

# Mazes of Boundaries, Identities, Memories and Longings: Letters Between Two Border Passing Women

## ■ Azza Basarudin and Maddy Mohammed

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Maddy Mohammed, Intellectual-activist, Chicago

*Dear Maddy,*

It has been quite some time since we had a dialogue in this format, and I welcome the chance to do it again. How are you? Not writing you as often is unhealthy for my soul. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about the topic we so often used to discuss when I lived in Chicago – about a non-Arab woman doing research on Arab women. I know we covered so much ground on this topic, but being back in graduate school makes these questions more prevalent, frustrating and at times, painful. Shall I demonstrate what I mean?

Scene 1: In a graduate seminar at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a white woman sitting next to me introduced herself and we started talking. One of the questions graduate students obsessively ask each other is about research and/or areas of interest. I explained that I am interested in researching how factors such as gender, culture, religion, colonialism and imperialism (among other factors) shape the construction of Arab-Muslim women's identities (as I have been "trained" to do!). She looked at me and said how exciting and brilliant it sounds. Then came the real comment – but you are not Arab right? You do not look Arab. Looking pleased when

I shook my head negatively, she asked me where I am really from and upon knowing my nationality (disregarding that nationality is a complex concept), asked why I am not interested in studying my own people/culture. Surely, she said, that would make my research process uncomplicated and more meaningful. She of course sees nothing wrong with her research about Chinese women working in the agriculture industry in Hunan, China.

Scene 2: In a Women's Studies conference, I was having lunch with a group of graduate students from various institutions in the United States. The topic of conversation revolves around who is doing what type of research, in which geographical locations, etc. I dreaded my turn. When it came, I embarrassedly mumbled something similar to the explanation from Scene 1. Sure enough the onslaught of questions began – why the Middle East? Why Arab-Muslim women? Why not your own people/society? Is it less fascinating and less challenging to study your own people?

Scene 3: I was visiting a close Arab friend in Oakland, California. A noted artist and writer, her house is never void of family, friends and strangers who cannot seem to get enough of her company. At one of these gatherings,

I was introduced to a Lebanese graduate student visiting from New York. The topic did not fall far from our research interest. For some reason (probably my physicality), this person assumed I am researching South East Asia until with some embarrassment and an uncomfortable silence (after my clarification), he asked why I am interested in Arab women and the Middle East. I wonder if he felt "put in his place" by my clarification. Perhaps not because he then asked if I am Muslim. He seemed pleased that I possess at least one "requirement" (despite the fact that Islam is not just a religion, but also a world view that does not seem to matter to him – e.g., people can be Muslims, but are not necessarily religious). He proceeds to mumble on how interesting it is that my name is Arabic and that perhaps I have some long lost connection that "legitimizes" my interest. After countless such encounters since starting school, I never cease to be amazed how many ways there are to inquire about one question, to patrol borders and boundaries, to authenticate, and to rationalize and/or de-legitimize my interest!

*Azza*  
Tuesday, 2003, 12.41pm

*Dear Azza,*

Good to hear from you. I am doing well, thanks for asking. So it would seem our discussions on the topic of non-Arab women doing research on Arab women did not go in vain. I hope you have found some usefulness in our intense conversations. I wish we had more of them. But let us use this opportunity to engage in dialogue once again. One can look at your scenarios from a variety of locations: whiteness, identity politics and questioning of authenticity and representation, racializing and qualifying, border crossing/passing and patrolling – institutionalized and internalized.

Scene 1- I had to smile when I read scene 1. It is all too familiar - classic experience of American racial politics between a white person and a non-white person. It is important to note the place of where this is all happening, in an institute of higher learning in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

It has been my experience that many white Americans do not believe race is an issue, so I am told, but with a critical eye and a closer look, their life beliefs and practices and social interactions reveal this is not the case. This statement in itself bares witness to the colorblindness that prevails in our society and recycles

unexamined practices of maintaining and sustaining a system built on white supremacy that subscribes people to categories that carry power, authority and status. What becomes clear is that a system built on whiteness over the ages has repositioned and reshaped and recycled itself and often resurfaces in encounters such as the one you described. Keep in mind though that we have ample examples of whites that are aware of white privilege and whiteness and reposition and rearticulate themselves.

You might be thinking why I am connecting Scene 1 with whiteness when you are depicting how people respond to your research. Let me try to explain my intentions by asking some questions. Her being a non-Chinese woman researching Chinese women and you being a non-Arab women doing research on Arab women can/would be a location for sameness. So why was it not the same in her eyes? Why could she not find sameness and some sort of link/connection? Why was it that she identified your research as harder or less meaningful for you because you are not studying your "own" while her interest and meaning goes without question? She is not only non-Chinese, but white and you are not only non-Arab but Malaysian ("colored"). One can speculate that she was not just asking questions, offering you advice and sharing/exchanging conversation, she was asserting her white privilege over you and naming and authorizing you through a sense of knowing and belief system assumes that whiteness holds superior authority and status. I wonder what would have been the response if you told her that perhaps she would make more meaning of her research process if she studied whiteness history and culture?

Scene 2) Perhaps the obsession of graduate students as you pointed out, of obsessively asking each other their area of interest and research, is something you may need to adjust to. It doesn't seem though that this is only what frustrates you. It is assumed that your interest would be your own people and therefore maybe you should be doing research on this. I guess when folks assume incorrectly they cannot seem to place you. I think it is natural for people to place each other as a way to sift through knowledge and learn something about someone. But I have grown

to become troubled by this idea that people need to place each other in categories, it can be quite dangerous when squeezing into something that does not fit. It creates a sort of mental, spiritual, intellectual crisis. It fragments people and creates an unhealthy relationship

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between self-actualization (meeting one's own human potentials on this earth) and our responsibility and contribution to community, greater society and the global world.

Scene 3) Well at least you do have that one check off on the list, you are a Muslim, and there is that name of yours that sounds Arabic! I apologize for my remarks, but after a while one needs humor to deal with such things. Before I respond further, I am curious to know if this is also a common example of your encounter with Arabs in relation to your topic of study?

*Maddy,  
Wednesday, 2003, 2.30pm*

*Dear Maddy,*

I can always count on you for making these issues more complicated! I thought of whiteness when Scene 1 was happening, but given the topic of conversation, whiteness was the furthest factor from my mind. Often times I forget how white privilege is exercised in so many different ways, and how it reshapes and represents itself in even more dangerous ways. Perhaps I was just too agitated with the question to really take notice of how whiteness was in action (not that I should ever forget). Why the overwhelming need to categorize people in this country? (I realize that this form of categorization takes place in many other countries as well). I guess when "attacked" that way, more often than not I am "silenced", regardless of who is asking the questions. Why the silence? Entitlement, ownership, identity, borders, boundaries, privilege, ethics, social reality, representation, intruder, outsider, belonging, and purpose are all agents of silencing when it comes to researching a people/group not my own.

My dilemma is neither new nor unique. Many scholars have debated and written about the phenomenon of the insider/outsider in conducting research. I am thinking of our professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Heather Dalmage's theory<sup>2</sup>, whereby people are taught from an early age to know where "borders" exist, why there are needs to "patrol" those borders, and the consequences of attempting to cross them. As a non-Arab woman researching Arab women, the borders I encounter are loaded with meanings and signify the most important sites of struggle, resistance and accommodation. I think the woman in Scene 1 asserted her whiteness over me through policing the boundaries of authority and

superiority, in Scene 2, the borders are created to identify and locate me to fulfill categorization needs and in Scene 3, cultural borders are created to protect power and privileges, which are kept in place by cultural norms, language, and individual actions. By being a Muslim and fulfilling one of the "requirements" I am allowed to "cross" the border. However, this "crossing" also comes with a price - does "crossing over" legitimize my research interest? Perhaps other forms of "border patrolling" will now come into play? Who and/or what determines the boundaries of outsider/insider? Isn't the insider/outsider category fluid and ever changing?

Interesting that you asked about Scene 3. Recently I had an encounter with an Arab-American woman who was about to begin graduate school. When it came to the question of my research, she did not exhibit any of the responses from Scene 1, 2 or 3. To her, the project sounds important and exciting. Even when I asked her opinion (of the fact that I am not Arab but doing research on Arab women, etc) the response was simple: "Why do white people think they can study us and never exhibit guilt or discomfort? Why should you? Besides, are you not a Muslim?" For her, the Muslim half of me allows one foot into the world of Arab-Muslim women and minimizes the question of identity and authenticity. I am not claiming that being a Muslim automatically grants me an "insider status" because the differences that exist in our histories, cultures, norms and languages are all very

salient factors. By positioning myself as a Malaysian-Muslim woman interested in researching Arab-Muslim women, I hope to expand the possibilities of discovering, examining and understanding sameness and/or differences. Going back to my encounter with the Arab-American woman, I think our mutual respect for each other also stems from the fact that we are both women of color and perhaps that is a bond the also "legitimizes" my research interest. To answer your question about my encounter with Arabs, I would say that many are generally curious as

to why I have so much interest in the Middle East. Sometimes when they find out that I am also a Muslim, the curiosity sorts itself out. Interesting isn't it? Perhaps the Muslim part of me (which I cherish dearly) does "legitimize" certain issues.

As an Arab-American, how do you feel about this? No doubt our friendship might make you biased, but what do you really think? This is the perfect opportunity to

hear an Arab woman's perspective on my dilemma. How do you feel about non-Arabs doing research on "your people"? (your people is in quotation marks because I know like many people, you inhabit multiple spaces and negotiate multiple identities as Palestinian, as Arab, as Arab-Palestinian, as Arab-American, as Arab-Muslim woman, as Palestinian-Muslim woman, etc)

*Azza  
Friday, 2003, 3.27 am*

*Dear Azza,*

I am going to attempt to answer your question about my views on non-Arabs doing research on Arabs. It is a loaded one and not that easy for me to use written language to explain.

Let me begin by speaking from my experience of growing up in the American Educational "banking" system (note Freire's Chapter 2 (pg 52) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed for the definition of "banking concepts" in education). From grade school through secondary school I was surrounded by teachers, textbooks, curriculum and social experiences that portrayed histories, cultures and identities of Arab people in ways that were false (particularly when the topic involved Palestinians), and romanticized, orientalized and misunderstood, along with the history of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and the first Americans who always seemed to be remembered last - the indigenous ones.<sup>3</sup> I grew up suspect of those that constructed and taught knowledge, in general, and in particular on that dealing with Arabs. I was able though to get a good sense of self-identity as a youth through groups such as my family, my Arab ethnic communities and solidarity groups. I was also fortunate enough to visit and live with relatives in Palestine for a short time. It was not until I got to college that I was introduced to positive curricula, images, history and culture on Arabs.<sup>4</sup> However, this was not consistent and I can count the places this happened and with which academics, fellow students and associations it happened. And with every positive experience there were more negative ones. It did put some hope in me and over time I began to re-think the possibility of non-Arabs doing research on Arabs (I must be honest and say my sense of distrust has not completely disappeared).

Growing up Arab in America is a story I'm not inclined to discuss that much. I'm sharing this because I feel that I

can offer you insight by speaking from my locations and experiences, my sense of knowing. I believe that counts as "legitimate" knowledge. If you can't speak from your location and recognize it, you sometimes, through process, repeat and recycle the very thing you are attempting to get some knowledge or better understanding of. We are in different locations, spaces and environments. I am speaking to you outside the academy, as a non-student in the university (this does not mean one is not learning). I have chosen to postpone graduate school until I am "ready". I am very interested in your experiences because I think you can share some insight about what it is like. I work at a civic public policy organization in Chicago, our initiatives and projects center around public policy and race. Because we work with all sectors of society I get to step inside the academy occasionally to work with people and network. Many times I feel back at "home". I always did enjoy the classroom, even with all its limitations one can still appreciate the opportunity of space and time to study, learn, deconstruct and re-create ideas and such. It is important to have a place of one's own to think and make sense of what is happening in our lives and the lives of others.

So with that said I will answer your question and say that I have no trouble with the idea of non-Arabs doing research on Arabs. Purpose and meanings are exposed through research and analysis: what was set out to do and why; what was attempted to do and how it was

done; what was the process and challenges, how one adjusts and performs and interacts with informants, what was the outcome, and with equal importance, what the research and constructed knowledge is being used to do. This is the judge and indicator of whether the research holds "valid" knowledge, is it not? Even bias or questionable and suspectable research (from anyone's perspective) can be deconstructed, re-created and such. This does not take away from the damage of what this type of research can do and the purposeful intent and

sponsorship of the scholarship. And I will add that I am not just critical when dealing with non-Arabs but with all that do research and construct, govern and process knowledge.

I have a few questions of my own; I hope you don't mind answering them. "Do you feel guilty about doing research on Arab women or not doing research on your own "people" (more and more that is beginning to

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sound intrusive for me)? Do you always have a sense of “solidarity” among women of color? Because I do and I don’t. Is it becoming easier to find your space among the academy and communities and groups you encounter relating to your studies (this includes places outside the academy that offer support to your studies and sense of knowing)?

Do people honestly think that it is fascinating to study their own people? I would imagine it is not fascinating but rather necessary (and you don’t need the academy for this but I know what context you were writing in). Perhaps, though I am bias in this sense because I am Palestinian and feel studying one’s own people and culture is crucial to survival and existence (but I can’t be the only one to think this way).

Sometimes I wonder why people from other countries come to America to study their own country? I know there are many different answers and I don’t want to be ignorant to the fact that there are global conflicts, occupations, wars and economic instability that would bring someone here to study. I suppose I’m talking to those that might not fall into those categories (I’m using the categories now). I think though we unwillingly volunteer to put American institutions in a higher place and I’m not so sure they have earned it. But who am I to judge?

I would imagine that doing research on the topic of Muslim or Arab Muslim women reveals many complexities? How are you finding it so far?

*Maddy*  
Saturday, 2003, 1.45 pm

Dear Maddy,

You are not being intrusive. We are comfortable in our spaces with each other and that is why we are able to dialogue about this. This dialogue feeds and nourishes my soul. There is something to be said about researching a group not one’s own. I cannot describe this feeling, but it is a combination of trespassing, guilt and pain. I wish I could name and explain this dilemma, but it is something I am still struggling with and for now it is the “problem that has no name.”<sup>5</sup> I often wonder if perhaps this is a problem because I dwell on it constantly, but this is an issue that I need to come to terms with (the sooner the better) and to work it out the best way possible. Why the guilt about doing research on Arab women? It is proba-

bly because I am a “woman of color.” Reflecting on your question about solidarity, I’ve always had a problem with the word “solidarity” and term “women of color.” I did not become “colored” until I arrived in this country, and even then, the term didn’t evoke “solidarity” as I would hope. Yes, maybe we should have solidarity as “women of color”, but we are also divided through our nationality, religion, sexuality, race, class and various other issues. Do I feel solidarity? It depends on who is asking the question. Solidarity reminds me of my experiences in “sisterhood,” being turned down for my volunteer effort for a non-profit Arab organization because I am not “Muslim enough.” What does “Muslim enough” mean? I would feel better if they turned me down because I am not Arab or because of my lack of fluency in Arabic, etc. I am reminded of Audre Lorde’s words, “It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences.”<sup>6</sup> So much for solidarity and sisterhood. Having organized with other women of color reminds me of how sometimes we are not only fighting white racism, but also racism

among people of color. Sometimes internalized racism has a more damaging effect. As of now, I prefer alliances, for alliances “advocate love, commitment, responsibility. They are about concrete manifestation of our rebellious spirits and our sense of justice. They are about shared visions of a better society for us all.”<sup>7</sup>

Does my research on Arab-Muslim women reveal many complexities? Definitely. For as long as I can remember, I have always been fascinated and intrigued by the Middle East. As a child, I remember studying the history of Islam and Muslims and wondering why Islam was revealed in the Arabian Peninsula and not elsewhere. Never having the chance to visit the Arab world (I will this summer), and only hearing stories from family members who performed the Haj, and had the opportunity to explore other Middle Eastern countries, ignited my curiosity. Why the fascination? Perhaps I am reproducing colonial fantasies. Perhaps I am romanticizing Islam and its revelation some fourteen hundred years ago. Perhaps I am terrified of discovering the “truth” about my own society. The speculation is endless. I honestly do not have the answer. You must be frustrated and think that I should pack my bags and leave the graduate program!

Am I finding more agreeable spaces in the academy? Yes and no. For the most part, many people in the academy

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## The Western and Eastern View

think there is nothing wrong with them studying/researching other people. After all, that is how we produce knowledge for the human race (not to devalue other forms of knowledge and knowing). So, in that sense, I get away with it, but most of the time, scenes like the ones I’ve depicted come into play. But other times my conscience gets the better of me and thinking how anthropology originated (as a tool for colonialists to gain insight into native societies) brings out all these troubling questions: Who am I to feel “entitled” to pick and choose any group of people, any geographical location and any issue to further my academic career? Is this how privileges are supposed to be utilized? How can I be accountable to my informants? Who owns knowledge? How do we reinterpret knowledge so that we can give back to the community and the rightful people and let it benefit them? How can we be accountable in transmitting knowledge?

