"Of loss and of remembrance":
Harem as Home in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*

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Abstract:

This paper traces Leila Ahmed's remembrance in *A Border Passage*; a memoir recollecting her family home as a space haunted by sounds and shadows, and imbued by a lyrical tone. The memoirs explore the motif of loss as experienced by the text's female protagonist; unexpectedly missing the harem lifestyle she grew up to cherish. The recollections celebrate harem as home, bonding women together; a place of respite and sanctuary without which loneliness and insecurity prevail. The memoirs are, thus, written as a form of healing. The protagonist oscillates between the sense of loneliness and molestation in her father's house; a symbol of the absence of human bondage, and her mother's family home; a place of female solidarity and a benign rhythmic lifestyle. As such, the memoirs are a counter narrative to harem life as oppressive and reductive, to one that is empowering and sustaining; a means to fend off paternal tyranny and celebrate maternal bondage. Such ideas run counter to Western feminist discourse, opting for Eastern concepts like the harem lifestyle which empowers women and their female bondage.

الملخص:

تتتبع هذه الورقة تيمة الذاكرة عند ليلى أحمد في رواية *ممر حدودي*؛ وهي مذكرات تستعيد من خلالها بطلة الرواية منزل عائلتها كمساحة تطاردها الأصوات والظلال من خلال سرد مشبع بنبرة غنائية. تستكشف المذكرات فكرة الفقدان كما عاشتها البطلة، فقدان أسلوب حياة الحريم الذي نشأت لتعتز به. هنا، تحتفي الرواية بمفهوم الحريم باعتباره نسيجا يشد النساء معًا برباط وثيق، فهو الملاذ الامن والذي بدونه تسود الوحدة وانعدام الصحبة. وبالتالي، تكتب المذكرات كشكل من أشكال الاستشفاء من الالام. تتأرجح البطلة بين الشعور بالوحدة والتحرش في منزل والدها والذي يرمز لغياب الألفة والأمان، ومنزل عائلة والدتها والذي يرمز للتضامن النسائي وأسلوب حياة إيقاعي حميد. على هذا النحو، فإن الرواية تفكك المفاهيم التقليدية لحياة الحريم باعتبارها قمعية وتقلل من شأن المرأة، في مقابل الترويج لهذا المفهوم باعتباره تمكين للمرأة ونمط حياتها. ففكرة الحريم عند ليلى أحمد وسيلة لدرء الاستبداد الأبوي والاحتفاء بالأمومة. تتعارض تيمة كتلك مع الخطاب النسوي الغربي المناهض لمثل تلك المفاهيم، ويعضض مفهوما شرقيا جديدا يحتفي من خلاله بنمط حياة الحريم الذي يمكّن المرأة ويدعم أنوثتها.

Leila Ahmed begins her memoirs with a remembrance of things past. Her poignant recollections of her family home are haunted by sounds and shadows that make the description a lyrical one, as critics and reviewers have not failed to point out:[i]

> The opening passages of *A Border Passage* are written in an intensely evocative, lyrical style; the description is of the place, Ain Shams,

> Ahmed's family home. … She meticulously traces the rhythms of that place in the varying shades and shadows of mimosa and eucalyptus and the lilts and sounds of life lived within it; the cry of the karawan, street vendors' calls, and the reed piper. (Shereen, p. 119)

Yet the lyricism is not without its grief, nor is the magic evoked that of wonder and joy. The scenes and sounds Ahmed describes, and that critics are captivated by, are located *outside* the house. The magic is not related to the interior of the house, nor the people who inhabit it, but to the outside world, the garden, and nature. And that most haunting sound of all, the song of the reed piper, is "the music of loss, of loss and of remembrance" (*BP*, p. 5). Ahmed's opening paragraphs are ambivalent when it comes to the images conjured and the determination of what it was really that her loss entailed: whether it was a happy childhood and fulfilled family relations, a home in the sense of security and protection and peacefulness, or idyllic days stretching out in the sunshine. This paper will argue that the loss Ahmed experiences is not related to a happy childhood in Ain Shams, her home, but to a harem style of life associated with her grandparents' home Zatoun, the family summer home in Alexandria, college life at Girton, and women's communities in Abu Dhabi. While she can see clearly that the harem can become a means of oppression, she also celebrates the bonding of women when they live together and create an alternative world. Harem as home is a motif that dominates the memoirs, and where there is no community of women associated with a harem like lifestyle, Ahmed is gripped by loneliness and insecurity. This is most clearly demonstrated the second time she goes to Girton College to do graduate studies and is not lodged in the college, and when she goes to the States to engage in the exhilarating and nascent debate over feminist issues. It is when she is in the States, deprived of the reassuring company of women in a harem – despite the feminist

circles she moves in – that she realizes the extent and quality of her loss, and writes the memoirs as a form of remembrance.

