

Love on Girls' Side of the Saudi Divide

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — The dance party in Atheer Jassem al-Othman's living room was in full swing. The guests — about two dozen girls in their late teens — had arrived, and Ms. Othman and her mother were passing around cups of sweet tea and dishes of dates.

About half the girls were swaying and gyrating, without the slightest self-consciousness, among overstuffed sofas, heavy draperies, tables larded with figurines and ornately-covered tissue boxes. Their head-to-toe abayas, balled up and tossed onto chairs, looked like black cloth puddles.

Suddenly, the music stopped, and an 18-year-old named Alia tottered forward.

"Girls? I have something to tell you," Alia faltered, appearing to sway slightly on her high heels. She paused anxiously, and the next words came out in a rush. "I've gotten engaged!" There was a chorus of shrieks at the surprise announcement and Alia burst into tears, as did several of the other girls.

Ms. Othman's mother smiled knowingly and left the room, leaving the girls to their moment of emotion. The group has been friends since they were of middle-school age, and Alia would be the first of them to marry.

A cellphone picture of Alia's fiancé — a 25-year-old military man named Badr — was passed around, and the girls began pestering Alia for the details of her showfa. A showfa — literally, a "viewing" — usually occurs on the day that a Saudi girl is engaged.

A girl's suitor, when he comes to ask her father for her hand in marriage, has the right to see her dressed without her abaya.

In some families, he may have a supervised conversation with her. Ideally, many Saudis say, her showfa will be the only time in a girl's life that she is seen this way by a man outside her family.

The separation between the sexes in Saudi Arabia is so extreme that it is difficult to overstate. Saudi women may not drive, and they must wear black abayas and head coverings in public at all times. They are spirited around the city in cars with tinted windows, attend girls-only schools and university departments, and eat in special "family" sections of cafes and restaurants, which are carefully partitioned from the sections used by single male diners.

Special women-only gyms, women-only boutiques and travel agencies, even a women-only shopping mall, have been established in Riyadh in recent years to serve women who did not previously have access to such places unless they were chaperoned by a male relative.

Playful as they are, girls like Ms. Othman and her friends are well aware of the limits that their conservative society places on their behavior. And, for the most part, they say that they do not seriously question those limits.

Most of the girls say their faith, in the strict interpretation of Islam espoused by the Wahhabi religious establishment here, runs very deep. They argue a bit among themselves about the details — whether it is acceptable to have men on your [Facebook](#) friend list, or whether a male first cousin should ever be able to see you without your face covered — and they peppered this reporter with questions about what the young Saudi men she had met were thinking about and talking about.

But they seem to regard the idea of having a conversation with a man before their showfas and subsequent engagements with very real horror. When they do talk about girls who chat with men online or who somehow find their own fiancés, these stories have something of the quality of urban legends about them: fuzzy in their particulars, told about friends of friends, or "someone in my sister's class."

Well-brought-up unmarried young women here are so isolated from boys and men that when they talk about them, it sometimes sounds as if they are discussing a different species.

Questions for the Fiancé

Later that evening, over fava bean stew, salad, and meat-filled pastries, Alia revealed that she was to be allowed to speak to her fiancé on the phone. Their first phone conversation was scheduled for the following day, she said, and she was so worried about what to say to Badr that she was compiling a list of questions.

"Ask him whether he likes his work," one of her friends suggested. "Men are supposed to love talking about their work."

“Ask him what kind of cellphone he has, and what kind of car,” suggested another. “That way you’ll be able to find out how he spends his money, whether he’s free with it or whether he’s stingy.”

Alia nodded earnestly, dark ringlets bouncing, and took notes. She had been so racked with nerves during her showfa that she had almost dropped the tray of juice her father had asked her to bring in to her fiancé, and she could hardly remember a thing he had said. She was to learn a bit more about him during this next conversation.

According to about 30 Saudi girls and women between ages 15 and 25, all interviewed during December, January and February, it is becoming more and more socially acceptable for young engaged women to speak to their fiancés on the phone, though more conservative families still forbid all contact between engaged couples.

It is considered embarrassing to admit to much strong feeling for a fiancé before the wedding and, before their engagements, any kind of contact with a man is out of the question. Even so, young women here sometimes resort to clandestine activities to chat with or to meet men, or simply to catch a rare glimpse into the men’s world.

Though it is as near to hand as the offices they pass each morning on the way to college, or the majlis, a traditional home reception room, where their fathers and brothers entertain friends, the men’s world is so remote from them that some Saudi girls resort to disguise in order to venture into it.

At Prince Sultan University, where Atheer Jassem al-Othman, 18, is a first-year law student, a pair of second-year students recently spent a mid-morning break between classes showing off photographs of themselves dressed as boys.

In the pictures, the girls wore thobes, the ankle-length white garments traditionally worn by Saudi men, and had covered their hair with the male headdresses called shmaghs. One of the girls had used an eyeliner pencil to give herself a grayish, stubble-like mist along her jaw line. Displayed on the screens of the two girls’ cellphones, the photographs evoked little exclamations of congratulation as they were passed around.