Your question on studying one’s own society reminds me of a book I read some ten or eleven years ago, entitled Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society by Altorki and El-Solh (published in 1988, perhaps it’s too old to be referenced, but I think the book is still useful). Some of the benefits of studying your own society are that one has the advantage of possessing a similar body of knowledge (is this likely?), meanings of cultural patterns are more readily understood (I am inclined to agree), it is easier to build rapport and closeness and to better understand social reality on the basis of minimal clues (what about differences among people of the same group?).<sup>8</sup> Do all those factors (among others) make researching your own people more exciting? Like you said, perhaps not fascinating, but necessary and in that necessity, I think fascination and/or satisfaction will kick in. Possibly.

So this is my dilemma – given all the uncertainties and fears I have about the research process and its outcome, I know that I will try to present knowledge as it is given to me, but why do I still feel like an unwelcome intruder? Not a complete foreign intruder (interesting that I say that, perhaps the Muslim half of me that has “crossed over”), but an intruder nonetheless. I am thinking of Anzaldua, “Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travesia, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape ‘knowing,’ I won’t be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious.

‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens, I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.”<sup>9</sup>

*Azza,*  
Monday, 2003, 2.54 am

Dear Azza,

It sounds like you are in the process of working your issues out. Because I know you I have all the confidence that you will be conscious and use each challenge to be an accountable educator and researcher. Perhaps this is part of your “training” process.

I absolutely do not want to see you pack your bags and leave graduate school. I think the pain and silencing you speak of is real and should be recognized. If you didn’t care you would not be agonizing. I think you should always remember the pain, whether it is yours or someone else’s, use it as a tool to heal injustice, create and work for change.

Of course you did not become colored until you came to the United States. It comes with the territory. Were you not stamped and labeled “alien” when you entered the borders? That’s a hint courtesy of United States hegemony. People have told me that we are so obsessed in America about race. I would have to agree and that is one of the reasons why I need and want to make sense of it all. Remember this is my topic of interest and research. We have been naming and giving examples of what we mean by all this. I feel no need to keep going. It becomes quite draining.

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About the women of color issue. Your experience in being rejected and your feelings about solidarity I can relate to and validate. I have had my share of border patrolling (you defined it rather well earlier) in my in-group and outside groups to know that it is a life process that fluctuates, moves and grows. One last thing about your comments on fighting racism among people of color, whiteness is not only sustained and practiced

by whites alone, there is room for non-whites to believe in the system, and they benefit from it too. Whiteness becomes a state of mind- very clear but mythical. It is not enough to have a sense of sharing sameness with a certain race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender sexual orientation, but also one must possess and share like minds and actions.



I thought maybe you were rejected by the non-profit Arab-group because you don't wear the hijab (in addition to what you've mentioned) - interpreting you as not "Muslim enough" thereby disqualifying you. I have myself experienced this among some Arab Muslims/Muslims (mostly women and men who believe all Muslim women should wear the hijab). Sometimes being born something does not necessarily give you the "inside status," being a Muslim woman wearing or not wearing the hijab can be an example. I'm not sure if I am correct in my statement though because rarely do I get an opportunity to discuss this openly and honestly with others and don't have a good sense of all the multiple feelings and experiences.

Thanks for sharing with me your story of how and why you became interested in your studying Arab women. I get a better sense of your location and where you are speaking from. I love to hear autographical testimonies. I would be interested to know more about what your relatives described of their travels to the Middle East. Perhaps another time.

In closing, I would like to end with our beginnings. In many ways it highlights some of the intersecting themes and topics we have been discussing through out this exchange.

We both were taking the same women's studies class on the history of ideas on women. It was the second or third day of class; we were finishing up reading/discussing the philosophy on creation of man and women. The instructor and most of the students were focusing on Christianity and citing passages from the Bible and having what seemed to be a "inside" limited discussion in many ways. I felt frustrated because the last class period they were doing the same thing and I didn't understand them and no one, including the instructor, seemed to notice and went on as if everyone knew what they were saying. I felt a little invisible and did not want to disappear in this class, I thought to myself: is this how the rest of the semester will be in this class? I did not want to continue in this position. I hesitated but spoke up and said something like I was not that knowledgeable in Christianity and although I am familiar with some things I am not familiar with what they were discussing and asked if someone could explain so and so. The professor (who newly emigrated from Europe) turned red and apologized for assuming we all knew. She thanked me for bringing this to her attention. The white female student who was doing most of the talking turned to me and asked me what I was. The discussions after that were more inclusive but had many agents of silencing throughout the semester. I felt out of place, but was relieved that I was able to move out of invisibility and pass into visibil-

ity and voice myself. I remember looking around the room and came upon your smiling face. I felt a warm connection. We talked afterwards and re-introduced ourselves outside the circle. I later learned you were interested in doing research on Arab-Muslim women and you discovered I was interested in race and whiteness. I remember feeling that sense of hope I was writing to you about earlier. You are a welcomed "intruder" in my space!

Who owns knowledge? This is a great question to ask and reminds oneself to stay grounded. There are endless multiple answers to this question and even still you cannot finish seeking all of them out. I would like to believe we all own it. But that is somewhat naive.

I enjoyed this dialogue very much. I am reminded of Freire in concluding, "dialogue requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in the power to make and remake, to create and recreate, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)."<sup>10</sup>

I wish you the all the best. Take care and keep in touch.  
*Peace, Maddy*  
Wednesday, 2003, 5.50 pm

*Dear Maddy,*

I smiled to myself when I read the story of how we first met. I remember looking at you (you were sitting across from me and I sensed you were looking around for some "connection") and when you asked that question (about Christianity), I knew I had found an ally (perhaps I am categorizing you?).

Feeling trapped in this maze of complexities (despite every now and then seeing a light at the end of the tunnel), I can only hope that the pain and silencing that you and I speak of will heal itself as we move along in our lives. I identify with what you wrote, "I think you should always remember the pain, whether it is yours or someone else's use it as a tool to heal injustice, create and work for change."

You also wrote, "Sometimes being born something does not necessarily give you the 'inside' status ..." - but being born an "outsider" will never make a person an "insider" ever, no matter how connected oneself is to a group that is not one's own.

Dialoging with you gives me hope and makes it more viable to think through the issues that I am dealing with. I was not hoping for solutions, but insights and pointers to raise more questions (it's unavoidable) and take it to

the next level. My location as a woman of the global south now living and working in the United States also plays an integral part not only in constructing my new fragmented identity, but it also unfortunately contributes to my dilemma as a researcher. One might ask if I lived in my country of origin (Malaysia), would my positionality and the research process be less problematic? That is a question that I constantly ask myself and I regret to say that might be something that I wish I had had the opportunity to explore before I migrated to the United States. New knowledge occurs through tension, difficulties, mistakes and chaos.<sup>11</sup> I am hoping that the knowledge I am gaining, sharing, exchanging and producing is a knowledge that will go through such stages.

Thank you for going on this journey with me. I hope we have many more ahead. Say hello to your feline friends for me, perhaps I will see them sometime soon. I leave

you with this poem<sup>12</sup> that speaks to and for my troubled soul.

The bridge I must be  
Is the Bridge to my own power,  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate

My own weaknesses  
I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But to my true self  
And then  
I will be useful  
By Donna Kate Rushin

*Azza*  
Thursday, 2003, 1.45 pm

## End Notes

\* Azza Basarudin was born and raised in Penang, an old colonial town in Malaysia and grew up living among a blend of working and middle-class Muslim, Chinese, Hindu and Eurasian cultures. Maddy Mohammed lives in Chicago where she is a fulltime student of conscious living. She is an intellectual-activist working on multiple social justice projects. She is interested in returning to the Academy some day to continue her research in Race, Ethnicity and Whiteness studies.

1. See Churchill, Ward. *White Studies: The Intellectual Imperialism of U.S. Higher Education* (1995) and Semali, Ladislaus. *Perspectives of the Curriculum of Whiteness* (1998).
2. See Dalmage, Heather M. *Tripping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000.
3. As I write this the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq continues. The American educational institutions that educated me rather poorly on Arab people's history, culture and religions is now in an authority and holds "consulting" positions in overseeing Iraqi educational institutions. This is truly concerning.
4. This does not mean that it was only in college I was reading credible research on Arabs by non-Arabs. I was reading in and out of school, (multiple kinds of books and narratives by non-Arabs and Arabs alike) on my own.
5. I am borrowing this term from Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).
6. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. New York: The Crossing Press, 1984.
7. Cited from Molina, Papusa. "Recognizing, Accepting and Celebrating Our Differences." *From Making Face Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspective by Feminist of Color*. Ed. Gloria Anzaldua. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990. pg.328.
8. The benefits of studying one's own society is cited from Altorki and El-Solh's book.
9. Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. pg. 70.
10. Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000. pg 71.
11. Cited from Anzaldua, Gloria. "Now Let Us Shift...the Path of Conocimiento...Inner Work, Public Act." *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. Eds. Gloria E. Anzaldua and Analouise Keating. New York: Routledge, 1990. pg. 563.
12. Cited from Andemicael, Iobel. "Chameleon" from *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. Eds. Gloria E. Anzaldua and Analouise Keating. New York: Routledge, 1990. pg. 40.

# Writing their Own Way: American Women, Palestine's Bedouins and Issues of Safety in the Nineteenth Century

## ■ Jim Ross-Nazzari

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We felt no fear of them, for we had heard in Jaffa that if there was a woman in the caravan there was no danger of their attacking it. They have a profound respect for courage. (Kate Kraft, shortly after arriving in Palestine, 31 March 1868)<sup>1</sup>

Joseph rushed into the tent, exclaiming: 'Sir, your revolver, the Bedouins!' Until then we had believed but little in attacks of Bedouins. (Kate Kraft, on the night Bedouins attacked her encampment, 25 April 1868)<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, more and more Americans traveled abroad, especially after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Many, upon their return home, published their travel accounts. I have collected and analyzed the published accounts of fifty American women. What follows is an investigation into how American women travelers who ventured to Palestine perceived and interacted with Palestine's Bedouin populations by examining their published travel accounts. American women either tended to feel safe because they were in the care of Bedouins who acted as their guides and guards, or, conversely, they felt unsafe because Bedouins were nearby. In either case, it was rare for these American travelers to

identify Bedouins without some negative descriptor. Most, such as Mary S. Allen, qualified Bedouins as "the wild Bedouin tribes."<sup>3</sup>

Also, some American women compared Palestine's Bedouins with American Indians. Hilton Obenzinger notes that Americans typically equated Arabs with American Indians, usually within the settler-colonial context of seeing Palestine as the American West and the Arabs as American Indians who fought against being "civilized" by American settlers.<sup>4</sup>

At first, few American women drew connections between feeling or being safe and being in the presence of Bedouins. In all but one case, Bedouins were hired to serve as guides and guards for these Americans. Sarah Haight, being the exception, still recalled a sense of safety when she was in the presence of Bedouins. While traveling from Jerusalem to the Jordan River, Haight and her party came upon a group of Bedouins who sought to race the Westerners. "We were not to be outgeneralled [sic] by a Bedouin . . . so we slacked our reins and put our fleet coursers to their utmost speed."<sup>5</sup> Haight reportedly beat the Bedouins in the race, and established her camp right in the middle of the Bedouin encampment.

While she did describe them as "wild," she noted nothing but hospitality and respect from them. According to Haight, the Bedouin "sheik" offered both pipe and tea to her. After smoking, and drinking a cup of tea, many Bedouin men came to her tent in order "to pay their respects to us." Before leaving the next morning, Haight presented the "sheik" with a pair of Turkish pistols in exchange for his hospitality. In fact, Haight never felt that the Bedouins, while "wearing so rough an exterior," would ever harm her or her fellow travelers because the Bedouins were simply too hospitable, as she told her reading audience.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all American women in my study hired Bedouins to be their guides or to act as personal guards while in Palestine. This indicates that the women believed themselves to be in harm's way and thus needed an armed guard; they nevertheless did not feel the harm came from Bedouins. For example, Lizzie McMillan hired "a Bedouin guard from the time of leaving Jerusalem until we got back, as they say it is not safe to travel in this country without one." Unlike Sarah Haight's description of Bedouins as wild and rough, McMillan called her Bedouin guard "very handsome . . . [who] took good care of us."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Mrs. Marie and Miss Emma Straiton hired Bedouins as guides. Mrs. Straiton also described Bedouins as "wild Arabs" who were traditionally noisy. "The Bedouins and camels kept up such a noise and every moment I expected to see a dusky head peep through the covering."<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Louise Griswold hired a Bedouin "sheik" to act as the group's escort and guard.<sup>9</sup> Mattie Wood hired a Bedouin not only to guide her through Palestine but also to act as her personal guard. It was not her idea, however, to hire this particular Bedouin. According to Wood's account, he was "furnished for our protection at the request of the United States Consul." Furthermore, Wood claimed that some Bedouins were "paid by the Turkish government to protect travelers from the assaults of wandering Bedouins."<sup>10</sup>

Bedouins were not only to serve as American women's guides and guards, however. Sometimes they provided information and other times they were trading partners. Sarah Barclay Johnson noted her relief when she came upon a party of Bedouins. Johnson became lost somewhere in the "wild region" near the "banks of a deep and rapid river." She had unsuccessfully looked for a place to ford the river when she came across a group of Bedouins: "A party of Bedawin [sic] approached, and for the first time we felt a sense of relief" because she had hoped that they might be able to tell her where she could safely cross the river.<sup>11</sup>

Near the Jordan River, Johnson came across another group of Bedouins who traded their fruit ("the veritable apples

of Sodom" as Johnson described them) for her telescope. It was not her telescope that these Bedouins were most interested in obtaining, however. Johnson claimed that Bedouins always treated her with respect and "with the greatest kindness" because she had medicine, which they needed.

Yet she also noted that "the profound ignorance of these semi-civilized beings, very naturally leads to the grossest superstition, of which we often had instances." Also, "of medical knowledge, they have none," reported Johnson. She noted that Bedouins would frequently place their sick upon the tombs of saints, or a Koran would be hung around the patient's neck in the hope that divine intervention would cure the malady. "Another popular mode of treatment is a severe flogging!," proclaimed Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, according to Johnson, she and her party were always safe in the company of Bedouins because Bedouins needed and sought western medicine.

Johnson's characterization of Bedouins as "semi-civilized," ignorant, and superstitious does not seem to be outside the norm for how westerners viewed non-westerners. According to Judy Mabro, "accusations of prejudice and superstition are common." Yet, Mabro also sees these accusations more prevalent when the subject is a non-European woman.<sup>13</sup>

There was one thing that each of these six women who portrayed Bedouins in a positive manner had in common: none of them traveled alone. Each one came to Palestine with at least one American companion. This could suggest that these travelers already felt a level of safety and security simply because they were not alone. This cannot be said about those who felt unsafe when Bedouins were near by, however.

While those six travelers felt most safe when in the company of Bedouins, the majority of American women, both the lone travelers as well as those who ventured in groups, felt just the opposite. Ten of the twenty-two travelers who observed Palestine's Bedouins noted in their published accounts being unsafe when Bedouins were nearby. Jane Eames felt generally unsafe because each Bedouin she saw was armed "with a gun or a sword or pistol, and sometimes with all three."<sup>14</sup> Eames had heard stories about Palestine being "unquiet and unsafe." She said that seeing all of those armed Bedouins was an indication that those stories were true. Not surprisingly, Eames concluded that the reason, at least in part, for the safety problem in Palestine was due to the extensively armed Bedouins. She never suggested that the Bedouins were armed because Palestine was unsafe. Instead, she believed that Palestine was unsafe because Bedouins were armed.<sup>15</sup>

Like the ideas purported by Eames in her travel account, many other American women, such as Susan Brewer Thomas, believed that Palestine was unsafe due to the hostile, as she called them, "wild Arabs," and consistently portrayed Bedouins as unruly, uncivilized, and untrustworthy vagabonds.<sup>16</sup> Susan Wallace believed that Palestine was unsafe because the Bedouins did not acknowledge law: "They are a law unto themselves, and acknowledge no other ruler."<sup>17</sup>

Others, such as Susan Elston Wallace, Mary Ninde, and Clara Moyses Tadlock believed that Bedouins were born thieves.<sup>18</sup> While passing through Hebron, Wallace noted that soldiers were stationed in the area. She attributed the presence of these soldiers to "thieving Bedouins, who infest these desolate roads, robbing with impunity, unless the avenging sword is in sight."<sup>19</sup> Ninde and Tadlock also portrayed Bedouins as murderous heathen who would put to death any foreigner they came across. According to Tadlock, Bedouins killed travelers just to steal their possessions, "like those Texas stage-robbers."<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, L.L. Adams reported that "Bedawin [sic]. . . are known to be great robbers, and often attack parties of travelers."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, she hired a Bedouin for protection: "In front, on a splendid white horse, rode an Arab Sheikh, in all the warlike array of gun, sword, and spear, and dressed in the gay colors of his tribe . . . He was to be our guard as well as our guide." She believed that she needed the help of a Bedouin to protect her from other Bedouins. "This Sheikh is the chief of a tribe of Bedawin

[sic] in that region," Adams reported, "and his presence with us was a sufficient protection against the attacks of his men, who might otherwise have plundered us on our way."<sup>22</sup>

Not only were Bedouins portrayed as murderers, but also, according to Mary L. Ninde, Bedouins turned killing into a game for their self-amusement. Ninde recalled a story she heard about six scientists who were robbed by Bedouins. After relieving the scientists of all worldly possessions, according to the story, the Bedouins gave the scientists a choice in regard to how they would die: either jump off a cliff or be shot.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Cora Agnes Benneson, an Illinois attorney, simply reported in her travelogue that she proceeded through Palestine "cautiously, with our guard always ahead, for the Bedouins live by plunder, and often attack strangers."<sup>24</sup>

Most of these women who forwarded racist or stereotypical views of Bedouins never experienced a negative encounter with Palestine's Bedouins themselves—they were merely passing on to their readers the rumors and innuendoes they had heard about Palestine's Bedouins. In fact, it was not unusual for these women who reported over and over that everyone should be frightened of the murderous, thieving Bedouins as a group, to describe individual Bedouins as caring, hospitable fellow travelers. Cora Benneson, for example, noted that the Bedouins she met respected "the laws of hospitality, however, and if any one in trouble solicits their aid, they give him the kindest reception, and protect him for three days after his departure from their camp."<sup>25</sup> On the one hand Benneson told her readers not to trust Bedouins (as a monolithic entity) because they were known murderers and thieves. She also told her readers how individual Bedouins were helpful to, kind towards, and receptive of foreign travelers.

