles,

responsibilities, and rights. Because her marriage was not in one category exclusively, it put in front of her the question of "how do I conduct myself?" with no clear pathway forward. Halima thought that she could be one of the "lucky ones," the ones who manage to find love and passion without the transgression of challenging the genealogical society's prescriptions. All she had to do was to wait for her feelings to develop into romantic ones – which never happened.

The Story of Maher: Forever Young?

Maher is a 60-year-old engineer and never-married Saudi man, which is quite rare. I was introduced to him through another interlocutor of mine, who told him about my project. Maher expressed a great interest in the subject of marriage in Saudi Arabia in general and was happy to share his own experience. Paradoxically for a man in his position, he told me, "I can write a whole book about marriage in Saudi Arabia from my experiences!" Maher and I would meet in a café in his neighborhood which offered us some privacy as it had little traffic. Still, it was quite awkward given that we never met before having a few phone calls, and the fact that there were usually a few families sitting in the café around us whenever we met. He did not seem to mind though, and I was happy enough to have an interlocutor who was a man willing to share his story in detail, which I struggled to find throughout the course of my fieldwork.

Between the ages of 19 and 45, Maher told me that he was actively seeking marriage, and pursued somewhere between 15 and 20 women as potential wives by way of

his mother, sisters, friends, or himself. His most notable self-initiated attempt, when he was in his 40s, happened after he saw a beautiful woman in a shopping mall. He subsequently asked his mother to ask her social circles about her, until they were able to track her down. The woman's father accepted to allow Maher to get to know his daughter during an engagement period, without a marital contract. Maher told me that he was instructed not to contact her directly, but to coordinate with her father to set up a time at their home. Maher and the woman sat alone and got to know each other over a period of six months, which he describes as intellectually stimulating and intense – a deep connection. However, after six months, the woman's father called Maher and told him that it was not to be: "*mafi naseeb*" (it's not written in destiny). Maher told me that the woman's father never gave him a reason, which hurt him deeply. Through acquaintances, he eventually managed to get her direct phone number in hopes of acquiring an explanation. "She just told me, 'hi Maher! I should've called to apologize, but I didn't know what to tell you. To be honest, someone else asked for my hand and I initially refused him, but now I feel like he is *naseebi* [my destiny].'" Maher asked her if she loved her new suitor, and she said "no… but I feel he is my *naseeb*. You were interesting and fun, and I enjoyed our time together…"

After this, Maher told me that his mother set out on an aggressive campaign to find him a wife, much to his frustration as he felt that she was "seeking a wife for herself, not for me!" His mother was mainly anxious to find a wife from a very high social class (Maher and his family can be considered upper-middle class) rather than one that Maher could connect with on a personal level. "My mother isn't good at this. Even if I was a traditionally minded person, my own mother should know my preferences well. She should

know that my preferences were less about looks and social class, and more about personal compatibility." He told me that sometimes his mother would initiate meetings with other families about the possibility of marriage without even informing him. Only when she liked the family and the woman herself would she then involve Maher – which put him in many embarrassing situations where he had to reject the potential bride after her and her family had already gotten excited at the prospect. When he complained to his mother that he felt she was choosing for herself rather than him, his mother, he thinks, sought to teach him a lesson.

"Once, she took me to some people's house. I didn't know anything about this visit or its purpose. The house had neon lights, blue, pink, green… on the outside. I could tell that this house belonged to a family of a lower social class. Me and my mother walked in and talked a bit to the father of the household, just general chit chat. Then in the corridor, this cute young girl who was dressed up in full make up and an evening gown, as if she's going to a wedding, started to approach me. She was shivering. Obviously, they were from a completely different mentality. The girl was so nervous that I had to calm her myself! She stayed around for a few minutes and left. This was apparently *al-shofa al-shar'iyya.* It should have been obvious to my mother from the house, the family, the girl… that there is a big cultural difference between us! I told my mom, 'shame on you for doing this!' and she replied to me, 'well, you always said you wanted me to look outside of our social circles!' I felt like she was taking revenge on me by going this far." Maher could clearly see the class gap between himself and this woman, as upper-middle class families like his tend to be a bit more relaxed about gender mixing in the workplace, social settings, and educational

settings (especially as many Saudi men go abroad for higher education). He *considered al-shofa al-shar'iyya* as something that only highly religious Saudis would do, and that it was not a common practice amongst upper-middle class families like himself. Maher tried to apply for jobs in companies that had mixed gender environments in hopes of getting to know women in a non-familial setting, but it did not work out.

