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# Qatar: Then & Now

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Finally, we thank the writers, who have bravely let their words reveal their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Writing always takes courage and we are only the facilitators – they are the true storytellers.

Editors,

Carol Henderson  
Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar, PhD

# **Qatar: Then and Now**

## *Introduction*

The personal essay form has been in circulation for over two thousand years, inviting the reader to eavesdrop on the writer's mind as it meanders on a given topic or issue. The success of the first collection, *Qatar Narratives*, has ignited interest in writing within the Doha community, offering a platform to discuss what matters most. We have chosen to continue with first person essays because they allow research into the self—opening spaces for honesty, unashamed subjectivity, and exploration of how the writer experiences the world. The principles of good essay writing do not vary from strong writing in any genre: cultivating an engaging voice, illuminating through concrete example, and transporting the reader from an individual to a universal perspective.

This second volume is an invitation to all the writers to pause and reflect on the many changes happening both in the Gulf region as well as within Qatar. These opportunities are much needed for our workshop participants, many of whom are undergraduate students from across institutions in Qatar. They are a 'hinge generation,' between tradition and modernity, and perhaps most acutely aware of the challenges inherent in juggling the competing demands of familial, cultural, and professional obligations.

When looking at the past, we often succumb to the temptation to view the world through a romanticized or nostalgic lens, where the past is simpler, happier or easier than the present. In the workshops we held with writers included in this second volume, we found a tension and awareness that, yes, while social relationships were perhaps more easily maintained prior to urbanization in Qatar, there were also significant challenges in everyday life, thirty or fifty years ago. Advances in education, health care, technology, and women's role in society are all part of the new era, the era of reform and progress. As societal roles shift and globalization encroaches on the familiar, our participants reflect on their access to educational opportunities, lifestyle shifts, and future professions.

These essays offer glimpses into various parts of society in Qatar,

which are otherwise unavailable to the entire population; essayists comment on customs at the female wedding, urbanization and sense of place, and shifting dynamics within the private spaces of family. Others show us the mixed emotions sparked by progress as they balance the new gains with recent losses. These writers, in conversation with themselves, share their inner thoughts, conflicts, and triumphs—and confirm the diversity and depth within Qatar's borders.

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**then**  
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## The Sidra Tree

*Saad Rashid Al Matwi*

It is a Thursday afternoon. The weather is pleasant; the northern wind is cool while the sun is shining with warmth. Spring has always been my favorite season; it reminds me of the days when I used to play with sand in our backyard in our old house in Al Sadd. My grandmother used to say that our old house was one of the first houses to be built in the Al Sadd area. My family moved there in the early 1960s and we lived there until a few years ago. This house was renovated and expanded several times. Since the time we left this house, I hadn't come back until now.

Today I go back to the old house to meet one of my childhood friends. As he is late, I walk into my old house that is empty now. I always played in the sand here and tried to build a small house or a castle. I walk around to the backyard. Over there is the sheepfold where my grandmother used to keep her sheep; one of my daily duties was to take care of them. The fold is empty now. I walk toward the kitchen slowly, the voice of my grandmother still my mind and calling me loudly.

“SAAD...SAAD come to me now.”

The kitchen door is closed, yet I still remember the trick for opening it. It works this time too. Our kitchen, also empty, was my grandmother own territory; no one was allowed to do anything, or to move anything without her permission. She knew every spot in her space well, knew how to maneuver, and knew the place of each tool and item. Our kitchen was typical, with two ovens, two Fridges, and shelves for species, sugar, salt, etc. The special thing about our kitchen is that it had three doors that are still there. One leads to the backyard, the second to what we used to call “*Alhoosh Al Shamali*” (the northern yard), which is the older division of our house. The last door leads to “*Al hoosh Al Janobi*” (the southern yard). In the middle of the southern yard stood a huge Sidra tree as old as our house.

Once upon a time, this tree used to be wrapped with green leaves during the spring. Today it stands naked. In the space between the three doors, my grandmother laid her carpet made of palms fronds and sat. Like a queen sitting on her throne, she settled on the ground, sun reflecting on her golden *batoola*, emphasizing a wide smile beneath it. She wore orange colored

*jalabia*. I always loved this color on her, because it made her shine like the sun. Now I can almost smell her Arabian coffee. She had a special recipe for making coffee; it had an amazing flavor. I have never since drunk Arabian coffee like hers, and never will.

I hear her voice again—calling on me—taking me to that time when she gave me orders and I obeyed.

“Saad, take these bags of bread to our neighbors. It’s Thursday. Did you forget?”

I see myself taking the bags and walking in an automatic manner through the southern yard to the *majlis*. The yard now is covered with dust and the ground is covered with leaves from the Sidra tree. I pass through our *majlis* toward the outer door. I enter the *majlis* and cross it to get to the outside door that takes me to the neighborhood. I can hear my uncle’s voice bragging: “This door was never closed.” It is closed this time I visit. The wooden door squeaks, the carpets are worn out, and the rain has leaked and damaged the roof. The males of the family used to gather here every day, especially on Fridays. Memories start to come into my mind, memories of my uncles sitting inside entertaining guests. I hear voices of my relatives and my family’s friends, approaching after performing the *Al jama’a* prayer, and I am running back and forth to the kitchen to bring the dishes for the Friday lunch.

Taking the old path I walked every Thursday, I follow my small footsteps and walk out of the door and cross the football field opposite our house. The football field was not a proper field but a space covered with sand, yet it was more than enough for us. I walk, just like I always did, to Umi Metha’s house.

She was as old as my grandmother and her house is the closest to ours, with only the field separating the two. I remember how each time the ball flew over her walls and fell inside her house, she would deflate it before giving it back, and shout, “Boys...come and take your ball.”

I walk toward the house as I used to do, but there is no house standing there, only a huge white wall. I don’t remember that there was such a wall. I raise my head, and I see now a five-floor building, I walk around the building and I find a glass door. This door is facing the street not the field as the old door used to.

I turn left, as I always used to, toward Umi Shama’s house. She was even older than my grandmother; she lived in this house alone with her daughter, her husband having died years earlier. When I visited them, they used to give me candies and chocolates and always asked me about my studies. I approach the house and find that the wall is destroyed and the house is under construction. There are no human being inside. I go inside to the living room, and there are no candies and chocolates this time; there is only concrete and cement. I go back to the street looking for something or someone. And I find nothing familiar. I see people, workers from south Asia, North Africa, Europe, and all around the world.

I walk back and retreat into our old house through the *majlis* door. But

the door is closed. I open it and walk toward the yard looking for my grandmother. She is not there sitting on her rug, not even standing in the kitchen. My grandmother passed away ten years ago, but I can still smell her oud in her bedroom and in the southern yard. Can a person die and leave his smell behind? Her odor brings back feelings of peace and security. I long for her. I shout, calling for her. I want to say, “*Uma* no one is there... everything has changed”

No reply. But I can hear her voice, coming from within me, saying: “*Ya olde* (Son)... Our hearts change, thus the world changed; our country is not as it used to be.”

Is she talking to me or am I imagining? My cell phone rings and brings me back to reality. Was I hallucinating?

It is Khalid, one of my childhood friends, calling. We were supposed to meet at the football field. I leave the house and there he is, standing in the same place as in the old days. He’s not a small kid playing football anymore. He has changed. He is a father now. He greets me, and says, “Do you remember when Umi Metha, may God rest her soul, used to deflate our balls.”

I nod yes and smile back unable to add anything.

Touring the area like strangers, we notice that the new modern buildings clash with our old houses and often with each other. You can sense that they belong to people with different interests. Some have been built quickly to start generating revenues; others are of designs and materials that were copied or brought from somewhere around the world, but surely not from our country. I remember the old houses; they shared similar designs, and were made of local materials. They were brownish in color and didn’t stand out, because people didn’t care about that. Now, I see different colors from light blue to dark orange. All these colors show the competition that exists between the buildings’ owners, with each trying to outshine the others.

The neighborhood has lost its meaning of unity and homogeneity. Previously a neighborhood was made up of the same tribe, and each house had an extended family living in it. The houses stood next to each other, and their doors were always open. It was safe, as no strangers lived among them. Today the same area is made up of buildings and houses; the residents barely know each other. The buildings have become taller, the houses bigger, but our hearts have become smaller.

Khalid and I catch up and then he tells me he has to get back to his family. He excuses himself and leaves.

I watch him walking away and the memories are enveloping me again. My old house is the last one to stand in this neighborhood. Buildings now surround it. Outside its wall and behind its closed doors, I can still see the Sidra tree standing still. I always thought of the Sidra as similar to my grandmother and as part of me, part of myself. It was the only thing that

I wished to take with me. I still remember my grandmother saying before she died, "I will not leave my house." I can see now why she refused to leave; she was rooted in this house like this tree. Can we be like this tree? It has extended roots in the earth, but its branches never stop reaching for the sky. Can we keep our heart rooted to our values and our culture, and still be modern?

When we moved I couldn't take the Sidra with me, but I planted its seeds in our new house. The Sidra there is not as big as this one, but I'm sure it will be one day. While I'm staring at the Sidra, I hear the call for *Al Magrab* prayer coming from the mosque to my old house. With a smile on my face and in my heart, I feel secure again; this is the only thing that has not changed in my neighborhood.

## Kneeling by my Grandmother

*Ghina Elkasti*

It took my mother sixteen years to completely unpack and adapt to the fact that she would be staying in a new country, living a new life away from home.

“When are you coming back from that desert?” my grandmother would say, with a trembling voice filled with hope. Year after year, her daughter replied, “Soon.”

I was two years old when my parents came to Doha; my dad had a new job in the catering department in Hamad Hospital; my mother wanted a better life for her children away from civil war. My teenage sisters and brother, however, were resistant to change: moving from a relatively big home situated in a valley with only two other houses, where they could see the Mediterranean sea and play between pine trees, to a small apartment surrounded by dust and sand and a portable wooden mosque. They had to change their schools and leave behind their French language education for an education entirely in Arabic, and move from mixed schools of boys and girls to segregated buildings.

Unlike them, my younger brother and I grew up in Doha as if it were our home town; we went to a private school for twelve years with students who held the same nationality as we did, and we spent summer vacations back in Lebanon. My sisters always mentioned, as I was growing up, that I was lucky to have a stable life. I never had to change friends, never changed schools except for high school. But they never knew that I was missing something, family. I was missing the memories that my sisters cherished—their close relationships with cousins, uncles, and aunts, and, most of all, a relationship with Grandma. During our trips to Lebanon, my parents spent a lot of time with my grandparents and family members. My sisters went out with their cousins, enjoying places that held memories for them, while I spent my time exploring a new town and comparing it to where I was living my childhood—one Friday on the coast of Doha, building a castle of sand, to a Sunday morning in a coffee shop or restaurant by the Ouwali river, where we played in its cold running water, jumping on rocks, and hiding between the trees.

Few of my family members visited us in Doha, except my Grandma, who came to visit us more often than we went to see her in Lebanon. The first time my grandma came to Doha, when I was six years old, my mom pushed

me to move closer, to let her hug me and hold my cheeks tight to rain over them with kisses; yet I had never seen her in a picture or even heard her voice through every Friday's noon call that my mother used to make to her. With fast steps I walked back to hold my mother's arm, standing close beside her, hiding behind her blue skirt, while my older sisters embraced my grandma, kneeling on the floor close to the couch where she rested after her first airplane flight. She took off her *hijab* and, with a small comb from her purse, rearranged her short dyed hair that she rarely let show, and removed her shoes that were as small as my foot size when I was 13 years old.

Every evening went the same way, with my sisters sitting close on the floor and my grandma telling the same stories that used to entertain them back when they lived in Lebanon, in a time when electricity was unavailable at night for turning on a TV or a radio. Although I used to sit away from them, pretending that I was playing with my dolls, I was still eager to hear the stories that she used to tell and my sisters still love to hear even after growing up.

Since I hadn't had the chance to have this grandmother/granddaughter relationship, I have always felt that she was only my sisters' grandma. However each time she came for a month or more, she used to tailor me a skirt or sew me a sweater and while doing that she would ask me to come closer to check on the fit.

Every time she came, my sisters reminded her of her stories, and laughed at how these stories were fantasies that they used to believe were true, stories that look now like a traditional Arabic edition of a Disney movie or cartoon. But I couldn't remind her of anything, not even the clothes and sweaters because they didn't fit anymore. I envied my sisters because they had spent more time with my grandma when they were young than I had. They had this strong bond with her that I didn't share.

Years passed and my grandmother's visits became more frequent; my mom had to take care of her. In the summer we used to go to see her during our vacation and in winter she used to come visit us. When I was fifteen, I was the only daughter left at home; my sisters had gotten married and moved out. That year I didn't notice her busy with needles.

"Teta," I asked, "So no sweater this year?" I felt shy, spoke softly. She looked at me and smiled, pointing at her thick eyeglasses.

"No, my dear, I spent more than half of my life tailoring, and now I have quit; plus I have old fashioned designs for you that you don't need."

This was the start of the first private conversation I had with my grandma. For me, sewing was harder than solving an integration problem in mathematics, and I was amazed by how my grandma, who never finished high school, would do a much better job than I ever could of calculating and measuring sizes and creating different designs and shapes. Tailoring was her education that she enjoyed the most after she left school.

“It was 1939,” she told me. “I was twelve years old when I quit school; my parents forced me to wear *hijab* and even to cover my face with a black veil, giving no reason except tradition. I hated covering up and I used to take it all off as soon as I vanished from the house’s balcony view—until a small stupid fight with my sister, which led her to tell on me. And I was then asked to choose to stay home or wear the cover and go to school. Innocently and not realizing the circumstances and only thinking that I didn’t want to look awkward among the students whose parents weren’t strict like mine, I chose to stay home. A young girl at that age, in that time had nothing to do at home except housework; this is when your great grandma suggested that I learn tailoring, always pushing me to learn anything, keeping me busy so that I would not get married early. Marriage was a huge responsibility that my grandma knew I would not be able to handle at such young age, and those years, we believed, should be lived for me, for my interests. Four years later, however, your grandfather showed up.”

She continued her story, and I found myself kneeling on the floor beside her, exactly as my sisters had done before, listening carefully to her. And I started comparing her story to mine. When I moved to a national high school in Qatar, I learned more about the religious view of *hijab*. I hadn’t known a lot before, in the private school that I went to earlier. Because of the diversity of students’ religions, there were no classes offered to learn Qur’an or Islamic shari’a.

Her story made me realize how the environment around me affects my decisions; how I suffered from the thought that I should wear the *hijab* when I was in a private school where other girls didn’t and how I made my own decision to wear it when I changed to a school where all the girls wore it. She felt conflicted the way I had when she was my age. Only old ladies had to cover up when she was a school girl and she didn’t want to; tradition made it hard for her to decide, and the environment made it impossible to adapt if she looked different.

“You are lucky to live in an environment that relates traditions and values to religion,” my grandma said. “The awareness you have today for religion is better than what we had sixty years ago.”

An hour went by as we sat and talked about changes and her memories of when she was my age. I no longer felt different from my sisters. I finally got to kneel by my grandma and listen to one of her stories; this tale was different, though. It was about real life, not fantasies, and this made me feel more special. I had longed my whole life for this special relationship with my grandma. And finally I have it.



# Keeping Faith

*Autumn Watts*

I wonder what my grandmother would think of Qatar. I think she would have liked the white mosques and the blue sea; the Qatari family ethic would have made sense to her, as would their dedication to God. She would have looked for similarities instead of difference. A devout Christian from Kansas, she believed strongly in the traditional roles of men and women. She believed that, besides a commitment to God, taking care of her family was her most important calling.

She had lived a sheltered girlhood in a quiet town with red brick streets. When she met my grandfather, an educated Episcopalian minister, she was dazzled by his charisma and worldliness. He had been to college and travelled to Europe, and sang church hymns with a beautifully trained voice.

But this was 1940. My grandmother was naïve. She could no more guess that she would be heading into a loveless marriage than she could predict her future granddaughter would one day live in a country farther than even her husband had travelled.