Benneson described an encounter she had with a Bedouin troupe led by a man named Ibn Ishmair. First, this is one of the few cases I have encountered in which an American traveler took the time to note the name of their Bedouin host. Second, while Benneson told her readers to fear Bedouins, she also described her chance encounter with this particular Bedouin in nothing but pleasant terms. For example, she said how one wife of Ibn Ishmair entertained them in "European" custom, while his other wives observed "traditional [Bedouin] hospitality." She noted

that Ibn Ishmair and others in his group lived simply, yet were wealthy and had "a native dignity and grace of manner, which might have been envied by a prince."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Benneson continued to fear Bedouins, even after her meeting with this one Bedouin leader. Upon departing from Ibn Ishmar's camp, she once again reported being very nervous for fear of running into a group of Bedouins. "We finally reached Kuneitirah in safety," she reported.<sup>27</sup> This entire exchange is rather odd because while Benneson witnessed or experienced nothing that should have made her fearful of Bedouins, she nonetheless feared Bedouins and passed on those feelings to her readers by never challenging or questioning the veracity of the rumors that Bedouins were, by nature, a thieving, murderous lot.

If anyone had initial cause to fear Bedouins out of personal experience it was Dr. Sarah Wells who reported being captured by a group of Bedouins. "Horrors of those who before had fallen into the hands of these lawless rovers, rushed before our minds. What were we to do?," Dr. Wells pondered. She noticed "no indication of mercy . . . in their black fierce looking eyes [while] they demanded our money and other effects." Wells, et al, were ordered to mount their horses. "For hours we traveled on under the guidance of our captors," Wells noted.<sup>28</sup>

Upon reaching the Bedouin encampment, Wells' dragoon was taken to the leader's tent while the travelers awaited their fate. "In a little while, we were invited into the tent," recalled Wells, "and to our surprise and great relief, the sheik received us with the utmost hospitality." Wives of the sheik spread out new mats on the ground for Dr. Wells and her fellow travelers to sit upon. They also served fresh milk, coffee, bread, and eggs to the Americans. In exchange for the food and drink, Dr. Wells gave them lemons, oranges, and some sugar.

After "resting for a while," as Wells called it, the sheik provided the travelers with a guide and an armed escort. She noted that the Bedouins were from the "Azeneah" tribe which she called "the largest and most powerful of all the wild Arabs." Interestingly enough, she believed it was divine intervention that delivered her and her party "from these wild, fierce, marauding people."<sup>29</sup> It was not that the Bedouins she met were hospitable, kind, and generous. She believed that it was Providence that saw them to safety. It must be remembered, however, that Wells' ten-year long trip around the world resulted in a large, published account, which in turn spawned an across-the-country circuit of lectures about her ten years away from the United States. In other words, it is not impossible that Dr. Wells just made up, or at least embellished, her encounter with the Bedouins in order to sell more books, which in turn

would bring more people to her lectures, which would result in more sales of her book. She portrayed herself as a woman who faced certain death, yet somehow God intervened on her behalf to deliver her back to the United States to share her harrowing experiences with the American reading public.

Similarly, Kate Kraft never believed that Bedouins would attack a party of travelers, until her party was attacked one night. Her concern, however, was not of being killed by Bedouins. "I already fancied I was carried off by an Arab chief, tied behind him on his horse, riding at a fearful rate over mounts and valleys to the place of his abode."<sup>30</sup> There seems to be a possible romantic nature to Kraft's wording, nonetheless. Her fear of being taken by an Arab sheik "to the place of his abode" was unique among her fellow American women travelers.

Even when individual "wild Arabs" proved to be hospitable, provided shelter and food, and gave American travelers guides and escorts, these women still continued to believe and portray Palestine's Bedouins as a monolithic entity of ruthless barbarians who would opt to steal from and kill travelers over being hospitable.

This does not suggest, however, that American women travelers saw nothing good or placed no positive characteristics upon individual Bedouins. In fact, just the opposite was true. For example, Maria Ballard Holyoke called Bedouins "lawless and predatory" when speaking about them monolithically.<sup>31</sup> Yet, she placed positive characteristics upon individual Bedouins such as "the Sheik of the whole district" who offered her protection. She identified him as "a splendid fellow, with a keen black eye, and a countenance expressive of sagacity, dignity and good nature." She described another Bedouin man as "brilliant eyed" who "readily returned a courteous salutation."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Nellie Sims Beckman was interested in the Bedouins because she saw them as contradictory:

Murder and plunder they delight in, yet an act of kindness they will never forget. They respect the laws governing their ideas of hospitality, but do not hesitate to rob, plunder, and murder any one to whom they are not obligated. They have scanty food and clothing, but their evident happy and contented tent life make them objects of interest.<sup>33</sup>

Marion Harland placed both positive and negative characteristics upon Palestine's Bedouins, yet her "observations" were based on stories she heard from other members of her traveling party. She never actually met, spoke with, or reported seeing any Bedouins. "Their object in living seems to rob other tribes, and to fight the injured parties afterward," Harland believed. She identified their "leading characteristics" as "politeness and hospitality to guests; revenge and ill-doing to enemies; and a large and



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh



level eye to the main chance, especially in the matter of robbery and horse trades."<sup>34</sup>

According to Harland, not only were Bedouins harsh to their enemies, they were equally harsh to their wives or daughters who they suspected of carrying on extra-matrimonial liaisons. The husband or father would take his wife or daughter on a hunting expedition, or for a long ride, and always return alone. According to Harland, no questions were asked. Or, "her father or brother takes her off out of sight of the camp, and shoots her as he would a dog suspected of hydrophobia."<sup>35</sup> No other American woman traveler recorded this unusually severe method of dealing with adultery or suspected adultery or other acts of "dishonor," however. Yet that is not to say that "honor killings" were not widespread in Palestine or any other place in the Middle East in the nineteenth century.

These examples tend to suggest that the American travelers did not differentiate between Arab culture and individual personalities. Thieving and murder were seen as cultural traits, while physical features and adherence to law codes were viewed as personality traits that were shared by particular Bedouins. Yet even though some Bedouins were portrayed with handsome physical features who routinely followed cultural laws regarding hospitality, underneath that veneer, so believed some of these Americans, were the sociopathic traits of thieving and murder.

As stated above, some Americans identified the Bedouins they came across as something akin to American Indians. Again, Obenzinger notes that it "was a standard association" for American travelers to equate Arabs with Indians.<sup>36</sup> Louise Griswold, from New York, noted that the Bedouins she came across resembled "the Comanche Indians of our own country."<sup>37</sup> Later on, she came upon a Bedouin encampment. She noted that they were "savage looking" and their yell resembled "an Indian war whoop."<sup>38</sup>

Anna P. Little came across a group of Bedouins near Jericho. Some of the Bedouins began dancing and performing for the travelers. "The leader came up to us," recalled Little, "placed his mouth to our ears, and with his hand patting his lips gave the most thrilling howls, something like the Indian war-cry."<sup>39</sup> Also, Little noted that the leader of this Bedouin group, whom she called "Shiek Yosef" (possibly a take off on the Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph, who would have been known in the United States at that time) gave the women a presentation "of a Bedouin on the war-path." According to Little:

He suddenly dashed off, racing over the plains, and quickly turning his horse, came like a flash to Aissi [Little's

guide], who had also started his horse, and when the two met, Yosef gave an unearthly yell and drew his sword as though he intended cutting off Aissi's head.<sup>40</sup>

It was not the yelling of Bedouins that reminded Lucia Palmer of Indians, rather it was their horsemanship. In Bethany, Palmer noted that the government placed a group of Bedouins in charge of protection for the town and its vicinity. "The sheik was an old man; he came out to meet us, but his son, heir apparent, was to accompany us. At our appearance the son came galloping down the hill at a speed that would astonish an American Indian," recalled Palmer.<sup>41</sup> In another account, Lucy Bainbridge portrayed the English spoken by her Arab dragoman as broken and awkward: "Must go now, gemman; run horse six mile. Day's bad, bery bad Bedouin here; me can no make 'em do."<sup>42</sup>

Several women in this study tended to portray Bedouins as "Palestine Indians." It is unclear just how widespread that mentality was among the other women in this study, however. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay noted that Americans developed more intense anti-Indian views later in the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that some of the women in this study described Palestine's Bedouins as Middle Eastern Indians. If there was a pervasive anti-Indian sentiment among the American women who ventured to Palestine, and if they tended to view Bedouins as Indians, it should not be surprising to discover Bedouins being characterized in a negative manner. Of the six who consistently portrayed Bedouins negatively, Benneson, Tadlock, Ninde, and Wallace all traveled to Palestine after 1872, the year of the Modoc War.<sup>44</sup>

Overall, American women travelers drew a connection between their personal safety and the relative proximity of Bedouins. While some believed the presence of Bedouins meant that they were safe and secure, others felt anything but safe and secure when Bedouins were present. Even though almost every woman in this study placed some good qualities or characteristics upon individual Bedouins, nonetheless most also feared collective Bedouins.

Only one woman in this study viewed Bedouins in a neutral manner. Mrs. D.L. Miller simply noted "During the day Bedouin [sic] Arab camps were passed, as we saw their tents, which were made of goats' hair closely woven together, making them water-tight . . . These people are of a roving nature, therefore remain but a short time at one place. Their families go with them, of course." Miller also noted that the Bedouins she saw hunted and fished for their food in and around the Lake Hulch area. She did not place any fear in connection to their presence, nor did she seem relieved that Bedouins were in the vicinity, thus suggesting that Bedouins were not connected to safety, as many of Miller's contemporaries tended to believe. Miller's

account is also unique because she used the words "people" and "families" in describing the Bedouins. In short, she never judged them; she just described them.

In conclusion, while most American women portrayed Bedouins in their published accounts as a monolithic entity and reacted with fear, some also showed individual Bedouins to be kind, honest, helpful, and hospitable. Even a few Americans drew parallels or connections between

Palestinian Bedouins and American Indians. Those women never mentioned the sources of their apprehension thus suggesting that they could have simply feared what was culturally and socially foreign. Of course, by equating Bedouins with American Indians they were possibly perpetuating stereotypes of "savage" and "uncivilized" American Indians and transferring those stereotypes on people who they believe physically and socially resembled American Indians.

## End Notes

1. Kate Kraft, *The Nilometer and the Sacred Soil* (New York: Carleton, 1869) p. 197.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 263-264.
3. Mary S. Allen, *From West to East* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1898) p. 84.
4. Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) pp. 190-191.
5. Sarah Haight, *Letters from the Old World Volume II* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840) p. 136.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-140.
7. Lizzie McMillan, *Letters of Lizzie McMillan* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1902) p. 209.
8. Marie and Emma Straiton, *Two Lady Tramps Abroad* (Flushing, NY: Evening Journal Press, 1881) p. 89.
9. Mrs. Stephen M. Griswold, *A Woman's Pilgrimage* (Hartford, CT: Published by the author, 1871) p. 289.
10. Mattie Sisson Wood, *England and the Orient* (North Attleboro, MA: J.A. Wood, 1882) p. 247.
11. Sarah Barclay Johnson, *Hadji in Syria, or, Three Years in Jerusalem* (New York: Arno Press, 1977) pp. 47-48. A reprint of the edition published by J. Challen, Philadelphia [nd].
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-127.
13. Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991) p. 155.
14. Jane Anthony Eames, *Another Budget*. Second Edition (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855) p. 386.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Susan Brewer Thomas, *Travels in Europe, Egypt, and Palestine* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1860) pp. 306, 307.
17. Susan E. Wallace, *Along the Bosphorus* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1898) p. 84.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 84; Mary L. Ninde, *We Two Alone in Europe* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Company, 1886) p. 292; and, Clara Moyse Tadlock, *Bohemian Days* (New York: John B. Alden, 1889) p. 371.
19. Wallace, *Along the Bosphorus*, p. 84.
20. Tadlock, *Bohemian Days*, p. 371. Besides comparing the Bedouins with Texas stage-robbers, she also compared them to Mormons due to their shared custom of plural marriage. *Ibid.*
21. L.L. Adams, *A Ride of Horseback Through the Holy Land Written for the Children* (Boston: Henry Hoyt, 1874) pp. 44-45.
22. Adams, *A Ride on Horseback*, pp. 195-106.
23. Ninde, *We Two Alone in Europe*, p. 292.
24. Cora Agnes Benneson, "Palestine To-Day," *The Unitarian*, September 1890, p. 431.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Dr. Sarah Furnas Wells, *Ten Years' Travel Around the World* (West Milton, OH: Morning Star Publishing Company, 1885) pp. 204-206.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.
30. Kraft, *Sacred Soil*, p. 264.
31. Maria Ballard Holyoke, *Golden Memories of Old World Lands* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1893) p. 481.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 472, 473.
33. Mrs. William Beckman, *Backsheesh, A Woman's Wanderings*. (San Francisco: Whitaker and Ray Company, 1900) pp. 202-203.
34. Marion Harland, *Under the Flag of the Orient* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1897) p. 171.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Obenzinger, *American Palestine*, p. 190.
37. Griswold, *A Woman's Pilgrimage*, p. 300.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 304, 305.
39. Anna P. Little, *The World as We Saw It* (Boston: Cupples, 1887) p. 350.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 348
41. Lucia Palmer, *Oriental Days* (New York: Baker and Taylor Company, 1897) p. 164.
42. Lucy Seaman Bainbridge, *Round the World Letters* (Boston: D. Lothrop & Company, 1882) p. 379.
43. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontier of Women's Writings* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) p. 178.
44. As Georgi-Findlay points out, Americans tended to view Indians in a more negative manner after the 1872 Modoc War. *Ibid.*

# "When One Sits Among The People"

## Lucie Duff Gordon's Letters from Egypt

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As a child Lucie Duff Gordon (née Austin) had travelled a lot with her intellectual parents, learning to appreciate the customs of different people in many foreign countries. Yet it was not for pleasure, or by her own choice, that in 1861 she left England for good. TB forced this forty-year-old lady to leave her children, her friends and her country for The Cape of Good Hope. There she first met (and was immediately fascinated by) Islam, almost by chance:

Yesterday I sat in the full broil for an hour or more in the hot dust of the Malay burial ground. . . . round me sat a crowd of grave brown men chanting 'Allah il Allah' to the most monotonous but musical air, and with such perfect voices. The chant seemed to swell, and then fade, like the wind in the trees. . . . I kept at a distance and sat down when they did. But a man came up and said: 'You are welcome.' So I went close . . . There were 80 or 100 men, no women, and five or six Hagees . . . the whole lot making less noise in moving and talking than two Englishmen.<sup>1</sup>

After a short unhappy summer back in Europe, in 1862 Lady Duff Gordon emigrated to Egypt. She stayed there,

and became a sort of Bint el-Beled (daughter of the land) until her death in Cairo, where she asked to be buried, in July 1869. On her arrival in November 1862 she was welcomed by a young boy chanting the Zikr: "I never heard anything more beautiful and affecting," she wrote home.<sup>2</sup> Duff Gordon was immediately enchanted by Cairo: "well may the Prophet (whose name be exalted) smile when he looks on Cairo," she told her mother in November 1862.<sup>3</sup> The writer fell in love at once with Egyptian customs. After a short while, Islamic prayers became her prayers: for example she acquired the habit of saying Al Fatah when starting on a journey, or concluding a bargain.<sup>4</sup> While many Victorian women travellers preferred to be left alone and — like Marianne North — were more interested in exotic flowers than in foreign people (often labelled as "ungrateful blacks"),<sup>5</sup> Lucie Duff Gordon liked to be among the native people.

