



## FATINA SHAKER

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*Elizabeth Farnsworth interviews sociologist Fatina Shaker about moderate Islam, the aftermath of Sept. 11 and the role of women in Saudi Arabia.*

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Jeddah, on the edge of the Red Sea, is Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city. Because it is the gateway to Mecca and Medina, millions of people from around the world visit here here each year.

Many Saudis from Jeddah also work and study abroad. But even in this international environment Fatina Shaker stands out.

Born into a middle class family with a commitment to education, she was one of the first Saudi women to win a Fulbright scholarship. She got a PhD in sociology from Purdue and has been a university professor, editor of the first Saudi woman's magazine and a newspaper columnist.

Like other Saudi women, she wears a robe -- called an abiyah -- and covers her head with a scarf when in public. She taught me how to wrap a scarf, which foreign women are asked to wear in public too.

FATINA SHAKER: Like this.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: oh...so you throw it over.

FATINA SHAKER: Yes....over.

FATINA SHAKER: Of course if we're in a women only group you can take it off and go without it.

Many Saudi women go further than wearing the abiyah and scarf. They cover all or part of their face with a veil.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Who determines how veiled you are? Does a woman determine it? Or would her husband?

FATINA SHAKER: Usually the woman with her husband and father. It's the rules of the family. Sometimes the woman is actually more conservative than their husbands. The basic islamic requirement is to be decent and cover your hair, but beyond that it is all familial and social rules.

## A repressive society?

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I spoke with Shaker about that and other matters in an interview in her Jeddah home in late January.

To many American women -- just to see a woman covered in black from head to toe -- not being able to see -- this is proof that this is a repressive society.

FATINA SHAKER: Well if I were not a Muslim, I would feel the same way. If I would see a woman covered totally in black, I would feel sorry for that woman and feel that way, but again, our reality here is very, very complex. It's really multi-layered. When you see on the surface, of course you get that impression. But just go beyond a bit and you get to a second level of reality, a third, a fourth. People here don't show you everything at once.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Shaker's life is multilayered. She recently married Saudi architect Sami Angawi, whom we featured in a story on the NewsHour last month. Shaker is Angawi's second wife. He lives part of the time with her in her modest home and part of the time with his first wife, an artist, in a house they designed together. Islam permits having multiple wives. As a woman in Saudi Arabia, Shaker is not allowed to drive and can not hold certain jobs, among other restrictions. I asked her if she wanted more freedom.

FATINA SHAKER: Well I need to see development. Freedom -- this is a very sensitive, very edgy. Freedom from what to do what? Okay, as a person, I can hear what they.... I don't mind covering my head, but don't cover my mind. Give me choices. Don't force me to work. Don't force me to stay at home. But give me that choice according to my situation, my family situation, my capabilities whether I like to work or to stay home to raise my kids and take care of my husband.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And you've had this freedom?.

FATINA SHAKER: I had. You know I was fortunate enough to have a family, to have a situation to have that freedom. But again, freedom is not given. You really have to really work for it. You cannot just sit and wait...And you come to a very important point here, Elizabeth. That Saudi Arabia is not a homogeneous society. It's a heterogeneous society. You know this kingdom of Saudi Arabia is really the unification of different regions. So all of us, our reference is Muslims, all of us are Muslims. But we have with that framework within generic Islam we have different social customs, different family orientations, okay, and also different interpretation of what makes a person a good Muslim. Again, you have different interpretations of the human being, like, you know, conservative Islam or extremist Islam, they see the dark side of man. And here, unfortunately, women become the easy card to play around with. And this is again, wrong, this is not Islamic. Islam has never seen women as the source of vice. Extremism sees women as the source of vice.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You mean for somebody who is being extremely intolerant, they can play on people's irrational fears of women? Is that what you're saying?

FATINA SHAKER: Yes, plus the fear of our women becoming so "free, quote un quote, as western women" or you know -- see this is the stereotype we have of other people. Freedom means just no traditions, no values, no whatever, whatever, OK? So, that fear is there.. If we just give them just a little bit of freedom, they will take off without control, so they need to be under control. This is the extremist view, and as I said, because they see the dark side.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Extremism has gained ground in Saudi Arabia. Shaker said -- because outspoken conservative sheikhs won young people's allegiance in the absence of other political options.