After doing a Ph. D. on Edward Lane, Leila Ahmed got involved in feminist studies and especially women in Islam, which eventually resulted in the publication of *Women and Gender in Islam* in 1992, and her appointment as the first professor of Women's Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School. Her research into the history of gender in the Arab world, and its relation to older civilizations as well as to present day feminism, grounded Ahmed in Islamic law, history and women's issues. This included a thorough investigation into practices such as veiling and the segregation of women. Historically speaking, neither veiling nor the confinement of women were specifically Arab or Muslim practices imported from the Arabian Peninsula and implanted on the Arab Muslim countries of the Middle East and the East Mediterranean. In her *Women and Gender in Islam*, Ahmed traces how Mesopotamian, Persian, Hellenic, Christian and eventually Islamic cultures "each contributed practices that both controlled and diminished women, and each also apparently borrowed the controlling and reductive practices of its neighbors" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 18). Many of the stifling practices related to women confinement and veiling were the direct result of the Byzantine civilization (Ahmed, 1992, p. 26-8). This line of research, which seeks to free Islam from the stigma of being the initiator of oppressive cultural/religious practices that hid and segregated women, is taken up by other researchers such as Fadwa el Guindi, who explores the origins and development of veiling in Islam. She argues that Jewish women were veiled as early as Biblical times, and that Egyptian Jews in Egypt observed segregation during the Middle Ages, according to the Geniza documents (El Guindi, p. 150). Conversely, she adds that Nelly Hanna's study on the architectural patterns in seventeenth and eighteenth

century Cairo reveals that the division of the house into male and female sections during the eighteenth century had not been previously known. This means that if "the division of homes into male and female sections is considered new for eighteenth-century Egypt, then most likely this division did not exist among the majority population during the Geniza period" (El Guindi, p. 151). Enlightened men object that the seclusion of women is not decreed by the Koran. Qasim Amin argues against it by using verses from the Koran (xxxiii, 53, and xxxiii,32) that specifically say it is the Prophet's wives who are to be secluded, and that they are not like other women. Thus, seclusion is prescribed to the wives of the Prophet only (Amin, p. 30).[ii] It is unclear when women were "hidden" from the male gaze in Egypt,[iii] but by the nineteenth century women were veiled[iv] and segregated through a collaboration between religion and the patriarchy. Edward Lane observes that the men and women of the same house inhabited different apartments, if they could afford it. The less fortunate had to simply entertain men in the same apartment, but make do with hiding the women of the house from the male visitors. Lane narrates the amusing story of how he was allowed to see his friend's widowed mother, but not the wife:

> She usually comes to the door of the apartment of the hareem in which I am received (there being no lower apartment in the house for male visitors), and sits there upon the floor, but will never enter the room. Occasionally, and as if by accident, she shews me the whole of her face, with plenty of kohl around her eyes; and does not attempt to conceal her diamonds, emeralds, and other ornaments; but rather the reverse. The wife, however, I am never permitted to see; though once I was allowed to talk to her, in the presence of her husband, round the corner of a passage at the top of the stairs. (Lane, p. 178)

Lane is smart enough to recognize the elaborate dynamics at work here. The single – thus marriageable – mother is being shown off, with all her wares and attractions. Since the wife, however, is not available, she is not to be seen. The elaborate architecture involved in providing apartments for the women and children on the one

hand, and men on the other, meant that the family could afford to provide the protection for its womenfolk that the lower classes could not, since poorer women had to go out to work. Thus seclusion was more a sign of privilege and respect than oppression – though oppression was certainly a spin off of the system.

The word "harem" (*hareem* in Arabic) derives from the root *h-r-m* which relates to the two meanings of "to be forbidden or unlawful, and to declare sacred, inviolable, or taboo" (Peirce, p. 4). Used as *haram*, it denotes a sacred space such as *al haram al sharif* (the Sacred Enclosure) and *al haramein al sharifein* (the Muslim pilgrimage sites). Thus the "concept of sanctuary that connects sacred places, like mosques and pilgrimage centers, also applies to women, women's quarters, and family – a connection that brings out the significance of the idea of sanctity in these contexts" (El Guindi, p. 96). According to language, Islam and traditional practice, meanings of sanctity and respect surround the word "harem", which is "gender-specific only in its reference to the women of the family" (Peirce, p. 5).