Whatever the terms of that marriage, my two aunts and my father were born. In the early years my grandparents lived without a house, sleeping on parish floors and migrating westward from church to church, until they reached Nevada. In that fierce desert climate they bought their first and only home, shaded with peeling eucalyptus and a stubborn mulberry tree over a dry yard that yielded tough grass and recalcitrant roses. My grandfather preached at a local church and my grandmother taught high school English. When her husband brought home a male friend, she ignored them both. She raised her son and her daughters, and coaxed roses in the sandy yard.

One of her daughters left for marriage, the other for the convent, but her son would return home after his wife (my mother) divorced him. From visiting my father on weekends, I remember cornbread and sausage soup, my grandfather's rich voice resonating down the hallway, the paper taste of unblessed sacrament, my grandmother's comb picking through the wet tangles of my hair as I sat on the floor against her swollen knees.

When a stroke crippled her larynx and left her voiceless, my grandmother retired from teaching, but she continued tutoring for free. She wrote books for children about love and God and finding home, and gave them away. She wrote

long letters and mailed them to her friends in Kansas. After I left home, she wrote letters to me.

I rarely wrote back; I was busy. I had a fiancé and a full-time job, and I had started college. But my grandmother never complained. She stitched a quilt with a poem she wrote along the border, with my name in the center next to my fiancé's.

My fiancé would suffer a debilitating mental illness, dissolving our marriage before it began. But before that happened, I left for the capital to intern at the Smithsonian. It was fall, and the trees flushed with color. I collected a leaf in every dazzling shade and sent them to my grandmother.

She died the day before my letter arrived. My father buried the leaves with her.

Years later I returned to the East Coast for graduate school. Four years after that, on a whim, I accepted a temporary contract teaching literature in a country I couldn't pronounce. I would fall in love with Qatar and decide to stay there; I would learn how to correctly say its name.

And here I am. In some ways I've come full circle: from desert to desert. But instead of a humble, shaded house in a softly decaying street, with roses that refuse to flourish, I live in a highrise apartment with a view of the sea. Like my grandmother, I've moved away from home to a foreign place; but unlike her, I followed no one.

I am the first woman of my family to work abroad. I've moved farther than any of them; I earn a higher salary; I have travelled to places my grandparents never dreamed of. I live in a multicultural Muslim city and I have friends of different beliefs and backgrounds. Of my family, I am the only woman who has lived alone and by her own means.

But for my grandmother, raising a family was the best part. We were her heart and her center. In her advancing age, she had hoped to see me married with a family of my own. I suspect my solitary life now would have struck her as sterile and lonesome. She would have worried about my encroaching middle age, about children forever unborn. She would have been proud of me. She would have pitied me.

In her seventies, my grandmother divorced my grandfather. However, of her own volition she continued living with him in the same house, cooking his meals, and tending to his needs. When diabetes robbed him of one leg, and he grew bedridden and senile, she remained his primary caretaker. She would wake in the dark hours of the night, rise from her narrow bed, lever herself to her walker (after two knee replacements, walking was both painful and difficult) and shuffle in her tiny steps down the hallway, until she reached the cavernous darkness of his room.

Although my grandfather lived with us, he occasionally had minor surgeries, and afterwards, he would recuperate in a nearby nursing home with a full medical staff. By then, my grandfather's full dementia had left him incoherent, confused and often weeping. During these internments, my grandmother would wake at dawn and begin to walk in the early morning before the days' rising heat. Step by tiny step, she would cross eight shadeless blocks and one major intersection to visit her ex-husband.

My grandmother lived her faith every day; it surrounded her like air; she breathed it. I am of no faith, but still it surrounds me. It embraces my friends who pray with the sun's movement; and my ears, when the call to prayer rings throughout the city. All my life, it seems, I've lived outside faith yet at the same time within it.

Perhaps it is faith that drives a woman to follow her husband, even beyond life, even without love. It's a faith beyond my experience, although my grandmother seemed to understand it deep within her bones. But now, writing this, I realize my life, too, has been faith driven. Faith in self has brought me far from my family's territory. It has drawn me to a country few Americans understand, or can locate on a map. It keeps me here. It gives me courage to live my solitary life without husband or children; it promises me fulfilment and meaning; and it offers me choice.

In many ways, I see Qatar being shaped by the faith of women. From Her Highness who has transformed education, to female citizens who redefine "traditional" and "modern" on their own terms. Expatriot women like myself arrive drawn by a better salary, a better career, or for new experience and broadened knowledge; while women from circumstances more difficult than mine, with harder choices, work as nannies to support their own children from abroad. All these women defy limitations; they negotiate complex identities, and somehow balance them. They may delay raising a family, or raise no family; and they may be supported or not supported by their own grandmothers in this decision--grandmothers who may be proud of them or may pity them, or both.

I wonder about these grandmothers. I wonder if they see themselves in their granddaughters—these daughters and mothers who live such completely different lives, who fling themselves to all corners of the world, or into new worlds without leaving home. I have my grandmother's love of writing, as well as her thick ankles and possibly her bad knees. My body is a map of our shared genetic landscape. Would she, given my choices, have also chosen my life? Would she have served herself; would she have been happier for it?

I miss her letters. But my grandmother has gone farther now than I have ever travelled, to a place beyond my reach. She sends no answers.

## Through my Grandmother's Eyes and Mine

*Mohammed Fehaid Al Marri*

I went to my grandmother over the weekend and asked her, "Tell me about your life, grandma. Was it comfortable or hard? What do you remember from it?"

"Come here, boy, sit next to me." She told me, "Listen, I was born in a small village called Swoda in Saudi Arabia. These villages had houses and some parks but didn't include any hospitals. It was in the middle of the desert. My own mother was very tired because the time was coming for me to come into this life. My father took my mum to *al daua*, a woman who helped other women have children."

"My mum arrived at her house at 4 am and I came to this life at 4:30 am. When I was four years old, my mom taught me how to pray, clean the house and cook – by the time I was 12 years old, I knew how to be responsible for everything. And I was married at that time. Before I got married I asked my mother, 'How old will my husband be?' She told me, '18 years old.'"

"You mean you were 12 and he was 18?" I asked my grandma.

"Yes, that's right," she said.

"Did you meet him before marriage, grandma?"

"No, I didn't. After a few years, we had two beautiful girls: your mom and your aunt. My husband's work transferred him to a city. After arriving in the city, I sent your mom and your aunt to school, and from that moment I realized that everything would change."

"How?" I asked, full of curiosity.

"Your mother met her husband in a shop when she went to buy something. He saw her and then came to my husband and told him he wanted to marry her. He then went back to continue his studies in Egypt and sent your mom a lot of money from there. After some years, they finally married."

"Really," I exclaimed.

"Yes," she said. "And they could buy so many things and you can buy so many things now. We couldn't when I was young."

"Yes," I said. "We can buy computers, phones, televisions and radios."

"We had none of that," my grandma said. "I used to communicate with my mum by mail or see her once a week. Now you have everything you need."

She went on. "Year after year everything changed for the better in our life here. The government tries to make people's lives more comfortable and it does. The government builds a lot of facilities, like clubs, schools, airports, hotels, hospitals and shops. There is everything any person could want to be happy. And there is the university here."

"Qatar University is like any university in the world," I tell my grandma. "I am very happy since I have joined it."

"Really," she said. "That is good."

I told her that everything I need, everything that is necessary for me to learn engineering and all the skills I need, I can get right there at the university.

"I am very happy because I don't feel lonely or freaky," I tell her. "I don't have to go to Egypt or some other place to study. I like to spend time with my friends. I don't have to be like other students who study abroad and only get to see their families on holidays. They have to live alone, with all different people and not be in their homes with their families."

"That is good," she says. "Very good."

"I study Arabic drumming and I love to swim," I tell her.

"Yes you swim every week or you'll be like a fish out of water," she says. "You need to swim to live."

"That is true," I say. "School is a great place. We meet different people from different places. School is the source of information and where we learn how to deal with things and other people. We have a big social world at school."

The last thing I want to mention and I tell it to my grandmother and to anyone else. I say it proudly, anytime, anywhere. My country is paradise for me; if I travel to another place for more than one month, I feel like a person lost in the desert without a guide, a sick person, a man without a heart.

My country is everything to me - like a girlfriend that I can never leave.

## A Letter to my Grandmother

*Hissa Abdullah Ibrahim Al Maadeed*

Dear Grandmother,

Yesterday marked ten years since your death. To honor your kindness and love, I spent my day recapturing my memories of you, holding the radio that never left your hands, and flipping through your photo album. The photos took me back twenty years, to a life much simpler than today's life, yet very fulfilling.

There I was: a three-year-old girl in a white dress covered by a long black scarf made of cashmere fabric known as *bikhmag*, decorated with beautiful traditional golden designs around the head opening. I was playing in the neighborhood with other girls wearing similar customs and boys wearing long *thoub* and small traditional caps on their heads, *tagya*. I can see the joy on my innocent face and feel the happiness beating in my small heart as I jumped and skipped, trying to show off my beautiful *bikhmag*. I can see myself running around a circle of children, with a small stone clutched in my petite hand as if it was a precious jewel that I did not want to let go of. Eventually I had to; that is the rule of the game *tag tagya*, a traditional game in which children form a circle and one of them runs outside the circle with a small stone which he/she has to place behind another child, who becomes the next "hunter" (player) while the other players energetically sing joyful songs.

I also saw myself with you visiting one of our neighbors, an old kind lady named Um Majid, whose husband was the head of the pearl divers known as *al nokhitha*. In those days, pearl diving was the major line of business in the Gulf region. Divers would be in the sea for months in search of pearls, risking their lives to secure their income. In those days, technology was not available, so divers dove into the dangerous sea with only a clip on their noses, net baskets to collect the pearls, and their strong faith in God to strengthen them in the mysterious deep dark waters. If they got lucky, they would find Al Dana, the most precious pearl in the sea. After collecting a good quantity of pearls, they would set off to produce pearl jewels in India, the hub for Asian traders at that era. After producing pearl earrings, necklaces, and rings, they would sell them in Qatar or other countries of the region. It did not take long for Japanese pearl farms to successfully enter the market, which sadly left Abu

Majed (Um Majed's husband) without a job. The cultured pearl, a copy of the natural pearls, was sold at cheap prices and meant the end for the pearl diving business in the Gulf region.

Thinking of you, I kept collecting pieces of the past in my memory, with agony and a slight heartache. One of the pieces was about our beloved neighbors who were a huge part of our family. We always visited them, sent them food, and spent time with them. Um Majid, Um Jassim, and others were always there for us—in our celebrations and sorrows, sharing our happiness and sadness. I do not remember their doors ever being closed, or ours. That is probably because the neighborhood was so safe, we as children were always there wandering and never felt endangered. Stories of kidnappers and thieves, in those days, were only myth stories to entertain. At Um Majed's house, I could clearly see a group of ladies wearing black sheer cover over their daily clothes, known as *abbaya* and decorated with a gold strip. The ladies' faces were covered with a shiny veil face or *batoola* that gave a glimpse of their rough yet kind eyes.

A picture of a house made of clay popped up in my mind repeatedly; a house that does not exist anymore, your house. It was a one-floor house with three bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. The rooms were built around an open area or *hawy*. There was not any toilet in your house, but a small hole in a corner of the *hawy*; beside the hole there was a water container for users to clean with. Located in the *hawy* too was a water well, from which we used to drink, shower, and cook. This house held us together as one strong happy family. In those days, family ties were pure. We shared many meals together, from early breakfasts to mid lunch and late dinners. We would gather every evening, fighting over the wood stool seat to listen to one of your precious stories, stories that had a moral significance and that we grew to inhabit unconsciously in our lives.

One of the stories that I adored, *The Grasshopper and the Bird*, or “*Yaradah o Asfoor*,” was about luck. As a child, I was naïve enough to think that the story was merely about a grasshopper and a bird; little did I know that *Asfoor* and *Yarada* are names of actual humans! You also told us about generosity and honesty from the stories from the Holy Quran and of our beloved Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him). When I remember the way you used to tell us stories, I get a sense of joy, thrill and a flare of sadness.

We were living in an electronic-free area with no TVs, computers, or even air conditioners. The only electronic tool was your small black radio with a long aerial. You were so attached to that radio. I do not blame you; it was like the entertainer in every house, broadcasting news, Quran readings, the Prophet's sayings, and the old Qatari songs like *Al Mradaah*, played on special occasions including Eid. It is true that with the absence of air conditioners we felt hot most of the time, but the love and kindness of the surrounding environment made us forget that feeling.

I still remember the place where we went to learn how to read and write and our only teacher, *al mtawaa*. Girls used to gather around *al mtawaa* every morning to read Quran and to learn the Prophet's sayings and traditional poems. Boys, on the other hand, used to go to a man teacher, "*al mtawaa* for the same educational material. *al mtawaa's* and *al mtawaa's* houses were our schools, and their wooden canes our punishment.

Grandma, I wish you had lived to see our life today. It is totally different from the old days. Kids play different games and wear different cloths. The *bikhnag* became a custom worn only in Garangao, an event in Ramadan. The three year-old girls of today wear western cloths of jeans and T-shirts; they find them more comfortable and casual. Boys of similar ages, on the other hand, wear western cloths of shorts, T-shirts, and sport shoes, but they have not quit their traditional cloths of *thoub* and *tagya*. Luckily, the black *abbaya* and *batoola* still exist in our lives, but the latter is worn by our grandmothers only.

Children's games have become more sophisticated than the simple *tag tagya*, more international, and more isolating as well—PSP, Game Boy, and X-Box. Neighborhoods have become full of cars instead of kids and are not as safe as before. When it comes to our neighbors, the family spirit does not exist anymore. In fact, we rarely see our door to door neighbors or talk to them. Our family itself is not as attached as before; we seldom gather, even at meal times. Modern life has made each of us live in a different time zone, even though we are living under the same roof. Even when it happens that we gather, we hardly talk, thanks to TVs and laptops, which have become our life buddies.

Technology has made our life easier, broader, and more enjoyable. Because of technology, I can talk to my brother in the USA while sitting at home in Qatar. The TV and internet opened a huge window in our small homes, a window for knowledge, communication, and entrainment. Our social life happens through technologies rather than face to face. It's true that telecommunication makes socializing much easier, but it ignores the importance of physical presence in relationships; body language is invisible behind computers or cell phones. Even the summer is not as hot as it used to be, thanks to air conditioning, which exists in every house and building.

Our education system is more developed than before. There are different schools for different ages. For instance, nursery school for children, primary schools for kids above the age of five, high schools for teenagers, and people above seventeen go to university I wish you could see the variety of sciences that we learn in these hubs of knowledge; chemistry, philosophy, and biology to name a few. Our linguistic abilities have enabled us to talk to people from different parts of the world, learn about their cultures, and take advantages of their innovations. Today, university students rarely travel abroad to study, thanks to our country, which brought to our doorsteps a collection



of world-class universities.

Grandma, do you remember your clay made house? It is now replaced by a larger, fantastically designed house with three floors. The clay, in fact, is no longer used as a construction material; it is substituted with strong building materials, such as cement and steel. Not to mention the sky scrapers which reach the clouds because of their incredible heights.

Pearl diving became history. Today, oil and gas industries are the engine of Qatar's economy. Pearl ships have been replaced by oil and gas vessels and exploration projects. From this precious source of energy, our country became one of the richest in the world. Abu Majid's grandsons and granddaughters need not worry about securing their income anymore; national and international companies are competing to recruit Qatari candidates for various jobs at different industries.

Women's roles in our nation have reached those of men if not exceeded them. The idea of men as the bread winners is not valid anymore. My sister, Kholoud, started a successful Spa business; my mother went out to teach children the Islamic religion in primary schools, while I became the CEO of a multibillion company. I wish you here to see how women have become almost equal to men in contributing to the growth of our country.