"I used to be so romantic that I wanted to die before my future wife does," Maher told me. "But now I think liking is more important than loving. Loving can be a nightmare – you can be in love with someone you don't even like. I was naïve." After failed attempts to find a partner, and with the lack of options for meeting single women around his age that he can get to know on a personal level, he decided to "become a bachelor forever" at age 45.

Maher told me that he then vowed to live his life to the fullest without a partner. He built a beautiful apartment for himself, filled with artworks and trinkets that he's gathered throughout his many years of solo travelling around the world. He is also deeply invested in several hobbies such as art collection, traveling, scuba diving, and keeping up with musical trends. He told me that many of his friends are younger people (men and women) in their late 20s or early 30s, but also people of his own age group: "I feel like I'm not really a grown up like the friends around my age, because I don't know the responsibilities that come with having children. They're envious of all my free time, but I tell them: you have fatherhood!" As a result, he's become an unofficial father figure to many of his friends' children, who go to him for advice but also friendship. "I like to keep up with the times. I am passionate about music and want to keep up with it all the time. I ask my nieces and

nephews to give me flash drives full of the latest music periodically. That's why many of my friends are young. I even went on an overseas trip with friends of mine who were a couple, they're in their 30s!" He admits that sometimes this results in some awkwardness. "I love dancing and having drinks with my younger friends somewhere in Bahrain, and I'm a really good dancer, but because I'm old I get self-conscious and feel watched… so I try to be on the sidelines."

Maher has also cultivated deep relationships with his nieces and nephews, siblings, and his parents whom he supports as they grow older. "I'm like a 'cool uncle' to them… I never miss any of their extracurricular activities, and I always do something special for them on their birthdays. Some of them are older, in their 20s now." But when it comes to friends and acquaintances his own age, he told me that he experiences difficulties sometimes. "Before, my unmarried status used to make my friends' wives nervous. They wouldn't like their husbands to see me, they think I might be a bad influence, someone promiscuous or hedonistic." However, he eventually befriended some of the wives of his friends as well; and as he gained their trust, they would actually encourage their husbands to spend time with him and allowed him to build friendships with their children who are in their late 20s or 30s.

When I asked Maher whether it was hard to let go of the idea of marriage and partnership, he contemplated for a few seconds before answering me. "It was hard…but what I can say is that for a long time, I delayed doing things because I was waiting for a partner. I don't think like this anymore."

Even though my project is about marriage, I found Maher to be an interesting and important person to talk to as someone who had ultimately chosen, or so it seems, not to participate in this institution, especially because marriage is propagated as the dominant path to adulthood in the discourses surrounding Saudi marriages by institutions, family, and the media. In the absence of marriage, there are not many other models of what adulthood can look like for a single elderly man – leading Maher to spending a significant amount of his time socializing with and relating to younger people who are single or at the beginning of their marital journeys and childless. In this way and others, he managed to build a kinship network for himself that looks quite different from the one he would have built under marriage and a nuclear family. He is able to present himself somewhere between a father figure and a friend to his nephews and nieces, spend several hours every day with his aging parents, and cultivate unlikely friendships with his friends' wives and their children.

Being a man, Maher also managed to escape a lot of the pressure to get married to someone he's not sure about. Although fatigued by his many failed attempts to marry, ultimately he was able to reject potential wives that he did not find to be personally compatible with him – as opposed to the many Saudi women I've spoken to during my fieldwork who have succumbed to family or even self-pressure to have a life partner, even if he was not appealing to them or even economically secure. For Saudi men, the possible promise of autonomy is not necessarily linked to marriage the way it is for women. The freedom to travel, for example, is one that is always afforded to Saudi men regardless of marital status, while many Saudi women are discouraged from traveling alone or with friends and told that this is an activity reserved for married life only. And although Maher

did experience some degree of suspicion towards his marital status from others, it was nowhere near the experiences of the women I have spoken to in unhappy marriages that fear the social isolation and backlash that they might experience upon becoming a "spinster" or a divorcee, facing hostility from within their own gender as well. In Saudi, fantasies of autonomy and self-making are gendered: for women, it involves marriage; and for men, not necessarily so. For Maher, the life decisions he delayed before he announced his decision to be a forever bachelor had to do mostly with his living arrangement: questions about how he was to design his future house, and whether to buy or rent. It did not stop him from advancing his career as an engineer, traveling the world, and investing in his hobbies.