At first the writer (just as the Oxford-educated Katherine in the Postmodern novel *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje) "read" Egypt as a three-layered text: "This country is a palimpsest in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over the Bible. In the towns the Koran is most visible, in the country Herodotus," she wrote home.<sup>6</sup> Yet, soon her perspective changed. Lucie,

like a sort of Shakespearian Bottom, was gradually "translated." Living in "The French House" (or "Maison de France") in Luxor gave her the opportunity to get to know the natives exceptionally well. The house she rented was built on the ruins of the Khem temple, and was considered one of the best houses in town: even Gustave Flaubert had sojourned there in 1850. However, Lady Duff Gordon was struck by the violent way Egyptian architecture had been defaced to westernize its aspects. The effacement of Egyptian architecture therefore came to mean for her the erasure of a whole culture: "shabby French houses, like the one I live in, are being run up; and in this weather how much better would be the Arab courtyard, with its mastabah and fountain!" She wrote.<sup>7</sup>

If "Orientalism" (as Edward Said named the discursive construction of the East as opposed to the West) had taken travel books by women into account, borderlines all around us and within ourselves would probably be positioned differently.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, however, the encoding of the East as "other" (meaning inferior, worse; meaning countries to be exploited, people to be enslaved, cultures to be blotted out) is a crucial patriarchal structure of Western society. And patriarchy, to protect itself, has systematically erased women, women's her/stories, women's point of view, and their writings.<sup>9</sup> Lady Duff Gordon's Letters from Egypt could have contributed to shape the Western conception of the Orient in quite a different way. She happened to witness what was to be a pivotal period for Egypt, the one in which Ismail Pasha succeeded Said Pasha. In her letters the Victorian aristocrat juxtaposed their violent rule, as well as European exploitation and disrespect for human rights, with Islam.

The main characteristic of Islam, as Duff Gordon perceived it, was in fact its respect: particularly for those who are small, poor, female; particularly for foreigners. "What I have met with everything Arab — nothing but kindness and politeness," she wrote to the prejudiced Baronet who was her husband.<sup>10</sup> To her mother she explained:

The most striking thing is the sweetness and delicacy of feeling — the horror of hurting anyone . . . the creed is simple and there are no priests, a decided advantage. It is enough for you if you do no injury to any man, and above all to any woman or little one. . . . pretty sound morality, methinks, and might be preached with advantage to a meeting of philanthropists in Exeter Hall.<sup>11</sup>

Victorian philanthropy was characterized by the will to "improve" the life of the lower classes at home and of the natives in the colonies. Lady Duff Gordon, however, affirmed: "I don't want to improve mankind at all, or assist in the advance of civilization. Quite the other way."<sup>12</sup> The writer took a firm stand in favour of the oppressed Egyptians: "My heart is with the Arabs," she seemed to cry, and she stuck to her position.<sup>13</sup> "This country and these people . . . are so full of tender and affectionate feeling, when they have not been crushed out of them," she affirmed.<sup>14</sup> Lady Duff Gordon indignantly reported how ill-treated the Egyptians actually were: "What chokes me is to hear English people talk of the stick being 'the only way to manage Arabs' as if any-one could doubt that it is the easiest way to manage any people where it can be used with impunity."<sup>15</sup>

Having grown up among "Radicals," literally on John Stuart Mill's knee, Lucie thought it only natural that the Egyptian people should have the possibility to enjoy the same rights as her own fellow countrymen. She also earnestly believed that British authorities were intent on using their influence to help the natives obtain their "natural rights." Unfortunately, she was proved wrong: "I have been amazed at several instances of English fanaticism this year. Why do people come to a Mussulman country with such bitter hatred 'in their stomachs' as I have seen three or four times?" Duff Gordon asked in 1865.<sup>16</sup> Two years later she remarked: "I wonder when Europe will drop the absurd delusion about Christians

being persecuted by Muslims. It is absolutely the other way — here at all events."<sup>17</sup> The writer, with greater political acumen, focus on a further key point: "East and West is the difference, not Muslims and Christians. As to that difference, I could tell volumes. . . . I sleep every night in a makaab open to all Luxor, and haven't a door that has a lock. They bother me for back-sheesh; but oh how poor they are, and how rich must be a woman whose very servants drink sugar to their coffee!"<sup>18</sup>

As far as differences between East and West were concerned, Lady Duff Gordon was impressed by the fact that in several instances Arab women were freer than European women. Not only were corsets almost unheard of in Egypt, she realized, but marriage was not the only possible lifestyle for women. In 1864 she met "an eccentric Bedawee lady" called el Haggeh, *The Pilgrimess*: dressed like a man but for her beautiful jewels, "she is a virgin and fond of men's soci-

*What chokes me is to hear English people talk of the stick being 'the only way to manage Arabs' ...*



ety, being very clever, so she has her dromedary and goes about alone."<sup>19</sup> Lucie stared at her, puzzled and bewitched. "No one seemed surprised, no one stared," she wrote home, at once shocked and relieved,

and when I asked if it was proper our captain was surprised. 'Why not? If she does not wish to marry, she can go alone . . . what harm? She is a virgin and free.' . . . She expressed her opinions pretty freely as far as I could understand her. . . . To me she seems far the most curious thing I have yet seen.<sup>20</sup>

For some time Lady Duff Gordon seemed to be obsessed by this queer lady. She kept on asking about el Haggeh, who she is likely to have seen as her own doppelgänger or at least a kindred spirit:

I made further inquiries about the Bedawee lady, who is older than she looks, for she has travelled constantly for ten years. She is rich and much respected, and received in the best houses, where she sits with the men all day and sleeps in the harem. . . . As soon as I can talk I must try and find her out. . . . There are a good many things about the harem which I am barbarian enough to think good and rational.<sup>21</sup>

Several weeks later, the writer was still thinking about the mysterious pilgrimess: "I asked Mustafa about the Arab young lady, and he . . . is to let me know if she comes here and to offer her hospitality from me."<sup>22</sup> In the same year Lady Duff Gordon met a sixteen-year-old girl en travesti: "Her father has no son and is infirm, so she works in the field for him, and dresses and behaves like a man," she wrote home.<sup>23</sup>

Lucie enjoyed visiting hareems, where she sat for hours listening to intriguing stories told by women storytellers as skillful as Sherazade herself: "Harem is used here like the German Frauenzimmer, and to mean a respectable woman," she told her mother.<sup>24</sup> Harem was, from Duff Gordon's point of view, a place where women lived together sharing everything, even motherhood. It was a place where women, removed from the company of men, could learn to love one other: "My pretty neighbour has gone back into town. She was a nice little woman, and amused me a good deal. . . . I observed that she did not care a bit for the Pasha, by whom she had a

child, but was extremely fond of 'her lady,' as she politely called her."<sup>25</sup> In a harem Lady Duff Gordon was particularly awed and moved by an imposing elderly noblewoman: "She asked about my children and blessed them repeatedly, and took my hand very kindly in doing so, for fear I should think her envious and fear the eye - she had none."<sup>26</sup>

The female condition in Egypt was for Lady Duff Gordon at once puzzling and incredibly fascinating. On the one hand there were women who had never left their husband's home since marriage; on the other hand a married woman who had a lover seemed not to be emarginated or blamed as would happen in Victorian England. Among the Arabs there was no "double standard" in morality, as Lucie realized with delight: "Violent love comes 'by the visitation of God;' the man or woman must satisfy it or die."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Lady Duff Gordon's Arab servants appeared to be "shocked at the way Englishmen talk about the Harem among themselves, and think the English hard and unkind to their wives, and to women in general."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, comparing the Western "weaker sex" to the Eastern "more spirited sex," Lady Duff Gordon summed up as following: "Tout n'est pas roses for these Eastern tyrants, not to speak of the unbridled license of tongue allowed to women and children."<sup>29</sup>

Little by little Egypt and its Arab inhabitants became the touchstone for Lady Duff Gordon. Egypt was the country of well-bred, well-mannered people par excellence, Europe was "savage" and "incivil." In 1863, after an unhappy summer interlude in England and France, Lucie wrote contemptuously from Luxor: "It is a real comfort to live in a nation of truly well-bred people and to encounter kindness after the savage incivility of France."<sup>30</sup> Although Lady Duff Gordon realized in Egypt how Christianity and Islam had many common aspects ("Curious things are to be seen here in religion. Muslims praying at the tomb of Mar Girgis, St. George, and the resting-places of Sittina Mariam and Seyidna Issa, and miracles, brand-new, of an equally mixed description"),<sup>31</sup> when comparing

Christianity to Islam, she always chose the latter. In 1864 there was a terrible epidemic of cholera in Egypt: the Coptic priests exhorted to fast and pray in order to mitigate God's wrath. She seems to have almost cried in her letters: "It is enough to make one turn Muslim to compare these greasy rogues with such high-minded charitable shurafa as Abd-el-Waris and Sheykh Yussuf. A sweet

little Copt boy who is very ill will be killed by the stupid bigotry and the fast."<sup>32</sup>

Gradually the writer adopted a form of transculturation: she came to regard Egypt as her own country, she defined herself as a "complete Arab"<sup>33</sup> and "a 'stupid, lazy Arab.'"<sup>34</sup> In her letters home it is clear how Lady Duff Gordon started identifying herself completely with the Arabs: "A fanatical Christian dog (quadruped), belonging to the Coptic family who live on the opposite side of the yard, hated me with such virulent intensity that, not content with barking at me all day, he howled at me all night, even after I had put out the lantern and he could not see me in bed," she wrote.<sup>35</sup> Her estrangement from British people appears evident to the reader when she narrates about the visit of the traveller and painter Marianne North and her father, whom Lucie had known since childhood: "Mr. North looked rather horrified at the turbaned society in which he found himself. I suppose it did look odd to English eyes," she told her mother in January 1866.<sup>36</sup>

Time itself seemed to flow à l'Arabe for Lady Duff Gordon. Little by little, Western time ceased to convey any meaning whatsoever to her. "7 Ramadan," she dated a letter to her mother in 1866.<sup>37</sup> In April, 1868, she closed a letter with the words: "I no longer have any idea of British time, but here it is the eighth day of Mohazzan."<sup>38</sup> Lucie's very name was then changed by the Egyptian people, who called her Sittie ("Lady") Noor-ala-Noor ("light from His light"). This new name was given to her by a poor widow whose only son Lady Duff Gordon had saved from death.<sup>39</sup> In 1863 Lucie began to study Arabic seriously, although she had already known it a little: "I have been learning to write Arabic, and know my letters — no trifle, I assure you," she boasted with her eldest daughter, "I am beginning to stammer out a little Arabic, but find it terribly difficult. The plurals are bewildering and the verbs quite heart-breaking. I have no books, which makes learning very slow work."<sup>40</sup>

Her own language even gradually became hybrid: "at Cairo . . . we shall be, Inshallaha, on the 19th," she wrote in 1863.<sup>41</sup> In January 1864, commenting on a photo sent from England she remarked: "it is ugly, but very like the Zuweyeh (little one)."<sup>42</sup> Women, even the British, became tout court Harem. Learned women (such as Lucie's mother, Sarah Austin) she started defining as Halmeh ("which the English call Almeah and think is an improper

word");<sup>43</sup> alms became backsheesh, Queen Victoria of England "The English Sultana."<sup>44</sup> In the letters of Lady Duff Gordon expressions such as Alhamdulillah! (God be praised), Mashallah! (God bless you), Wallahy! (by God) are frequent. She also started using, translated into English, typical Arab idioms, for example "darken one's face" (meaning "bring shame") and "do not make oneself big" (i.e. not being haughty).

Lady Duff Gordon was on very good terms with the Ulema, who praised her "Mussulman feelings."<sup>45</sup> "Fancy a Shereef, one of the Ulema, calling a Frengeeyeh - a heretic — 'sister!'" she exultantly wrote.<sup>46</sup> Although gravely ill with TB herself, the writer spent most of her time taking care of the Arabs, particularly when they became ill. When she realized that she could do nothing for them, that they were already dying, she simply held them in her own arms until the end. Her behaviour, so far from that of European women travelling in Egypt at that time, won her many hearts: "As I kissed [the boy], a very pious old moollah said 'Bismillah!' with an

approving nod, and Sheykh Mohammed's old father . . . thanked me with effusion, and prayed that my children might always find help and kindness."<sup>47</sup> Even when a foreign Sheykh showed his disapproval of her, Duff Gordon's Egyptian friends did not let her down:

There was a tremendous Sheykh-el-Islam from Tunis . . . seated on a carpet in state receiving homage. I don't think he liked the heretical woman at all. Even the Mahon did not dare to be as 'politeful' as usual to me. . . . Then Yussuf came . . . and sat below me on the mat, leaned his elbow on my cushion and made more demonstration of regard for me than ever. . . . It was as if a poor curate had devoted himself to a rank papist under the eye of a scowling Shaftesbury Bishop.<sup>48</sup>

While discussing women travellers in exotic countries, Sara Mills has used the term "going native" not only for the process of their adopting the natives' customs and the abandoning of their own, but also the fact that they "potentially aligned themselves with that culture."<sup>49</sup> Mills adds that "this 'going native' by women constitutes both a challenge to male Orientalism and a different form of knowledge about other countries."<sup>50</sup>

Lady Duff Gordon took a decisive step toward "going

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native" by choosing not to differentiate between an Arab and an European tyrant — or at least a conniving accomplice of European injustice. "One feeds six or eight Arabs well with the money for one European," she bitterly remarked, "a water-melon and a loaf a-piece, and a cup of coffee all round; and I pass for a true Arab in hospitality. . . . no European can live so, and they despise the Arabs for doing it."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the writer witnessed several massacres of unarmed, innocent people. She also realized despairingly that no one in England seemed to care for what the Arabs were enduring: "your letter shows how little moment the extermination of four villages is in this country," she wrote her husband.<sup>52</sup> Lucie, on the contrary, exposed what was happening in Egypt:

Mahommed was really eloquent, and when he threw his melayeh over his face and sobbed, I am not ashamed to say that I cried too. . . . I know that Mohammed feels just as John Smith or Tom Brown would feel in his place. . . . Every man and

woman and child in any degree kin to Achmet-et-Tayib has been taken in chains to Keneh and no one here expects to see one of them return alive.<sup>53</sup>

In a desperate letter to her mother, Lady Duff Gordon expressed her views with great clarity, situating her perspective in the same dust where the Arabs were forced to stay: "You will think me a complete rebel, but . . . one's pity becomes a perfect passion, when one sits among the people — as I do, and sees it all; least of all can I forgive those among the Europeans and Christians who can help to 'break these bruised reeds.'"<sup>54</sup>

Lady Lucie Duff Gordon's letters told the story of two cultures, the Eastern and the Western culture, which never really met each other. It would seem the violent, stupid, prejudiced Europeans still bear the blame for that.

To conclude in her spirit, though East and West have not yet truly met but only clashed; yet, they still may meet, Inshallah.

## End Notes

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30. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
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39. Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from The Cape*, p. 158.
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# The Doubly Bound World of Kurdish Women

■ By Diane E. King

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The original caption of this picture, which appeared in the 2000 Amnesty International wall calendar, tells us that it is of "Kurdish refugees" as they "collect wood for heating, village of Doganli, Turkish Kurdistan 1997." While other women trudge through the snow behind her, a woman has taken a moment out of her task of burden-carrying to pose for the camera. Most likely at the behest of the photographer, she affects a needy, helpless person reaching out for assistance.

By the most commonly - accepted definition, a refugee is a person who has been granted protection from violence after crossing a state border. Such people rarely live in villages; they are usually housed in cities or in camps. The women in the picture are residents of a village built by the Turkish army after it



Photograph courtesy © of Sebastiao Salgado (Amazonas Images/Contact Press Images), All Rights Reserved. "Kurds in Doganli, Turkish Kurdistan, 1997.



destroyed their homes in its conflict with Kurdish separatists. The image shows them gathering wood, most likely for use as fuel. This suggests the agrarian lifestyle that Kurds, and other people in the region's villages, have lived for centuries. While not materially rich, this life is nevertheless one in which people meet their own needs through cash-cropping, subsistence agriculture, and gathering, as the women are doing in the picture.

If a careful reading of this photograph and its caption thus suggests self-sufficiency to a greater degree than it suggests flight and dependency, and that the women are not "refugees" in the conventional sense of the term, no doubt there is a reason Amnesty International chose this image for its wall calendar, which is distributed annually all over the world: a list of the world's most famously battered ethnic groups would surely include the Kurds somewhere near the top. A disproportionate number of Kurds have become refugees and asylum seekers or displaced within their own countries. Around 25 million Kurds (perhaps more, perhaps fewer, since reliable census data does not exist) live mainly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. As many as one million may now live in the West, mainly in Western Europe. Most went to the West in search of refuge.