Collecting these pieces of beautiful memories made me realize how grateful I am for what we have now of modern technology, easy lives, and the wide range of educational fields. I am grateful for the stage of development that we reached in our nation. I am grateful for the powerful source of energy that Allah blessed us with. I am grateful for our nation's effort to diversify the economy so that our prosperity will last forever. I am grateful, most importantly, for the role that I can play as a woman in my beloved nation that, long ago, you grandma could not play.

Yet with all my gratitude, I hold some regrets and heartache for our past. I regret that the simple intimate life we had rarely exists these days. I regret the fading away of many unique traditions such as the *bikhnag* and the game of *tag tagya*. I regret that we seldom find neighbors, like Um Majid, to share our happiness and sadness. I regret that we rarely sit as a family and have a peaceful meal and talk with each other, as we used to do when you were here.

While I was having these mixed feelings of gratitude and regrets, I remembered one of your sayings, "Nothing is perfect except the face of Allah." In that moment I realized that even if the past has faded away, even if you are not with us anymore, I still have a precious thing from the past and that is you, the treasury of your wisdom. In hard times, your wisdom makes me bend gently like a flower bending in the breeze, bending but not breaking. In good times, your wisdom makes me appreciate what I have and share it with others. Even though you are not with me, your wisdom is taking good care of me wherever I am. May Allah bless you and reward you for your wisdom and kindness in heaven, Janat Al Ferdows. Amen.

## The Blind Narrating the Blind

*Suzannah Mirghani*

My grandmother's inability to read and write was slightly ameliorated by the fact that she was diagnosed with diabetes and began to lose her sight in her sixties. Masking a vague sense of embarrassment about being illiterate, she used to reach out for, and pretend to read, newspapers, books, napkins, or anything else that felt like it could, should be read. This confused me as a child, not comprehending the politics, the histories, the traditions, and the cultures she faced in this simple and utterly useless gesture. She gave this up however, after I matured a little and stopped competing to see who could learn to read first.

Like many people of a certain age, my grandmother was a wealth of knowledge, of histories, of tragedies and comedies, and of family tales told to guests at funerals and at wedding ceremonies. Some of them were true, and some of them we know to be the tales she told herself in the dark to make up for her invisibility during the day. A blind person is ignored like a teetering thing and unless it falls to the floor and clangs, it has no presence and makes no sound. The blind use their requests for company wisely; who knows how long it will be before she hears someone creeping past her door.

I began to see her in a different light when I really listened to her stories; part reminiscence, part warning, part oracular, part mourning. She spun cotton on a spool and stories around the room, and once you were caught in her words, you became enticed and asked for more; thirsty from the desert she made you cross and tired from the nomadic journey. She told of the time when she was a child-bride and proud and was given away in pomp and ceremony. She was young but she was keen. Since an even younger age that she could not recall, she had been trained for this. She could cook the entire palate of her tribe and even began to learn his; she could bend to milk the goat and tip toe to milk the camel with similar agility. She could tell a pregnant animal just by the way it shook at the knees and she could sing so captivatingly that she swears it was she who dragged him to her unwillingly. It was her choice and it was her voice. During those long days of ritual, she was taught the secret that every woman wished she could overhear or learn accidentally. She guarded it like a fox for the sake of her daughter and someday,

she always said, she would give it to me since my mother has disappeared into the fog of modernity and has long forgotten the sound of the desert and was deaf to the whispers one hears on the journey.

When my grandmother finished another of her stories, she waved her hand across the desert of Doha and asked me to describe it.

“What has become of the well?” she said “And what is that smell? And where is that cold wind blowing from? Are these the dark months already?”

She and I sat on the balcony and she asked me to describe to her the shape and the size of the city. “Is it beside an oasis? Does it have a good vantage point? Is it well protected against the wind?”

I explained that we were twenty floors high and studied her reaction. This does not seem to bother her; she too had once stood atop a mesa. I told her we were surrounded by buildings that scraped the sky and watched as the shadow of a bird flew across her sightless eye. She remained composed and told me not to be so naïve, that verticality is not a virtue and that she too had climbed dunes as high as these monstrosities.

I watched her silently, and then told her that from where I stood, I could see the sea. She retreated a little into her seat, slumped, unfamiliar with the noise it makes or the way it looks. She was afraid, for once, of the vastness of all that she could not comprehend or see. The same feeling crept into me when I once fetched a stray ball across a mound and, for a long second, I was caught in the clutches of history. That day, I stared out across the dunes, miles away from the Friday afternoon with my grandmother, where voices played below, upon the Inland Sea.

I feared then that I had deserted the desert, and now the desert had it in for me. Yet the fight was still in her and she shook her wisdom at the puniness of my sea. She told me that the desert was deeper and more dangerous and that once a people drown in it, they would never be found again for centuries.

My grandmother died without ever having understood the need for a city and I, in my attempt to describe it to her, in the only language I know, unknown to her, made it seem even more alien, unfamiliar, and unkind. We will always be strangers to each others' stories, though we tried, on high-rise balconies, to bridge the divide. Sometimes, we prove ourselves to be as deaf as we are blind.

The older I become and the more I begin to resemble her – my nose extended to a point I never thought it could reach, and my wrinkles etching deep into my skin – I am drawn towards her. It takes me years of maturity, it takes books and university, it takes love and children and death and philosophy, to realize that my ninety-year-old illiterate grandmother was the epitome of a humanity I could never emulate or pretend to be. She was mother and matriarch, the womb that bore my people, the wisdom that was given for free, the all-seeing falcon perched high on the family tree.

## The Cycle of Life: A Qatari Story

*Shaikha Daoud Al Shokri*

*For many years, I kept hearing old people say “your generation is totally different...” I was always wondering what that meant. Seeing my confusion, my mother sat me down one evening when there was nothing much to do and told me the following story.*

One summer evening, in a room as hot as a furnace, Fatima was perspiring and breathing hard... She was holding her mother's hand tightly, weeping and agonizing. Her husband was walking anxiously in the back yard. She felt she was near death and couldn't take any more pain. Then, an old woman who had a lot of experience arrived. Pacing around quickly, she asked for boiling water and towels. Fatima seemed to have lost consciousness, but she was still wailing... She needed help beyond that of an old woman to deliver... Yet, nobody around her could do anything except ask God to have mercy on her. A few minutes later, in the hot and stuffy room, her moan was mixed with her baby's crying. The towels, blankets and bed sheets were covered with blood. That distressful scene was forgotten when the baby was passed from hand to hand. The anxious husband stepped in and his lips curved into a smile when he heard his baby's cry. The next day, cooked fenugreek and honey were provided to the tired mother. Neighbors cleaned the home and visited her regularly. Their life was synergetic; everyone wanted to help.

*My mother spoke the last sentence with nostalgia. The way that people cared for each other in those days most have been great. Yet, I was wondering silently how I would cope without a hospital or air conditioning, if I were in labor. My mother continued:*

As days passed, the beautiful baby, Mohammed, grew up quickly. Every day he woke up early to have breakfast with his big family, with his grandfather, father, uncles and cousins. Then he played with his cousins and friends in the street near their houses. The most popular game was “Spait Hai Lu Mayet” which means Spait, (a male name): “Are you dead or still alive?” They chose one of them to act as Spait, and they buried his face after covering it with “ghutra”, a scarf. Then they started asking him if he was still alive, and every time he had to respond. If there wasn't any response, they would take his head out of the hole quickly. The winner was the one who stayed in the game

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*What an unusual game, I thought. I grew up playing with dolls and riding bicycles. My mother's voice brought me back to the dreamy story.*

At the age of six, while Mohammed was playing around his house, his mother was behind the window calling him to come in. When he entered the house, she hugged him and dried his sweaty forehead. After that, she told him quietly that he had become a man and had to join the Quran Group in their village in order to start memorizing some verses.

The next day was exciting; the Quran Class was full of energetic children. The Mutawa', Quran teacher, read from the Holy Quran loudly and then all the students repeated after him, even more loudly. They started with the alpha-

bet. That's how Mohammed learnt how to spell the first Arabic letter, "alef". When he returned home, he told his relatives about what he had just learnt in the first class. He was motivated to learn more in the coming classes.

A year later, Mohammed, his teacher and his classmates were walking around the village reciting the Holy Quran completion Dua'a. People who met that parade gave them money or small gifts from their shops or just smiled. Of course, the happiest people were Mohammed's family. They were proud of him because he had become a literate person now.

*I really like the idea of becoming a well-educated person in only a few years, which was so easy in the past. By contrast, I will have to study for the rest of my life. My mother went on:*

Ten years later, after a tiring day, Mohammed found his parents waiting for him. His father asked him to sit close to him and started: "Dear son, we need a happy event to visit us..." His mother, Fatima interrupted "your cousin Hessa becomes a pretty lady, and we had looked carefully before we chose her." Suddenly, he couldn't say a word; he only gave a shy smile, as if to say that he understood what they wanted to tell him.

After a week, everyone was busy in the village preparing for the big wedding. Men bought attractive decorations and butchered sheep and cows. Women were preparing tasty foods such as machboos, a kind of rice dish served at festive occasions. Its delicious spicy smell, yellowish color and fried nuts and currant around mouth-watering meat make it the main dish at weddings. They also prepared Harees, one of the favorite meals there. It is pounded wheat with lamb or chicken, and it was covered with a fresh ghee layer. In another corner, there were ladies preparing the bride. She had a nice henna design drawn on her hands and feet. She was dressed in a colorful dress and her straight black hair was mixed with golden chains that dropped from a jewel crowning her head. The wedding was beautiful and the songs and taps added a really good feel to it.

Mohammed was anxiously pacing up and down in a hospital aisle. A few minutes earlier, he had just brought Hessa there. In the delivery room, nurses and a doctor around her were giving her suitable medications to reduce the throes of childbirth. Controlling blood pressure and heart beat was the most important step to ensure that everything went fine. The well-equipped room with its advanced technology made the operation easy... Mohammed thanked God because he held his baby today. Hessa and her baby had enough care before and after the delivery; they had been looked after perfectly. The hospital provided them with a comfortable room for four to five days. A good service was provided to visitors, too.

*How different from Fatima's experience, I thought. The story went on:*

He was sitting in the living room watching a football match. In

another room, Hessa was coaching their daughter, Abrar, for her next test. In one corner in the house, his son Khalid was playing a Game Boy, and his brother Hammed was playing an exciting video game! Their housemaid was cooking in the kitchen. Everybody was busy, but mainly by himself. His children were enrolled in advanced schools which taught different languages in addition to science and mathematics skills. They had opportunities to join high-quality universities, like the ones in Education City, Qatar University, Calgary College or the College of the North Atlantic.

*Like me...*

Abdulla's wedding was totally different from his uncle Mohammed's. It was held in a big luxurious hall. A long table containing every kind of food that you can imagine was at the end of the hall. A high-class service was provided during the wedding. Ladies' hall seemed like a colorful picture; they were dressed wonderfully, in expensive modern clothes. The wedding hall with famous brand name perfumes invited you to enter it. The princess of that evening, the bride, wore a white gown and a bright tiara. She was holding a wonderful flower bouquet. That was some time ago, but Mohammed can still remember the glamour of the party.

Now, I can really understand that our generation is not as same as the old one. As though guessing my thoughts, my mother proceeded:

Also, Mohammed can notice all the difference in his country between the past and the present. Life is better now, easier. The economy depends on petrochemical industries and other rich resources in Qatar. The recent changes in the constitution, which put Qatar on the international map, fill him with pride, a special kind of pride, of the achievement of the collective. This is the one thing that has not changed. In the past, he was proud to belong to his immediate and extended family. Now, his family seems to have grown, expanded to become a nation. He can see its influence on the larger family of nations, especially in its peacemaking efforts in Lebanon or the generosity of its leaders toward the natural disaster victims in the United States. Like Mohammed himself, his country went through the process of birth, growing pains, learning process to the celebration of its many new achievements...

*This is where my mother's story ends. It is late already. I go to bed, but I cannot sleep. My mind is too busy, trying to handle the past and the present at the same time. Finally, in a state between sleeping and waking, I have a vision of Mohammed, sitting in his living room on a hot summer evening.*

*Suddenly, Mohammed's phone rings. Abdulla's voice sounds agitated as he stammers: "she is perspiring and breathing hard..."*



## Nuptials in 1950's Arabia: A Portrait and Perception

*Amna Abdulaziz Jassim Hamad Al Thani*

“To the sound of the *muradah*, a poetic dialogue complimenting the bride, my fourteen year old self was paraded, by family and friends, seated on a silk Iranian carpet, celebrating my wedding in my father’s home. The folds of my voluminous emerald green *thob Al nashel* cast shadows on the surrounding walls, whilst the beaming *dinar*, a circular gold plate with molded strips of gold sequentially chained to it, gracing my head, radiated dancing lights which created a kaleidoscopic effect over the emitted shadows. I was constantly balancing myself by clutching the edges of the carpet; my hands were decorated with odorous henna in geometrical shapes, which could be glimpsed beneath the fine lattice of the intricate clinging *kufuff*, a gold hand bracelet.”

This anecdote, related by an aged friend, provides a portrait of a traditional Arab Gulf wedding in the 1950's. Fourteen was an optimum age for a girl to be married. By that age, she was expected to assume the role of a married woman, attending to household duties and bearing children. “Getting married at such a young age is a blessing,” said my friend. “As a girl flourishes in her marital home she learns her duties, priorities, and what she is expected to fulfill to be a good housewife, therefore satisfying her husband’s demands. Conflict did not occur between the couple with regards to priorities, unlike the increasing conflict arising in today’s marriages as a result of women getting married at an older age. Marrying later, often with established careers, many women’s priorities are already formed and mainly focused on their careers, as a consequence, they are frequently unwilling to change their priorities to suit their husband’s wants.”

The process of marriage started with the ritual of *milka* held around a week prior to the wedding. The night before that, the bride-to-be would have *rashoosh*, which consisted of henna powder, saffron, and rose water, dissolved and stirred to form a thick paste, and then generously poured and combed through her hair. The purpose of *rashoosh* was both to fragrance her hair with a combined aroma of the ingredients, and lighten the color. Henna would be used to embellish her hands with designs. She would spend the whole night with her hair wrapped in cloth and her hands gloved in cotton mittens, waiting



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Preceding a girl’s *milka* she used to receive the *daza*, a package of gifts combining practical household necessities with luxuries to pamper the bride. It was sent by the groom’s family both to honor the bride and her parents and to demonstrate the groom’s family’s social status. The *daza* contained custom made

clothes, gold, rolls of fabric, money, perfumes, kitchen utensils and dry staple food items. “The *daza* that most brides receive today are very different to what brides used to receive,” my friend explained. “The *daza* changed gradually, in line with contemporary tastes and needs; a standard *daza* package today includes jewelry, money and cars.”

On the evening of the wedding, the bride was prepared for the ceremony by her mother and sisters who would dress her in her wedding gown, *thob Al nashel*, a caftan style silk dress embroidered with golden seams, which was perfumed with *dihn al oud*, an oil based scent. Her make-up was minimal, just a fine line of kohl on her eyelids. Droplets of *dihn al ward*, rose oil, was sprinkled sparsely in her hair to give a pleasant infusion of rose. The final adornment was the placing of the heavy pure yellow gold jewelry on the bride. My friend nostalgically commented, “Current brides are over made-up, they plaster the make-up on, and the wedding gowns are a hybrid of Western and modern Arabic culture. They have certainly lost the essence of simplicity found in the traditional style, where the purer look was more feminine.” Once the bride was prepared, she was seated on a carpet and carried out of her dressing room by close female relatives. Chanting the *muradah*, girls dressed in bright colored chiffon frilled gowns, their hair groomed in tight sleek braids, lifted the bride on her carpet, to a cacophony of noise coming out of a family sitting area where anxious guests awaited the presence of the bride. The bride’s mother, her face glistening with tears of joy, led her daughter’s entourage to the family sitting area. There she could be greeted by guests.

The groom, on the wedding afternoon would have the *razfah*, the archaic male sword dance, performed at weddings in the *majlis*, the men’s gathering area. The *razfah* usually was over at around seven in the evening. It was followed by a dinner; the groom would have his dinner with his father and other guests who participated in the *razfah*. After the dinner was over, the groom and his father would head to the bride’s house.