Of course, there are limitations in terms of the information I was given access to. I did not get to learn any details about any relationships he had outside the marital context. However, Maher's case is one that radically diverges from any kind of norms imposed on him. He side-stepped pressure to get married, pressure to act "appropriately" due to his age or gender and fostered an apparently rich life away from notions of the nuclear family by forging unlikely friendships and alliances with younger friends, nephews and nieces, and even the wives of his friends.

The story of Imam Fahad and his four wives: Forging unconventional marital bonds

Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I had not seen many examples of happy Saudi marriages. But there was one surprising exception: the polygamous family of Imam Fahad.

Imam Fahad was an elderly man, in his sixties, who dedicated his life to the betterment of Saudi marriages after he retired from his comfortable job with the Saudi government. He was also the *imam* (leader of prayers) of a medium-sized mosque in the Eastern Province and would frequently receive visits to his mosque office or calls for marital advice by both men and women (although with women, these interactions took place on the phone). By the time he retired, he had amassed a considerable amount of money that he uses to support his multiple wives. He also launched a website called Mawaddah which enabled Saudis looking for a spouse to sign up, fill out a questionnaire with their basic information, and browse other profiles with similar information (no pictures). However, the parties cannot communicate to each other directly on this platform, in order to ensure that the process is completely *halal*. If two people are mutually interested in each other's profiles, Imam Fahad would be the one who contacts their families to arrange a visit. My discussions with Imam Fahad were quite formal, as I would visit him with the company of my father in his mosque office and revolved mostly around his work on this platform. When he learned that I was interested in interviewing more people, he gave me the numbers of several social workers who work on marriage-related issues. Later on, when I ended up meeting two of them (Fatin and Mais), I realized that these social workers were also in fact his wives, and my discussions with them became much more personal and intimate.

Imam Fahad (63 years of age) comes from a family where polygamy is very common – the default, in fact. From the accounts of his wives, it seemed that he was almost always married to four women at any given time, although he ended up divorcing some and marrying new ones, and their order ("first wife," "second wife," etc.) would often shift as a

result of this. He only has biological children with his first wife (Umm Saif, who was around the same age as he) and another wife who had since passed away. The rest of his wives were significantly younger, in their late thirties or early forties, and had already been married before (and some had children from these previous marriages).

Fatin was extremely friendly when I spoke to her on the phone and explained to her how I got her number and what my project was about. She was very eager to meet and invited me over to her apartment a few days later. The first time I went to her home, I realized that it was an extension to the bigger house where Umm Saif (Imam Fahad's first wife) lived. Fatin lived in this small apartment with her and Imam Fahad's five-year-old son, Fawwaz. She greeted me with coffee and cookies and was very welcoming and gregarious, despite not knowing much about me, and the atmosphere was not formal at all – we were both wearing jeans and t-shirts, and her son was nearby playing with his games while she and I spoke.

Initially, I was interested in Fatin's work as a marriage counsellor/social worker. But because of the friendly and relaxed atmosphere, we ended up also talking about her personal life story in great detail after the first visit. While laughing, she told me how her very first "marriage" lasted only one day. She was fifteen, and a distant relative had approached her family to ask for her hand in marriage, which she and her family accepted. However, when they wanted to celebrate the writing of the marriage contract (*milka)*, the groom's father found her outfit too revealing and inappropriate for the occasion and called the whole thing off in anger. Her next marriage would be when she was 18, after she graduated high school, when her family picked another distant relative for her to marry.

She told me that her first marriage was troubled from the very beginning. Although the content of what she was saying was disturbing, Fatin was laughing as she was telling me these stories, giggling at how absurd they are. On their first night together, her husband insisted on having intercourse and was fixated on confirming her virginity – but it did not go as planned. He was not able to maintain an erection ("he was unable to prove his masculinity and perform") and grew angry and blamed her. "He kept saying the problem is me, and he started hitting me. It wasn't my problem! But he told me to call someone and learn what sex is. To be honest, I didn't really know what it was. I thought it was going to be hugs and kisses." Eventually, he talked to some relatives who recommended that he go to the pharmacy and get some drugs that can help with maintaining an erection. "When we finally had sex, he asked me to show me my blood to prove that I was a virgin. I gave him my underwear thinking, 'here you go, you weirdo!' He took a bath and was happily singing, while I sat there sad crying. He didn't even say sorry. He was only concerned about my virginity status and proving his masculinity."