This essay is about situatedness: the situatedness of the Kurds in global and regional context, of Kurdish girls and women within the larger body politic of Kurdish communities. Kurdish girls and women live in a double bind. As Kurds, they suffer the effects of political instability and repression. The sources of these are multiple, and implicate everyone from consumers of oil to Western governments. Until very recently, one source, Saddam Hussein and his government, loomed largest over the Kurds I know. Fear, displacement, and violence have been a way of life for many Kurdish girls and women. Hundreds of thousands were victimized on Saddam's orders. Secondly, Kurdish girls and women suffer the effects of being females in a heavily male-dominated society in which their movements and achievements are restricted, sometimes violently such as in the case of honor killings.

I have chosen to tell their story through the lens of my own situatedness as a female Western anthropologist studying the Kurds and living in the Arab world. As I show, the lines between the Kurds' experience and that of my own have become blurred, and this has recently made for some rich moral dilemmas. As I have spent time with the

Kurds I too have experienced the binds of working under political repression and a restrictive gender system.

My entrée into the world of the Kurds began in the mid-1990s in California when I was searching for a research topic in cultural anthropology. I was interested in social change in traditional societies when the local population of Kurds caught my attention. The Kurds I met in California were mainly from Iraq, and it seemed all of them reported having suffered and fled, in most cases from the Iraqi government. When I learned that their traditional homeland had enjoyed relative political stability and openness to the outside world since the 1991 Gulf War, I decided to try to carry out my research there.

At the time, the Kurdish part of northern Iraq was not under the control of the Baghdad government; a Kurdish administration governed behind an internal border enforced in the air by the U.S., Britain, France and Turkey. People who were not of Iraqi origin, such as myself, were only allowed out of Turkey and into the region in conjunction with the relief and development efforts there. After lobbying several NGOs by fax, phone, and email, I eventually found one that would allow me to visit northern Iraq under its auspices. In return for pledging to generate data that would benefit the local population served by the NGO, I received border-crossing authorization.

On my first trip in 1995, I stayed for five weeks during which I secured permission from the Kurdish authorities to conduct research, and learned as much as I could about the social environment so as to design a research

project that I would start the following year. I remember very well the day I first crossed from Turkey to Iraq at the Habur border-crossing. I hired a driver to take me from Diyarbakir, the main city in Turkey's Kurdish area, to the border a few hours away. At the border my luggage was copiously searched by gruff border guards as we waited in the scorching heat. Finally I crossed the bridge, where I was met by a representative from the NGO, an American man who worked as a veterinarian.

My first discussions with the American NGO personnel involved where I would stay, and this was determined by the local gender conventions. I had made it clear in correspondence that I wanted to be as immersed as possible in the local social environment, and I therefore insisted on living with Kurds. As a young unmarried female, however, there were few households

that qualified. If I lived in a household that included one or more men, I would be the object of sexual gossip by the watching community. This would cause social problems not only for me, but for the host family. Households without men were few and far between.

One such household existed of which the NGO personnel were aware, and they had arranged for me to live there during my stay. A woman around the age of fifty who had been widowed several years earlier lived with five of her twelve children, daughters who ranged in age from early teens to early twenties. I was not the first outsider to live with them; they hosted another American, a woman who worked as a nurse for an NGO. Over the following five weeks the seven of them gave me a crash course in local mores. I hired one of the daughters as a translator and assistant. She and I made numerous visits to homes, NGOs, and the offices of local officials as I worked out the details of my research topic and settled on a plan that I would implement beginning the following summer. I returned to the US with plans to begin the following year with six months of language study followed by a year of residence in a village examining how villagers interacted with and understood the presence of international NGOs.

From the start, my introduction to Kurds and Kurdishness centered around the world of Kurdish girls and women. For me, the most striking feature of life for the girls and women I lived among was its restrictiveness. During the initial weeks I struggled to learn the rules. I learned that it was considered uncouth to be seen eating in public, to walk alone anywhere, to chew gum in the presence of a man, or to drive a car. My research assistant and I took taxis and rode the bus around town, but she was very careful about where we went, and we reported all of our movements to her mother when we returned. Whenever possible, we stopped by her brother's shop near the main souq. A chat of a few minutes sufficed, and showed him and the watching community that we were not engaging in any unsanctioned behavior. As I got to know more people, I began to see this family as relatively liberal in its ways. In other households, the female members were even more restricted, and it is likely that in many families, the older members, both male and female, would have prevented any female members of the household from working with me.

*... Even though Iraqi Kurdistan has been free from Saddam for the past 12 years, we were not free from the fear of him.*

In 1996 I attempted to return to Iraq to begin my language study and fieldwork as planned, but arrived just as the Habur border was closed due to an incursion by the Iraqi army into the Kurdish area. I waited in Turkey for the political situation to stabilize and for the border to reopen, but neither happened as I waited for two months. Carrying out my research in Turkey was impossible due to the political repression of Kurds there, which was much in evidence. As an outsider associated with Kurds, I was also considered suspect. I was followed regularly by the secret police, interrogated in a threatening manner, and heard many testimonies from local Kurds of Turkey's violent repression. Faced with all of this, I made an unplanned trip back to the US. Determined to continue my trajectory of learning the Kurdish language and culture even if I was displaced, I visited a refugee English course for women and asked for their help. One woman told me that her husband was away working in another city, that she was living alone with her six children, and that I was welcome to come and live with her. I thus took up residence in my second Kurdish household, this time in California. Again, gender conventions dictated where I lived and among whom I associated. My host made it clear that I was able to stay only because her husband was away for an extended period. She guarded her movements and those of her teenage daughter in a manner similar to what I had observed in Iraq.

A few months later I was hired by a refugee resettlement agency as a counselor for Kurds evacuated from Iraq as a result of the same events that had prevented me from

crossing the border from Turkey. The group I counseled had been employees of the NGO that had initially invited me to northern Iraq. We marveled at the unanticipated turn of events that led to our being together again, this time on the other side of the world.

In 1997 I tried again to return to Iraq. After waiting for two more months for border-crossing permission through Syria, I was finally successful. The moment I actually crossed the border is etched in my memory as a kind of homecoming. My involuntary displacement from

the Kurdish region the year before, and attempts to reconstruct a Kurdish experience elsewhere, had rendered this "authentic" Kurdish locale highly desirable to me. I understood the longings for homeland that I had heard from diaspora Kurds with a new potency, one rooted in similar experiences.





"Interiors"  
by Azhar Shemdin.  
Winner of the Alice Peck  
Art Award, a juried  
exhibit in Burlington,  
Ontario, Canada

know of no female Kurdish colleagues in my field of anthropology.) I want more Kurdish artists like my friend Azhar Shemdin, who recently wrote to me, "I, as a person and artist, cherish my free spirit and individualism and detach my judgment on things from the influence of relatives and groups whatever they are. I paint what I see and experience, or read about. I try to look at the posi-

tive things that come out of misery, and try to heal life's wounds by taking refuge in nature." Azhar paints Kurdish subjects, yes, but more importantly she paints human subjects. She paints life and death. She paints tolerance. She paints pain. She paints beauty. You can see her art on the web. There are so many ways to tell the story.

### End Notes

I am especially grateful to my Kurdish friends for sharing their lives with me so generously. I also thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, which funded my 1996 trip and my research in 1997-1998. I have also received funding from Washington State University, American University of Beirut, and the University of Kentucky.

## Ingrid Jaradat Gassner An Austrian Media Activist in Palestine

*This is an interview conducted via email with Ingrid Jaradat Gassner, director of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. Jaradat, who is of Austrian origin, recounts what it is like to be a foreigner living in the Arab world.*

### 1. Background information about your self and previous political and personal interest in the Middle East before moving to Palestine.

My name is Ingrid Jaradat Gassner. I was born and raised in Austria and am an Austrian citizen. Since I grew up in an environment without any personal relations to the Middle East - no Palestinian relatives, no Jewish relatives - I grew up knowing very little about the region and the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. I was also too young to understand events during the so called "high-times" of Austrian (Bruno Kreisky's) involvement in the Middle East, and later on there was no longer any Austrian involvement. I did, however, always have a lot of curiosity and a strong sense of doubt in the validity of Austrian public opinion, including in what was said and reported by the media about the Palestinian people, starting from the days of the June 1967 war, when Austrians admired a strong and victorious Israel. My first trip to the Middle East was to an Israeli kibbutz - by pure coincidence and

not by choice. Simply because there was nobody to help me and my friends travel after high school and work anywhere else, Latin America, for example, would have been our first choice.

My political education therefore began in Palestine: it was easy to understand that the kibbutz had nothing to do with socialism and that Israelis' missed the major root causes when trying to explain the conflict with the Palestinian people. Later on, I finished my B.A. degree at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. At that time, I already was active with a small group of anti-Zionist Israelis and Palestinians (Matzpen). I have remained a political activist since then, was involved in socialist organizations in Austria, the solidarity movement with the anti-colonial struggle in Latin America, until I returned to Palestine at the time of the first Intifada. For 12 years now, I have been married in Palestine. My husband and I have one son (Nadim). We live in Beit Jala, West Bank and are both founding members of BADIL Resource Center, an organization working to promote Palestinian refugee rights, foremost their right to return, as well as to restitution.

### 2. Why did you decide to move to Palestine?

Although I did return to Austria for a period of time (1983

- 1988), I did not really feel at home there anymore. I graduated (M.A.) from Salzburg University with a thesis on educational policies and the Palestinian minority. When I was asked to come to work at the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem, an organization operated by anti-Zionist Israelis and Palestinians from Jerusalem, it seemed the natural thing to do. I was not planning an academic career for myself, and there were very limited perspectives for political activism in Austria. In addition, I had the experience and knowledge required for this type of work in Palestine. So it was mainly for reasons of political activism that I came here.

**3. How did you manage to fit into the Palestinian society? Which factors facilitated and hindered your integration?**

The major factor that facilitated my integration was the fact that I have shared political activism with the people here in Palestine. The fact that there were organizational frameworks in which I could work and live with the people here very much helped me to feel part of this society. I thus rapidly began to feel that the people here, and their society, were not so different from what I had been used to. In fact, I am convinced that much of what appears to be so different, culturally and socially, are customs and habits that can be negotiated if understood and taken into consideration.

Of course, I will always remain a "foreigner" for Palestinians who do not know me. This is sometimes disturbing. However, there is an advantage to the small size of Palestine - which in fact has become Bethlehem district in my case due to the military closures - and closed character of Palestinian society: People can always know who is who, and I can move freely within my network of social support.

**4. How is your relationship with your Palestinian relatives?**

My Palestinian relatives, i.e. my husband's mother, broth-

ers and sisters live in Sa'ir, one of the large Palestinian villages (in the meantime declared towns) in the Hebron district. My husband's mother, Um Hamdi, is a very tolerant and smart woman, although she never had any formal schooling. She has always loved me, because she is so happy that her son found the woman he wanted to marry - after years that she and the whole family thought that he will never get married. She, as well as his brothers and sisters accept the fact that I live differently from the way they do. It is enough for them that they feel that I respect them and they respect me. The fact that we do not share a household, and even live in a different town, has certainly helped to avoid all kinds of tensions that would have appeared if we lived next to each other. So - no problems on the family front.

**5. Please describe your work at Info Badil?**

I am the director of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights. We are an organization with a General Assembly of some 50 veteran community activists in the West Bank refugee camps, a Board of seven, and a staff of nine. It is my job to draft overall institutional strategies, raise funds, write institutional reports - in addition to taking part in the advocacy and information work implemented as part of our program.

**6. How would you describe your identity today, as a woman of Austrian origin having lived in the Arab world for an extended period of time?**

I would describe myself as a woman with Austrian citizenship, familiar with central European culture and thinking, but feeling like a Palestinian. I have very little tolerance for Western ignorance regarding Arab history, culture and religions, Zionism and the Palestinian struggle - and even less tolerance for Western arrogance and the perceived Western monopoly on democracy and civilization.

BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights is a Palestinian community-based organization that aims to provide a resource pool of alternative, critical and progressive information and analysis on the question of Palestinian refugees in the quest to achieve a just and lasting solution for exiled Palestinians based on the right of return.

BADIL was established in January 1998 and is registered with the Palestinian Authority and legally owned by the refugee community represented by a General Assembly composed of activists in Palestinian national institutions and refugee community organizations.

PO Box 728, Bethlehem, Palestine;  
Email: [info@badil.org](mailto:info@badil.org);  
Website: [www.badil.org](http://www.badil.org)

## Arda Arsenian Ekmekji

# An Armenian-Lebanese Academician Recounts

### ■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW Staffer

Arda Ekmekji is an Armenian Lebanese scholar living in Beirut. Born in Jerusalem, Ekmekji lived in Jordan until 1968 after which she came to Lebanon to enroll in the American University of Beirut (AUB). She holds a BA in Ancient History and an MA in Archaeology from the AUB. She also has a Ph.D. in Archeology from the University of Paris I (Sorbonne). Ekmekji served as a faculty member at AUB for around two decades teaching Cultural Studies, Ancient Religions and Civilizations as well as Archaeology. She then moved to Haigazian University in 1997. She began as Director of the Faculty of Humanities and since 1998 has served as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Haigazian University.

Ekmekji recounts that her family fled to Palestine due to the ethnic cleansing of Armenians that took place at the beginning of the century in Turkey. She recounts: "Thousands of Armenians fled to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq." Ekmekji asserts that even though she is ethnically Armenian she feels very Lebanese and admits that culturally she is very Arab because she has been living in Lebanon for the past 35 years. She asserts: "I think I have lived in Lebanon more than I have lived anywhere else in my life. I feel very Lebanese and part of the system. I strongly believe that when you live

through a war and then peace in the same country that counts for something." Ekmekji admits that most Armenians living in Lebanon consider themselves Lebanese. "Let's face it, we are very much part and parcel of the local fabric. We have no anxieties regarding not knowing where we are or where we belong. We feel we belong here, that is why we never thought of leaving Lebanon during the war years. We lived the hardships of the war just like our Lebanese next-door neighbors. We were threatened by the same bombs, endured the same misfortunes."

On living in Lebanon Ekmekji continues that the Lebanese system accommodates everyone. The multi-cultural makeup of the Lebanese society is what is distinctive about Lebanon, she admits. Moreover, the fact that the system in Lebanon is based on 19 denominations with religious representation makes all the difference. Ekmekji explains: "In Lebanon you are born, you get married, get divorced, inherit, die and are buried based on your religious sect. Things happen first at the religious level unlike the West where matters are settled at the civic level. In this part of the world religion is not an option, without a religious passport you can't do much. Hence, the fact that you are an Armenian living in Lebanon does not

imply that you are an outsider. On the contrary, you are seen as belonging to one of the 19 different equally balanced and accordingly proportioned denominations that make up the Lebanese society. Therefore you are given your own little niche and you do whatever you want as long as it is permissible."

However, Ekmekji admits that despite the fact that Armenians are well integrated in the Lebanese system and have adopted it as their own in certain aspects, they still prioritize the Armenian culture first and foremost. Armenians, in an attempt not to forget their Armenian heritage have founded their own institutions in Lebanon such as schools, universities, academic centers, churches, etc., which cater to Armenian cultural and educational needs. Given that the Armenians have lost a lot of their heritage due to the Armenian exodus, they strive to preserve what is left of their culture. She admits: "We are burdened in a sense because we are fighting a number of battles. On the one hand we want to preserve our Armenian heritage and on the other we want to fit into the Lebanese culture. Our children are expected to learn the language and familiarize themselves with Armenian culture."

Ekmekji goes on to explain that Armenians living in Lebanon do not face any restrictions. She admits: "In Lebanon no one says we can't speak Armenian or found our own institutions or have our own church, or teach Armenian. Had we been living in a country where we are not allowed to even mention that we are Armenian, that would have been traumatic." However she acknowledges the fact that Armenians are stereotyped by the Lebanese: "If you are an Armenian you are supposed to eat Basterma, speak broken Arabic and live in Bouj Hammoud." Ekmekji explains that the reason why Armenians, when speaking Arabic, mix genders is because the Armenian language is gender neutral. "Our grammar has no feminine and masculine and I think that is very indicative of the way we think. Our minds fail to differentiate between masculine and feminine objects."

