
Reviewed by Burcak Keskin

Published on H-Women (July, 2000)

This book provides an easy-to-read introduction to the issues surrounding identity formation in the Middle East. The memoir comprises two sections – a child's eye account of Egypt's twentieth century transformation, and the subsequent account of a self-enlightened Egyptian woman scholar as a result of her travel to the 'West'. Her articulate narration throughout the memoir conveys how and why she came to "examine, analyze and think about the world which [she is a part of] from the vantage point [of] the margins" (p. 288).

The book opens up with a quote from the Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi: "To hear the song of the reed/ Everything you have ever known/ must be left behind." In contrast to these words, the following pages demonstrate how vividly Ahmed remembers her childhood and constructs her "Egyptian woman identity in the Diaspora" on the unforgettable essence of her Cairo days. As she states in the interview at the end of the memoir, Ahmed does not intend "to write an objective reconstruction of facts" but to reflect "their trace and residue in [her] consciousness and the workings of memory, that make up the stories that we tell" (p.314).

Thus, while she talks about her relationship with her father, she also tells the story of Egypt's successful effort to gain independence from Britain and the consequent modernization efforts that took place.

Being an engineer, Ahmed's father maintains great respect for science and critical thinking, which, in the last instance, makes him "internalize the colonial beliefs about the superiority of European civilization" (p. 25). Her mother, on the other hand represents the colonized culture of Egypt, of which Ahmed becomes more aware when she goes to college in England. Growing up with such parents makes her conclude that "we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousnesses a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us" (p. 25).

In my opinion, this hybrid approach to the world also originates from her living at intersections throughout her life: Her father comes from a native Egyptian family, her mother from the Turkish upper class. They speak French, English, Turkish and Arabic at home. While Ahmed deciphers
the meaning of life from the books of various Western authors, she also listens to mystic stories about angels from her grandmother and initiates into the "oral tradition of Islam" on her days with her aunts. She enjoys a "white life" in Egypt and "gets colored" during her days at the Girton College in England. In this respect, the slippery ground that she is born into enables her to write and live -- to use Patricia Hill Collins's term -- as "an outsider from within".

Throughout the memoir, Ahmed does not only grapple with the subalternity of Arabness vis-a-vis the "West" but also unpacks the very notion of Egyptian national identity with respect to being an Arab in the Middle East. She discusses the 1948 war with Israel, Nasserite socialism and nationalization of the Suez Canal in order to elucidate how the category of "Arab" is constructed with respect to the politics of the day. Her elaboration of these crucial historical moments does not sound as "a lecture on Egypt", because she talks about them as she lived through them as a child.

A striking example of her first encounter with the ideological construct of "Arabness" is the departure of her Jewish best-friend, Joyce, from Egypt -- an event which colors her perception of the Egyptian attitude toward Jews. The confrontation with the British on the nationalization of the Suez Canal brings up the position of Jews in the Egyptian society. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President, declares that the Egyptian Jews may stay in the country "if they give up their foreign passports and accept Egyptian nationality" (p. 174). As Joyce's family chooses to leave for England, the girls' friendship ends by giving birth to two ideologically constructed personas: an Egyptian Jew wandering in Europe to find her "new home," and a Muslim struggling with Arabness and Egyptianness in the mainland.

During her days in England, Ahmed realizes that she is living through two different notions of the Arab, one constructed by the West and the other perceived by the Arabs themselves. She rebels against "other people's inventions, imputations, false constructions of who [she is]-what [she] think[s], believe[s], or ought to think or believe or feel"(pp. 255-6). Ahmed's encounters with other Middle Eastern colleagues in England and her visit to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates makes her furthermore realize that being an Egyptian is actually different from being an Arab. As she reads Egyptian history from a different angle, she finds out that Egypt had taken different positions than the other Arab nation-states first at the turn of the twentieth century in favor of the Ottoman Empire against the British, and then in the 1930s against the emerging Palestinian opposition to Israel. Her reading about "the history of Jews in Egypt and about Egypt's relation to Zionism and Palestinians" shifts her "understanding of Egypt and its relation to the Arabs." She sums up this self-enlightenment period by stating that "the world was not as [she] assumed it to be and its seas and continents after all were [she] thought they were" (p. 249).

