Watching Oprah from Behind the Veil

by Jeff Jacoby

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She has been called the most influential woman of our time. They are among the most disempowered women on Earth.

She is a self-made billionaire, with worldwide interests that range from television to publishing to education. They are forbidden to get a job without the permission of a male “guardian,” and the overwhelming majority of them are unemployed.

She has a face that is recognized the world over. They cannot leave home without covering their faces and obscuring their figures in cloaks.

She is famous for her message of confidence, self-improvement, and spiritual uplift. They are denied the right to make the simplest decisions, treated by law like children who cannot be trusted with authority over their own well-being.

She, of course, is Oprah Winfrey. They are the multitude of Saudi Arabian women whose devotion to her has made *The Oprah Winfrey Show*—broadcast twice daily on a Dubai-based satellite channel—the highest-rated English-language program in the kingdom.

A recent *New York Times* story—“Veiled Saudi Woman Are Discovering an Unlikely Role Model in Oprah Winfrey”—explored the appeal of America’s iconic talk show host for the marginalized women of the Arabian peninsula.

“In a country where the sexes are rigorously separated, where topics like sex and race are rarely discussed openly, and where a strict code of public morality is enforced by religious police,” the *Times* noted, Ms. Winfrey provides many young Saudi woman with new ways of thinking about the way local taboos affect their lives. . . . Some women here say Ms. Winfrey’s assurances to her viewers—that no matter how restricted or even abusive their circumstances may be, they can take control in small ways and create lives of value—help them find meaning in their cramped, veiled existence.”

And so they avidly analyze Oprah’s clothes and hairstyles, and circulate “dog-eared copies” of her magazine *O*, and write letters telling her of their dreams and disappointments. Many undoubtedly dream of doing what she did—freeing themselves from the shackling circumstances into which they were born and rising as high as their talents can take them.

But the television star never faced the obstacles that confront her Saudi fans.

That is not to minimize the daunting odds Oprah overcame. She was born to an unwed teenage housemaid in pre-civil rights Mississippi and spent her first years in such poverty that at times she wore dresses made from potato sacks. She was sexually molested as a child and ran away from home as a young teen. It was a squalid beginning, one that would have defeated many people not blessed with Oprah’s intelligence and drive and natural gifts.

But whatever else may be said of Oprah’s life, it was never crippled by Wahhabism, the fundamentalist strain of Islam that dominates Saudi Arabia and immiserates Saudi women in ruthless gender apartheid. Strict sex segregation is the law of the land. Women are forbidden to drive, to vote, to freely marry or divorce, to appear in public without a husband or other male guardian, or to attend university without their father’s permission. They can be jailed—or worse—for riding in a car with a man to whom they are unrelated. Their testimony in court carries less weight than a man’s. They cannot even file a criminal complaint without a male guardian’s permission—not even in cases of domestic abuse, when it is their “guardian” who has attacked them.

Could Oprah herself have surmounted such pervasive repression?

Some Saudi women manage to find jobs, but Wahhabist opposition is fierce. In 2006, Youssef Ibrahim reported in the *New York Sun* on Nabil Ramadan, the owner of a fast food restaurant in Ranoosh who hired two women to take telephone orders. Within twenty-four hours, the religious police had him arrested and shut down the restaurant for “promoting lewdness.” Ramadan was sentenced by a religious court to ninety lashes on his back and buttocks.

Is it any wonder that women trapped in a culture that treats them so wretchedly idolize someone like Oprah, who epitomizes so much that is absent from their lives? A nation that degrades its women degrades itself, and Oprah’s message is an antidote to degradation. Why do they love her? Because all the lies of the Wahhabists cannot stifle the truth she embodies: The blessings of liberty were made for women, too.