This was the original meaning and practice related to the concept of harem.[v] Throughout the nineteenth century in Egypt, middle and upper class families observed the system, until in the early twentieth century it began to disintegrate. By the time Leila Ahmed grew into consciousness, the harem had all but disappeared. What reached her were echoes of that "sanctuary", that marginal space women occupied and which was fulfilling in a special way. *A Border Passage* recollects and analyses the experiences of home, harem and women's communities that have either sustained, or failed to sustain, Ahmed.

The generation of Ahmed's parents was the transition from the conservative society that segregated its women, to the more liberal and modernized one. Her father, whom she admired greatly, was an Egyptian who had received the traditional

education of memorizing the Koran, but had eventually "internalized" European manners and morals, and hence his children were given a foreign education.[vi] By contrast, his wife – though of Turkish origin – did not respond to European influence. She listened to Om Kulthoum, did not seek a career, and spoke Arabic but not English. These two different spirits infused the two houses that Leila Ahmed grew up in: Ain Shams (the family home that her father built) and Zatoun (the house of her maternal grandparents, where she often went to visit).

Ain Shams is the house haunted by sounds and music of loss, but it is not the house that Ahmed was happy in. Rather, it was the scene of some of her loneliest, unhappiest, and most terrifying moments. This is where her father suffered a long illness, was kept under house arrest by Nasser's government, and the whole family underwent the degradation of money shortages and harassments inflicted by the regime. There is also loneliness and lack of companionship, since hardly any mention is made of her brother or sister. Her only companions are English books; without them, the young Ahmed would have sunk into despair and gloom from which there would have been no return:

> I don't know how I would have survived the loneliness of my teenage years without the companionship of such books, read to the sound of only the wind in the trees, alternately dirge and solace. I remember moonlit evenings, leaning on my windowsill, when all that stood between me, the spell of the moon, and the pull of some vast abyss below was a book that I could turn to and bury myself in. (*BP*, p. 14)

The scenes evoked are eerie, rather than romantic, loaded with intimations of death and loneliness. The house itself is described as being at the intersections of civilizations and cultures, hence giving her a plural identity capable of belonging everywhere:

> Our house, then, standing as it did at the intersection of country, desert, and city, stood also at the edge and confluence of these many worlds and histories. It seems entirely apt now, as I look back, that Ain Shams was in

> this way quintessentially a place of borders and that even geographically it was so placed as not quite to belong to one world. Or rather to belong, at once, to all of them. (*BP*, p. 16)

An equally valid argument, however, is that Ain Shams, with all its intersections and convergences, was also an unanchored place that did not provide Ahmed with any strong form of bonding, whether cultural or familial. The one person whom Ahmed felt close to was her nanny, a foreigner. And even her nanny was incapable of ridding Ahmed of her cosmic fear of loss: "Her dying was my one great and secret dread in childhood" (*BP*, p. 51). Ain Shams was the creation of her father, and was dominated by the garden, which he hoped would give his family a healthy physical and intellectual environment, where both bodies and spirits could roam free. Perhaps Ahmed unconsciously needed less to roam and more to love and be loved. Her mother was not a demonstrative person who, "unusually in this society, always shrank from touch" (*BP*, p. 21) and kept all the members of the family "at an equal distance" (*BP*, p. 54). Encouraged by the father, the mother imbibed the spirit of the garden and reading, to the exclusion of all else. She was so immersed in her reading that she seemed not quite conscious of Ahmed and her needs, which were looked after by Nanny. The garden, and books, occupied her afternoons:

> That is how we remember her: reading. Sitting, freshly bathed, on the chaise longue in her bedroom, wearing fresh cotton clothes, clothes with the sweet smell of cotton dried in the sun, the air blowing through them. Behind her, the garden. A book in her hand, a cup of Turkish coffee on the table beside her. Reading. (*BP*, p. 73)

And it was in the garden that Ahmed's neighbour Freddie molested her, causing her mother to carry her off to the doctor for examination, and to forbid her from playing there. Ahmed cites this incident as being the great divide in her life, when childhood and joy ended for her. Waïl Hassan finds that Ahmed "first describes an Edenic existence of childhood, a time unmarked, as it were, by any significant events, being

instead an undifferentiated period of primordial harmony and bliss" (W. Hassan, p. 22).[vii] Yet Ahmed's narrative does not portray her childhood as an extended pre-lapsarian state. On the contrary, there are significant events that blight her young life, such as the Freddy incident, while the dominant sense in Ain Shams is not one of "primordial harmony and bliss" but of fear and loneliness: on one page alone, these are the sensations that Ahmed describes relating to her childhood at Ain Shams: "a kind of obscure terror", "Terrors above all about death", "mesh of anxieties", "the sense of terror and precariousness that seemed to have pervaded my childhood" (*BP*, p. 48). These are the experiences she goes through in the house built by the westernized father, which can be called patriarchal because it is dominated by the male's values of liberalism, progress, intellect, and the imagination.