“A lot of girls do it,” said an 18-year-old named Sara al-Tukhaifi who explained that a girl and her friends might cross-dress, sneaking thobes out of a brother’s closet, then challenge each other to enter the Saudi male sphere in various ways, by walking nonchalantly up to the men-only counter in a McDonalds, say, or even by driving.

“It’s just a game,” Ms. Tukhaifi said, although detention by the religious police is always a possibility. “I haven’t done it myself, but those two are really good at it. They went into a store and pretended to be looking at another girl — they even got her to turn her face away.”

Grinning, Ms. Tukhaifi mimicked the gesture, pressing her face into the corner of her hijab with exaggerated pretend modesty while her classmate Shaden giggled. Saudi newspapers often lament the rise of rebellious behavior among young Saudis. There are reports of a recent spate of ugly confrontations between youths and the religious police, and of a supposed increase in same-sex love affairs among young people frustrated at the strict division between the genders.

And certainly, practices like “numbering” — where a group of young men in a car chase another car they believe to contain young women, and try to give the women their phone number via Bluetooth, or by holding a written number up to the window — have become a very visible part of Saudi urban life.

Flirting by Phone

A woman can’t switch her phone’s Bluetooth feature on in a public place without receiving a barrage of the love poems and photos of flowers and small children which many Saudi men keep stored on their phones for purposes of flirtation. And last year, Al Arabiya television reported that some young Saudis have started buying special “electronic belts,” which use Bluetooth technology to discreetly beam the wearer’s cellphone number and e-mail address at passing members of the opposite sex.

Ms. Tukhaifi and Shaden know of girls in their college who have passionate friendships, possibly even love affairs, with other girls but they say that this, like the cross-dressing, is just a “game” born of frustration, something that will inevitably end when the girls in question become engaged. And they and their friends say that they find the experience of being chased by boys in cars to be frightening, and insist that they do not know any girl who has actually spoken to a boy who contacted her via Bluetooth.

“If your family found out you were talking to a man online, that’s not quite as bad as talking to him on the phone,” Ms. Tukhaifi explained. “With the phone, everyone can agree that is forbidden, because Islam forbids a stranger to hear your voice. Online he only sees your writing, so that’s slightly more open to interpretation.

“One test is that if you’re ashamed to tell your family something, then you know for sure it’s wrong,” Ms. Tukhaifi continued. “For a while I had Facebook friends who were boys — I didn’t e-mail with them or anything, but they asked me to ‘friend’ them and so I did. But then I thought about my family and I took them off the list.”

Ms. Tukhaifi and Shaden both spoke admiringly of the religious police, whom they see as the guardians of perfectly normal Saudi social values, and Shaden boasted lightly about an older brother who has become multazim, very strict in his faith, and who has been seeing to it that all her family members become more punctilious in their religious observance. “Praise be to God, he became multazim when he was in ninth grade,” Shaden recalled, fondly. “I remember how he started to grow his beard — it was so wispy when it started — and to wear a shorter thobe.” Saudi men often grow their beards long and wear their thobes cut above the ankles as signals of their religious devotion.

“I always go to him when I have problems,” said Shaden who, like many of the young Saudi women interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition that her last name be omitted. “And he’s not too strict — he still listens to music sometimes. I asked him once, ‘You do everything right and yet you’re listening to music?’ He said, ‘I know music is haram, and inshallah, with time I will be able to stop listening to music too.’” Haram means forbidden, and inshallah means “God willing.”

She added, “I told him, ‘I want a husband like you.’”

Separated From Cousins

Shaden lives in a large walled compound in a prosperous Riyadh suburb; her father’s brothers live with their families in separate houses within the compound, and the families share a common garden and pool. Shaden and several of her male cousins grew up playing together constantly, tearing around the pool together during the summer, and enjoying shared vacations.

Now that, at 17, she is considered an adult Saudi woman and must confine herself to the female sphere, she sometimes misses their company.

“Until I was in 9th or 10th grade, we used to put a carpet on the lawn and we would take hot milk and sit there with my boy cousins,” Shaden recalled, at home one February evening, in front of the television. She was serving a few female guests a party dip of her own invention, a concoction of yogurt, mayonnaise and thyme.

“But my mom and their mom got uncomfortable with it, and so we stopped,” she said. “Now we sometimes talk on MSN, or on the phone, but they shouldn’t ever see my face.”

“My sister and I sometimes ask my mom, ‘Why didn’t you breast-feed our boy cousins, too?’” Shaden continued.

She was referring to a practice called milk kinship that predates Islam and is still common in the Persian Gulf countries. A woman does not have to veil herself in front of a man she nursed as an infant, and neither do her biological children. The woman’s biological children and the children she has nursed are considered “milk siblings” and are prohibited from marrying.

“If my mom had breast-fed my cousins, we could sit with them, and it would all be much easier,” Shaden said. She turned back to the stack of DVDs she had been rifling through, and held up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, the version with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet, a film she says she has seen dozens of times.

“It’s a bit like our society, I think,” Shaden said of late Georgian England. “It’s dignified, and a bit strict. Doesn’t it remind you a little bit of Saudi Arabia? It’s my favorite DVD.”

Shaden sighed, deeply. “When Darcy comes to Elizabeth and says ‘I love you’ — that’s exactly the kind of love I want.”