A related "geographical" dislocation in her intellectual contemplation is about her Muslim identity as a woman. In her own words, Ahmed "became black when [she] went to England . . . [and] a woman of color when [she] went to America" (p.238). Ahmed meets with feminist analysis in the 1970s when she begins to read American authors such as Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Patricia Spacks, Adrienne Rich, and Mary Daly.

When Ahmed comes to the United States with enthusiasm for utilizing a feminist approach in her scholarly work, she encounters the "whiteness" of American feminism. She thinks about those days as being interwoven with the "implication and presumption that, whereas they -- white women, Christian women, Jewish women -- could rethink their heritage and religions and traditions, we [Muslim scholars] had to abandon ours because they were just intrinsically, essentially, and irredeemably misogynist and patriarchal in a way that theirs (apparently) were not"(pp.292). She then feels the necessity to unpack these "white"
prejudices about women in Islam and allies herself with the emerging black feminist criticism launched by June Jordan and bell hooks in the late 1970s.

This scholarly choice paves the way to her numerous articles and her path-breaking book, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Ahmed provides the gist of her thesis when she argues for the necessity to distinguish between the oral Islamic tradition and textual Islam. The oral Islam refers to everyday practices of women and the "ordinary folk" (p.125). It constitutes the moral Islamic ethos that is "gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical." Because oral Islam is passed on the younger generations "through touch and the body and in words spoken in the living moment", it is "subtle and evanescent" (p.121). Textual Islam, on the other hand, is based on the "classical texts of Islam that only men who had studied the classical Islamic literary heritage could understand and decipher." Ahmed calls this "men's Islam" (p.121).

Since the "foundational [Islamic] texts" were written in "eras when men believed as a matter of categorical certainty that God created them superior to women and fully intended them to have dominion over women", the textual Islam is "largely oppressive" (p.126). In contrast to the oral tradition of "women and simple, unlearned folk," "men's Islam . . . has been supported and enforced by sheiks, ayatollahs, rulers, states, and armies . . . . [It] has wielded absolute power and has not hesitated to eradicate—often with the same brutality as fundamentalism today— all dissent, all differing views, all opposition" (pp.130-1).

Ahmed tries to convey these two conflicting versions of Islam to a Western audience. She does not advocate accepting either version en masse but questioning the injustices of both as to reach a less misogynist Islam. Her endeavor has its merits in and of itself. Nevertheless, one needs to question the way Ahmed identifies the followers of the two practices of Islam. Though she tries to refrain from associating the two traditions exclusively with women or men, she talks about oral Islam only with respect to the practices of women. She mentions "ordinary folk"—composed of both men and women—but she does not give any examples of "ordinary" men's practices. She does not elaborate comprehensively on the women who abide by the textual Islam either. Within the discussion of "men's Islam," she mentions Zeinab al-Ghazali, the founder of a Muslim Women's Society, who advocated "the legitimacy of using violence in the cause of Islam."

Ahmed attributes Zeinab al-Ghazali's "unpeaceful" Islamic tendencies to her religious upbringing by her father "who had attended Al-Azhar University [and] had received [a training] in studying [classical Islamic texts]" (p.123). Zeinab al-Ghazali is thus assumed to have an inborn predisposition that is distorted by "men's" education. In between the lines, Ahmed implies that if Zeinab al-Ghazali had been initiated into Islam by her "female" relatives as Ahmed had been, she would not take up violence as a solution. This ambiguous categorization of who can be a "legitimate" knower of oral or textual Islam echoes the renowned debates on the question of whether men can be feminists (Digby 1998; Jardine and Smith 1987) and also reminds us of the womanist theological attempts on the fringe of religious essentialism (Sanders 1995). Though Ahmed presents a more cautious analysis in her memoir, she needs to rethink her analysis as to avoid criticisms of using universal categories based on biological traits.

At the end of her memoir, Ahmed once more quotes Rumi, this time referring to the stanza: "This is how it always is/ when I finish a poem. / A great silence overcomes me, / and I wonder why I ever thought to use language" (p.306). I contend that these lines determine Ahmed’s ultimate position in the struggle between oral and textual Islam. Even though Ahmed’s memoir may not provide a clear-cut answer to this question, it defi-
nitely presents a precise account of the changes both in the socio-political architecture of the Middle East as well as its twentieth century interpretations in academia.

Works cited


Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://networks.h-net.org/h-women


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4313

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivative Works 3.0 United States License.