FATINA SHAKER: The conservative -- or even more than the conservative -- these are the people who had the legitimacy to talk and they used religion as really a weapon. On everybody's head. On women and men. Especially the educated ones. Especially the ones who want to use their minds, who really want to develop the country, who have lived here and abroad, who are not afraid because their religion, their Islam is solid within, okay?

## **Effects of Sept. 11**

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: But things are beginning to change, Shaker said -- because Crown Prince Abdullah and other Saudi leaders are taking measures to counter the extremism that became evident September 11. 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis influenced by Muslim extremists.

FATINA SHAKER: Now the government has realized that it has done wrong by really giving credit to these people. And now as probably you have heard, the Crown Prince Abdullah has really come out on the TV and said, no extremism anymore. No extremism anymore. Islam is not. Now everybody's coming back to the middle.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Really? You think so. Because some people have said it's just form, but it's not really happening.

FATINA SHAKER: No. Some of it is really happening, okay? In fact, the government is realizing now that it had given too much room for the conservative brand of Islam, the conservative voices of Islam to be heard on the account of the middle voice.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Instead of the middle voice?

FATINA SHAKER: Yeah, instead of the middle voice. But then really, I like to bring something else here to be able to understand how complex it is. That conservative voice really started, it was there, but it started to be heard during the '70s and the '80s, where we had the influx to Saudi Arabia from other countries, of that voice of Islam, that brand of Islam, that is the conservative, the extremist, the most rigid. You know, after the oil embargo, Saudi Arabia became so rich, so much money. All of a sudden it was open to the outside world. So it's reasonable enough to expect that people, especially on their religion or the religious people, ulema or sheiks, they would become afraid and worried that you know, like a small fish being worried to be swallowed by a bigger fish. But really, as a Muslim, we shouldn't be afraid.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Could you get in trouble for talking to us like this?

FATINA SHAKER: I don't think so.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: No?

FATINA SHAKER: I don't think so. I know my limits. If, if I have something critical to say, I know why I'm saying it, so it really depends. And there's another problem here, not only in Saudi Arabia, but in the developing countries, in the Arab countries, the Muslim countries. It's not only the king. It's not only the Crown Prince. It's not only the minister. It's really the people around. So I guess this is one thing the government has to look at. The surrounding people, the bureaucrats around okay? They should really shake the bureaucracy. Because some of these people prevent honest, loyal people, open minded people, real Muslim people from getting to, and they really give an entirely different picture of reality to the responsible people. Everything is okay. You hear that. Everything is okay. We don't have problem.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: We've heard that.

FATINA SHAKER: Yeah, everything's okay. Now, to me, this is really defeat. And this is lying and this is against religion and against national interest. Now if there is a problem, we should say that yes, there is a problem. As a Muslim, I will be judged by my god, whether I gave an honest advice to my boss or not. We are not talking about problems or realizing that we are having problems only because 9/11 had happened. Go to the newspaper, the Saudi newspaper and read some of the articles, the columns written by women and by men. We've been talking for 20 or 25 years or 30 years about our education system, about the need to reevaluate our priorities.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: She believes American authorities have known for years there were problems in Saudi Arabian society but looked the other way until being attacked September 11th.

FATINA SHAKER: Saudi Arabia and the United States have known each other for a long time. They have been friends for a long time. The American government knows exactly what is the situation in Saudi Arabia in every respect.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Shaker has retired from her university job in Jeddah and is spending a lot of time with Angawi. She had been divorced for many years before they met.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You're a bit of an enigma to me -- a Fulbright scholar, a PhD and you're also a second wife.

FATINA SHAKER: Yes, I'm a second wife. And I could say I'm really proud of it, proud of having that provision, happy that I as Muslim woman have that provision that allows me to be a second wife. I never thought I'd accept to be a second wife, but when I met my husband, Dr. Sami Angawi, and all of a sudden we realized that both of us would like to get together, not only as colleagues, but really to get together as a couple. We were happy to find that provision that

allowed us to that, but under one condition: that it would not harm his family. So this is where it is very important from my viewpoint that marrying a second time will not really be on the expense of the first marriage. Of course, there are cases where the husband has divorced his first wife and he marries a second time, it's OK. But, in our case, the family is there. It's intact. It's improving, and my husband is so determined to keep his family and to improve the relationship with his wife and his children.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Fatina Shaker said this Muslim approach to marriage is just one more example of the complexity of Saudi society. She hopes foreigners will look deeply enough to see through the veils.

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