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A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—a Woman's Journey

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I will read two selections from my book *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—a Woman's Journey*, one from the very beginning, to give a sense of the book's flavor, and another from the chapter called "Harem," which focuses and reflects on the issues of the relation of women to Islam.[1]

I read now from the very beginning of my book:

> It was as if there were to life itself a quality of music in that time, the era of my childhood, and in that place, the remote edge of Cairo. There the city petered out into a scattering of villas leading into tranquil country fields. On the other side of our house was the profound, unsurpassable quiet of the desert.
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> There was, to begin with, always the sound—sometimes no more than a mere breath—of the wind in the trees, each variety of tree having its own music, its own way of conversing. I knew them all like friends (when we left in the summers for Alexandria I would, the last day, make the round of the garden saying goodbye to the trees), although none more intimately than the two trees on either side of the corner bedroom I shared with Nanny. On one side was the silky, barely perceptible breath of the mimosa, which, when the wind grew strong, would scratch lightly with its thorns at the shutters of the window facing the front of the house, looking out onto the garden. On the other side was the dry, faintly rattling shuffle of the long-leaved eucalyptus that stood by the window facing the street. On hot nights the street lamp cast the shadows of the slender twirling eucalyptus leaves onto my bedroom wall, my own secret cinema. I would fall asleep watching those dancing shadows, imagining to myself that I saw a house in them and people going about their lives. They would appear at the door or windows of their shadow house and talk and come out and do things on the balcony. I would go to bed looking forward to finding out what had happened next in their lives.
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> I loved the patterns of light cast by leaves on the earth, and I loved being in them, under them. The intricate, gently shifting patterns that the flame tree cast where the path widened toward the garden gate, fading and growing strong again as a cloud passed, could hold me still, totally lost, for long moments.
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> Almost everything then seemed to have its own beat, its own lilt: sounds that distilled the sweetness of being, others that made audible its terrors, and sounds for everything between. The cascading cry of the *karawan*, a bird I heard but never saw, came only in the dusk. Its long melancholy call descending down the scale was like the pure expression of lament at the fall of things, all endings that the end of light presaged.
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> Then there was the music of the street beyond the garden hedge in the day, not noisy but alive, between long intervals of silence, with the sounds of living. People walking, greeting one another, the clip-clop of a donkey, sometimes of a horse. Street vendors' calls—"tama-a-tim" for

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1. Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—a Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

tomatoes, "robbabe-e-eccia-a" for old clothes and furniture. And the sound, occasionally, of cars, though rarely enough for us to be able to detect the horn and the engine even of our own car. Our dog, Frankie, could detect it long before we could, when the car was still almost two miles away. That was how Frankie died in the end, running out as he always did to greet my father when he arrived in the car driven by a uniformed government chauffeur. Frankie's front paw got run over, leaving him whimpering about in a cast that he soon chewed through. Father put a guard on his mouth but it was too late; Frankie got gangrene and died. More precisely, he was put down, although this was kept from me at the time.

Then there was the sound sometimes, in the earliest morning, of the reed piper walking past our house. His pipe sounded private, like someone singing to himself. A simple, lovely sound, almost like speech, like a human voice. He would say "good morning" with his pipe and one knew it was "good morning." When he passed, it would feel as if something of infinite sweetness had momentarily graced one's life and then faded irretrievably away.

Years later I'd discover that in Sufi poetry this music of the reed is the quintessential music of loss and I'd feel, learning this, that I'd always known it to be so. In the poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi, the classic master-poet of Sufism, the song of the reed is the metaphor for our human condition, haunted as we so often are by a vague sense of longing and of nostalgia, but nostalgia for we know not quite what. Cut from its bed and fashioned into a pipe, the reed forever laments the living earth that it once knew, crying out, whenever life is breathed into it, its ache and its yearning and loss. We too live our lives haunted by loss, we too, says Rumi, remember a condition of completeness that we once knew but have forgotten that we ever knew. The song of the reed and the music that haunts our lives is the music of loss, of loss and of remembrance.

Next I will read short excerpts from chapter 5, which deals with growing up in that world:



> By the time my mother was a child, the practices of concubinage ceased to be. But the attitudes underlying those bygone customs were not quite gone.
>
> Even in my own childhood, Zatoun, my mother's paternal home, was a place palpably apart, imbued with some unnameably different order and way of being. The aura and aroma of those other times and other ways pervaded it still, in the rustle and shuffle of silks and the soft fall of slippers along hallways and corridors, in the talk and the gestures and in the momentary tremor of terror precipitated by the boom of Grandfather's voice, and then the quiet, suppressed, chortling laughter of the women as its boom faded and he passed into the recesses of the inner hall. The odor and aroma of another time, other ways, another order.
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> Looking back now with the assumptions of my own time, I could well conclude that the ethos of this world whose attitudes survived into my own childhood must have been an ethos in which women were regarded as inferior creatures, essentially sex objects and breeders, to be bought and disposed of for a man's pleasure. But my memories do not fit with such a picture. I simply do not think that the message I got from the women of Zatoun was that we, the girls, and they, the women, were inferior. But what, then, was the message of Zatoun? I don't think it was a simple one. I can only set down what I remember of Zatoun and Siouf in Alexandria, my mother's family's summer home.