On the groom’s arrival, the bride was carried to the Al Khulla, the wedding room, where she would meet her groom for the first time. My friend described what used to be considered the climax of the ceremony, “Modern couples have lost the spontaneity of their first meeting at the al khulla, marrying after a relationship has developed between them. The tense emotions are less acute and so they don’t experience the thrill that the first meeting triggered, in the past, on wedding nights.”

The morning after the wedding, the bride would have her mubarakas, relatives and friends coming over for greetings. The bride was dressed in another *thob al nashel* which had fragments of gold threaded into it, *nairat*. Her hair would have bunches of *mashmoom*, a dainty scented flower intertwined in

her hair creating a cascade draping over her head. At twelve noon, the mubarakah would end and *ijrah*, stewed meat and rice, would be distributed to neighbors, serving as a blessing to the couple and signifying the end of the wedding ceremony. “An Arab Gulf wedding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, typically ends with the couple traveling to their favorite destinations, missing out on the little traditional customs, such as the *ijrah*”, my friend sighed wistfully.

“The naively innocent youthful bride has vanished, along with the little traditional pre-marriage customs we used to have, which were born out of a less complicated society. The wedding festivities today are detached from their cultural roots; it is no longer a purely Arab experience. The old customs are seen as outdated in our developing society, but along the way, although we are losing many of the traditions, we are blending some of them into the modern style, so at least we are holding on to a small part of our heritage.”

## Who Does Not Know How to Use a Pen

*Maha Mohamed Al Shirrawi*

After a long hard working day in one of the American Universities, my granddaughter, Maha, came back home at around 9:30 at night. She had to have her dinner alone as other family members had already finished their meal together. I saw her eating alone in the kitchen and approached the little wooden table where she was sitting. “You look tired and exhausted dear,” I said to her. “Be easy on yourself.”

Maha smiled, stood up, and kissed me between my eyes. “I am sorry I missed dinner,” she said. “I had to stay with my study group in the university.”

I nodded, took a deep breath, and said, “Everything has changed now, hasn't it? I remember when we were taught by *al mutwa'ah*; we did not have to stay away from home for more than three hours and yet we thought that it was too much time away.”

I sat next to my granddaughter, put my walking cane aside, and started recalling my memories and what I had gone through since the 1940s. I told my granddaughter about how I had lived with my family in *Freej Al Bed'a*. A *Freej* was an area comprising several houses built from mud and rocks, all adjacent to each other but separated by unpaved roadway. Every morning, children wore traditional clothes; boys would wear white *thoubs* while girls would wear colorful dresses with black cloth on top, “*Bukhnag*,” weaved with golden or silver threads that covered the upper half of the body - except the face. Children would go out in groups and head to the houses of *al mutwa'ah* - female teacher for girls - or *al mutwa* - male teacher for boys - to learn reading and to memorize the Quran. I had the honor to be taught by *Amna Al jidab*, the first woman to take teaching as a career in Qatar.

The classes used to be held at the inner courtyard, *Al Lewan*, of the house. The floor was covered with *Haseera* – a rug made out of palm leaves- and the roof made out of wooden sticks tied with a rope to shelter us from the burning sun. The walls were finished with white *Noura* or gypsum as we call it now. A clay pot filled with chilled water was placed on the corner of the balcony from which we quenched our thirst. *Al mutwa'ah* wore a traditional dress *Dara'ah*, weaved with golden threads from the sleeves edge. Also, she wore a black scarf *Malfa* and covered her face with a piece of cloth that only showed

her eyes, known as *Batola*.

*Al mutwa'ah* used to recite a new chapter from the holy Quran every day, and students recited it after her. We worked hard to memorize, as she used to call us one by one on the following day to recite in front of the class. If any of the girls did not recite properly, *Al mutwa'ah* took a big stick and beat the student's foot to make all of us would pay more attention in the next class. Fortunately, teachers are no longer allowed to punish the students because the rules of the education in the state of Qatar prohibit that. Students who learned faster than others were awarded with a gift—food, money, or candies. Also, every week *Al mutwa'ah* collected her fees from students. She was paid around one *Rubbia*, the Indian currency that was changed into Riyals. Nowadays, education is free for all national students in public schools, and the government awards bright students with scholarships for higher education in private universities inside and outside Qatar.

“When I remember those good days,” I told my granddaughter, “I cannot but cry over them. I miss my childhood, my friends and neighbors, my *Freej*, and the days we spent with *Al mutwa'ah*. Still, I believe that everything is now changing for the best; *Al mutwa'ah* and *Al mutwa* do not exist anymore. Students now go to a variety of schools, where education is not only limited to reading and memorizing Quran. Your education now has to be in English; different subjects are taught; some schools are coed, and teachers are using different techniques. And, most of all, girls are now expected to get high degrees to hold important positions.” I laughed. “But of course, you know all of this already.”

I looked at my granddaughter and added: “Honey, live your life and try to cherish every day of it. Study hard, get your certificate, and have a good job in the future.”

We ended our discussion with her saying, “Who does not know how to use a pen, is not worth a pen.” We both know what this means: a person without education will be weak and life will be hard for him or her. And we both know that my granddaughter will not be without a good education.

## El Kanderi: The Waterman

*Buthayna Mohammed Al Madhadi*

I'm watching TV with my grandfather on a Tuesday afternoon; we are watching a documentary on life in Qatar before the discovery of petroleum. The program recaptures the social life in the Qatari society and the transformation that has taken place since the discovery of oil and natural gas. In one scene, they show the old neighborhoods, old mud houses, and a man going around to the houses, carrying big buckets on his back.

My grandfather suddenly says: "You see this man. This is *El Kanderi*."

"Really?" I ask, confused. "I knew a girl in preparatory school with the same family name. Are the *El Kanderi* on TV and the girl's family name related?"

"It is likely that the names are related," my grandfather says. And while pointing at the TV, he explains. "During that era, each area had about five *Kanadrah*. They all used to carry cool, clean water and distribute it to houses. Each waterman was called *El Kanderi* and all of them were referred to as *El Kanadrah*. This name applied to all watermen in the Arabian Gulf, especially in Kuwait. This is why a lot of Kuwaitis have *El Kandari* as their last name, implying that their ancestors used to work as watermen."

Back in the 1940s, a waterman's day started as soon as the *Fajir* prayer was announced. In the pre-dawn hours, he began his work. He carried two big water containers made of metal sheets in the form of rectangles, each called *Tenkah*. These two metal water containers hung by a rope, each on an end of a two-meter piece of thin but strong wood. He placed this strong piece of wood horizontally on his back, behind his neck. With all this weight on his shoulders, the man walked to *Ain*- a well- and filled his two metal water containers with water. Sometimes he stood by the shore waiting for ships carrying fresh water from other areas, like Bahrain and Basra, to fill his metal tanks. As soon as he filled his containers, the man walked towards the neighborhoods, hoping to sell the water and make a living. This was the waterman, *El Kanderi*.

*El Kanderi* distributed water all day, taking short breaks every now and then from the heavy weights he was carrying. *El Kanderi* sometimes stopped by some women sitting on a rug, cooking and selling *nakhi* and *Bajillah*. He bought some and had it as breakfast on his way to the houses. He stopped by salesmen in shops and greeted them. He sat indoors with them, as

their shops were sealed by palm trunks, which reduced the sun's heat. *El Kanderi* and the salesmen drank tea and Arabian coffee and ate dates. Because *El Kanderi's* job was tiring, he needed to stop in on shopkeepers and rest. They would chat for a while and then *El Kanderi* continued on his way, to fill the tanks and jars in the rest of the houses with cool, clean water.

In neighborhoods, *El Kanderi* was admired by children. In each neighborhood, boys wearing *Thobs* and girls in *Bukhnag* played outdoors on the sand. They played *Gais*, *El Lagfah*, and *El Teelah*. Whenever the children saw *El Kanderi* coming, they stopped playing and ran calling on him. "*El Kanderi*, my Mum wants you to fill our water jar." "My Mum needs you to fill our tank right away; we do not have any water." He replied with a smile, saying, "I'm coming."

Everybody knew everybody else and people kept their doors open without any fears or concerns. So when *El Kanderi* reached a house, he found the door unlocked and open. Since honor and reputation issues were the women's main concern back then, *El Kanderi* entered houses shouting, "Ehm Ehm," so that the women in the house would be aware he was coming and cover up. At that time, it was shameful for a woman to talk to a man without covering her face. She used her *Melfaa*- a black scarf that was made up of soft cotton. Some women also wore *Batoolah*, a green shiny face cover, to cover their faces when talking to strange men. *Batoolas* back then were worn by women regardless of their age. Now only elderly women wear it.

After the housewife directed *El Kanderi* to the jar in her house, *El Kanderi* walked, with his face down, looking at the floor, towards the big jar, called *El Hib*, and filled it with water. Some houses also contained big water tanks that were also filled by *El Kanderi*. Whenever *El Kanderi* ran out of water, he returned to the closest well or *Ain*, refilled his metal water containers, and came back to distribute water to the houses.

Most of the people paid *El Kanderi* on a monthly basis; a few paid him daily. People who did not fill their tanks regularly paid each time. For those who preferred to pay monthly, *El Kanderi* had a special way of recording his deliveries, to keep track and make sure he got paid the right amount. Whenever he filled a *Hib* or a tank with water, he drew a line on the wall of the house using a piece of coal. By the end of the month, he counted the lines to know exactly how much each family owed him. He usually got about three *Robiyas* per month. This amount varied from house to house because in some houses, *El Kanderi* only filled *Hibs*, which were small compared to tanks. Other houses, however, contained both *Hibs* and tanks, which cost more.

By the mid sixties, people stopped relying on *El Kanderi*. The government had developed ways to deliver surface water from lakes and seas into people's houses, using pipes. However, the water that reached their houses was not always purified. In addition, this new water system did not always work for everybody.

Sometimes, the pipes got clogged and cleaning them required a lot of work. And because the pipes were made of low quality steel, they rusted, resulting in polluted water. Some pipes leaked and broke down. Even though some people were still facing difficulties finding water at that time, *El Kanderi* became less popular. By the beginning of the 1970s his job disappeared completely.

When the TV show ends, my grandfather says, “You see, dear, for Qatari citizens in Qatar, water is available for free despite the excellent water services. *Kabramaa* is now responsible for water treatment plants, where it sterilizes water and makes it accessible to everyone.”

“It seems that *El Kanderi* worked really hard” I say. “He did,” my grandfather says. “He had to because this was his only source of living. Life back then was more difficult than today. People now don’t have to work as hard as our parents and grandparents did. However, back then people were like a loving and caring family. Life was simple and peaceful, and its simplicity was what gave it a special flavor.”



## A Pearl and a Rahha

*Fatma Nasser Al Dosari*

Being a daughter of a native Qatari family in the new millennium is easier than many may think. I know I may have a few stiff-minded elderly relatives I have to dress *draah* in order to please; but I still can claim the glamour my inner self seeks.

Many girls my age feel that they were born at the wrong time and in the wrong place, in a place sealed with traditions and yet also at a time which lies in between. But I could not be happier.

I was born into an environment that literally treats women like queens; this can be recognized throughout our history. Also, it is an environment that is rich in heritage and potential—a heritage that has more value than the stereotypical camel-riding that comes to the minds of many when they hear the word “Arab.” We have more potential than the gas wells that many now associate with the mention of “Qatar.”

Taking myself as an example of a contemporary Qatari daughter, I was named—like many others – before I was born; even before my dad. My late great grandmother, Fatma bint Nasser Al Ali, asked my grandfather to name my dad’s (he was a baby back then) elder daughter after her. For many, it may not seem fair, but I am glad that I was named after her. Anyone who knew her, and hears her name when someone calls me, thinks of her good deeds and great reputation. She was a genuine woman who treasured everybody in her family and beyond. So, naming me after my late great grandmother does not overshadow my character. It inspires me to follow her good lead as a role model and even to excel beyond her by my own *samgha*, which means learning how to be a pearl and a *rahha*.

*Rahha* as well is another significant tradition in our cultural legacy. It is the two-pieced rock tool, a wondrous hand mill, used to grind wheat, barley, rice, and other kinds of grains. In the past, all houses owned at least one. Women were usually are the ones who used them as a part of their daily home chores. I remember a story about my deceased great grandmother and the *rahha*. She was dealing with it not as a rigid tool but as a sensible core, a symbol. I realized from this that each one of us has a *rahha* inside us. It is the soul that God created and a man or woman’s thoughts are the grains. We either grind fine grains that lead us to a great fate and heaven or we make bitter grains that lead us to a dreadful fate

and hell. A man or a woman should not have a vacant *rahba* a man or a woman should have a *rahba* filled with God's love and with the hope of meeting God. A man or a woman's *rahba* is always maintainable.

In our culture's legacy, pearls have a great value. They were the source of income that people of the sea in Qatar depended on. Also, they were a source of pride for every woman who dangled them from her neck and ears. I recall a story my grandmother told me about my grandfather. When he was in his late teens, before oil was discovered in Qatar, he was a well-known young pearl diver who anxiously traveled for months over troubled seas eagerly searching for the most valuable pearl. He had spotted my grandmother for the first time and promised himself that he would win her love by getting her the most attractive and precious pearl ever found. He rented a shabby boat and went to a distant sea with two mates of his. It was deep water full of dangers, but his patience and willingness paid off by the two huge triumphs he won. He found two dazzling pearls, one of which he wrapped in velvet maroon cloth and presented to my grandmother as her dowry. And he traded the other in the market and gave its worth to his two fellows.

I always remind myself of this story and of how my grandfather risked his life to win a precious stone for a precious soul. This is how I should be, a lavish jewel that a person has to work hard to gain; a unique gem that is clear for all to see; a sign of beauty and great worth; a sole identity full of the rhythms of the Qatari heritage; a bright smooth rock veiled by a consistent dark shell.

I try constantly to repair my *rahba* and be a better individual. To be simple but to adhere. To ease up on hard contents to softer ones. To achieve ambitions with fewer expenses and more attempts. To be poised and energetic.

Anyone, girls or even guys, can be a pearl and a *rahba*. You need to accept who you are and explore yourself rightfully. Traditions do not contradict with modernism; they both add value to your uniqueness and shape your identity. Stereotypes may create mirages between your values and your heritage or culture's potentials, so you have to reveal your respect to them, educate others, and never feel shy. Qatari women should appreciate the opportunities the time and culture offer them to shine in the sweat of their hard work. There are pearls and *rahbas* in all families all around the world; they just need a little polish to shimmer and a tiny push to grow in the right direction.

## Coming to Doha

*Mohammed Al Kubaisi*

Everyone loved this small, quaint town, and every guest across the seas was amazed by its people, who had lived here for centuries. It was a calm and peaceful land, where you could hear the murmur of the sea and birds singing. The air was clean and full of happiness. Even when you were sick, this land would bring life to your body, cleansing all your organs. People were kind and generous. Although they were poor, and did not have enough food for their daily meals, they offered any guest who visited them hospitality that he would never forget.

What is this land I am talking about? Who are these people? It is Al Shamal, the original home of most tribes of Qatar, including my tribe Al Kubaisi. This town, about 97 km north of Doha, was also home to many other tribes, like: Al Mannai, Al Naimi, Al Kuwari, Al Kaabi, and Al Mohunadi. These tribes were like one hand: they worked together, fished together and most important, they were friends in war.

Now all my tribe members in Doha have left their original home, leaving behind all those good memories, the beauty of that hard-working time, the fantastic mud houses they had built, and the old stories related to the sea. All these memories were left behind the doors of their old houses. They were unhappy but it was time to move to Doha.

You see, Shaikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani, our ruler in that era, approved an order for all tribes in Al Shamal town to come to Doha. The first tribe that agreed was ours. Most of our family (the tribe) moved to Doha including my uncles. They did not move directly after the order; some of them stayed there and some were looking for jobs in Doha. The men, including my uncles, applied for jobs with Qatar Petroleum Company and to live in Doha. When they were accepted, they did not come to Doha directly. They had two houses, one in Al Shamal and one in Doha. The one in Doha was for men who worked in the city, and the one in Al Shamal was for the women (wives) and their children. It was hard for their children to get educated away from their parents, and it was hard for my uncles to drive back and forth from Doha to Al Shamal.