The mother, however, belonged to a different world, despite having taken so eagerly to the garden and to reading. Her family home, Zatoun, still observed the practices of the older generation which had not been swayed by a European lifestyle. Unlike Ain Shams, with its freedoms and rather wild garden, life at Zatoun was structured and rhythmic. It was strange to Ahmed, but not eerie or terror inspiring. It was here that her mother felt comfortable:

> It was a world whose underlying rules and rhythms, profoundly inscrutable to me, were, as I also naturally sensed, quite known and familiar to my mother. This was the world in which, even more than in our own home, she was completely at home. This was Mother's true home, her true and native land. (*BP*, p. 51)

This was the world inhabited by women, women who had not yet fully "liberated" themselves from Turco-Egyptian Islamic traditions. Here, many of the harem practices were still observed, rendering the community of women a secure, empowering force. As the car carrying Ahmed and her mother entered Zatoun, and the gates closed behind them, Ahmed did not feel she was being driven to a prison;

rather, it was as if she were entering a new world: “I could sense … that once we had entered its portals, the doorkeeper slowly bringing together behind us the huge iron leaves of the gate he had opened to let in our car, we had crossed into some other world” (*BP*, pp. 99-100). This world, though new to Ahmed, carried the last vestiges of a dying system. It was mysterious, but comforting:

> 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 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. (*BP*, p. 99)

Zatoun had its rhythms and system. Of the female members of the family, only the grandmother remained in the house. All the daughters had got married and had had children, but they went religiously every morning to visit their mother, sometimes taking their children along. This was when Ahmed had the opportunity to experience the harem at Zatoun. Being a relatively wealthy family, the architecture of the house allowed for separate quarters for the women. These morning gatherings were held in Ahmed’s grandmother’s sitting room, where, in contrast to the engulfing loneliness of Ain Shams, companionship and laughter ruled the day:

> The atmosphere in Grandmother’s receiving room was always wonderful. I do not remember a single occasion when it was not a pleasure to be there with the women. Relaxed, intimate, affectionate, rarely solemn, their conversations and exchanges were often extremely witty and sharp and funny. … The room was furnished with deep, wide sofas all the way round. Grandmother, always on her particular sofa, always in the same corner, would sit cross-legged or with her legs tucked up beside her under her black robe. On the carpeted floor beside her sat Umm Said, joining in the conversation when moved to do so or when invited to comment. (*BP*, pp. 104-105)

In this room the generations of grandmother, mothers and children met, along with the housekeeper-cum-companion who was as part of the mistress’s household as were the

daughters. While there was an order and hierarchy to be observed, there was also room for human emotions and bonding with the other females of the house.[viii]

The women's quarters were reserved specially for them. The young grandsons were allowed in, but not men, not even the grandfather himself, for all his being the patriarch of the family:

> Not that Grandfather ever entered Grandmother's receiving room. No man, not even Grandfather, ever set foot there, to my knowledge: his presence would have been a violation of the seclusion rights of any woman present who was not his wife or daughter or close relative. (*BP*, p. 107)

The grandmother's personal receiving room is sacred space, like *al haram*, circumscribed by sanctity. This is her own private sphere. According to anthropological research, "the organization of space is seen as representing social relationships through ideological structures" (Moore, p. 81), and historically, this has been translated into notions of public/male and private/female. In the West, the dichotomy can be traced to the Greeks, where the polis was common to all men and clearly separated from the private realm:

> The reproduction of life, the labor of the slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master's domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere. In contrast to it stood, in Greek self-interpretation, the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence. Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. (Habermas, p. 3)

It was in the public sphere, the men's domain, that freedom was allowed, visibility was encouraged, and action took place. The private sphere of the females was hidden from the public gaze. When the West moved beyond this clear division of gender boundaries, it turned upon the East a condescending eye and accused it of imprisoning and oppressing its women. The harem was increasingly used to represent the