Ekmekji continues: "My identity is extremely rich. Being an archeologist I think of myself as down town Beirut with all its layers, namely the Byzantine level, the Roman level, the Greek level, etc. When I think of myself I have all these levels which are extremely rich in my culture. Given that both my parents are Armenian, I feel very Armenian, I appreciate the Armenian culture and speak

the Armenian language and this is one important layer of my personality. The fact that I am Armenian is like the cherry on the cake, it never slowed me down. Another enriching layer is due to the fact that I was born in Jerusalem and lived there till the age of 17. Besides, having lived all my adult mature life in Lebanon, I have an enormous layer which is Lebanese. Also there are all the other sub-layers that come in like being exposed to the American system of education, the American and the French. Besides, being engaged in academia, in voluntary work through various NGOs, being a member of various committees, belonging to the Armenian evangelical church, etc. Ekmekji affirms that these multi-faceted layers that form her identity have added spice to her life. "Being able to shift gears between all these different layers is vital and enriching. It does not affect me negatively or make me feel schizophrenic. On the contrary, I think its very boring to hear an orchestra playing on one string. If you can play on a number of different strings you will get nicer music provided you can blend the sounds properly."

According to Ekmekji, what unifies Armenians is the Armenian culture and language. She recounts that she once attended an International Armenian women's gathering in which there were around 200 Armenian women from all over the world and the only common denominator between all these women was that they were Armenian. Yet culturally they differed intensely. "What is common between an Armenian women brought up in Tehran, a second brought up in Los Angeles, and a third brought up in Lebanon? When they get together there is only the Armenian culture and heritage that binds them. However, in terms of modes of dress, mentality, and ways of thinking one is typically Iranian the other is typically American and the third typically Lebanese. How I think, vote, the way I dress are all influenced by the culture in which I live. For instance, an Armenian woman living in Tehran might be wearing the chador when she steps out of her house. On the other hand if you take me as an example, as an Armenian woman living in Lebanon, I am no different than any Lebanese. When walking on the street I do not send out signals indicating I am Armenian. I do not have a specific mode of dress, I do not wear a sari for instance. In my private life I am different because I talk to my daughter in Armenian. Moreover, if there is an Armenian dance group performing I would like to attend the event. Besides, I attend a church service each Sunday that is in Armenian. Yet, I do

all the other things the Lebanese way i.e.. I celebrate my independence day, labor day, I vote, etc. If I sit with my Lebanese neighbor, who is a non-Armenian, and discuss the situation of women within the family we wouldn't find much difference in our situations."

Ekmekji affirms: "We Armenians are very conservative. A single mother is an issue of great scandal, a divorced woman is still unacceptable in society, and a widow living alone is still frowned upon, but this is the case of Armenian Lebanese. An Armenian living in France will not suffer the same problems. It depends on the country you are living in and the rules of the game." She holds that the typical image that comes to ones mind when one thinks of an Armenian woman is the image of the Armenian mother. She explains: "Armenian women are expected to take care of the children and raise them properly. Hence, any woman who ventures outside the home and decides to work in the public sphere has to fulfill all the domestic requirements first." On mixed marriages Ekmekji admits that intermarriages between Armenians and non-Armenians are acceptable nowadays. Given that Armenians are dispersed all over the world they are marrying non-Armenian men. These marriages are taking place because it is hard to convince the new generation why they should marry Armenians only. However, Ekmekji asserts that getting married to an Armenian and in the Armenian way is still highly valued and essential in order to preserve the Armenian culture and heritage.

Ekmekji recounts that when the Armenians first came to Lebanon they were unable to mix with Lebanese because of the language barrier. Given that they only spoke Armenian and Turkish they felt very isolated. Moreover, the trauma of belonging to a country and nation which has experienced genocide drove them to cling to each other, haunted by the importance of survival and the need for protection and even over protection. This is where the myth, that Armenians live in ghettos, developed. Armenians are accused of living in their own cocoon, refusing to mix with others and forbidding their children to play with their non-Armenian neighbors. This was partly true, though later generations saw the situation change because Armenians gradually learned Arabic and thus the artificial barriers disappeared. Ekmekji holds: "Given that we live in Ras Beirut, my daughter is mistaken for a Ras Beiruti because she has the typical accent. She is one hundred percent Lebanese despite the fact that she is Armenian and has attended an Armenian school for 14 years of her

life. Moreover, if I am to ask her where she would like to live and encouraged her to choose any country in the world she would choose Lebanon. She is a typical Armenian Lebanese."

On moving to Haigazian, Ekmekji admits that leaving AUB was not easy. The move was a big and challenging one she affirms. "Given that Haigazian is a small institution, the challenges were great and I felt there was so much I could do." Ekmekji explains that Haigazian was founded in 1955 in honor of Dr. Armenag Haigazian, a highly respected Armenian educator who was killed during the Armenian genocide. When Haigazian opened its doors in 1955 it had an enrollment of 43 students. With time student enrollment increased and the current student body is 750 students. When the university was first established it was designed to function as a Junior College, offering two years of university-level education. However, the demand for upper classes increased, pressuring the institution to develop a variety of four-year programs. The student body is 50% Armenian, the rest come from a large number of different nationalities. Ekmekji holds: "I am very happy with the move because at Haigazian I feel I am reaching out to students. Qualitative changes happen very fast at Haigazian because we are a small institution. If someone has a creative ingenious idea it is easily implemented, there is no need to go through the bureaucracy imposed by big universities. We have implemented great changes in curriculum design and programs. Given that I have worked in the field for many years I am aware of the loopholes and try to make things better for faculty members."

Ekmekji concludes that Armenian women living in Lebanon have all the advantages enjoyed by Lebanese women and suffer the same handicaps, crippling them. Women in Lebanon have made great strides in improving their status, however, discrimination still persists. Despite the fact that the Lebanese female population is the most educated in the Arab world and although women in Lebanon have a high rate of school attendance that exceeds that of males, yet, they still are absent from the political arena. Women in Lebanon could make a difference if

they were given the chance. "Mind you, Armenians are obsessed with educating their children irrespective of their gender. Actually, they would rather go hungry than not educate their children. Also it is important to note that Armenian women have made huge strides and are pushing to reach decision making and top ranking positions."

*Being an archeologist I think of myself as downtown Beirut with all its layers ... I have all these levels which are extremely rich in my culture.*

*... despite the fact that Armenians are well integrated in the Lebanese system ... they still prioritize the Armenian culture first and foremost.*



# Experiencing Feminism as “De-Foreignizing”\*

## ■ Margot Badran

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The following is a brief account on how feminism became a road in, or a common route, for a non-Arab woman - one not born an Arab nor claiming Arab ancestral links - who went to an Arab country to live as an “insider”.

As a young woman when I went to Egypt to settle after my marriage to an Egyptian I met with many different people who took it upon themselves to tell me how to act in ways that I found restrictive. While I was chaffing at ways people were trying to reshape me, I met some first-wave Egyptian feminists. I discovered that many things that I had been told were part of my Egyptian culture - things that I, the female foreigner, must accept - they called injustices perpetrated against women and they encouraged my resistance. Patriarchal controls imposed on women were not part of a sacrosanct culture, they insisted, and must not be given the gloss of indigenous culture or religious prescription to be preserved. Saiza Nabarawi, whom I met in 1967, and who became a mentor and elder friend, had, along with her mentor and elder, Huda Sha’rawi, removed the veil from her face thirty-four years earlier in an act that signaled their refusal to conform to patriarchal control cunningly imposed in the name of Islam and “indigenous culture”<sup>1</sup>

The unveiling was enacted on the eve of the feminist movement they would help lead for a quarter of a century. In telling me the story of her unveiling, Nabarawi was urging me to investigate and question restrictions and injustices imposed in the name of culture; she was teaching me that there was also a local tradition of dissent and resistance against injustices to women and that this was as much a part of the culture as the restrictions it opposed. She told me about the feminist movement of which she had been a part from the 1920s until the mid-1950s and how, after the dissolution of an independent feminist movement in 1956 by the state under President Nasser, she had kept a low profile at home and had become more visibly active in the international arena.<sup>2</sup> Had I not met Saiza Nabarawi, Hawa Idris (the niece of Huda Sha’rawi), Inji Aflatun (a communist and feminist writer, activist and artist), Duriyya Shafiq (leader of the Bint al-Nil feminist movement), and others in whose homes I visited, I would not have been aware of the continuation of a behind - the - scenes feminist discourse. I could point now to them and their activism as examples of a tradition of insider resistance: I could make their arguments mine - arguments framed in the discourses of culture, nation and religion. I did not have to be the dutiful pupil forced into remedial

learning.

Early last century, when Egyptian feminists exposed and confronted patriarchal oppression, they were branded foreign. They and their feminism were discredited as Western despite the fact that these disturbing “aliens” were Egyptian women with impeccable nationalist credentials, who had been active in the nationalist movement against British colonial rule, and whose nationalist activism - inseparable from their feminism - was enthusiastically accepted. Thus, it was with Egyptian activist women castigated as foreigners that I began my journey through the minefields of the gendered “us-es” and “thems”. From these women, I learned about ways of thinking and behaving that were alternative to the conventions that had been presented to me as obligatory in the discourses of nation, culture, and Islam. I learned from them how they had fought to construct a new identity for Egyptian women, initially simply as persons with the right to move in public space, to alter their dress and habits, and to be respected while exhibiting new forms of decent behavior; and I learned how they later demanded their rights to be fully participating citizens of a modern, independent state. These women, who had bridged colonial and postcolonial society, found that their own subject positions had changed from fully accepted participants in the militant nationalist struggle to second-class citizens in the new quasi-independent state in 1923.

From them, I learned how they experienced being foreign. This was first, by not being accorded in practice the full and equal rights of citizenship that the Egyptian constitution granted them and, second, by being labeled as “Western” and thereby delegitimized because they dared to object. I was reinforced in my own will not to succumb to the attempts of others to define and control me, not to bow indiscriminately to inherited modes of behavior. I saw firsthand that it was not simply one set of Egyptians - or only conservative Egyptians - who could admit one into society, nor one set of conventions, to which one must adhere to become “properly” Egyptian. I learned that the epithet “Western” used in a pejorative sense could be applied to anyone in an attempt to place her outside the borders of acceptability, to “foreignize”. The last of the “first-wavers” accepted me as ‘one of them’, in Saiza Nabarawi’s words. She, Hawa Idris, Amina al-Sa’id, Inji Aflatun, and others understood that I had not come to Egypt to perch on the fringes, enjoying the easy social

and economic benefits that accrued to expatriates, but to settle, to live the hard times with them, to become one of them. Intentions and actions mattered as they dissolved the borders between themselves and me. These feminists, who well understood the manipulative, delegitimizing, and stigmatizing uses of the foreign, gave me the chance to become an insider and to choose what to accept and reject, and the chance to shape my own identity.

My interactions with these Egyptian feminists drew together two projects: the personal project of becoming an insider in Egypt and a professional project of academic research on the history of the rise of feminism in Egypt. The two projects worked to reinforce and enhance each other. I felt that my research was a path to a deeper understanding of Egypt and a grasp of its culture - of both its plural realities and its possibilities for change. My relationships with my elder mentors, meanwhile, helped me live Egypt differently.

By the mid-1980s, Egypt had been my home for twenty years, although during these years I came and went frequently. Several years earlier I had finished my thesis on the first wave of Egyptian feminism for my doctorate at Oxford University. throughout the process I had continued to mesh personal and professional projects.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years was a long time and my sense of being foreign in Egypt had become muted. I had staged resistances and

had made accommodations. If I felt that people had given me more space to be myself, I also was a different person than I had been before. And it would not be long before I would lose my early feminist mentors and guides: Saiza Nabarawi, Hawa Idris, Inji Aflatun, and Amina al-Sa’id, all of whom died in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Egypt was a different place from the country I had first entered. In the afternoon of Nasser’s death in

1970 and with the coming to power of Anwar Sadat, Arab socialism was dismantled “open door” capitalism was introduced, a multi-party system was permitted to surface, and formerly silenced voices and ideologies were once again allowed in public space. This period saw the rise of Islamism, or political Islam, and with it the dissemination of a reactionary discourse on women and gender. But feminism, too, found expression once again in this new, more open public space. If the first-wavers I met in Egypt lent me a hand in pulling me in and mentoring me, I participated alongside second-

*We came together as  
women & formed our own  
feminism from the base of  
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wavers in enacting our feminism. We came together as women and formed our own feminism from the base of shared experience and the common problems we faced living in Egypt.

Second-wave feminism inside Egypt was constructed around our shared experience and positionings as women. A major concern of the new second-wave feminism was the rise of a reactionary discourse about women articulated by political Islam. As participants in the construction of second-wave feminism, we articulated what we lived in Egypt, or witnessed at close hand in a place where we spent our daily lives; we were conceiving a new wave of feminism from within (although the perennial and ignorant allegations that feminism was Western could be heard in certain quarters). Ethnicity, race, and origins were not constitutive of the “us”. The “us” of Egyptian feminism accommodated difference; it was pluralistic; it included foreigners; it included men. My participation in this second-wave feminism, which continued the fight against the patriarchal, social, and economic injustices women faced, brought me further inside.

In the 1980s, Nawal al-Saadawi, who combined socialism and feminism, encouraged me to join the Arab Women’s solidarity association (AWSA) in Cairo, which she had recently founded. I attended the monthly *nadwas* (public seminars) held at the AWSA headquarters where women and men debated gender issues affecting

our lives in Egypt. As a historian, I gave papers at AWSA analyzing aspects of women’s nationalist and feminist past in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> I published both scholarly papers and articles in the local Arabic and English press. In 1990, Sana’ al-Bissi invited me to write an essay on the meaning of feminism for the mass circulation magazine she had founded called *Nisf al-Dunya* [Half the World].<sup>5</sup>

Through such projects, I participated in Egyptian intellectual and activist life, exploring and experiencing Egyptian feminism as pluralist rather than particularist.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, identity politics was rampant both in Egypt and in the West, though its reverberations and concepts of foreignness were markedly different in these two settings. In Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, identity politics pivoted around

secular and religious poles. Second-wave feminists were concerned with what we saw as the dangers of a spreading, gender-conservative Islamism. Feminists wanted to hold the ground and Islamist women activists wanted to change the ground as part of a larger movement intent upon establishing an Islamic state. In 1990, Valentine Moghadam organized a conference on Women and Identity Politics in which I participated along with many scholars from the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> At this conference, we discussed the dissatisfaction we detected on gender issues from women associated with Islamist movements, specifically the older Islamist movements in Egypt and Iran. We were seeing the seeds of what was later to be called Islamic feminism.

*Feminists wanted to hold the ground and Islamist women activists wanted to change the ground ...*

## ENDNOTES

\*This text is taken from a chapter by the author entitled “Foreign Bodies: Engendering Them and Us” previously published in *The Concept of the Foreign: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* edited by Rebecca Saunders and published by Lexington Books in 2002. (pp. 91 -114)

1. Saiza Nabarawi herself had had insider-outsider problems when, after having been raised ostensibly as a “French girl” in her early teens, she returned to live in Egypt in her country of birth. Her periodic recounting of this story told me that she never quite got over a sense of displacement, even though she felt intensely Egyptian and was a fervent nationalist. See my article “Alternative Visions of Gender”, *Al Ahram Weekly* (Feb. 13-19, 1997), 11.

2. My book, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* tells the story of the first-wave feminist movement.

3. My doctoral thesis is entitled, “Huda Sha’rawi and the Liberation of the Egyptian Woman,” presented to Oxford University in 1977. The thesis, which is available at the Bodleian and certain other university libraries, contains materials not published in my book.

4. One of the papers I presented is “Al-Nisa’iyya ka quwwa fi al-’alam al-’arabi” [“Feminism as a Force in the Arab world”] which was published in *al-Fikra al-mu’asira al-’arabiyya wa al mar’a* [Contemporary Arab Thought and the Woman] (Cairo: Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, 1989).

5. The article is called “Ma hiyya al-nisa’iyya?” [“What is Feminism?”] *Nisf al-dunya* 34, no.7 (Sept. 21, 1990), 85.

6. The conference was held in Helsinki in the fall of 1990; many of the papers were published in a volume edited by Valentine Moghadam called *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Denver: Westview Press, 1993). My chapter in this book is titled: “Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt”, 202 -27.

# To be an Arab or not to be... that is the question!

■ By Mona Katawi

Graduate Student, University of Heidelberg

When I was offered to write an article as a non-Arab woman living in Lebanon, I paused for a while before answering, wondering whether I really felt like a non-Arab. I have been pondering about this ever since, wondering what makes an Arab. This subject turned out to be more elaborate than I had first thought. If being, or for that matter, not being an Arab were simply a question of origin, of blood and genes, things would look slightly more calculable. I rather doubt that one can be born as an Arab, since “Arabism” is not a state induced by natural processes, but rather through socialization and acculturation. It seems that many factors have to be taken into consideration, as the place where one has lived, which language one speaks and, sometimes, the physical appearance. Two worlds that often clash are the way people view themselves and the way they are viewed by others. This is precisely the point where I faced most of the difficulties. My father was born in a village in Palestine, and he left his village for Germany to continue his studies when he was about 18 years old. My mother’s family emigrated from Portugal, turning Germany into their new home decades ago. I thus see myself as a product of three cultures, but my mother tongue is German and Germany is the place where I feel at home. When people ask me whether I feel more like an Arab or a

German, I tend to say that I am “fragmentary”, that I am a product of many cultures and that such a question is oversimplified. It would certainly be justifiable to ask whether at all it is important to answer this question. However, after one year of living in Beirut, I realized that this question was central to my experience in Lebanon and other Arab countries. This might be linked to the fact that people, in general, are afraid of what they don’t know, and therefore like to categorize things. A human being without a culture must seem like a bewildering case!

