



## *Emirati Women: Generations of Change*

**Jane Bristol-Rhys**

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The monumental changes that have impacted the oil-rich rentier states of the Gulf are well documented. Petroleum exports have generated colossal sums of cash that, at least for those select smaller nations with tiny citizen populations and abundant hydrocarbon resources, have underwritten the creation of an extensive social welfare structure. Entitlements like government employment, pensions, health care, education, low-interest or interest-free loans, marriage grants, and subsidized goods are just a brief list of some of the benefits that come with citizenship. In the United Arab Emirates, these allowances are complemented by a spectacular constructed environment that has taken on a theme park atmosphere that never seems to be anywhere near completion, a perpetual work in progress.

Jane Bristol-Rhys, in the opening chapter of her book, gives an accurate impression of this scale of growth that has come to define how people commonly refer to the United Arab Emirates. She explains, "It is almost impossible to avoid superlatives when writing about the changes that have occurred in this small country. Rapid, breathtaking, amazing, mindboggling, stunning and unbelievable have all been used to describe the . . . development that built the UAE so quickly" (p. 5). However, as Bristol-Rhys quickly points out, these adjectives are only part of the broader narrative that characterizes life in one emirate today—Abu Dhabi. More concealed, she argues, are the ways in which the country's women have adapted to such rapid transformations in just four decades. But by interviewing women old enough to still remember Abu Dhabi's recent preoil heritage, as well as using classroom discussions with the younger generation of students at Zayed University, the author builds a unique account of how Emirati women understand this new world and their place in it.

One of the themes that repeatedly emerges in the author's text is the sensitivity that the women of Abu Dhabi have about the image that they project to outsiders. Ridiculed and stereotyped by the foreigners who populate most of Abu Dhabi's labor markets, Bristol-Rhys reveals an acute self-consciousness that plagues the women who are aware that many observers view them as frivolous, flamboyant, wasteful, and lazy. Some of the women that Bristol-Rhys spoke with readily dismissed these labels as the jealous rants of an envious expatriate community who ignore their charitable contributions, declaring that no one would dare scrutinize the private expenditures of



Bill Gates because he is better known for his public donations. The Emiratis, these women protest, receive no such license, and they resent being measured by alien standards that are not of their own making. Still, others in the research saw their spending habits as symptomatic of a brand of social competitiveness that has arisen in the oil rent economy that demands they maintain appearances if they wish to avoid gossip and uphold their status. Within this context, there is no arena more contentious than that of weddings, which, Bristol-Rhys insists, are the public tournaments where Emirati women distinguish themselves most through their lavishness: VIP seating, Parisian couture, security checkpoints, and opulent venues are all hallmarks of these “battles of the mothers” (p. 78).

Another motif that is intricately tied to the contemporary wealthy routines of Emiratis is how the historical legacy of the region is recalled and interpreted by the women of Abu Dhabi. According to Bristol-Rhys, there is an obvious generational gap that informs these perspectives. This divide ranges from those who have not yet forgotten the poverty and scarcity that typified Abu Dhabi’s existence before oil, followed by those who were spoiled by the initial influxes of petroleum profits to the point that they were deemed by an interviewee as the “wasted generation” (p. 81), to the current descendants who have no knowledge of life devoid of material fulfillment. When the female elders recollect about their hardships, they also reminisce over how they used to have self-reliance, increased personal mobility, and economic roles in their families’ lives. By contrast, Bristol-Rhys depicts the present era as one fraught with concerns by Emirati women over their deepening dependency on governmental support, men’s incomes, and household domestics for their own perseverance. Moreover, what is hastily being lost in this time line is any sense of cultural authenticity that can be balanced against the nation’s sudden metamorphosis into a global hub. The author makes it clear that questions of identity are easily confused when the Emirati past has been so carefully manufactured. At one end are the Bedouin myths, desert adventures, and reconstructed “traditional” edifices that sell a sanitized, consumer-friendly kind of nostalgia to tourists and locals alike. These, Bristol-Rhys contends, are little more than attempts to make the past into something that can be palatable for the present. Simultaneously, though, is the Emirati demonstration of a profound disassociation with anything predating the age of oil that began during the reign of Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Hence, the author’s comment that “Young Emiratis seem to look at their pre-oil history in the same way they regard the *jahiliyya* time before the prophet . . . a past that bears no connection with their present and even less with the future they are creating” (p. 120).

Consequently, by either abandoning the past or trading it in for a more stylized edition stripped of its harshness, there is frailty to Emirati women’s modern-day identities that Bristol-Rhys introduces in an insightful manner that begs for further attention. It is the author’s assertion that because the past continues to hold such strong connotations of struggle and sacrifice, the Emiratis are compelled to put these former indignations behind them by engaging in rampant consumerism at levels that



are nothing short of staggering. At the same time, the women of Abu Dhabi place themselves in a precarious position whenever reminders of their humble origins intrude upon their refined personas. As Bristol-Rhys discovered, what might be seen as an innocuous visit to a wedding celebration by rural kinfolk can be enough to undermine the preferred, cosmopolitan version of one's life story. This, she tells us, is due to the whole novelty of these dominant renditions coupled with the fact that they lack any solid, legitimizing foundation; thus, when contested, the narrative unravels. Like Abu Dhabi itself, fabricated nearly overnight, the women of the city have stories that are "too new, too fragile, and too thin to survive when juxtaposed with reminders of the past that is being forgotten systematically" (p. 122).



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