Orientalist fantasy of sexual licentiousness and perversion. Even "late twentieth-century European literature represented harem women as occupied only with men's pleasure. The west came to define the harem as prison for women and their captors as violent Muslim males. Islam thus became closely associated with violence against and subjugation of women" (Sharif, p. 154). At its best, the harem was for the West " a space of opacity" (Grewal, p. 25), an area that could not be penetrated or controlled. Yet, the problem is not in the actual segregation, but in its meanings in the Islamic East. These notions of public and private spheres, dominant until the eighteenth century in Europe, have different interpretations in the East. Thompson points out that it "is remarkable that the conceptual framework of public and private spheres has never dominated Middle Eastern women's history" (Thompson, p. 52), which may be true, but may also be a Western interpretation. The reason could lie in El Guindi's discovery that "the term 'privacy' has no equivalent in the Arabic language. Accordingly, the Arabic-English dictionary translates privacy in terms that correspond with the Western notion, such as 'personal,' 'secluded,' 'secrecy,' and 'solitary,' further supporting its non-indigenous linguistic origins" (El Guindi, p. 82). El Guindi provides one conceptual equivalent in Arab culture, which is that Arab privacy "concerns two core spheres – women and the family. For both, privacy is sacred and carefully guarded. For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture and proxemic behavior" (El Guindi, p. 82). Her analysis accords with the academic point of view that is becoming dominant today, that the veiling and segregation of women was originally thought of as a form of respect for women, providing them with signs of respect and space of sanctuary.

This interpretation can be taken a step further. In the East, public and private did not mean clear cut boundaries between males and females. More precisely, this

delineation of space was organized more round sanctity and respect than gender. In her study of the imperial Ottoman harem of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Leslie Peirce points out that "the inner precinct of the royal palace, inhabited only by males, was known as the 'imperial harem'" (Peirce, p. 5) because the sultan lived there. When he built another section for the women and children, that too was called "the imperial harem", not because the women lived there, but because the sultan did. In the case of the Ottomans, the standard Western dichotomies of public/male private/female did not apply. The higher one moved up in society, the more this meaning was diluted:

> In many ways, male society in the Ottoman world observed the same criteria of status and propriety as female society. The degree of seclusion from the common gaze served as an index of the man as well as the woman of means. Poor women and poor men mingled in the city streets and bazaars, for their cramped households and lack of servants prevented them from emulating the deportment of the well-to-do. … Ottoman society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was dichotomized into spheres characterized less by notions of public/commonweal/male and private/domestic/female than by distinctions between the privileged and the common, the sacred and the profane – distinctions that cut across the dichotomy of gender. (Peirce, p. 8)

This concept is inherited from the dual meaning Islam carries of *hass* and *amm*, which can go beyond the traditional notions of private and universal to acquire the sociopolitical meaning of "the elite versus the common, the ruling class versus the ruled" (Peirce, p. 8). Peirce remarks that Bernard Lewis distinguishes how power relations are marked out in Islamic society,[ix] agreeing with him that they are drawn by "spatial division more horizontal than vertical, in contrast to Western metaphors: instead of moving *up*, one moves *in* toward greater authority" (Peirce, p. 9). Both harem and *hass*, then, are defined by eligibility and exclusion, and represent status and honor (Peirce, p. 9). When the Ottomans occupied Egypt, they carried such cultural baggage with them, and the harem system in Egypt followed to a great degree

the signs of honor, respect, authority and sanctity accorded to women by the Ottoman harem. Thus, the further one goes into Zatoun, the more the authority of the grandfather diminishes. He abdicates power to his wife, who rules alone in her receiving room. The private sphere here grows to connote not just sanctity and privilege reserved for upper class women, but inviolable rights and power too.

Participating in harem life was empowering in other ways, too. These women provided each other with support in their everyday lives, so that their affairs and of their dependants could run smoothly. Ahmed recollects how sustaining those daily visits to Zatoun were:

> All the aunts came nearly daily to Zatoun, sometimes with their children. Going to Zatoun and spending a couple of hours with Grandmother and with other women relatives was no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and pleasure. It was a way of sharing and renewing connection, of figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and the people who worked in their homes. All five sisters had married men they had never met, and no doubt these daily sessions in which they shared and analyzed their lives were vital to adjusting to what must have been trying circumstances. Their meetings surely must have helped them keep their homes and marriages running smoothly. (*BP*, p. 104)

The construction of this women's community was built round shared interests in what would seem marginal affairs, or mere gossip, as the men would have called these sessions. They were entirely unrelated to the male domain of "doing". Yet the concerns of these sessions were, arguably, equally valuable. These women gathered in a spirit of love and communion in order to resolve issues pertaining to the most essential aspect of social and political life, the very foundations on which society and nation are built: marriage, children, and family. It is these foundations that are life sustaining, and this is the occupation of the female members of the household. The Zatoun experience is a manifestation of natural bonding and sisterhood that empowers women and their dependants.