Shaikh Khalifa Bin Hamad listened to this story, and he realized that this was a difficult situation. The children's schools were only in Al Shamal. So he built a new neighborhood in Madinate Khalifa that was totally new, just for the

Al Kubaisi family, with new houses and new schools. The neighborhood was not near Qatar Petroleum Company, but it was still in Doha, which means it was much better. Eventually, the entire tribe moved to Doha.

The tribe members, including my father and grandfather, tried to adapt to the new situation. In Madinat Khalifa there was not any sea for fishing, no birds singing, and no huge boats for diving under the seas to look for pearls. However, the thing that made the new situation easy to accept was that we were also together, home by home, side by side, and wall by wall, living again in one family without distances straining our close family bonds.

My family began to adapt to the new situation. Children now get educated by modern learning in schools. Some of them have completed their studies in countries abroad, like the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, houses now are provided with electricity and air conditioners, unlike the mud houses that were not able to hold any electricity. Of course my father and grandfather did not particularly like this new situation, but it was a stage of adaptation and they were satisfied with their destiny.

Now it has been years since the early adaptation stage. A new generation has come, born in Doha. This generation is well educated and has the ability to work and learn more about life. Although they were not born in Al Shamal and they do not know how hard life was in that time, they have heard many stories from their grandfathers, amazing stories that show the value of creating one family, of facing dangers, and of traveling across the seas to provide daily meals.

They left their home but they did not forget their history. They came to Doha and they brought with them a rich history of sacrifice. My grandfather, known as Essa Bin Khalifa Al Kubaisi; Shaikh of Al Kubaisi at that time, wrote a poem after he had visited Al Shamal again:

We came to you our land

We will not fear from the darkest nights

We came to you our land

We will not hide the shining sun.

We will not forget our original land; we will not forget our history, and we will live to teach the new generation the meaning of creating one family and sacrificing in order to live a satisfied life.

At the same time, my parents and all the family members were very happy even though trying to forget the sad moments of leaving their home was really hard and painful. Every woman sang a beautiful song to her children, every man took his sons and left them in the *majlis* to learn more about poetry, every old man and woman walked with their slim sticks and met young children in the halls with a lovely smile that could carry the bright future to them.

Years and years after leaving Al Shamal, the sad moments are now

gone. The life that was in Al Shamal is now in Madinat Khalifa, opening all house's *majlis* for any guest, arranging the sword dancing (Al Ardah) for every Eid. The tribe leaders were really delighted and over the moon. Seeing the family members bonded together again was just like a dream. They expressed their happiness by taking the rifles from their houses and shooting into the sky with much laughter. I said from my heart, "Thank God we are one family again."

In the end, "No history, no present" is a traditional saying by our grandfathers that indicates the importance of family history. Remembering these events from the past leads us to live with comfort and happiness because we will carry this message to the coming generations. We will tell the new generation how we were and how we are right now, making sure to pass on our meaningful history.



Qatar: then and  
**now**

# The Secret Smile of Change

*Mashaael Salman Rashid*

The car suddenly stopped.

*Here we go; everything is finished, no need to think about my dreams, just forget them!* I thought.

At this moment my future was to be decided. Would my brother turn the car around and go home or would he carry on to the college?

*Why hadn't I handled this in a different way, why hadn't I told them before?*

I held my breath. My brother looked at me, and I waited for his decision.

*Oh, my God. How had I gotten myself into this situation?*

To start from the beginning, we have to go back a week

Studying at university for me was a dream that took a long time to realize. I finished high school with excellent grades, which helped me get a scholarship to study in the Academic Bridge Program. As the name suggests, this program was designed to help students make the transition between studying at high school and university: it was a bridge between the two. The ABP would teach students who had just finished high school the skills required to study at university, for example, English, math, computing and communication skills.

I was so happy when I got a scholarship that I hadn't expected; I felt excited. It would be a new experience after finishing high school, and I would be able to get a good education. Unfortunately, one day I got a phone call that threatened to destroy my dreams before they'd even started. I was watching TV happily with my sister, and suddenly my phone rang with an unknown number.

When I answered, a lady was asking about me. A lady I didn't know. This wasn't a real surprise as much as what she told me next.

"We want to inform you that the Academic Bridge Program classes are for both boys and girls," she said, "and we need to be sure that you will agree to study in our program under these conditions."

I was shocked. I remained silent for seconds, and thought to myself, *Excuse-me, what are you talking about! It can't be!*

We didn't really have mixed study environments in Qatar. All our public schools are separated: girls' schools and boys' schools. I said to myself, *all of my dreams are gone with this new system!* It was a difficult issue to deal



with. If it were only about me, then I think I would have accepted it, but what about my family? I thought that it was impossible for my family to let me enroll in a MIXED educational program. If there had been a previous experience like this for someone in my family, it would have been easier to convince them, but unfortunately there wasn't. It would be the first time in Qatar to put into practice a mixed education environment. All of these thoughts came to my mind while the lady was waiting for my answer. In fact, I didn't have an answer to tell her. But she needed to have an answer and she needed it straight away. If I said, "No," then all my dreams were finished, and if I said, "Yes," what about my family?

The silence was becoming embarrassing and then suddenly I heard myself saying: "Yes, no problem I will be happy to be one of the first students that will try this new experience!"

As I pronounced these words, I felt as if there was someone else talking. I had to defend my dream, although I wasn't sure how.

I couldn't tell my family about it, at least not now: I myself hadn't gotten used to the idea. How to tell them, how to convince them? I had no idea! My life would change a few days later: an interview was required to specify my English level. My brother was giving me a lift to the Academic Bridge Program building to have the interview. He didn't know yet about the new system.

Actually, I thought, if I didn't tell him and he discovered later, when we arrived, it would be worse. I was so afraid that he would turn the car around and go home if I told him but I was left with no choice. As we were approaching the Academic Bridge Program campus, I started to talk to my brother.

"This program is really a great opportunity for Qatari students to improve their skills and to be able to learn how to survive at university."

He couldn't guess why I was telling him this. He thought I was happy and nothing was wrong.

"Actually, there is a small problem," I said, "and I really wish you could understand and help to solve it."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. By the time I finished telling him there would be boys and girls studying in the same place, the car suddenly stopped.

I thought, *here we go, everything is finished. No need to think more about my dreams, just forget them.* He was surprised that I hadn't told my family before, and that I was just making this decision by myself, which was not true. I wanted to show him the place first and talk to people there, so he and I would know what it was like.

He looked at me, and I waited for his decision. I was overcome with relief as he started the car again and drove until we arrived at the building. In fact, I was lucky, because the place was almost empty; there was hardly anyone there, and it seemed quiet. There were not many boys around, which was really good at that moment.

I had an interview to determine my English level and it went well. But that didn't matter; it was what happened later that mattered: it was unbelievable, but I convinced my brother and my family to let me enroll in the Academic Bridge Program.

The following week for the first day of class, I was really nervous, scared, excited and happy. When I arrived I was shocked, because unlike on the previous visit, now there were many students.

*Where am I*, I thought.

I was seeing so many boys.

*Oh my God, how will I be able to come every day for eight hours and stay with these boys in the same building? How will I be able to study with boys in the same classroom?* I was asking myself this as I walked through the building.

I was nervous. I couldn't look left or right. I just walked straight, pretending no one was there. I couldn't say hi to my friends because I felt too shy to talk. I felt all of our conversations would be heard by the boys, so I just kept walking until I arrived at the meeting room. It was a big room.

Unfortunately, I arrived late with some of my friends. We couldn't find seats in the rows at the back, where the girls were sitting behind the boys. The only empty seats were in the front row. So that's where we sat, with all the boys' eyes on us as we took our seats.

I wished a hole in the ground would open up and swallow me at that moment.

*Congratulations, Mashaael, that's what happens when you're late on the first day*, I told myself. *What a bad start!*

The director gave a speech for the opening day of the Academic Bridge Program. He said it was a great opportunity for the students to be enrolled in a program that would help them to gain the required skills for studying at university.

*I hope I can focus on what I will learn now*, I said to myself.

But that was easier said than done: the first class at the Academic Bridge Program was bad.

I was still nervous. I couldn't behave naturally. Usually, I would feel free to talk, get used to any new place quickly. But this time the situation was different: for the first time in my life I was sitting in the same room as boys. I could hardly talk or think. I was mostly just listening.

They arranged us in the class so that the boys were on one side and the girls on the other. We were in the same class, but without sharing any conversations.

"Good morning, each one of you should now introduce him/herself to the others," the teacher said. I was really embarrassed, I felt too shy to talk. I thought, *what I would say!?* *How would I talk?*

I will never forget my first presentation: it was terrible!

I was standing in front of all the students. My face turned red from embarrassment. My voice shook while I was talking; I had prepared to talk for ten minutes, but I only spoke for three. I practiced the day before and I really did well. Unfortunately, I couldn't do the same for the real thing. Because in the real thing there were boys present and in my room at home I had been alone. I forgot everything and was focused on finishing the presentation. After the presentation, my teacher, who usually let the other students ask if they had any questions, asked me to have a seat immediately, which was kind of her. She could see that I was hardly standing.

But then, as time went by, I got a chance to do another presentation. I made up my mind that this one would be totally different from the last. I would know what to say exactly and within the required time and not sit down before. It was about seatbelts.

I thought: *how could I make this presentation interesting?*

I had an idea, which was to have an interview with one of the students that drove. At that time, none of the girls had a driving license.

There were four girls and six boys in that class. I thought, *who should I choose to interview during my presentation?* It had to be a boy. Actually, there was one student all the girls could talk to. He was fat, friendly, and easygoing.

But still, I had to think how I could choose him in front of all the others; I needed a good reason. So I made a plan. I'd write the names on small pieces of paper and pick one paper randomly, which would be the one I'd interview. I had to make sure to pick the fat boy with whom I'd feel comfortable interviewing.

There was only one way to be sure to pick his name, which was writing his name on all the slips! During the presentation, I told the students that I didn't know who I should choose to interview, so to be fair I'd choose randomly.

I smiled a secret smile but no one could guess why.

"*Yeah, it is fair,*" I said to myself.

To make it seem more plausible I let one of the boys pick the paper from among the others. I pretended I was surprised when he chose the name of the fat boy.

I was really good at controlling myself, making sure not to laugh.

I am convinced he believed 100 % that the draw wasn't planned. Thank God they didn't open the other papers!

Sometimes we feel that there are impossible things that we will never be able to do. We give up before we really try. The Academic Bridge Program was the first step I took towards my future.

I was a little shy girl who didn't know how to deal with different types of people. I was limited in my closed, old-fashioned school environment. I couldn't feel the change in me during the year of studying in the Academic Bridge Program.

It was later that I could feel it: I could see how much my character had

improved. All my fears had gone; I felt different. I could deal with all students: girls and boys. I learned not to judge before getting involved and seeing things clearly. I learned to think beyond the borders and to see things from a distance. And it wasn't just for me; for our country, Qatar, too, it was a big step. My conservative society took a bold step and from what I can see it has succeeded.

A lot of people were afraid of these changes in 2001 and some still are. They thought it was too much, it should be slower, it should be more gradual.

This idea is normal; sudden change is worrisome: we get used to things being done in a certain way. But that's not a reason to turn our backs on change.

Yes, they'll be some problems and some mistakes. But that's inevitable; that's how life is.

What I am sure of is this: if you want to make progress you have to take a risk, you can't separate the two. Even if it's taking a new route to get to work there's a risk. You might get lost and be late to the office. But it might give you a new way that's quicker and a more comfortable ride to work every day in the future.

Let's stay confident and forge ahead.

## Olden Golden Times

*Heba Sajd*

Being a 21<sup>st</sup> century girl, I admire my grandmother and all the grandmothers back in the 1960s. All of them lived hardworking and meaningful lives. I personally think that women from my grandmother's time were much better off than we are in the present generation. Women at that time had a simple but more successful life.

When we think of the present world and the coming future, we can appreciate all of our opportunities and the technical and social advances of the day. But back in the 1960s women did not have such facilities or importance. Women now have remarkable positions, whether they are in a professional field or a housewife caring for their children and home. Women in the present are able to communicate socially and professionally with the outside world. Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are more engaged in social activities.

Women today think that we could not solve problems or communicate without the knowledge and access we have to different associations and institutions. But women of our grandmothers' generation had their own will and power to gain knowledge without having so many resources. We women felt responsible for educate ourselves even if we were not allowed to.

In the present world, the women's generation is more social and active but they prefer doing more things the easy way. We expect things to go in a way that doesn't take much of our time. This doesn't mean that I am condemning the new generation but, actually, this is just the way it is, the way we do things. We think of making our lives as easy as we can. Let's compare the life of a housewife back in the 1960s to the life of a housewife now. Women used to use manual machinery—hand pumps for water and wooden bowls and sticks for crushing different spices for food. There were no washing machines in their time; they washed clothes by hand. Things such as food processors or grinders were not available. To mince mutton and beef they had to use some difficult techniques which were surely not as easy to use as the machines we have today.

My grandmother, named Amina, lived in Doha for more than a half of her life. She came to Doha after marrying my grandfather back in the 1960s. Amina was a very responsible, organized, and caring person. I have seen a lot of women here in Doha of her age, and I feel that at that time women had their

own special qualities. In some ways we cannot match their ability to manage their personal lives.

Many women of the new generations, when they get married, focus on their social and professional lives. This is good but they may forget to give importance to their children and home. One thing that comes to my mind again and again while thinking of my grandmother is this: when my mother was a child, my grandmother brought her up. This is very different from what women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do. Amina gave all her attention to her children and engaged herself in their best education and growth. She was more than a mother to all of her children and she had a very friendly nature with them. I love this quality of motherhood, that your child comes to you and shares all the secrets and problems he/she has. Being a mother is a precious gift in and of itself, but when you have a strong communication bond with your children you feel the best of all. I think women now should adopt this ability to love their children and have strong communication with them. Both parents and children must work for this strong relationship. In the future, when I will become a mother, I will try to follow the way my grandmother raised her children.

Another issue to compare, a very big one I think, is the attraction towards the opposite sex, which is nowadays a growing fashion. Some women try different ways to attract the opposite gender. Women in the past respected their limits; they had special issues and they tried to keep themselves away from such matters. Some women in Muslim countries are trying to adopt the western culture, which is very shameful and very misleading in regards to their religion.

Sometimes I imagine myself back in my grandmother's time and I think what my life would be as a woman then. Women at that time were very strong compared to the present generation. They never became as frustrated as the present generation. Women took life as a hard-working test; even though it seems to me that it was a very demanding life.

Another thing that is very rare nowadays is the closeness and love between the family members. In old times there were no such inventions as mobile phones and televisions and VCRs. But now as science has been making tremendous progress in this field, family members have lost interest in each other. The feeling of togetherness has become lost somehow. Children don't spend their times at home with parents; they engage themselves with friends. There was a common rule before that everyone had to sit at the dining table and discuss problems and matters of concern. Now everyone is so busy they just don't have time to spend with family. These moral values have changed. Women showed love and caring for each other in a family and for all the family members. I feel these were good and positive qualities that women possessed at that time.

Both generations have their positive characteristics. But while think-

ing of the healthier way of life I think that my grandmother's generation was a lot better than the present generation. We should make our lives have a meaningful goal in both personal and professional fields. I would really encourage the young generation to work hard and to adopt some strong qualities from the past generations. Doing this might help us to live our lives in a much better way.

## Simple Life Pleasures

*Shaikha Yacoub Al Kuwari*

“There is certain majesty in simplicity which is far above all the quaintness of wit.”  
Alexander Pope

When we talk about the magnificence of the life we're living nowadays—the focus on higher education, the economical growth, the need to own big houses or lots of glamorous handbags or makeup or expensive cars—we often forget about what's most important: to seek peace of mind, which is something we need the most. It always annoys me when I think about how the fast growth in technology makes us miss many simple life treasures that our grandparents enjoyed. Have you ever wondered how our grandparents managed to live without having half of what we have today, with what we wouldn't live without today? Giving this idea deep thought would bring us to a very simple realization; they lived with complete conviction that contentment is the key to happiness in life.