My impressions are mainly based on my experiences in Beirut, in particular, and Lebanon, in general, and I will narrate a few incidents from my past to clarify the points I’m trying to make. When I was a child, I lived in Nablus for a couple of years. There, people always regarded me as a foreigner. I tried my best to be accepted as an Arab girl, but very often I was spoken to in English, even if I talked to people in Arabic. My friends frequently accused me of not being able to understand their culture and what the Palestinians have been through because I was not a “real” Arab. It seemed to me they had created an intimate circle in which they could talk freely. A silent wall was built between themselves, the Arabs, and me, the

"outsider". There was a general kind of mistrust toward my mother, my siblings, and me. Once, my parents wanted to choose a new school for my sister and me and when we went to look at the new school, many kids started insulting us, calling us Jews and apostates, and saying we would burn in hell.

Interestingly, my sister, who has darker skin than I do, and whose Arabic is more fluent than mine, found it easier to be accepted as an Arab. Here I would like to clarify what I mean by more "fluent". In fact, we both have the same accent, which our friends often teased and called "heavy". The difference between us was that my sister mastered many of the expressions common to the Arabic language. There are expressions in the Arabic language for several occasions, as when somebody has showered, when someone gets a new haircut, or when one returns safely from a trip and many other occasions. I reckon this is an important aspect of the Arabic language I have failed to master. On one occasion, I met the sister of a friend and I asked her how her sister was doing. She said her sister was sick, and instead of using the proper expression "May she get healthy", I said "Thank God for her health", which was certainly unsuitable. Another thing my friends often found amusing was that I never learned how to belly dance and that all my attempts to imitate their elegant dance failed. They used to wrap a shawl around my waist and make me dance in the middle of the classroom, while everybody else was clapping and laughing.

Nevertheless, these memories certainly do belong to the positive sides of my experience in Nablus, even though it often was painful for a child of my age to feel like an outsider. Surprisingly, when it came to my behavior, many expected me to behave according to the norms and rules that were common at that time in Nablus. I remember getting angry looks and receiving hostile remarks for the way I walked, dressed or laughed. It was not common to hear women laugh aloud in public. I guess my passion for the hippie style at that time also must have shocked people.

In Beirut, this has seemed to be even more so, even though there has not been one standard way of perceiving me. Often I have felt that people were trying to

impose an identity on me that was not my own, simply because of my physical appearance and my name. It is also important to mention the fact that I came to Lebanon after having lived in Germany and Italy for several years. I had come to think of myself as a European, and I had lost a lot of my Arabic. At the time, being called an Arab irritated me, since I felt it cut the truth short and left a major part of my life out of consideration. It also seemed to me a rather patriarchal viewpoint, leaving my mother out of consideration, even though she was the parent that brought me up. I am sure that in many cases, people didn't have bad intentions.

*At the time, being called an Arab irritated me, since I felt it cut the truth short and left a major part of my life out of consideration.*

However, the anger I felt was increasing. Since I felt my Arabic was bad, I often talked to people in English. Some would simply answer in Arabic. Once, when I asked a man something in English, another man who was standing next to him said, "Talk to her in Arabic. She's an Arab." One day, I went to an Internet café with my boyfriend, who is German and looks German, as people say. We sat there, surfing on the Internet, when the shopkeeper came and asked us where we are from. We both said Germany, but he didn't seem to like my answer. He told me that I look Lebanese. I just ignored what he said. He left, and I thought the

issue was settled. After a few minutes, he came over again, emphasizing the fact that I certainly don't look German. Since I felt he was intruding into my private sphere, I didn't give him the answer he would have liked to hear. He went back to his desk, and a few minutes later, he took out a Koran and started reading some verses aloud. We were alone in the Internet café, and we felt extremely uncomfortable.

However, this is just one part of my experience in Lebanon. I guess that living in Beirut has also helped me solve the dilemma of my identity. I learned to be open about my origin and to talk about the way I view things. I met several people who seemed to be just as fragmentary as I was and who were interested in talking about their experiences abroad and in Lebanon. This experience has helped me to combine all aspects of my identity and not to refuse the Arab elements of it, since without it, I would probably not be the same person. My time in Lebanon will soon come to an end, but I am glad I have realized there were many people who have accepted me for who I am.

## Attitudes Toward Mixed Marriages in Bahrain: The Eroticization of Class

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### Abstract

Drawn from two years of ethnographic research amongst foreign residents in Bahrain this paper discusses marriages between Bahraini men and non-Arab women.<sup>1</sup> The first half of the paper outlines the entry of non-Arab women into the migrant workforce in Bahrain and the obstacles to marriage between these women and Bahraini men. The second half of the paper discusses the cultural attitudes toward mixed marriages and compares Bahraini-European marriages to Bahraini-Filipina marriages in order to explore the intersections of race and class in shaping attitudes towards mixed marriages. Bahraini-Filipina marriages meet with greater criticism and resistance from the extended family of the groom and the participants are subject to greater stigmatization than are Bahraini-European marriages. This paper illustrates how the current economic and social hierarchies shaping migration to the Arab Gulf influence attitudes of race, class and sexual attractiveness.

### Migrants and Marriage in Bahrain

Societies in the Arab Gulf are examples of extensive transnational labor migration with foreign residents sometimes outnumbering citizens. Most foreign residents come from South Asia, Iran, and other Arab countries. Yet, as circumstances in the local and global labor markets have

changed, significant numbers of East and South East Asian workers have migrated to the Gulf, particularly to work in the fields of hospitality, retail, leisure and health services. With the addition of South East Asia as a source of labor, the number of unaccompanied women migrating to work in the Gulf has increased. Unlike the South Asian countries from which male laborers emigrate more often than women, women represent a large proportion of emigrants from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

Despite this transnationalized population, inter-marriage between Gulf Arab men and non-Arab women has remained relatively low.<sup>2</sup> The endogamous traditions of Gulf societies remain strong. The preference is to marry someone from within a related lineage, similar social category, and religious sect, or at least an Arab. Some Gulf States, such as Qatar, formally discourage marriages to non-Arabs by requiring the prospective groom to apply for "permission" and banning him from employment in the civil service or security forces. Bahrain does not apply any such legal obstacles against marrying non-Bahrainis. In fact, unlike women in Bahrain who are the accompanying spouse of an employed non-Bahraini, who hold "housewife visas" and are prohibited from legally working in fields other than teaching or nursing, women married to



Bahrainis are allowed to work in any field. In addition, the female spouse of a Bahraini can apply for Bahraini citizenship. A wife's application for Bahraini citizenship takes a minimum of five years. In the meantime, she must maintain her residency visa, an often time-consuming and costly process. These visa regulations, however, are not really obstacles to mixed marriage. In fact, it's unlikely that many men and women learn about these legal requirements until after they are married. For them, it's a bureaucratic hassle and a periodic reminder that they've gone against social norms.

#### Women in the Migrant Workforce

If the legal obstacles are not sufficient to deter marriages across boundaries of nationality, what then has kept the numbers of mixed marriages low? One factor has been the gender balance of the migrant population. Since migration to Bahrain is primarily a migration of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, the migrants have until recently been overwhelmingly men unaccompanied by their families. Women were at first only a very small part of this labor migration. It was not until the 1980s, with the shift to South East Asian labor and the growth in the service industry, that Bahraini employers began recruiting women in increasing numbers.

Household work was one of the first jobs available to non-Bahraini women. This despite the fact that, until fairly recently, Gulf Arabs hired men to work as household laborers at least as often as they hired women. Like other occupations, both male and female household workers were originally recruited from other Arab or South Asian countries. The feminization of household labor in the Gulf States began roughly in the late 1970s and is still incomplete in some countries (Sabban 2002). The demand for female workers was actually greater in other occupations where women are recruited as groups to work in institutions and factories. In the 1950s and 1960s, Bahrain's schools recruited Egyptian and Palestinian women as teachers. In the 1970s, Indian women joined their Levantine and North African counterparts when Bahrain's hospitals recruited them to work as nurses. At this time, European women also entered Bahrain's workforce. In some cases, these were the spouses or dependents of skilled expatriate employees. However, single unaccompanied European, especially British, women also took jobs in Bahrain. Because of Bahrain's history as a under the United Kingdom's protection, British citizens have long been able to enter Bahrain without applying for a visa beforehand. During the economic boom of the 1970s, some young Britons took advantage of this to find work in Bahrain. The women amongst them often found office jobs in businesses where English was an asset. At the same time, companies serving an international clientele such as airlines and hotels recruited women from Europe.

As Bahrain's economy diversified in the 1980s, employers began to turn to South East Asia, particularly the Philippines, as a source of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The entry of Filipinas into Bahrain's labor force brought a shift in the gender balance of the foreign population. The South Asian laboring population in Bahrain has always been overwhelmingly male. In contrast, the population of overseas contract workers from the Philippines tips in favor of women - many of whom are young, single, and unaccompanied. International media have drawn needed attention to the South East Asian household workers in the Middle East. However, household work is only one of the many occupations held by South East Asian women in the Gulf. Filipinas, for example, work in jobs of all skill levels from waitresses to doctors, from manicurists to investment bankers. They are particularly ubiquitous in hospital services, the service sector, and the entertainment and leisure industries.

Although women had been recruited as teachers and nurses much earlier than the 1980s, before this point, it would have been quite rare to be served by a woman in a restaurant or shop. The entry of women into the service sector, particularly as retail clerks, waitresses and entertainers represents several significant shifts in the culture of Bahrain's public sphere. First, it puts women into positions where they are in contact with large and diverse clientele. This is not the case with teachers, nurses and household workers. There are still many Bahraini women who would not feel comfortable working in public; such exposure contradicts conservative Bahraini values of gender separation and privacy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the morality of the foreign women in these positions is subject to questioning based on these very same values.

Second, the recruitment of women in the retail and service sector was accompanied by a change in practices with respect to the housing and supervising of female workers. The teachers and nurses recruited between the 1950s and 1970s lived in dormitories subject to curfews and supervision. Dormitories are no longer the norm. More commonly, staff are either housed in employer provided apartments shared with co-workers or rent their own rooms or apartments. In either case, the level of supervision during their off time is much lower. Employees may be restricted from entertaining guests of the opposite sex in their apartments, but are only rarely subject to curfews.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the feminization of the service sector shapes criteria for assessing feminine attractiveness. Workers serving the public are recruited based on the perceived appeal they will have to prospective clientele. Employers regularly set height and weight standards; impose dress codes; and, screen applicants for personability, physical appearance

and personal hygiene. In general, Bahraini men and women perceive South East Asian and European women to be more consistently pleasing and attractive than they do South Asian or African women. Many of the cultural and physical features deemed typical of South East Asian and European women prove to be advantages in the labor market, and the continued placement of such women in positions associated with consumption and leisure reinforce the perception of their sexual attractiveness. However, as we will see in the following discussion, these same features and the nature of work in the public sphere contribute to a stigma associated with immorality and sexual promiscuity. It is important to emphasize here that cultural and class values can be a strong deterrent to inter-ethnic dating and mixed marriages.

#### Cultural Attitudes Discouraging Inter-ethnic Dating and Mixed Marriages

Until the mid-1980s, marriages between Bahraini men and non-Arab women remained relatively rare. During the 1970s and 1980s, one would occasionally hear about Bahraini men who'd married European or American women. More often than not, these were upper and upper middle class Bahrainis who'd met their wives while travelling or studying abroad. At the other end of the spectrum, are the tales about Arabs traveling to India for "cheap brides"—young women taken from poverty to wed elderly or impotent grooms. While the later were often understood as representing the sexist and patriarchal horrors of polygyny, arranged marriages, bride wealth systems and poverty, the former were interpreted as inevitable signs of Bahrain's emerging cosmopolitanism

While this handful of brides were being brought back from the West or India in the 1960s and 1970s, the occasional marriage must have been taking place between Bahrainis and foreign women working in Bahrain. However, these marriages never became fodder for sustained public discourse. The occasional marriages to household workers would not have represented a significant shift in practice. Arabs had been intermarrying with their African and Arab servants for generations. With regard to the foreign teachers and nurses, these women were employed in respected professions, were carefully supervised during their off time, and came from cultures that prefer arranged marriages over love matches. So, even the few marriages that did take place were likely to have been deemed respectable due to the cultural and, in most cases, religious similarities. In this early phase of women's migration to Bahrain, it was the unaccompanied European, particularly British, women who were often negatively received. The flight attendants working with Gulf Air are an obvious example of non-Arab women working in Bahrain before the 1980s. Although housed together in employer provided apartments, by nature of their work the flight attendants had considerable

freedom to move about and socialize in mixed gender settings. Viewed from the perspective of Arab-Islamic norms, these unaccompanied European women raised some consternation and many eyebrows. What sort of families would "allow" their daughters to migrate unaccompanied and unsupervised? What kind of background encouraged them to work and socialize amongst men not related to them? Not only were these women without the social legitimacy and respectability of family, but they also worked in a public occupation and engaged in relatively open practices regarding mixed gender socializing. These factors stacked up to sully the reputations of many of these women and the men who dated or married them.

The "Gulf Air Girls", as they are commonly referred to in Bahrain, quickly came to be viewed as dating stock for upper class Bahrainis. Until today one hears derogatory comments about these women and about the men they dated or married. For example, I was recently introduced to an American woman married to a Bahraini. The Bahraini woman who introduced us told me "She's a respectable one, not like those 'trolley dollies'". Referring to the in-flight drink trolley, the phrase "trolley dolly" encapsulates the perception of flight attendant as an occupation that displays one's feminine sexuality. An even more derogatory term expressing a similar stereotype is "screw-wardess". Capitalizing on these stereotypes, some nightclubs in Bahrain offer promotions such as "Air Crew Night" - free drinks with employee ID - to encourage these women, and men interested in meeting them, to patronize their club. Men were also criticized for engaging in liaisons with foreign women. It can be assumed that many of them "use" the women for extra-marital affairs or as entertainment to pass the years as they wait for a respectable arranged marriage.

Inevitably, some of these social and sexual liaisons resulted in marriage. Despite the negative stereotypes, their association with the privileged class often protects them from direct criticism. Most of the Bahraini men involved in these relationships were of relatively privileged social and economic status. While the women, simply by virtue of being European, were perceived to be (rightly or wrongly) from, at the very least, educated middle class backgrounds. The real and perceived class status of these couples has the effect of tempering some of the criticism of their sexual behavior.

Since the influx of female workers from the Philippines began, the situation has changed. Like their European predecessors, the Filipina workers are subject to cultural censure for their unaccompanied family status, their public occupations and mixed gender socializing. But there are some differences. Mixed marriages are now taking place with greater frequency and unlike the earlier mixed marriages, many middle class Bahrainis are marrying Filipinas.

At the same time, cultural attitudes about mixed marriages have also become more critical. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, although Filipinas of all social backgrounds emigrate to work overseas, a large proportion of Filipinas migrating for work in Bahrain are young, single women of marriageable age. On the one hand, these women fit the profile of personable, attractive service workers sought by recruiters. On the other hand, such young women are prime candidates for labor emigration. It is common practice in the Philippines for an unmarried daughter to migrate for work in order to help support her parents and younger siblings. These unmarried women are not hindered from emigration by marriage or children and provide a potential income for their families of birth. Another common profile of a Filipina émigré is the single/deserted mother in need of income to support her children (cf. Constable 1997).

Second, contrary to Bahraini stereotypes of Filipinas, their culture discourages extra marital relations and prioritizes marriage and starting a family during ones twenties. Filipino culture also values exogamy and encourages love matches rather than arranged marriages. Out marriage is an acceptable practice and a strategy for emigration from the Philippines and children of mixed marriages are praised as physically attractive.<sup>5</sup> With few cultural deterrents to mixed marriages, the young, single Filipinas migrating to Bahrain often entertain hopes of finding a spouse while abroad. Bahrain's multinational population offers many options—fellow Filipinos, South Asians, Europeans, Americans (especially US Military personnel) and Bahrainis.

Because Filipinas select their own spouses rather than enter arranged marriages, their courtship practices involve mixed gender socializing and dating. Thus they now share the flight attendants' reputation as accessible and approachable dating options for Bahraini and foreign men. This perception is enhanced by an eroticization of "Asian-ness". South East Asian women and homosexual men have become eroticized in Bahraini formulations of gender and sexuality. The recruitment of South East Asian women to work in the leisure, entertainment and luxury consumption industries has had the effect of suggesting an association between pleasure and Asian women. Furthermore, the unfortunate overrepresentation of Asian's in the sex and entertainment industry, the vulnerability of Asian workers to sexual harassment and abuse, and the often misplaced blame for such incidents all serve to sexualize or eroticize the South East Asian body. These women are considered "hot" and "sexy" by Bahrain's new transnationalized standards. A young Bahraini woman told me that her mother preferred the Filipina housemaid didn't serve her husband. She said, "Admit it. They [Filipinas] are sexy, with those cute little bodies. How can my mom compete with that?"