Ahmed's narrative provides a fresh outlook on harem life. Accounts of the harem by women who have experienced it are generally accounts of oppression. Most of those early memoirs were written by the upper or middle class women who were educated enough to write, but were also those on whom segregation was most severely enforced:

> Among the wealthy upper classes, elaborate architecture as well as large household establishments catered to the maintenance of strict divisions between the sexes. Eunuchs (castrated male slaves) guarded women and children, accompanied them if they went outside, and controlled all entries into the household. (Badran, 1996, p. 5)

In her memoirs, for instance, Huda Shaarawi recounts how closely watched upper class girls were in the harem. The eunuch, Said Agha, monitored all their actions, including their education. Shaarawi had requested her Arabic teacher to bring her a grammar book so she could learn Arabic properly. When the teacher obeyed, he was interrogated by Said Agha, and forbidden to teach her grammar: "The eunuch contemptuously ordered, 'Take back your book, *Sayyidna Shaikh*. The young lady has no need of grammar as she will not become a judge!'" (Shaarawi, p. 40). Said Agha also controlled their budget when they were in Alexandria, and sometimes "his carelessness and extravagance" (Shaarawi, p. 67) meant that there was no money left over for Shaarawi's needs. The eunuch even assumed the right to interfere in her marriage. She wept when she discovered that she was to be betrothed to her guardian, but then Said Agha told her: "Do you wish to disgrace the name of your father and destroy your poor mother who is weeping in her sickbed and might not survive the shock of your refusal?" (Shaarawi, p. 54). It was his words that made her consent to marry a man so much older than herself. The story is not much different in other parts of the Muslim world. In Lebanon, Anbara Salam al Khalidi (the first woman to take off her veil in public, in 1927) describes in her memoirs how miserable she was at the

loss of her freedom when she had to observe veiling and segregation. At the age of ten, she was so harassed in the streets that she herself requested to be veiled, thinking this was women's normal lot. She soon discovered that she had entered a prison, and that beggar girls enjoyed more freedom than the well to do:

> When I was ten years old I passed through the iron wall, stumbling on my *izar*, and joined ranks with my mother and grandmother who had preceded me there. I felt no sorrow then, thinking this was the fate of all girls my age, and that it meant that I had become a young woman where veiling was a form of respect for my person. The only thing that grieved me was that I was deprived of going out to play in the garden with my brothers, because it was exposed to the neighbours. Also, I was not allowed to climb trees and spend my afternoons there, as I had been used to doing in the past. This was the first stab of misery I experienced at veiling, seclusion, and chains.
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> At that age, an innocent friendship developed between me and a small beggar girl of my age who used to come to the house. … She would tell me amazing tales of her life. I don't remember ever pitying her. On the contrary, her stories used to feed my imagination with exciting dreams. I used to envy her unfettered existence, and wish that I could, if only for one day, lead her carefree life. (Al Khalidi, pp. 38-39)[x]

In Morocco, the girls were watched over by older women, and all their movements were carefully supervised. Fatima Mernissi's memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, delineate the seclusion of women and their oppression. From Cairo to Beirut to Fez, the story is not much different. The Mernissi house in Fez was guarded by a gate, which "was a definite *hudud*, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out" (Mernissi, p. 21), and this permission was granted by the doorkeeper Ahmed, who had strict orders not to let the women out. Though not a eunuch like Said Agha, Ahmed had the authority to drag back 17 year old Chama from the street when she tried to go to the cinema with her brothers, chiding her all the way: "A few minutes later, you saw Ahmed panting and puffing very loudly as he pushed Chama through the door. 'I have not been instructed that women were going to the movies,' he would repeat very firmly. 'So, please, don't create trouble for me, don't force me to run at my age"

(Mernissi, p. 115). However, in Mernissi's account, there *are* women who do uphold the oppressive system. They are the older women, whose age and position as mother in law entitle them to authority and privileges over the younger women of the household. This is usually the moment women wait for: when they can exercise their rightful power over the younger generation. Such are the dynamics of power that have been practiced in harems, from the Persians to the Ottomans to the North African countries.