I read a book recently about simple pleasures. It was amazing to find that more than fifty people in the book felt happy without today's complicated daily life. Instead, they enjoyed spending their free time at home or in the company of their families. So, despite everything we have these days due to developments in so many fields, we are still missing something—something I consider more important than most of what we have today. It is simplicity we are missing, simplicity in everything, which was the real glory our grandparents lived with.

Sometimes days pass and I don't get a chance to see my big brother or my father. It's not only because I'm under pressure to study hard or that I have exams. It's also because we're living in a big house. Each one of us has our own room and when we get extra busy we sometimes forget to ask about each other or don't have time to ask. This lack of communication has become the norm in many people's lives, not just in my family's. In the past, my grandma lived in a house that consisted of only two rooms with a small yard. Children spent time together, playing in the streets. All the family slept together on the floor in one room, sharing the same blankets and telling each other about their precious daily adventures. No one lives in such



houses now, though our grandparents were very happy living the way they did. Their relationships were stronger. Whenever my grandma recalls those days, she wishes that contemporary people could appreciate their modern lives the way people in past generations appreciated theirs.

Even the things that they used to worry about are different from what concerns us now. When we complicate our lives, everything gets more difficult and confusing. For instance, today's girls use fancy hair dryers to straighten their hair and to create fashionable styles. Don't you see that the number of girls suffering from hair loss is increasing? Why didn't the girls in the past suffer from such things? Elderly people who haven't used this technology have strong and healthy hair compared to young women's hair today. In the past, girls used simple techniques to take care of their hair. They put different types of oils in their hair to make it stronger and more shiny. The oil also helped reduce the curls. Even the hairstyles they wore didn't require the hair sprays or the strong hairpins that weaken the hair.

Make up was less complicated too. Girls now wear all sorts of make up that dries out the skin. Yet, we see that the girls today can't live without it. Many moms have skin that is much better than their daughters. Girls now tend to use botox to renew their skin after damaging it with a lot of techniques and toxins.

Leading a simple life didn't prevent our grandparents from enjoying their lives or from being great and successful. I believe many people think that the features and techniques required to be successful in life were founded recently, in this generation. They ignore that our grandparents were also able to achieve; they were practicing those skills without planning to do so, spontaneously. Take leadership skills, for example, which are considered some of the most important skills for success nowadays. These have always been found in men and women; they aren't new. Women used to have lots of these skills. Almost all of them knew how to cook, stitch, and take care of everything related to arranging the house and keeping it clean. They also knew how to raise their children with appropriate manners, even if they were living in difficult situations without their husbands, who were traveling for trading. Women were good listeners to each other and they took care of their neighbors and were always there for them in times of need. They were leaders. Leadership isn't a new concept like many people think; it was there when our grandparents lived their simple lives. But now people think, in our rushed technology-driven lives, that leadership is something new.

I believe that happiness is something you feel in your heart not something you try to seek. Before any of us tries to search for it out there, we must look for it inside of us. Every soul that is pleased and appreciates the simple things around it, free of the continuous greediness of needing everything in life, can be happy wherever it is. To me, simply watching my mother or father smile makes me feel happy and changes my mood. When we want to be happy we can feel contentment, even in the simple pleasure of eating a bar of chocolate.

Why do I always hear lots of people say that they haven't laughed deeply from their hearts? And that they wish that something would happen that would let them to do so! Has life become so complicated that people have to wait for so long to laugh and to enjoy their lives? All of this makes me believe that our grandparents' simple life was the thing that made them feel happy and comfortable, despite the fact that it was difficult compared to our life.

I don't mean that we mustn't appreciate the great developments of the present time. I don't deny that these advancements have helped us a lot and thank god we're living with all of these advantages around us. But, as I said in the beginning, the hurried life we're now living makes us miss a lot of simple pleasures—and this really annoys me. In fact, I strongly agree with the spiritual writer Papa Ramadas, who believe that it's always the little things that matter most: "Simplicity is the nature of great souls."

## A Different Life Now

*Maryam Turki Al Subaiey*

They all say life is different now. Yes, it is different, much more modern, much more tolerant, and much better for women. I always imagine: what if I had been born in a different era? Would I have been given the opportunity to study abroad? Would I have been able to work and improve my talents? Sometimes I even think of the small things, like meeting my friends in a café and going out with them on trips. Or even going to the beauty salon to have my hair done or to the spa for a massage. If I had been born, as a girl, in the Gulf, more than seventy or fifty years ago, would I have been able to enjoy these simple things? Which as I believe are not only privileges but rights. I would never know for sure. Because sometimes, I think that, despite the changes, my life, in certain aspects, is not that different from my grandmothers’.

I have two grandmothers whom I love so much; I visit them every week and I like listening to their stories. Even though they are from the same generation, have typical old names and both wear *batoola*, they are extremely different. My grandmother from my father’s side is originally from Emirates, from the “Al Swuaidi” family. Her mother taught her how to read and write. She has a petite figure and is very calm, very modern. She likes things to be neat and tidy; she doesn’t like a lot of noise or being around too many people. She only speaks wise words and never leaves the house, unless for something very important. She spends time in the *hotta*, the barn, at the side of the big house, checking on the goats and chickens. Then, she goes to the kitchen to check on the cook. After that she checks on the flowers in her garden. She always carries a small key in her pocket; it’s the key to the storage room. No maid can fool her and steal an extra can of milk or take a few more eggs, or claim that the plates and pots were already broken! She knows everything and manages everything. One day she was telling me how the house was different long ago. There was a dining room in the other *majlis* but, because no one liked to eat on the table, they just removed it. Then she pointed at the small *majlis* and said: “Your uncles and grandfather used to eat here.”

“Where did you used to eat?” I asked.

“In the same place.”

“You didn’t eat together?” I asked.

“When they finished,” she said, “your aunties and I would come and eat.”

“Why didn’t you bring your plates and eat together?”

“We used to eat from their big plate after they finished,” she said.

A big exclamation mark was on my face and I said, “What?”

In a surprised way. I paused for a bit then asked, “You mean that you used to eat what was left on the big plate?” and she said, in a calm pleasant way, as she always does, “Yes.”

Trying to understand what I had been told, I asked, “Was it fine with you to eat leftovers?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “It was a long time ago. It was common.”

I couldn’t help but ask, “What if you were hungry? And they finished all the food.”

My grandmother laughed and said, “If it’s finished, it’s finished!”

I was quiet for a while, looking at her, again trying to understand what I had been told. She didn’t seem mad about it; it seemed normal to her! That was the tradition. I immediately imagined myself. I would have probably had a nervous break down!

My other grandmother, on the other hand, is a pure *bedwen* from the *Al Mih Shadi* family; she told me that she used to live in a tent, which she helped make herself. She also used to bring the water from the well. She is a loud, cheerful person who loves to go to the desert, even in the summer. Somehow, for her, the weather is always lovely there, even during the burning summer heat. She would say, “What wonderful weather; it brings you soul back.” She is kind of chubby and moves a lot. She shows affection, sometimes too much, and always likes to give things away. One time I asked her, “Why do you go to the desert in the heat? It’s unreasonable.” She said, “I have nothing left but those goats and chickens there, they keep me occupied, and what else am I going to do? Plus, it reminds me of the old days.”

My mother’s mom is illiterate, stubborn, and has a weird hobby of building and demolishing. The back of the house used to have a room for the maid and a kitchen. Now you can see the back of the house at the front of the house; there are two new kitchens, a storage room and something else that I never figured out the purpose of! The same thing happens at her camp in the desert, building and demolishing, until you can’t tell the kitchen from the toilet from the storage room. But, what I find incredible about her is her rare talent for memorizing difficult *bedwen* poetry—after hearing it only once. She is an encyclopedia for old *bedwen* poetry, and she enjoys telling us her poetry with passion as much as she enjoys watching *bedwen* soap operas.

This grandmother has truly suffered in her life. She was an orphan and was raised by her aunt. She was considered a burden and was rushed forcefully into marrying a man who was as old as her father. She was nine years old.

“I was playing with the kids” she told me, “when my aunt called me

and changed my clothes and told me to wear (batoola) because I was a woman now. Then she gave me a piece of candy and handed me over to my husband. I couldn't live with him. So he divorced me and they married me again to another man who was even older than the first one. I had a son from him, and I was divorced again. Then I married your grandfather and had your mom and uncles and aunties."

Both my grandmothers amaze me with their patience. I wonder if I could ever handle the same injustices they have suffered. But today's situations are different level. I remember one time when my younger brother asked me where I was going. I thought to kid around with him and said, sticking my tongue out, "None of your business." He laughed because he saw that I was kidding, but my mom heard me and started shouting, "THIS IS YOUR BROTHER. HE IS A MAN AND HE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR YOU. DON'T DISRESPECT HIM LIKE THAT. YOU BETTER TELL HIM WHERE YOU ARE GOING."

I was surprised at my mother's reaction. I immediately said, "Does it make sense that I, being the oldest, ask permission to go out from my younger brother? I don't see him telling me where he goes, so why should I?"

She replied, breathing loudly, "You girls are such a burden! When are you going to get married so I can get rid of you?"

I never understood why girls were considered a burden and were always rushed into marrying young. I believe that the current generation should not pass gender discrimination to their children. Yes, men and women are different, but neither should suffer injustice. I, at least, would love to teach my children that they are equal; I will teach my son that he won't be punished less than his sister because he is a man. Whatever mistakes they make, they will be equally punished for, and for whatever good things they do, they will be equally rewarded.

My life is so different from my grandmothers' with much more freedom, with many more rights, but always with a fight! Somehow life is still the same when it comes to certain aspects. We are, after all, women.

## The People That Move On

*Kimberly Fernandes*

A couple of weeks ago on my way to class, I ran into a longtime acquaintance. Like we always do, we exchanged the “hellos” and “it’s-been-so-longs,” and then we set up a coffee date when we could catch up. I mentioned a time later in the month, and she shook her head.

“I’m leaving,” she said, bright eyes looking back at my own like this was nothing out of the usual.

“Oh, that’s unfortunate,” I mumbled, stumbling to set an earlier date so we could meet before she left.

And we did meet. Over coffee, she explained that she would be leaving to work in London. Disagreeing cries echoed within me, never making their way out of my heart and to my mouth. It had been only a year since she’d arrived from the United States, having completed an expensive college education, and now she was already moving on. I’d liked very much to have been able to speak with her for longer, knowing that this would be, in all probability, the last time our paths would cross for a long time. But she had things to tie up before she left, and so did I. We exchanged email addresses (that would be misplaced within a week, if not sooner, and unearthed only perhaps a decade later), confirmed that we were indeed Facebook friends (and could thus always remain in touch), and said our airy goodbyes.

I walked away slower than she did that day, thinking all the while, What will life be like without her here? No longer would there be the security arising from the knowledge that if I didn’t have the time to linger in the hallway and exchange pleasantries with her today, she would always be there for me – tomorrow, the day after, a week or even a month from now.

The Doha I have grown up in has seen an extraordinarily high rate of development in the past few years. There are, no doubt, people who were here long before I was born, and who will remain a part of this city long after I have gone. But there are, increasingly, people who come and go, remaining for six months or a year. They leave as swiftly as they have arrived, and suddenly the Doha that was is not the same any longer without them.

Doha grows, and there is sufficient evidence of this—tall buildings springing up almost out of nowhere, new people appearing from what would

once have been remote parts of the world. But now for me Doha is marked in my mind's eye not by a certain group of people and ritualized behaviors, but rather by a blur of shapes and gaping holes from where people have left. Left, leaving me, who has lived here all my life, with memories of people and of our times together that will probably hold good for nothing, except to remind me that I've had wonderful friends. Left, leaving me with the strange knowledge that I am well-versed with fragmented people and patterns of behavior that will not be a part of Doha again.

## The Way it Works

*Marwa Saleh*

As with any other country, Qatar has its own unique social structure engraved into its past and future society. Despite recently having moved to Qatar, I've memorized the way this structure works. After all, it is something that you encounter on a daily basis. The most striking aspect of this structure is the rather significant social gap between the 'working' population and the locals.

First, what is social structure?

When I think of social structure I ask who works for whom; who respects whom, and who is dependent on whom? Furthermore, what are the attitudes shared between the various residents of this country?

After becoming good friends with a few Qatari students at my university and mingling with them at certain events, I became convinced that Sheikha Mossa's incredible efforts are the only attempts being made to alter or tackle this social structure. Her ability to bring together young locals—whose parents or grandparents would have never been seen with a 'Pakistani,' and a Pakistani from an international school—is astonishing. Fortunately her influence is spreading throughout Qatar. The existence of Education City in this country and the presence of strong-willed people wanting to change the attitudes of others is a powerful and stable force that will be the reason Qatar will prosper even more, not only financially but also intellectually.

As an attempt to further illustrate the current social structure in Qatar, I will take you through a normal school day for me. I wake up, get to university, and kindly greet the 'Hemaya,' from the Philippines, at the gate, after which he smiles extensively and waves, wishing me a good day. After my morning lectures, I enter the prayer room and unintentionally disrupt the Pakistani 'cleaning lady' from her sleep. This same lady works at the dorms and I once invited her for Iftar, but she could not grasp the concept of my invitation (despite her being able to speak English), and just accepted some food I packaged for her in a bag. When she sees me standing at the prayer room door, she greets me, gives me a tired smile, gets up and puts her shoes on, then quietly leaves. Several Qataris then enter the room; we all pray and then leave.

A few hours later I am done with classes and decide to go out with a few friends for a quick lunch. As we leave EC (Education City), the Philippine



guards at the gate wave to me, recognizing me as the 'girl' with the 'funny' smile. While driving to Villaggio, I almost get run into by a speeding white Land Cruiser, and of course I then begin to yell and make angry remarks about bad drivers.

Next, we enter the food court, and stand in the McDonalds line behind a rather old, upset Qatari local, who is screaming at a Sudanese employee for turning his back on him. My friends and I stand confused at first, thinking about the recent psychology lecture we've had about "bystander non-intervention," and finally decide not to intrude in the argument (though argument may be the wrong word since this is a one-sided exchange). The Sudanese employee simply stands there, head down, with a frown and says nothing to defend himself. The Lebanese manager then approaches the local and apologizes for the 'fool's' behavior, "We are terribly sorry," he says. "The African is still new."

Shocked by what we have just seen, we order our food and return to our daily dosage of gossip. We then enter 'Mango' before leaving and are greeted by the Philippine worker at the door, "Hi, Ma'am." On the way back home, I notice the waves of Indian, perhaps Pakistani, workers walking on the sides of the road, with shirts covering their heads rather than their chests. I return back home, take a two-hour nap and then wake up to return to Cornell. As I walk through the empty, quiet halls of the university, I suddenly hear some unfamiliar and unrecognizable laughing and chatter around the corner; I go to see who it is. I find three Indian, (perhaps Sri Lankan) workers leaning against the wall, taking a break from sweeping the floor. When they see me they automatically resume work and change to straight faces. I laugh, and simply walk away, hoping that they would return to their 'happy' chatter. I go to an empty seminar room, where I finish my work for the next day before returning home again.

My summaries of encounters throughout the day construct a biased image of the current social structure. I barely deal with locals on an average day, and see more foreign workers and immigrants than I do Qataris. The working class consists of foreigners mainly, and if there are any working locals you barely see them because they occupy only high positions. The Qatari 'Hemaya' ladies at the front desk in my dorms get paid twice as much, if not more (according to gossip) than the 'foreign' receptionists. Hence, you witness that the segregation is on so many levels, which might be justified in such cases as in my dorms (encouraging locals to adopt 'average' jobs), but the distinction between locals and non-locals I feel is extreme in this country.