Aside from their sexual issues, her husband exhibited other concerning behaviors. "He wanted to move around all the time because he was paranoid, thinking that he was being watched or surveilled by the police. He would force me to go with him in his car and travel from city to city for extended periods of time. Once, the police stopped us and I begged for help and told them I wanted to call my family, whom I couldn't speak with openly because he had installed surveillance technology that recorded all our landline calls. They asked me, 'isn't he your husband though?'" It was clear to her that he had some mental health problems but was choosing not to liaise with any doctor about it. "He would

take some pills sometimes and become relaxed. He knew he had a problem but never went to a doctor. I never knew where he got those pills or what they were for exactly. But when he took them, he was normal and calm." When he was not medicated, he would hit her, do bizarre things like convert his entire salary into coins, lock her inside the bedroom, and not allow her to use the fridge. She tried reaching out to his family to let them know that he was acting in a bizarre and cruel way, but they never took her seriously or admitted that he has a problem. After eight months, she told me that he finally agreed to let her go back to her parental home. "He packed a small suitcase for me and took me there, saying he had a training for work, even though he was unemployed. He dropped me off at the beginning of the street, not even at my house. He prohibited me from getting the rest of my things." A week later, she was contacted by a lawyer and learned that her husband was filing for divorce. "I was like, may Allah bless you! Yes! I accept the divorce!"

For the next seven years after her divorce, she completed her bachelor's degree in social work and found work as a counsellor in different schools. She was 26 when her father introduced her to Imam Fahad, who was a friend of her father's and was looking for a wife. She told me that all her sisters were married by then, and her parents were getting anxious for her to marry as well. "When he came over, I acted unexcited and bored. I was watching an Egyptian movie. Fahad insisted on meeting me, and my father told me 'this is a religious man and it is his right to have a *roy'a shar'iyya!"* While giggling, she told me "I told my father, 'why? We don't have this tradition in our family,' but he insisted she dress up and come out to greet him. "I was so stubborn, I came out wearing an *abaya* and *niqab!* I'm not going to display myself in front of some guy!*"* Imam Fahad actually found

this quite amusing and funny, and told her father while laughing, “I’m not leaving this house until we do a *milka!”*

She decided to give the idea some thought after Imam Fahad’s first wife, Umm Saif, gave her a call and sang his praises. “She said he was a good man. She was the one who changed my mind. I love her so much. She always supported me and comforted me and continues to do so. But no one mentioned that I was actually to be his fourth wife, not second! No one told me about his other wives until after our *milka!”* Apparently, Imam Fahad knew that she would have refused if he had revealed this piece of information too early. “I couldn’t even tolerate one man before, so how would I tolerate a man with multiple wives? In our family, we have no examples of polygamy. Even my father didn’t know the whole truth. But I went through with it, because my father was sick, and I didn’t want to upset him.”

The marriage turned out to be a happy one, but she admitted that it was not always smooth. The first major issue they faced was fertility problems. She told me that because of his advanced age and diabetes, Imam Fahad was not able to conceive anymore. After trying for about eight years, they consulted a doctor. “I went through many medical interventions like IVF, and at some point, they suggested surgery before we found out the problem is him. I suffered many miscarriages, most of them when the fetus was 4-5 months old. When I was 30, I had a miscarriage when the fetus was 8 months old – we had already bought furniture and clothes, and everyone was happy. It affected me a lot mentally.” In parallel, they were considering fostering a child (full adoption is not legally allowed in Islam). She liaised with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development in order to do this, and after

almost 7 years of waiting, she finally got custody of Fawwaz. “After 7 years, I got news that there were Syrian babies who needed custody. They come from out of wedlock, or were abandoned by their parents, and some of them had health defects and were in dire health conditions. When we met Fawwaz, Imam Fahad immediately fell in love with him saying ‘I’m not leaving until I take this baby home!’ and we took him home a week later after some paperwork.” Everyone in their extended family was ecstatic. Fawwaz became the beloved child of the family. “My father, who was very sick with kidney and heart disease, was the happiest I ever saw him when he met Fawwaz. He even told me ‘I can die happily now that you have this child.’ We celebrated, we never hid that he was a *hadana* [fostered] child, I am so proud of it.” She also took advantage of a legal loophole in order to become officially registered as his mother. “I took hormonal treatment to stimulate breast milk production, and I nursed him. Then I was able to register as his legal guardian as I was Islamically his milk mother [an Islamic stipulation that offers wet nurses this honorary label when a woman breastfeeds a child more than 3 times].”

In parallel to this happy event, however, there was a drastic shift in marital arrangements. When one of Imam Fahad’s wives died due to health complications, he married a new one only 3 weeks later. Fatin told me that another one of his wives was so appalled and shocked by how quickly he chose to re-marry that she left him (they did not have any children). The new marriage did not end up working out, and they split after only two months together. “She was 25 and had two kids from a previous marriage,” Fatin tells me. “She was young and lively, and got frustrated because he wasn’t really interested in going out or taking selfies. It wasn’t his style. So, after she left him, there were only two:

me and Umm Saif." Six months later, around the time she was about to finalize the custody paperwork to receive Fawwaz, Imam Fahad admitted to her that he had secretly married not one, but two, new wives.