I skip forward now to a description of how we lived in Alexandria,

> where all of us—my mother and her sisters and their children and Grandmother—summered together, at the Alexandria house at Siouf.
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> It was my grandfather's house, but Grandfather himself rarely came there, perhaps no more than twice in an entire summer, each time for just a few days. Similarly, the husbands, including my father, came only intermittently, usually for weekends . . . Even when they were there, though, they were marginal figures. The moods of the Alexandria house and the rhythms and currents of its life were ours, those of my aunts and mother and grandmother and us children.
>
> It is easy to see now that our lives in the Alexandria house, and even at Zatoun, were lived in women's time, women's space. And in women's culture.
>
> And the women had, too, I now believe, their own understanding of Islam, an understanding that was different from men's Islam, "official" Islam. For although in those days it was only Grandmother who performed all the regular formal prayers, for all the women of the house, religion was an essential part of how they made sense of and understood their own lives. It was through religion that one pondered the

things that happened, why they had happened, and what one should make of them, how one should take them.

Islam, as I got it from them, was a gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical religion—just as they themselves were.

Mother's pacifism, let me note here, was entirely of a piece with their sense of religion. She was a determined pacifist, as I describe in an earlier passage, and extracted from each of my brothers an oath that they would never serve as combatants in any war. When, during the Suez war, my brother was called to the army, he stayed true to his oath. I see now in looking back how her pacifism, in fact, made complete sense, given their community's understanding of religion.

> Being Muslim, and also being Christian or Jewish in that multi-religious community in which I grew up, was about believing in a world in which life was meaningful and in which all events and happenings were permeated (although not always transparently to us) with meaning. Religion was above all about inner things. The outward signs of religiousness, such as prayer and fasting, might be signs of a true religiousness but equally well might not. They were certainly not what was important about being Muslim. What was important was how you conducted yourself and how you were in yourself and in your attitude toward others and in your heart.
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> What it was to be a Muslim was passed on not, of course, wordlessly but without elaborate sets of instructions or threats or decrees or dictates as to what we should do and be and believe. What was passed on, besides the very general basic beliefs and moral ethos of Islam, which are also those of its sister monotheisms, was a way of being in the world . . . in relation to God, to existence, to other human beings. This the women passed on to us most of all through how they were and by their being and presence, by the way *they* were in the world, conveying their beliefs, ways, thoughts, and how we should be in the world by a touch, a glance, a word—prohibiting, . . . or approving. Their mere responses in this or that situation—a word, a shrug, even just their postures—passed on to us, in the way that women (and also men) have forever passed on to their young, how we should be. And all of these ways of passing on attitudes, morals, beliefs, knowledge—through touch and the body and in words spoken in the living moment—are by their very nature subtle and evanescent. They profoundly shape the next generation, but they do not leave a record in the way that someone writing a text about how to live or what to believe leaves a record. Nevertheless, they leave a far more important and, literally, more vital, living record. Beliefs, morals, attitudes passed on to and impressed on us through those fleeting words and gestures written into our very lives, our bodies, our selves, even into our physical cells and how we live out the script of our lives.

In the following passage I am reflecting on what I have called in the book "women's Islam" or "folk Islam":

> Indeed it is obvious that . . . a far greater gulf must separate men's and women's ways of knowing, the different ways in which men and women understand religion, in the segregated societies of the Middle East than in other societies—and we know that there are differences between women's and men's ways of knowing even in non-segregated societies such as America. For, besides the fact that women often could not read (or if they were literate, could not decipher the Islamic texts, which require years of specialist training), women in Muslim societies do not attend mosques. Mosque going was not part of the tradition for women . . . Women therefore did not hear the sermons that men heard. And they did not get the official (male, of course) orthodox interpretations of religion that men (or some men) got every Friday. They did not have a man trained in the orthodox (male) literary heritage of Islam telling them week by week and month by month what it meant to be a Muslim, what the correct interpretation of this or that was, and what was or was not the essential message of Islam.
>
> Rather they figured these things out among themselves and in two ways. They figured them out as they tried to understand their own lives and how to behave and how to live, talking them over together among themselves, interacting with their men, and returning to talk them over in their communities of women. And they figured them out as they listened to the Quran and talked among themselves about what they heard. For this was a culture, at all levels of society and throughout most of the history of Islamic civilization, not of reading but of the common recitation of the Quran. It was recited by professional reciters, women as well as men, and listened to on all kinds of occasions—at funerals and births and celebratory events, in

illness, and in ordinary life. There was merit in having the Quran chanted in your house and in listening to it being chanted wherever it was chanted, whereas for women there was no merit attached to attending mosque, an activity indeed prohibited to women for most of history. It was from these together, their own lives and from hearing the words of the Quran, that they formed their sense of the essence of Islam.

Aurally what remains when you listen to the Quran over a lifetime are its most recurring themes, ideas, words, and permeating spirit, reappearing now in this passage, now in that: mercy, justice, peace, compassion, humanity, fairness, kindness, truthfulness, charity, mercy, justice.

It was Grandmother who taught me the fat-ha (the opening verse of the Quran and the equivalent of the Christian Lord's Prayer) and who taught me two or three other short suras (Quranic verses). When she took me up onto the roof of the Alexandria house to watch for angels on the night of the twenty-seventh of Ramadan, she recited the sura about that special night, a sura that was also by implication about the miraculousness of night itself. Even now I remember its loveliness. It is still my favorite sura.

I remember receiving little other direct religious instruction, either from Grandmother or from anyone else. [This is] the most memorable exchange with my mother on the subject of religion—when, sitting in her room, the windows open behind her onto the garden, the curtain billowing, she quoted me the verse in the Quran that she believed summed up the existence of Islam: "He who kills one being [*nafs*, or self, from the root *nafas*, to breath] kills all of humanity." It was a verse that she quoted often, that came up, in any important conversation about God, religion, those sorts of things. It represented for her the essence of Islam.

That one verse, she would say, is all the religion one needs. ⟆