In the same vein, a young Filipina who'd just moved in with her American boyfriend, told me she refused to hire a maid for fear that she'd "Steal my boyfriend".

Economic hierarchies and class issues contribute to the constructed attractiveness of Filipina women as being sexual and potential marriage partners, and may explain why lower middle class Bahraini men enter these marriages. Filipina wives are believed to be less economically demanding than a Bahraini wife might be. First of all, they do not demand a bride price. Second, many of the Filipina wives would willingly continue to work or are at least more likely than most Bahraini women to perform household and child rearing tasks without the assistance of household workers. The opinion that men like to date or marry Filipinas because "they get a housekeeper in the bargain" is widely held in Bahrain, of Arab, European and American men.

The economic aspirations can work both ways. Like many women around the world, the Filipinas I interviewed hoped for a husband and a marriage that would provide economic stability for themselves and their families. For many of these women who come from areas of high unemployment and economic hardship, the chance to marry a foreigner (or an overseas worker) offers greater economic possibilities than marrying at home. Since visa regulations allow the foreign wives of Bahrainis to work in Bahrain, marriage may relieve them of some of the uncertainties about employment continuity. For some of the women I interviewed marrying a Bahraini secured their residency and employment opportunities in Bahrain. In many cases, the boyfriend or husband not only provides for his wife but also provides economic assistance to the wife's kin in the Philippines. In this regard, they replace the woman as the overseas supporter of the family. It is quite common for the Bahraini spouse to find jobs in Bahrain for his wife's relatives or to invest in family businesses in the Philippines.

Grace and Walid, one of the couples I interviewed, have been married for 11 years. In many ways, this couple represents the ideals of many entering these marriages. Theirs is the transnational Cinderella story. Grace came to Bahrain as a singer at age 19. Walid fell in love the minute he saw her on stage and pursued her throughout her contract and after her return to the Philippines. Walid comes from a modest middle class background, but has moved up through the ranks to a management position with an international insurance company. Since their marriage, Grace has not worked. She manages the house, raises their two children, and has a supportive group of Filipina friends (most married to non-Filipinos). Although she does not work, with Walid's help she has purchased two Jeepneys for her family in Cebu, expanded and remodeled her mother's home, and arranged jobs in Bahrain for her older

sister, her niece and at least three family friends. Wistfully recalling her childhood fantasy Grace told me, "As a little girl, I always wanted to marry a man who went off to work each day wearing a suit. Someone who worked in an office, not like my father and the men around us." She achieved her dream and most of her friends see hers as a successful and happy marriage.

Not all the relationships between Bahraini men and Filipina women make such pleasant stories. Judith's situation, for example, illustrates another pattern all too common in Bahrain. Judith's Bahraini employer went to the Philippines to find a secretary for his small contracting office. According to Judith, he approached her in a Manila shopping mall, treated her and her friends to a few meals and outings, and then approached her mother and aunt to negotiate the job offer. The negotiations with the older women continued by telephone after he returned to Bahrain and was simultaneously "courting" the younger woman on the phone. Judith admits that the terms of employment were clear. The job description included sex. As Judith describes her relationship with this married man she expresses much gratitude for the financial support he provides for her and her family in Manila. In exchange for his "generosity", "I gave him my virginity" and "maybe I'll give him a child".

#### Conclusion:

The specific convergence of race and class represented in Bahraini-Filipina relationships open them to even greater criticism and stigmatization than the Bahraini-European

marriages that preceded them. The men are accused of hypocrisy and sexism, desiring nothing more than a "sex kitten" and "household slave", or of being too "cheap" to marry a Bahraini. While the Filipina women are viewed as "gold-diggers", willing to "do anything" for money or a visa. The clash of cultural values generates misunderstandings and the stigmatization of these marriages. Filipino culture values marital diversity and encourages marriages that are exogamous and choice based. In contrast, many Bahrainis are skeptical of mixed marriages, preferring endogamous and arranged marriages. Consequently, couples in unconventional marriages face a variety of potential objections, criticisms and stigma. In the earlier cases, of Bahraini men and European women, the perceived class status of the men and women involved tempered the criticisms. The more recent marriages between Bahraini men and Filipina women are subject to greater criticism due to the lower class status of both the men and women involved, by comparison, and the eroticization of Asian-ness in Bahraini culture.

Bahrain is host to many women such as Grace and Judith. It is in their relationships with Bahraini men that we see the inseparability of race and class as factors shaping attitudes about mixed liaisons and marriages in Bahrain. Their respective positions in the economic and social hierarchies, structuring labor migration, make these men and women attractive to each other. Each use different criteria for assessing attractiveness, but each are constructed within specific power relations that eroticize race and class.

#### End Notes

1. This paper is a small portion of 20 months of fieldwork conducted in Bahrain between June 2000 and April 2003 with support from a Fulbright Research Grant and URC grant from DePaul University.
2. Marriages between Bahraini women and non-Arab men are even rarer. Those that do occur tend to be between western educated women of elite status and highly educated or wealthy European or North American men.
3. Interestingly, as the culture of retail sector has been feminized by the recruitment of Asian women, Bahraini women have more opportunities for jobs in this sector.
4. The Sri Lankan garment workers are the most notable exception to this, as they are housed in labor camps. Household workers generally live at their workplace and their movements are much more restricted than workers in the service and commercial sector.
5. For a very interesting and honest first hand account of the mail order bride experience see Makow (2000).

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# The Denial of Citizenship

## The case of Arab women's rights to pass on their nationality

■ By Rima Habib and Lina Abou-Habib

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### Background and Rationale

At present, women throughout the Machreq and Maghreb regions are being denied their full national identities by being excluded from the rights, privileges, and security that all citizens of a country should have access to. Unjust laws, discriminatory constitutions, and biased mentalities, that do not recognize women as equal citizens, hinder women's rights to such things as political participation, economic security, mobility, and state protection.

In every country throughout MENA (Middle East and Northern Africa), women are not granted full-citizenship, and are thus treated by the state and society as second-class citizens. In many cases, the laws and codes of the state actually work to reinforce gender inequality and exclusion from nationality rather than granting women equal membership in their country. The state can be used to strengthen religious and familial control over women, making them even more dependant on these institutions for representation and security.

Unlike in the West, where the individual is the basic unit of the state, it is the family that is the basis of

Arab states. This means that the state is primarily concerned with protection of the family over the protection of the family's members. Within this framework, the rights of women are expressed solely in their roles as wives and mothers. State discrimination against women in the family is expressed through unjust family laws that deny women equal access to divorce and child custody.

Throughout the Machreq/Maghreb, Arab women, should they choose to marry a foreigner, are denied the right to extend their citizenship to their husbands. Furthermore, only fathers, not mothers, can independently pass citizenship to their children. In many cases, where a woman has been widowed, divorced or abandoned, or if her husband is not a national in the country where they reside, her children have no access to citizenship, and are thus excluded from the rights of a citizen. These rights include access to education and healthcare, and to land ownership and inheritance. There is no good reason for men to be able to extend their nationality to their wives and children while women cannot. This inequality not only refuses women their right as citizens, it also denies children their basic rights as human beings.

If the state is designed to only protect women from within their role in the family, the state often fails to protect women who are in need of protection from their families. By failing to protect women adequately from violence such as domestic abuse, rape, marital rape, and honor killings, the state fails to provide the protection forthcoming to a full-citizen. In fact, by ignoring issues of gender-based violence or by granting lenient punishments to perpetrators of violence against women, the state actually reinforces women's exclusion from the rights of citizens.

Additionally, women are frequently denied their right to nationality by requiring a male relative's permission to access the rights and privileges that she should inherently have access to. This works to increase the dependency women have on their male family members for economic, social, and legal stability. For example, in many Arab countries women must attain the permission of their fathers, brothers, or husbands in order to obtain a passport, travel outside of their country, start a business, receive a bank loan, open a bank account, or get married. All of the above should be available to women independently as equal citizens of their country, yet they continue to be denied.

### Citizenship, Nationality and the CEDAW

Article 9 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), explicitly holds state signatories responsible for granting women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality as well as the right of women to pass their nationality on to their children and husbands. However, many of its Arab states signatories do not respect this right and have not fulfilled their promise to grant full citizenship to women. Across the Middle East and North Africa, married women are denied their right to nationality if their husbands are non-nationals. In these cases the women cannot pass their citizenship to their husbands or their children while a man married to a non-national can. As such, all signatory Arab states have expressed reservations on this provision of the Convention.

### MACMAG GLIP's Campaign on Gender, Citizenship and Nationality

Since 8 March, 2002, the Women's Right to Nationality campaign organized by the Machreq/Maghreb Gender Linking and Information Project (a project of the Centre for Research & Training on Development), is one regional project that aims to focus on this issue across the Middle Eastern/North African region. Through regional workshops, awareness building and training are among the first tasks of the campaign whereby participants identify and understand the concepts of gender, nation-

ality and citizenship. Through research and advocacy training an action group is formed in each region, with experience and the ability to raise awareness and pressure their own governments to change policies that discriminate against women as national and full citizens and implement those already required by the CEDAW. Those countries involved in the campaign and its attendant action-oriented research include Yemen, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan and Syria.

In Lebanon alone around 800 women are in this situation of which approximately 60% are married to Arab non-nationals, 35% to Europeans, 10% to Asians and 5% to Africans. Research conducted with women in this situation has unveiled tremendous suffering at the level of access to social and economic rights, political participation, as well as mobility. It also indicated that women bear the brunt of the consequences at the individual, family and social level and suffer from exclusion as well as stigmatization.

MAC/MAG GLIP is among many grassroots organizations from around the Arab world who have aimed to pressure Arab state signatories of the CEDAW (as well as non-signatories) to fulfill their promise of granting women the right to full citizenship and be held responsible for such a task. It has recognized that the right to nationality is not only a women's right but also a human right based on the right to equal citizenship regardless of age, race or gender stipulated in the Declaration of Human Rights.

Based on the recognition that culture and tradition is one of the major influences of gender perception, GLIP has thus focused on the importance of awareness of women's status and issues in Arab countries. The aim of this awareness in the campaign is three-fold, a) to generate knowledge, b) set the stage for change and c) inform advocacy. Known as the Action Oriented Research Component, the second component of the campaign, organizations are trained to develop their research skills through identification of issues, comparison and assessment of changes pertaining to the issue and examination of different documents. Each in-country focal point (organization) will thus have the means to present a country case study report preparing for the last and most important part of the campaign, the advocacy component.

Through research and identification of the issues, actors and scope, the campaign is thus able to promote change from within rather than without whereby each in-country organization takes the responsibility of forming a campaign on the local level with the supervision of GLIP.



**A Suggested Mini-Annotated Bibliography**

The three annotated readings suggested in this section from the MAC/MAG GLIP CRTD library, aim to introduce the interested reader to the issue of gender and citizenship in the local, regional and global level. Reviewing the literature will give the reader a general idea of the history and importance of concepts such as citizenship and citizen rights from a feminist perspective. Each book provides ample information on country case studies from the Middle East to Canada and Australia.

**Books****Citizenship and the State: A Comparative Study of Citizenship**

Legislation in Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon

Uri Davis

Ithaca Press

1997 - ISBN: 0-86372-218-0

Davis provides insight into the definitions of key concepts such as democracy, citizenship vs. nationalism, state vs. nation, and sovereignty. Although lacking in any sort of gender analysis, this work does clearly depict the laws that determine citizenship and citizen rights in the Levant. The special case of Palestinian citizens and refugees is examined in each country case study.

**Citizenship: Pushing the Boundaries**

Feminist Review

Routledge

1997 - ISBN: 0-415-16174-6

This review aims to give its reader a glimpse of the issues surrounding gender & Citizenship that exist globally. The contributions included are the following: Women, Citizenship and Difference, Gender, Disability and Citizenship in Australia, The Lebanese Case, Fortress Europe, Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada, and Women's Publics and the Search for New Democracies.

**Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East**

Ed. Suad Joseph

Syracuse University Press

2000 - ISBN: 0-8156-2865-X

Beginning with an insightful theoretical introduction, this work is then organized into four regional sections: North Africa, Eastern Arab States, The Arab Gulf, and the non-Arab Middle East. Each of these sections includes country specific articles that examine the ways in which Arab women are excluded from the identity and rights characteristic of full-citizens. The history behind, and relevance of, concepts of citizenship in the middle East are questioned. Major reoccurring themes include the way in which religion influences citizenship; the importance of lineage/family, as opposed to the individual, as the most basic unit of the state; and family law.

**Book Review****Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East**

Edited by Suad Joseph

Syracuse University Press, 2000

Reviewed By Lynn Maalouf

Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East is a stimulating collection of essays authored by twenty women who have addressed the concepts of gender and citizenship across the different states of the Middle East. Following a provocative theoretical introduction, the volume is structured along four regional parts: North Africa, Eastern Arab states, the Arab Gulf, and the non-Arab Middle East, each of which includes specific country cases examining the reasons why women in these countries fall short of being "full-citizens," and offering an in-depth examination of national legislation on personal status, nationality, social security law, labor law and penal law.

The importance of this book derives from the underlying notion according to which the Middle East cannot be examined in a unified and generalized way. Thus, each essay examines the specificity of one state, or draws a comparison between two states based on "points of departure" as the editor suggests, viewed from the lens of evolving gender-state relations. Indeed, from the very beginning, the editor "cautions against essentializing the Middle East or stabilizing any aspect of these continually changing societies" (p. 4).

In the case of Algeria, Marnia Lazreg examines the historical formation of the concept of citizenship regarding women; she argues that since the country's independence, Algerian women have been locked in between the state's conventional interpretation of citizenship and the sharia', which represents women as subjects primarily. Lazreg contends that this paradox has served the interests of all Algerian governments that have existed since 1962: "The extension of formal citizenship to women enabled the state to disregard the antinomy between the assertion of equality before the law, a secular requirement of (substantive) citizenship, and inequality between men and women as prescribed by the sharia'".

Mounira Charrad draws a comparison between Tunisia and Morocco to explain how lineage and kin-based societies have impeded the individual citizenship rights of women. "Whereas in Morocco the legal discourse tends to enshrine kin privileges, in Tunisia the law provides considerably more space to a construct of self as an individual and, consequently, more rights to women". This dif-

ference emerged from the two states' divergent interests, and thus foundational policies: "In Tunisia, the newly formed sovereign state had an interest in transferring the allegiance of the population from particularistic loyalties to itself, and attempted to undermine traditional kin-based groups. In Morocco, the state maintained particularistic loyalties by placing them under a supra-authority". Suad Joseph also puts emphasis on the notion of kinship, which is a widely acknowledged factor shaping citizenship in Lebanon. However, Joseph's innovative argument is that in the context of a weak state, kinship in Lebanon has played a hegemonic role over males, females, seniors and juniors - and not only over females and juniors. She blames this shortcoming in studies about Lebanon to the "hyperfocus on the civic myth of sectarian pluralism," which she argues, "has glossed the critical kinship dynamics that have underwritten pluralism (legal, social, and cultural), resulting in the gendering and aging of citizenship laws and practices".

Another major case is that of the Palestinian Authority: Jad, Johnson and Giacaman explain that the fact that the state is in transition, Palestinian women have a role to play in shaping the setting of citizenship: "Whereas women activists in other contexts have often argued for inclusion in citizenship, under the particular circumstances of Palestine in transition, the women's movement must create the conditions of citizenship. This is both an opportunity for engendering citizenship, and an enormous challenge, which the women's movement addresses within the context of the democratic movements in Palestine".

One common conclusion that all the authors seem to agree upon is that patriarchy, "defined as a system of social relations privileging male seniors over juniors and women, both in the public and private spheres," is a decisive factor in the gender-citizenship equation. But they differ on the channels through which women in each country could focus their efforts to expand the scope of their rights, whether in practice or in text. Depending on the cases, some authors strongly denounce the restraints imposed on women as a result of kinship and religious forces, upholding the need to secure women's rights as individuals (Lazreg, Charrad), while others contend that women in certain countries need to work on securing their rights through family, as the basic unit of their societies (Altorki, Al-Mughni and Tétreault).

Deniz Kandiyoti concludes that through the cases studies presented in this book, it would be possible to conclude that women's rights "reveal the most serious fault lines in modern concepts of citizenship for the region." This, she argues, could mark the "diferencia specifica" of the Middle East.

**Box 1**

Without progress in the situation of women, there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name if they exclude the female half of humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings, and all societies. Boutros Boutros Ghali, United Nations Secretary General

**Box 2**

Everyone has the right to nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his/her nationality nor denied the right to change her/his nationality Article 15 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**Box 3**

What is Nationality?

Nationality refers to one's legal recognition of their status as a citizen, and their ability to extend this status to their spouse or children