Fatin was deeply hurt by this. "I told him, 'you chose the right time for you, and the wrong time for me.' He told me, 'but you know I am polygamous!' But my issue was more about stability. I had a problem that he kept wanting to marry new women and destabilizing our rhythm. Why wasn't he satisfied? It is almost like an automatic reaction for him to get married whenever he has an open slot for a wife." The secret was weighing heavily on everyone. "Even his new wives were angry because he wasn't giving them enough of his time. He spent a lot of time with me so that I wouldn't suspect anything. And they became resentful towards me. In the end it was too painful, I told Imam Fahad that I don't want to get to know them or be in touch with them. Umm Saif was a lot more neutral about this." Umm Saif was a great support to her during that time – taking care of Fawwaz when Fatin needed help and comforting her about her marital problems with Imam Fahad. "My father used to tell me, 'if you want to make me happy, make Umm Saif happy. She is not just generous; she is beyond generous."

When I asked Fatin how she dealt with the shock of the news that Imam Fahad had married not one but two new women, she told me that she enlisted the help of a marriage counseling hotline. She did not find it too helpful. "They would just tell me 'it's good that you know how to name your feelings. Now try to accept it.' But as a woman, you can't accept this, even if you know it is his right. You have to sink into some kind of personal crisis first. I considered divorce. But Fahad convinced me that he was a good husband for

me and told me he loves me the most. That he would divorce them all if I didn't come back."

With time, Fatin started to view the situation differently. "I realized that men are not like women. He is not satisfied with only one woman. I tried a monogamous marriage and a polygamous one. There are problems in both cases. The difference is your ability to handle it. With time, he changes." They went on a vacation to Turkey in order to work on their marriage and re-connect, and she decided to forgive him.

After that, Fatin would see Imam Fahad once every four days as he rotates between his wives. "Sometimes, I feel like he cannot handle it because he seems so tired, but he won't admit it. When he has problems with the others, he comes to me: 'Fatin, I have a headache from them! I want a divorce!' and I would tell him, 'don't you dare divorce anyone! You married them; you stick with them. Isn't your goal to help these women? They and their children are depending on you!" She admits that sometimes there is fierce competition for his attention. "Everyone cares about him, everyone gets him gifts, everyone wants his approval, everyone wants to make him happy. It was very hard in the beginning, but now I've accepted it, although sometimes, I still find it hard."

When I asked how her marriage is today, five years after this incident, she exclaimed with glee: "We have friendship! Love! Romance! All of it! A child! All kinds of relations, we have it! We never go to sleep angry at each other. He tells me that no other wife is as pretty as me or understands him as well as I do. He married them because he wanted to help them… but I am his closest wife." She also noted his willingness to listen to

her advice and be flexible. “He is very religious, and I come from a different kind of upbringing. We didn’t have polygamy in our family, and we were not very religious, we would listen to music and watch TV. Initially, he did not even want me to have a TV at home. But I told him that I need one for when family members come over. So, he got me one and we agreed that we won’t watch TV when he is here. He wanted his teenage daughters to dress very conservatively and be very religious, and I tell him ‘don’t force them! You instilled these values in them, so trust them. Don’t put them in a situation where they have to hide things from you!’ He listened and left them alone, and they turned out to be committed to Islam. I told him, ‘See? Everything worked out!’”

A few days after my conversation with Fatin, I met another one of Imam Fahad’s wives (whom I also did not initially know was his wife), called Mais. She was also a social worker who worked on marital issues, but like with Fatin, we ended up talking about her personal life as well. Unlike my first meeting with Fatin, my first meeting with Mais was much more formal. After a few introductory phone calls and messages, she invited me to come over to what she called “my modest home,” a small apartment that faces the mosque that Imam Fahad worked for. I saw that she was dressed quite elegantly and formally, and we sat in a living room specifically for guests (although in future meetings, we broke the ice quite a bit and she would dress much more casually and invite me to sit with her and her daughter in their everyday living room). Mais was also significantly younger than Fahad at 38 years old.