Despite my harsh comments on the segregation in Qatar, I still believe that efforts are being made by numerous locals to improve this noticeable, yet un-discussed (among each other), situation. The introduction of American Universities, Western shops, restaurants, charities and many other institutions is aiding in overcoming the obstacle of segregation. Moreover, it seems that education in Qatar has been playing a crucial role in forming an accurate

awareness of the social structure in Qatar. The youth in Qatar are shedding light on critical issues involving the workers within Education City, and soon enough their engagement in their country's affairs will yield greater change.

Until that day when we all feel like one in this country, I hope that each resident or visitor of Qatar forgets his nationality, and simply adopts the 'citizen of the world' motto, in hopes of encouraging others to join us and open up to the world. The segregation ideology is being challenged by the educated Qatari youth, and much work is being done currently, within Education City, to accomplish change.

## Two Alphabets, One World

*Afaf Osman*

Friday nights are not very different from any other night of the week for me, a first year pre-med. Lying on my bed, I desperately try to finish the five-page chemistry lab report due on Monday, but soon enough, I get bored, shut my pink laptop down and wander around the room. I open the window so that the sound of the kids next door reaches me; I always like to listen to them laughing or to their mother loudly calling their names, which I still haven't figured out. Their presence reminds me of my own family, of my mother calling us to dinner, my sister insisting on watching a cartoon at dinner time, and the fluorescent lamp casting all kinds of shadows on my father's face as he discussed the weather and other issues.

Every day I feel my family's absence. I miss the smell of the Bukhor lingering in our living room's air every afternoon; I miss the long walks with my sister on the sea side, and I miss the sound of the Azan waking us up everyday at four to pray. And now, here in Doha, less than 200 miles away, I look at the skies and I wonder, will Doha ever feel like home to me? I think about my parents living in the Emirates for twelve years, before that they were both born and raised in Sudan; did they feel the same way when they first came to Abu Dhabi? I thought about my grandparents, living all their lives in one country. Did they ever imagine that their granddaughter would be living in Doha?

I trip over something between my bed and the wall, and to my surprise, it's my long lost ID card, right in front of my eyes. Carefully I pick up the precious identity card, remembering the troubles I went through when I lost it for two days, and I place it on the top of my desk.

I notice the dim light of my desk lamp trapping the objects around the room in a mysterious haze. I feel the night breeze, young, happy and restless, on the tips of my fingers. Playfully it dances with the curtains and scatters the papers around my desk. Every night that I've been in Doha, I've sat at that desk and written. Sometimes I feel that those moments I spend writing at that desk are the only real moments in my life, and everything else is a shadow of them, everything else happens just so I can sit down at night and write about it.

Writing has always been a part of me. In the early days of primary school, I would sit in my mother's lap and proudly recite the lines of a simple

poem my teacher had taught me. As years passed, I grew more and more fascinated by the power of language, and by the time I reached high school I had already started, with my teachers' help, to write poetry and short stories in Arabic. The first thing my teacher made me do when I told her I was going to attend an American college in Doha was to make me promise her that I would write to her in Arabic, so that I wouldn't forget the language. "But how can I forget my language?" I remember asking her.

I asked myself this question again after two weeks of living in the dorms here in Doha.

Now, after midnight, I can hear the music coming from the next room. My housemates have a tendency to listen to music late at night, and a very special kind of music too, rock they call it, or metallic or some such names. When I want to ask them to lower the volume, the words magically flow out of my mouth. Without thinking about the tenses of the verbs, without thinking about the subject or the object, I ask them to lower the volume in one complete English sentence, just like how I magically wake up my Arabic roommate with an English, "Good Morning."

Every night, I wrote in Arabic; I didn't want to forget my Arabic. I knew that I can't and won't forget Arabic, but I somehow needed the assurance of writing in my mother language. While I continued to practice this daily writing ritual, other important things were happening in my life, one of them my exposure to English poetry. The only English poetry I'd ever read before coming to Doha was that of two poets: Shakespeare, because I really wanted to know the reason behind his huge fame, and Emily Dickinson, after Googling the first lines of one of her poems that appeared in a headline in the local newspaper. My sole focus was on Arabic poetry. But the English course I was taking in Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar required us to read several English poems, one of them actually originally written in Arabic and translated to English. Reading English poetry felt as weird as talking in English all day long, but very soon I surprised myself by responding to it, passionately. It was like discovering a garden, mysterious, happy and blooming with flowers, right in my dorm room.

One night, I decided to try it myself, to write a poem in English, something that I had never done before. My first poem, less than a month old now, has led me to hidden places inside myself that I never explored before. My first poem also led to my second poem and my third and I began to write English poetry whenever I found the time to sit at my desk at night. A new voice was born inside me; or rather a voice that existed but was never heard has now found the tongue to speak with. Every poem I wrote made me see the world around me in a different way. Had I changed? Yes. I definitely had, but I'm still the same person. It's just that now my world has two different dimen-

sions and I have finally learned to embrace the dual culturalism that characterizes my life now. My Arabic poems and my English poems fit together nicely on a shelf on the right hand side of my desk.

I placed a picture over the poems, a white and black image of a bride and her groom. Her name was also Afaf, her white dress finely embroidered with big white flowers. A silk veil draped her shoulders and her earrings radiantly reflect the light. She died young, my grandma, and I never had the chance to meet her. In my ten-year-old imagination, I wove all kind of different stories about her—the kind of woman she was, the kind of mother she was, what she did in her free time, what kind of clothes she wore and the kind of society she lived in. Today, however, I wonder if she ever had the chance to experience the world from the perspective of another culture. I know that she was an Arab woman, and that's something we share, but I also know that she never lived in a dorm, she never drove a car or had an e-mail address, and a Facebook account. She probably never wrote poetry in another language; she didn't wear jeans to school and she never went to college.

Here I am, her granddaughter, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Afaf. I look in the mirror and I ask myself: what do I share with her other than the genes for black hair and black eyes? I realize that I can see the world from angles she never saw. I can read and write poetry in two languages. But maybe it was looking at that picture of her, when I was a little girl, that helped me learn how to make up stories and to love language.

## Marriage in Qatar

*Mohammed M. Al Khater*

The acceleration and pace at which Qatar has transformed, judging just by the last decade, is staggering. So staggering indeed that the word ‘rapid’ doesn’t seem to do it justice anymore. I think it only wise, therefore, to limit my opinion on how Qatar has changed to specific social areas in a Qatari citizen’s life. I will concentrate on the social aspects that I think are in dire need of our attention. As a result, my opinion piece may seem overly critical but I hope it’s clear that I am only critical because I care about my country; I care about improving it even further and making it as great as I know it could be. Also, I am sure the other essays in this book have touched on a lot of the positive aspects of the transformation of Qatar (one of which is the existence of this very book you are reading), but I want to concentrate on what has perhaps escaped through the cracks or is possibly a new phenomenon that got created as a side effect of the change that is ongoing here. My main purpose is, therefore, to shed some light on these issues that need to be addressed and will be the foundations upon which we can begin to formulate a remedy for them—a remedy that can keep these social problems from spawning more complex problems that could be even harder to deal with and might end up plaguing the society as a whole, prohibiting it from ever reaching its true potential.

Qatar has generally progressed at an unprecedented rate and has achieved a lot in terms of improving education, building a stronger economy, having an exceptionally high employment rate, maintaining safety, and staying true to its conservative traditional roots. Looking at these alone, one cannot help but be impressed and proud, and rightly so; these are all worthy of our pride. But dig a little bit below the surface and you will discover some deeply engrained social problems that need to be addressed. I will discuss only one of them here: marriage.

Typical marriages between Qatari families are arranged. The mom (usually) goes scouting for ‘eligible’ women and decides which one suits her son best. The son can sometimes see a picture of the ‘chosen girl’ beforehand (depending on the girl’s family views of course - some don’t even allow that). He may not speak to her, though, until after the engagement and even then, they cannot go out to a restaurant or anywhere else unless there is a male

chaperone accompanying them (usually the chosen girl's younger brother). They can talk on the phone though. So, practically speaking, they get to know each other mainly by phone and at least, in theory, if they realize they are incompatible for any reason, the engagement is off.

If the engagement fails, the male's family goes back to square one, with the mom scouting for other eligible women. This is a purely traditional phenomenon and it is absurdly outdated. I understand that this was the norm back in the days of our parents' generation, but the difference between the world we, the new generation, live in, and the world they lived in is huge. We, the young adults in Qatar, are a testament to one of the biggest generation gaps that ever existed in this world. A generation gap that has been widened beyond belief by the unprecedented development Qatar has been through and by the interconnectedness of this era of globalization, which makes the whole world seem like one huge village.

I understand the importance of preserving our traditions and values; but I also understand that some of these traditions no longer make sense because they simply do not work anymore. The new generation is enlightened and has seen more; it expects more. Is it such a stretch to expect marriage to be, at the very least, with someone you know well enough to be able to decide whether that person is compatible with you on a mental, spiritual, and emotional level? This is a person you are going to spend the rest of your life with, for! How can you decide if that person is the one you want to spend your life with just by talking with him/her on the phone? Am I the only one who thinks this is preposterous and an injustice to all of us young Qataris? Surely, I am not, but I suspect most of us settle for this arrangement, as it is the only way for traditional Qatari families to marry. Where else can you meet the opposite sex here? Everything else that involves contact with the opposite sex is looked down upon; it is taboo and we just have to accept that.

According to the Rand-Qatar Policy Institute, 76% of Qatari women who participated in their survey refuse to get employment in the private sector because it is a mixed gender environment (source: *The Peninsula*; Sat, Nov. 1, 2008; p1). Why, I ask, do we have to accept this as the norm without even so much as questioning it? I am all for preserving our traditions and culture but not when those traditions no longer make sense, either rationally or religiously. I have painted a picture that is perhaps guilty of generalization, but I contend that it is still based on what the majority of Qatari families are like. There are exceptions nowadays to these rules and in the spirit of integrity I mention those here, but it is important to emphasize that those are nevertheless exceptions to the norm.

We need to truly debate whether traditional arranged marriages merit being the only 'real' and acceptable way of getting married in Qatar, in this day and age. If not, what are the alternative ways that are considered to be still viable here (keep in mind, according to the RQPI survey 76% of women don't even

want to work in a place that allows contact with the other sex)? We need a rational discussion in a public sphere between the young Qatari adults, to discuss these questions. That will be the first step towards truly adapting to and taking advantage of all that our ever-changing, ever-improving country is providing for us. I believe a dialogue will be the beginning of the process of designing a remedy that fixes at least one of the aspects in our society that escaped through the cracks of improvement.



## You Have Been Invited

*Yusra Samir Abdelaal*

Weddings have always been the highlight of every Qatari woman's social calendar but today they are as extravagant and exclusive as a British aristocratic event. At each Qatari wedding that I am lucky enough to be invited to, I observe the elderly Qatari women as they sit in their brightly colored floral-printed dresses, black *abayat raas* and gold *battoolas*, huddled beside their granddaughters, quite clearly looking bedazzled with their wide-opened eyes. Long gone are the days when a bride would come in a simple green dress embroidered in gold thread, henna decorating her feet and hands, dressed from head to toe in traditional gold chains and bangles, the aroma of burning incense all around her. No longer will you find a wedding that consists of a dinner with close family and friends followed by the carrying of the bride to her groom on a carpet. The simple, traditional Bedouin wedding of one's grandmother has metamorphosed into a luxurious, diamond and glitter-studded affair.

As I sit in the banquet hall, waiting, as excited as all the other girls and women for the arrival of the lucky bride, I try to take in everything around me. The latest popular *khaleeji* music, from the likes of Al Jasmi and Rashid Al Majid, blast out from huge Sony speakers so that you cannot hear yourself think let alone speak. Tables and chairs are scattered across the hall, all draped in the finest satins and silks, in beautiful shades of purples, pinks and blues. Chandeliers hang everywhere, dripping in Swarovski crystals, brightly illuminating the place. As soon as each girl and woman enters, after having greeted a whole procession of various female relatives of the bride and groom, she rips off her *abaya* and *sheila* to reveal the most exquisitely tailor-made gowns, covered in intricate laces, studded with crystals or decorated with sequins. Each wears killer heels adding several inches to her height. Their hair is backcombed and curled and holds so much hairspray that it does not move when they move their heads. As they walk, musky and exotic perfumes waft behind them. Their faces are caked with makeup, liquid foundation a few shades lighter than their skin and their lips gleam with Dior lip glosses. Different combinations of eye shadows blend into their eyelids; precisely drawn black eyeliner turns every plain girl or woman into a beauty, and long false eyelashes flutter as they chat and laugh with one another.

These women move across the hall elegantly as if they were swans gliding

across a lake, each woman exuding self-confidence and proudly showing off her beauty and good taste. On a long platform protruding from the koosha, girls and young women dance and parade up and down, making me wonder if I've been mistaken and am attending a beauty pageant instead of a wedding. The reason is quite simple: each girl and young woman knows that a wedding is the best place to show herself off; each one, groomed to her best, expresses her beauty with the knowledge that the older women will be looking at each one of them as a possible bridal candidate for their sons, brothers and grandsons.

As the bride arrives the chandelier lights dim and are replaced by an array of flaring disco lights; I am blinded by them as the bride slowly makes her way inside in her *zaffa*. As she mounts the platform Canon digital cameras from every angle snap and flash; the most advanced video recorders capture her and display her on huge widescreen LG televisions that are hung around the hall for all to see. The bride is a princess; her gown is Cinderella-quality, having been flown in months in advance from Haute Couture designers in Milan, Paris or London. She is draped in glistening diamonds and wears a hair-do and make up that has cost her thousands of riyals. This night is made as fantastical as something out of *A Thousand and One Nights*—precisely the effect that every Qatari woman wants to achieve when she plans her wedding.

Again I peer at the elderly women, who sit so calm and composed despite all the shrieks of excitement and blasting music surrounding them. For them, this wedding is out of a completely different world.

## Glossary

*Abayat raas* – a traditional black over-dress similar to a cape which covers the whole body, has sleeves and a section which goes over half the head, usually worn by older women or strictly religious women.

*Battoola* - a veil made out of gold paper which is worn by the older women in Gulf societies.

*Khaleeji* – adjective for Gulf.

*Al Jasmi* – popular Emirati singer.

*Rashid Al Majid* – popular Saudi Arabian singer.

*Abaya* - traditional black over-dress similar to a cape which covers the whole body and has sleeves and is worn by all Qatari women when they go out into public.

*Sheila* – a long, rectangular, black headscarf worn wrapped around the head.

*Koosha* – the special seating for the bride and groom.

*Zaffa* – a traditional Arabic rite in which the bride makes her procession to her koosha, symbolizing giving herself away to the groom and his family.

# Modernization in Qatar

*Aljohara Al Jefairi*

Physically, Qatar in 2008 is almost unrecognizable compared to Qatar in 1968, but in quality of life, social attitudes and political thinking it is also a different country. These social changes have come about partly as a consequence of the changes in physical infrastructure.

Following the first production of oil in 1949, and independence in 1971, Qatar developed the basic infrastructure of a modern state. Rumeillah Hospital was built in 1952; Doha Airport was constructed in 1963<sup>1</sup>. Official statistics show that in 1956 there were 14 schools and 1000 students in state education<sup>2</sup>. By 2006 and 2007 these numbers has increased to 278 schools and 11,249 students receiving education from the state<sup>3</sup>. Obviously, without construction of new schools, this increase would not have been possible.

With increased literacy came a greater awareness of social issues. The status of women in society, for example, became an issue as more women graduated from high school and university. There was social pressure to employ these girls and women in non-traditional jobs. Today, we find women engineers in Qatar Airways and women pilots in Gulf Helicopters and Qatar Airways<sup>4</sup>. How can we relate these changes to changes in infrastructure?

In 1968 the basic needs of the society were met in health and education. The buildings and services existed, but no attempt was made to upgrade facilities. As recently as 2000, some of the same schools still existed with ceiling fans for air-conditioning and may broken windows. These physical surroundings did not encourage students to love learning; indeed it seemed as if students were being sent to prison instead of school. Education was rarely discussed in the media and the Ministry of Education main building near the Corniche was as old and broken down as many of the schools. This was, perhaps, a sign of how unimportant the government felt education to be.