While initially shy, Mais quickly got excited when I told her more about my project, and I felt that she was very eager to share her story. There was a lot of pain in Mais's voice as she told me of her difficult life prior to meeting Imam Fahad. Her first marriage was when she was 13 years old, which was quite common in the southern region of Saudi Arabia where she originally comes from. Her husband was also young, 19 years old, and was a close family relative. "I loved him madly, because I was still a child, but he did not. There was a lack of respect and even physical abuse," she told me. Mais questioned her mental health during her first marriage: "I was a child; I was going through puberty and my mood was all over the place. I actually thought I had psychological problems, but then doctors told me that mood swings are normal during puberty." She also suffered a number of health problems such as leg pain, jaundice, and mental health problems (unclear which ones, exactly – but she did mention taking medication) arising from her three pregnancies, especially the first two, which she went through when she was 14 and 16 years of age. Life in the south was not easy: "we lived on the outskirts of Jizan and things were not readily available, we would have to take long trips for supplies, and the home was filled with people, so we never had any privacy."

When she was 33, Mais finally got a divorce from her first husband, and left to live in the Eastern Province in an apartment close to her brother who resided there. She started a degree in social work in a local university, although she never finished because of the turbulent events that followed. "My brother was extremely cruel to me, I don't want to go into details, but I actually called Walaa and begged them to intervene via arbitration. They never knew who I am, it was all on the phone. They told me that reasoning with my brother

was impossible and advised me to get married so I can escape, referring me to Imam Fahad's website, and personally putting me in touch with him via phone." At this point, I still did not know he was her husband, nor had she revealed it. Her expression got very intense and her eyes started trembling with tears – I thought maybe she had a bad experience with the website or with him personally. With a fluttering voice, she told me how she needed to get married very quickly, in a matter of days, before her final exams for the semester, as her father threatened to bring her back to the south after her exams. "He told me about two suitors. One was not suitable at all, and the other one was but he was travelling for a long time and I needed to get married faster than that. Fahad was trying his best to help me, then he told me that maybe there is a third option… a third suitor." She looked at me directly with glassy eyes for a few moments, and that was when I realized that she might be another one of Imam Fahad's wives. I asked, "was the third option himself?" She confirmed as a huge smile broke upon her face, and I realized that her intense expression earlier was perhaps one of overwhelming gratitude, love, and admiration for Imam Fahad. "We had never even met in person; all these consultations were on the phone." She was almost holding her breath as she revealed this to me. "He didn't tell you that I was his wife, did he?" I told her no, that I had met him through my father and only in his office to talk about his website Mawaddah. She chuckled, saying "I remember the day you met him! That day we were in the process of moving into this house, and it was a very hectic day, but Imam Fahad told me he had to meet you and your father. I was suspicious that maybe he was looking at a new potential wife!" I laughed, too, and reassured her that Imam Fahad and I had never discussed his personal life.

Mais told me more about how her marriage with Imam Fahad came about. “My dad arrived from the south and agreed to meet Fahad. It all happened very quickly – within three days. The same day we all met; we signed the marriage contract.” Similar to Fatin’s story, Mais also thought that Imam Fahad only had one other wife (Umm Saif, with whom she also enjoys a good relationship). “It all happened so fast, maybe that’s why I didn’t pay attention to this detail…” To me, it seemed quite obvious by now that this is a strategy that Imam Fahad uses on all his new wives. With admiration, she told me about how Imam Fahad protected her from her abusive brother, who tried to dissuade Imam Fahad from marrying her by telling him lies about her and destroying her property in a fit of rage. It seems that her first and foremost concern with the marriage at the time was finding immediate protection and shelter: “at first, I just told him to get an apartment for me and my children, that he wouldn’t have to do anything else… but then we ended up being together.” She continued telling me about how Imam Fahad took extreme care in his way of inserting himself into her life and that of her children’s, so as not to overwhelm them too fast. “He would not spend the night until the children were comfortable with it. Once, my son asked me ‘why is your marriage to Imam Fahad different? Why doesn’t he live here?’ and Imam Fahad then talked to all my children and explicitly told them that he would only start spending the night if they were all okay with it.” She told me that her children ended up having a wonderful relationship with Imam Fahad as well and started to love him deeply. In my visits to her home, I could tell that this was true by the way her children spoke of him.

Mais also talked to me about the challenges of polygamy. Similar to Fatin, she spoke of how she only sees Imam Fahad every four days. “On the other days I don’t hear from him at all. It is important to respect that every wife has uninterrupted time with him. We do not call him if it is not ‘our day,’ unless its urgent. But everyone wants him for themselves, everyone is hungry for his time, and this was difficult for me to navigate. When he is with me, I am not that strict about him not answering phone calls from his other wives. Sometimes things come up. I have to put up with that, and sometimes he’s not in a good mood because there is a problem in one of his other homes.” Still, it was clear that she was very deeply in love with him, and whenever she talked about him, she would smile and get teary eyed. “My first marriage was full of crazy love but no respect. With Fahad, it started with respect and then grew into love. I had my doubts about how much I could love him or be attracted to him, after all we have a huge age gap. But I love him so much.”