Recent developments in infrastructure have opened job opportunities, which did not exist forty years ago. The gas industry has opened the door to many Qatari graduates including women. In 1968 less than 20% of the work force was Qatari, and less than 5% was Qatari women. Today, in the oil and gas industries this percentage has risen to 55%<sup>5</sup>, and as industries grow that rely on oil or gas, such as chemical and fertilizer industries, this percentage of Qataries

in employment continues to grow. Engineers are also required to supervise the construction boom happening in Qatar now. Ashgal, the Public Works Authority, currently employs 33% Qataris<sup>6</sup>. With increased economic and construction activity, many other Ministries and corporations are expanding their workforce and women are being employed in jobs previously held by foreign workers.

It is not only in Government that the number of Qatari employees is increasing. In banks and private companies it is common to find Qataris working along with foreigners. If there was no infrastructure boom, it is unlikely that this would have happened. The trickle-down effect of increasing oil and gas revenues is making itself felt in many fields.

The most obvious example is in the development of Higher Education and the building of Education City. In most developed countries, a major city might have three, four or five universities, but with a population of millions. These universities are normally located in different parts of the city and have a tradition of competition rather than cooperation with each other. If we look at London, for example, we see that there are five major universities not close together and not able to allow their students to meet and collaborate<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, the vision of the Qatar Foundation for Education and Science is distinct<sup>8</sup>. Here, the concept is to bring together, on one site, world class universities in world class buildings. Although, the question is hypothetical, it is interesting to speculate whether these universities would have opened branches in Qatar without the assurance that the buildings and facilities provided by Qatar Foundation would be world class. The expenditure on building alone is an indicator of how serious Qatar Foundation is in trying to achieve its vision<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the teaching standard from these universities has also had an effect on education generally in Qatar. Qatar University has also undergone a process of reform. Standards of admission are higher, curricula have been revised, teaching is (mainly) in English and the possibility of making the university mixed sex has been discussed. Of course, it is possible that Qatar University would have made these reforms without the example of the universities based in Education City, but whether it would have aimed at raising standards to compete with these universities is doubtful, since for many years it was the only option for many students who wanted a university education. In other words, it had a monopoly and acted like most monopolies—too bad if you don't like the service!

The other area of education reform was in public secondary education. The Supreme Education Council was established in 2002 to oversee the educational reform known as Education for a New Era, which actually started in 2001<sup>10</sup>. The short-term objective of this initiative is to build “a modern world-class public school system” and in the long-term to “prepare future

generations to be productive members of Qatari society and the world at large<sup>11</sup>. What is not noted is that in 2001, the government built forty-two new schools to replace older, run-down schools. The first independent schools were given some of these buildings. The new buildings make a new start in education possible. They are both symbolic and, at the same time, a practical demonstration of the desire of the state to improve education.

Another area of development and modernization is medical care and facilities. With oil money, the first public health care system was established in 1953. A public hospital was built and developed into Rumeillah Hospital. Doctors and nurses were recruited from United Kingdom and a mass vaccination campaign against TB was set up; without oil money, this would have been impossible to fund<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the first medical facility in Dukhan was established by the oil company. Before these medical facilities were built, people had to rely on folk medicine, wise women and mutawa' to try to cure illnesses. In 1972, with the rise in oil price caused by OPEC's decision to cut production<sup>13</sup>, Qatar was able to build a new, modern hospital called Hamad Hospital. Currently this has been renamed Hamad Medical City and is building modern facilities in many specializations including IVF and cancer treatment. If oil was selling at \$10 per barrel, as in 1996, would these facilities exist today?

Social life in Qatar has also changed with development. Until the construction of shopping malls, it was very uncommon for groups of women or even for family groups to go to public places apart from the Corniche or a restaurant<sup>14</sup>. Now it is common for groups to go to a shopping mall as a social event. In other words, the shopping is not the main activity. The mall, and the people in the mall, has become an entertainment in themselves. Another area of entertainment that has proved popular with a growing number of Qataris is the cinema. Until about 1996, there were only two cinemas in Doha and they were not places families went to. Now, modern, comfortable, clean cinemas—offering a variety of entertainment for all ages and tastes—attract large numbers of people, especially on the weekend. This does not imply that traditional values have been lost, but, because the buildings and facilities exist, those who want to use them in ways that could not have existed sixty years ago have the opportunity to do so.

Food shopping has changed with the introduction of hypermarkets. Until 2001, supermarkets were not places many Qatari women frequented. As they mainly sold food, there was little incentive or attraction for Qatari women. People recall that food shopping was often done by men and the only places women went to shop were The Centre or New Trade Gallery. Along with the spread of malls and hypermarkets came the introduction of international brands of clothes and food. A Starbucks does not seem out of place in a shopping mall, but would have seemed very strange in the old Souq Waqif. It is normal to see Qatari women in this type of coffee shop, while they could not have gone to a

traditional small tea or coffee shop or shisha café. The opportunity only arose after the provision of the infrastructure.

The relaxing of social rules governing how women could be seen in public also carries over to driving. Now it is normal to see a woman wearing niqab driving but if roads were not modern and not safer than they were even ten years ago, it is unlikely so many women would drive.

The development of the towers area of Doha has meant that many Ministries and Government Departments have moved their offices there. The working conditions are clean, modern, and open. They are places where Qatari women can feel comfortable about working and the evidence is available to anyone who visits any of these buildings.

With the change in social attitudes noted above, there is also a change in political life. The new Constitution and establishment of the Central Municipal Council have given Qataris the incentive to take part in public debates about issues that previously were only spoken about in private. Of course, it is not possible to claim that this is a direct result of modernization of the physical infrastructure, but there are links with the change in social attitudes brought about by the recent infrastructure development of the country. This is guided from above and encouraged by H.H. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Misnad. She has been the driving force behind Qatar Foundation, and she has also been a role model for many, especially women and girls, in Qatari society.

The modernization of information and information technology (IT) in Qatar has also played a key role in opening opportunities for Qatari citizens. The Internet allows everyone to access information from the world and to learn from the world. Jobs are available that did not exist sixty years ago. There are no barriers to women being as skilled as men in IT; this is not a “traditional” field—there are no preconceived notions about “men vs women” in this work. Q-Tel customer service staffs are now mainly women and deal professionally with customers’ enquiries and problems.

Modernization can be viewed in two ways, the physical development of infrastructure and the change in social attitudes. It seems clear that the two are, in many respects, inter-connected. Physical development brings about social development. In the days before safe and cheap travel by air or road, the Hajj pilgrimage was a journey of a life time. Now, many people go for Omrah one or two times a year. In the same way, the development of the physical infrastructure of Qatar in the 1960s and 70s and the recent development, which began about ten years ago, have brought about significant changes in the lives of the citizens and residents of Qatar. In the first phase of development, the health and education of people changed dramatically as a result of modern facilities being built. In the second, and more recent, phase, social attitudes and mindset have started to show signs of change. In both cases the changes

are not reversible. It is not possible to return to “the old ways.” It will be fascinating to see how and in what way future modernization changes Qatari society.

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## Editor Biographies

**Carol Henderson** teaches writing workshops and coaches writers at every level of skill—all over the world. As Program Director of the North Carolina Writers' Network, one of the largest state-wide organizations in the US, she developed programs, ran national writing conferences, and managed grants. For the past twenty years she has published widely as a columnist, reviewer, and feature writer in newspapers and magazines, including *Woman's Day*, the *Utne Reader*, and the *Oxford American*. *USA Today* called her memoir, *Losing Malcolm: a Mother's Journey through Grief*, "A redemptive memoir about losing a baby and learning how to live . . . short on new-age buzz words, long on lessons learned from loss." She is also an award winning newspaper columnist. Henderson's workshops focus on self-expression by helping writers discover their deepest material and bring it to the page in their truest voices. She is currently editing several theme-based essay anthologies and working on two books, one about teaching writing. For more information on her work please see: [www.carolhenderson.com](http://www.carolhenderson.com)

**Mobanalakshmi Rajakumar** is a writer and educator who currently works and lives with her husband in Doha, Qatar. A scholar of literature, she has a PhD from the University of Florida with a focus on gender and postcolonial theory. She has published short stories, academic articles, and travel essays in a variety of journals and literary magazines. Mohana also reviews audio books for *Audiofile* magazine and regularly contributes to *Woman Today*. In her work on life in Qatar she has contributed to *Qatar Explorer*, *Qatar Resident's Guide*, and websites including *Qatar Visitor*. Founder of the Doha Writers' Workshop, a community group for writers of all genres that meets in Qatar, she believes writing is a skill that anyone can develop at any age. Currently she is working on a collection of essays related to her experiences as a female South Asian American living in the Arabian Gulf. She believes words can help us understand ourselves and others. Catch up on her latest via her blog at [mohanalakshmi.livejournal.com](http://mohanalakshmi.livejournal.com) or for more information please see her website: [www.mohanalakshmi.com](http://www.mohanalakshmi.com).

## Author Biographies

*Afaf Osman* was born in Sudan and has lived most of her life in the United Arab Emirates. This is her first year in Qatar as a first year student in the pre-medical program at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. She enjoys reading and writing both Arabic and English poetry; she is also interested in other forms of literature. Afaf is proud to be featured in this anthology as her very first published work.

*Amna Abdulaziz Jassim Hamad Al Thani* is a Qatari who has attended English speaking schools since the age of five and considers English her first language. She is currently enrolled at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the Sociology program and plans on completing a Masters of Science. In May 2008, she graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar with a Bachelors of Science degree in Business Administration with a minor in English.

*Autumn Watts* earned her BA in Cultural Anthropology at Portland State University and her MFA in Creative Writing at Cornell, prior to her appointment as the Writing Center Coordinator at WCMC-Q. Her fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in several journals, including Best New Poets and Qatar Narratives, and she enjoys collaborations with visual artists. Her creative work lately explores the social, natural and atomic history of rural Nevada where she was born.

*Buthayna Mohammed Al Madhadi* is a third year Qatari student at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, majoring in Business Administration with a focus in management. She has studied English since the age of six. She has conducted and analyzed a number of business, scientific, and political research including the project: “NPR’s Political Bias During the American Presidential Elections.” In 2002, she was the first place winner in a writing competition sponsored by the post office where participants imagined writing a letter to a distant friend.

***Fatma Nasser Al Dosari*** was born in a passionate rush for life after only eight months in her mother's womb and weighed 1.75 Kg. Her early birth was only the first struggle she defeated. Now, she is a student at Qatar University, majoring in architectural engineering. She has a great desire for positive changes among her society and herself which drives her to be a focal point for many.

***Ghina Elkasti*** has been a resident of Qatar for 19 years. Living away from her native made her adapt to a new culture and experience its differences and similarities. She is the youngest of three daughters. Neither her mother nor grandmother went to high school; however Ghina feels they are the best support she could have for goals in higher education. As a junior at Qatar University, majoring in Chemical Engineering, she is fulfilling the dreams of her female family members.

***Heba Sajid*** is a second year student of Para-medicine at the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar. She written for essay competitions since high school and has won prizes for her writing. She studied until the twelfth grade in Pakshama School in Doha. She is an active student, participating in events such as Global Village, Wanasah Night, and Case competition, as well as in debate competitions. Last year she was rewarded an honor-ship for being an exemplary student.

***Hissa Abdullah Ibrahim Al Maadeed*** graduated in June 2007 from the American University of Sharjah with a Bachelor degree in Business Administration with special concentration on Finance Marketing and a minor in economics. During her last university year, she was awarded a membership by the International Economics Honor Society or Omicron Delta Epsilon. She enjoys listening to classic music, reading, and meditating.

***Kimberly Fernandes*** is a sophomore at Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service in Qatar. Born in Mumbai, she has lived all her life in Qatar. She hopes to return and work in India one day. She is majoring in Culture and Politics. She enjoys reading and long conversations with friends. She would like to be a human rights activist.

***Maha Mohammed Al Shirrawi*** is a Qatari and a 2008 graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar where she majored in Business Administration. While attending the university, she participated in many research projects including "Migrant workers in Qatar" which was funded by Qatar National Research Fund's undergraduate research program. Another of her research projects, conducted as an independent study was "How Are Immigrant Workers Affected by the Inflation in Qatar?" She

now works as a Training and Development Coordinator in RasGas, Ltd.

**Marwa Saleh** is a second year pre-medical student at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. She moved to Qatar from Lebanon, where she had lived most of her life. She has traveled to Uganda, where she worked at a health clinic. Along with community service, she enjoys soccer and basketball, and coaches the women's basketball team at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. She heads Cornell's Student Volunteer Group aimed at promoting volunteering in Qatar.

**Maryam Turki Al Subaiey** is the second oldest in her family of three girls and three boys. She completed the Academic Bridge program at Qatar Foundation and went to the United Kingdom in 2003 to study at the University of Essex. She returned to Qatar in 2007 with a Bachelors of Arts in Political Science, having studied three foreign languages, English, French and Spanish. She is currently a political researcher at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Qatar.

**Mashaael Salman Rashid** is a graduate of Qatar University who majored in computer engineering. As a student Mashaael was an active participant in campus life and a member of the first University service learning trip to the West African country of Mauritania. In Mauritania she learned what a fortunate life citizens and residents in Qatar have and the importance of grass roots organizations to their communities. She now works at Qatar Central Bank in their IT department.

**Mohammed M. Al Khater** is a recent law graduate from Cardiff University. He has had two previous works published in the UK and plans to continue publishing in the future. He is currently an "in-house" lawyer in training at a large company and aspires to one day write and publish a novel. He enjoys reading contemporary and classic fiction.

**Mohammed Jabor Al Kubaisi** was born in Doha and spent his childhood in Al Shamal village, where his tribe lives. It is a small village about 95 km north of Doha. Currently he is a student in Texas A&M University, majoring in Petroleum Engineer. He hopes that someday to use his engineering skills to create a permanent footprint in the development of his country, in order to show that people living outside of the city center have contributions to make.

**Mohammed Al Marri** is a first year engineering student at Qatar University. He attended Omar bin al Khatabe independent school and has traveled to the UK for English courses.

**Saad Rashid Al Matwi** is a junior at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, majoring in Business Administration with a minor in history. Since childhood, he has always been attracted to the world of history and literature. He believes that Qataris as a society have the ability to preserve traditions, culture, and values, while developing and modernizing the country.

**Shaikha Daoud Al Shokri** is a Qatari student in the Foundation program at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. In 2006, she received an award in Bahrain as the best performing among the Qatari high school students. She attended Rabaa Al Adawia School and was in the top percentile there. On The Education Excellence Day in November 2007, she received a gold medal awarded for academic excellence.

**Shakiba Yacoub Al Kuwari** is a junior at Qatar University, majoring in Computer Engineering, with a love for the arts. Shaikha has been an active student at QU, representing the university as part of a delegation that attended the 2008 Zayed University, Women as Global Leaders conference in Dubai, UAE. She plans for graduate study in Multimedia and Design.

**Suzannah Mirghani** is a PhD candidate in the field of Communication and Media Studies at Eastern Mediterranean University in Cyprus. Suzannah's interests lie in the grey areas of copyright and culture but she also writes fiction when she can make time for it. She has been an active member of the Doha Writers' Workshop since its inception.

**Yusra Samir** is a Londoner who came to Qatar over five years ago. Within weeks of starting at her new high school, she fell in love with Qatar and the Qataris themselves. She has learn everything she can about Qatar, its history, its customs and its traditions, adopting the women's style of dress and their local dialect. She is a junior year at Qatar University in the International Affairs program and hopes to continue participating in the growth of Qatar while also preserving its culture and heritage.

**Aljohara Yaqoub Al Jefairi** is a third year international relations major at Qatar University. She has participated in a number of international conferences, as well as an educational trip to the United States. During these experiences as she meets people from other countries and various religions, most of them, she finds, are surprised to discover that Qatari women have abilities and ambitions.