Today, Mais supports herself financially by offering make up artistry services to clients in their home, and also has some knowledge about how to buy and sell effectively on the stock market. But her great passion was always working on marital issues in Saudi Arabia, even though she never was able to finish her social work degree. Still, she used her own personal life experience and actually developed an education module with the help of Imam Fahad on how to navigate polygamous marriages. When she pitched it to some family development institutions, however, they refused to take it forward, telling her that there isn’t a demand for such information, which Mais disagrees with. She is also critical of how certain charities who support divorced women run their programs: “most of them only support the divorcee for a limited period of time, and don’t really help her reap a living in a

sustainable manner. There is also no psychological support. As a counselor, I never recommended divorce, but if that's what the client wants, I go through all the different scenarios that divorce would bring – how would she support herself and her children financially? Where does she plan to live? What is the plan?" She had also developed a report of recommendations that she tried to pitch to different organizations that support divorcees, but similarly with no luck so far.

Discourses on marriage in Saudi Arabia from institutions and marriage counselors revolve entirely around monogamous marriages, even though polygamous marriages are not uncommon and are Islamically permissible (not to mention that they were heavily promoted as a religious duty in the 1980s, as discussed in Chapter 1). So, I found it curious when Mais told me that Walaa was not open to her education module on navigating polygamous marriages, even amidst anxieties that not enough women are finding suitable husbands (as discussed in Chapter 3). It is much easier for the Saudi state to shape the arena of marriage when the assumption is that everyone is and should be in a monogamous marriage.

Both Fatin and Mais had horrific experiences in their first marriages and seemed to be divested from the idea of marrying again – whether the marriage be monogamous or polygamous. Both of them entered the marriage with Imam Fahad for reasons unrelated to imaginaries of romantic love – Fatin to ease the pressure from her family, and Mais in order to find immediate shelter and protection. None of them had many expectations in the beginning.

However, in the entirety of my fieldwork, I never met interlocutors who seemed to be as happy and in love in their marriages as Fatin and Mais, in spite of all the challenges that polygamy brings. Imam Fahad seemed to have successfully woven a complicated yet thriving family system that works for him and his wives. Although not all the wives are friends with each other, they all hold Imam Fahad accountable to his promises to the other wives. The wives are also close to and friendly with Imam Fahad's first wife, Umm Saif, who is perhaps just as central as Imam Fahad as the matriarch to the entire family in her supportive parental role to Imam Fahad's other children, and in her care to his other wives who go to her for advice, comfort, and friendship. It is also no small feat that Imam Fahad and his family openly celebrate his and Fatin's fostered son, Fawwaz, in a country where such examples are uncommon or perhaps even secret (it is interesting to note that the ministry that arranges such fostering programs insist that the child and his foster family have to have the same skin tone to reduce "social stress" on the child). Finally, it is also admirable that Imam Fahad actually manages to spend his time and resources equally on all his four wives; despite the difficulties they find in not having as much time with him as they want, they never complained that he was unfair or neglectful. In fact, it seems that he is able to successfully make the two of them feel extremely loved, cared for, and appreciated.

Love thrived in this complicated family system in genuine ways that I did not encounter otherwise in my fieldwork. Rather than relying on imaginaries of monogamous heterosexual marriages, Imam Fahad's wives found themselves in love's romantic embrace in incredibly creative, surprising, and new ways, through experience and trial and error, and

without educational resources or inherited perceptions of what marriage should look like from their families who never engaged with polygamy. This kind of intimacy is exactly what challenges the autological subject/genealogical society binary of liberalism which will typically approach polygamy as a "savage passion" born out of social constraint. It is interesting that family development institutions are not open to receiving modules navigating polygamy, and it begs the question: does Saudi Arabia's shift to authoritarian neoliberalism include elevating some forms of intimacies (the intimate event) over others (polygamy) in a bid to fashion itself as a bastion of liberalism rather than its shadow of a state built on religious nationalism?

In this chapter, I sought to sketch out detailed life stories of a few Saudi individuals who are using the spaces opened by the clash of governmentalities to imagine new ways to find personal fulfillment, whether that includes marriage or not. The stories tell us of small experiments with the question "how do I conduct myself?" on an individual level, in a time when possibilities are wider than they used to be. I also introduced a new analytic framework that is useful to think with alongside the governmentality of authoritarian neoliberalism: the false dichotomy of the autological subject/genealogical society that liberalism presupposes and projects, and I have shown through individual stories how this dichotomy structures the experiences, thoughts, feelings, and decisions of Saudi individuals navigating marriage. These individual stories center living people rather than states or institutions like Walaa, allowing us to explore emergent meanings around intimacy, marriage, and love in Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

> *"When divorce increases, society's awareness increases. Divorce is not wrong. What is wrong is continuing to engage with things the way they currently are."*

Those are the words of one of my interlocutors, Hanan, and those words capture my sentiment at the end of this research.

My entire project was born out of observing a heightened anxiety around marriage in Saudi Arabia, that manifested in sensationalist discourse in the media, the creation of new institutions and actors, and everyday conversations about the marriages we saw fall apart in front of our own eyes amongst family and friends. There was an understanding that rapid social change has caused ruptures in knowing how to conduct oneself in marriage. Depending on who you talk to, these ruptures run the gamut from anywhere between "women have become loose-tongued" to "social media has ruined everything" to "the decline of tribalism left us with no options but to marry strangers." I have asked whether we should accept these problematizations on their own terms, and argued that we actually need to look beyond them to see how they speak to something else: a clash of governmentalities at the awkward intersection of one version of a state founded on a project of religious nationalism and another version where it implements authoritarian neoliberalism. But when I think of what Halima said, I believe that perhaps we should not look at this as a problem at all.

I have argued that efforts by state-sponsored institutions to fix the Saudi marriage are at best unhelpful and at worst damaging in the shapeshifting ways they prescribe how a "good wife" should conduct herself, and in the absurd pressure they put on her to tolerate, be patient, perform femininity, and make concessions in her marriage. These institutions also deliberately avoid tackling the actual problems that plague Saudi marriages, which range from labor inequalities in household and childcare to financial, mental, sexual, or physical abuse. In this manner, they reveal themselves to be doing little more than seeking to shield marital life from the space and flexibility that the clash of governmentalities can also open up – instead re-inscribing existing patriarchal patterns with multiple and new discursive strategies ranging from Islamic reason, pop psychology, (pseudo-)science, and romantic love. Here one encounters a manifestation of "authoritarian neoliberalism" which paradoxically commands the subject to be free but demands her to shape her freedom in a way that ensures that she is self-governing and not disruptive of the status quo.

Yet, it is quite senseless to hope to shield a specific part of life (marriage) from the very real consequences and manifestations of the clash of governmentalities in domains ranging from the economy, the way "Saudiness" is defined, and Saudi's relationship with the rest of the world and what it hopes to achieve from that. Outside of the narrow discourses of family development institutions, many Saudi individuals are taking advantage of the clash of governmentalities in an effort to reimagine their own paths to fulfillment, either in their intimate lives or in spite of it, whether that be through divesting from marriage altogether, choosing a partner without external interference, or participating in unconventional family arrangements. But so far, these are individual experiments by brave

people who chose to try something new, largely through trial and error and without models to emulate.

So maybe divorce, or the option to pursue it, is the answer after all – because staying in an unhappy marriage definitely is not. As Halima put it, maybe the "problem" is continuing to engage in a marital culture that is proving to be suffocating for many, especially women. Maybe divorce should continue to be the answer until a breaking point is reached – an acceptance that the status quo is not working, and that the solution is not to reinforce patriarchal arrangements that are incompatible with the new reality the clash of governmentalities is creating, but rather in a willingness to experiment with flexibility: flexibility in gender roles and trying new arrangements that at least *attempt* to revolve around both parties' needs for connection, rest, and respect. But when and how will this breaking point be reached?

This research project has attempted to capture what some of the major economic, political, and social changes happening in Saudi Arabia do to marital life. But more change is to come – change that is not in the form of planned megaprojects and grand economic visions. With the coronavirus pandemic and the sharp decline in oil prices happening simultaneously in March 2020, forcing the state's hand in imposing painful austerity measures including tripling value added tax and suspending cost-of-living allowances for public employees, the prospects suddenly look quite bleak and uncertain future for the neoliberal-inspired Vision 2030's (Al Jazeera 2020). What does this mean for the clash of governmentalities and imaginaries of Saudi Arabia as a transformed haven for foreign investors and the project to cosmopolitanize the Saudi citizen? This is a question I hope to answer in future works, *inshallah.*

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