If most memoirs focus on the miseries of harem life, and Ahmed finds that harems empower women, it does not mean she is blind to its injustices. For all its laughter and security, Zatoun also has dark secrets and a Locked Room. One son committed suicide because the grandfather would not allow him to marry the girl he loved, and one daughter took her life when the grandfather would not allow her to divorce the husband she hated. The grandfather was a fearsome figure who beat his children and whose presence in the house, though rare, was overwhelming. When he arrived, the house would immediately stand to attention:

> Servants would scurry off to do whatever they were supposed to be doing, and everyone – my aunts and mother and whoever was there visiting with Grandmother – would rearrange how they sat, adjust themselves, and stifle their laughter. … My aunts and mother and uncle were very formal and deferential in Grandfather's presence. If he came into a room where they were sitting, they would scramble to their feet, the very hurriedness of their motion probably being part of the appearance and respect that was due him. (*BP*, p. 107)

The women counteract this fearsome condition by providing an alternative world, where there is a lot of mirth, and where spontaneity ruled instead of solemnity. Though it has its own rhythms, it seems to lack the seriousness of the male world of reason and order. Such a dichotomy, of course, is not the special monopoly of Muslim or Arab women. In "Castration or Decapitation?" Hélène Cixous narrates how the

emperor of China asked the general of his army to train his hundred and eighty wives and make soldiers out of them. The more General Sun Tse tried to train the women to understand and obey the simple language of drumbeats, the more the women fell into disorder and laughter. When two of the king's favourite wives were decapitated to teach the rest a lesson, the remaining wives turned to the drumbeats as if they had been practicing military art all their lives. The moral of the story Cixous narrates (taken from the very serious text, Sun Tse's manual of strategy) is that it is "a question of submitting female disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation" (Cixous, p. 43). Laughter and lack of seriousness seem to be characteristic of women's communities, an alternative way of life by which they counter the seriousness, authority and tyranny of the male world. Laughter becomes a source of power and release.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, laughter has always had a vital role to play in people's lives. As early as the Renaissance, it was seen as "a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint" (Bakhtin, p. 66). Hence, laughter in harems – whether they be in China or Egypt – counters the seriousness of the male world, but provides an equally valid world view. It does not negate seriousness; rather, it offers an alternative outlook in which a liberating power is possible, since laughter can defeat fear:

> True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates form fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation; from didacticism, naïvete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever complete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. (Bakhtin, pp. 122-123)

In female communities, laughter operates by liberating women from fear of official figures of authority. On their own, they are capable of a levity that they are denied in the presence of the man of the house. Edward Lane points to how the absence of men from the house unlocks the springs of mirth: "In the presence of the husband, they are usually under more or less restraint; … in his absence, they often indulge in noisy merriment" (Lane, p. 187). At Zatoun, the women convert the very figure of authority into cause for laughter:

> My aunt Aisha in particular, the youngest and most irreverent, would reduce us all to helpless laughter. She and Farida were particularly good at imitations and could do hilarious renderings – exaggeratedly grand, authoritarian, and pompous – of Grandfather. (*BP*, p. 104)

This irreverent laughter has a subversive quality, for it is the folk humour of the underprivileged, the minorities and the masses who resort to parody to undermine the tyranny of official authority and overcome fear. This is the weapon of the weaker groups which liberates them by giving them "an acute awareness of victory over fear" (Bakhtin, p. 91). Like the folk humour of the European Middle Ages which parodied religious rites during feasts, women's humour parodied the most fearful figure in their lives. Originally intended as a form of entertainment and leisure, parody also counters the prohibitions and intimidation of official authority, and offers an unofficial truth by allowing gaiety and jests as a "parallel to official forms" (Bakhtin, p. 74). The laughter of women in particular not only gives them victory over the fear of men, but over fear of loss of identity and soul. When the husband of Fatima Mernissi's aunt Habiba divorced her and took all her belongings, she countered by saying, "But he can never take the most important things away from me, … my laughter and all the wonderful stories I can tell" (Mernissi, p. 17). Laughter then becomes more than life sustaining; it has become the very spring of life.

This limited women's space of Ahmed's grandmother's receiving room allowed the women an alternative world view, an unofficial outlook full of subversive liberating laughter which was also comforting and secure. Ahmed had a similar experience when she went to Abu Dhabi. There, the public sphere was entirely occupied by men, while women formed their own communities in their limited space. As with Zatoun, the women of the Emirates resorted to parody and laughter to create an alternative space and subversion of authority. The prominent local women were patrons of women's schools and colleges and attended their celebrations:

> On these occasions the students often presented plays they had written. They would strut about on stage with painted mustaches and the white robes of men and utter vacuous and hilarious pomposities that would make the audience, consisting entirely of women and girls (and little boys) in this segregated society, dissolve in laughter, guffawing and applauding. Informality reigned here, too. … And this, I realize now, was familiar space. Grandmother's corner room at Zatoun, like the balcony at Alexandria, this was space not at the center but on the margins of society, a place with its own perspective, its own rather skeptical, often amused view of the grand, important, and self-important people who occupied center space. My aunts Aisha and Nazli and Farida, too, had leaped to seemingly reverent attention in Grandfather's presence – and then, when he was gone, had done, in Grandmother's room, wonderful, hilarious imitations and send-ups of his imperious ways. (Laughter, that refuge and consolation of the powerless. Vehicle of scathing and skeptical critiques sometimes, but slipped in simply as entirely harmless humor.) This space was space in which, at some fundamental level and perhaps without my even recognizing it, I felt deeply at home. (*BP*, p. 104)

The sense of feeling at home in a harem, that space on the margins of public life where women formed their own communities, was experienced again in the family home in Alexandria, when Ahmed went as an undergraduate to Girton College, and when she lived for a while in Abu Dhabi. At the Alexandria family home, life was both more free and peaceful than at Zatoun. There was no Locked Room or intimations of death; only the sea where they swam and the balcony where they talked and laughed. In addition to the freedom of the sea and laughter, there was a security

deriving from a special brand of spirituality granted to her grandmother: "At Alexandria, Grandmother seemed … to have connections and influence among … powers that had the capacity to bless, and so living in this house over which she presided, I felt safe, reassured, as if we were all there under her – and consequently their – protection" (*BP*, p. 112). This was also a space which was free of men. They only came at weekends, and even then, "they were marginal figures" (*BP*, p. 112). It was a home entirely taken over by its women; the "rhythms and currents of its life were ours, those of my aunts and mother and grandmother and us children" (*BP*, p. 112). This was the house where Ahmed felt happiest and most secure.

At Girton College – located outside Cambridge, on the edge of society and at the margins of the public sphere, the way women's space is marginal – Ahmed finds that she feels "perfectly at home" (*BP*, p. 181). It is a community of women where authority is exercised according to age not gender, which is what makes Ahmed think that this is "the harem perfected … the harem of older women presiding over the young" (*BP*, p. 183).[xi] This hierarchy of authority and care is one of the principal foundations of the harem system. However, in the oriental harem, the older women supervised the sexual activity of the younger women in their care, [xii] while at Girton the tutors undertook the intellectual training of their charges. At Zatoun, the women were wives and mothers, while at Girton they were professionals on equal standing with men. The activities of the Zatoun/Alexandria women revolved round analyzing characters and situations to resolve issues and conflicts. As a consequence of these daily conversations, investigations into problems and possible resolutions, Ahmed argues, crises are averted: "children were saved the devastation of divorce, husbands kept monogamous, and women appeased (for good or ill) so as to endure some unendurable situation. At Alexandria and at Zatoun this activity that engrossed them

daily, with both gravity and laughter, was part of the job of sustaining life and sustaining the community in its ongoing life across the generations" (*BP*, p. 191). The Girton women engaged in a similar activity, but instead of real people, the professors of literature analyzed texts and fictional characters. Though literary analysis did not resolve the problems of families and thus sustain the community, it was favourably looked upon by the West, since it was conducted as a male activity of educating and getting educated and published. The Zatoun/Alexandria activity was as serious as the Girton one, despite being "leavened with much laughter" (*BP*, p. 191), and it was more beneficial,[xiii] yet it was

> called by outsiders to the process – by men of the official Arabic culture and by Westerners, men and women – idle gossip, the empty and even sometimes evil, malicious talk of women, harem women. That same activity, however, practiced by the women of Girton on written, not oral, texts and on fictional, not living, people was regarded as honorable, serious, important work. For the women of Girton no longer practiced it in the age-old traditional manner that women in their culture, too, once did – orally and to sustain life. They practiced it in the manner and tradition of men, as their own colleagues (and men down the centuries) had, in relation to written texts rather than living people, as a profession, and to earn money rather than to sustain life. (*BP*, p. 192)

Ahmed sounds rather critical of the way the Girton women have shifted their alliance to the other camp, but, influenced as she is by the Western ideologies of progress and modernization that she had internalized like her father, she can use that to provide another reason why Girton is the harem perfected. By allowing a community of women to pursue male professions, "Girton had offered for a moment perhaps a kind of transitional space" (*BP*, p. 192). Transitional space would eventually lead to space central and marginal at the same time: graduate studies at Girton again, where she was in the centre of Cambridge and not confined to the women's college rooms on the outskirts of the city; in Abu Dhabi where she was a woman holding a man's job in a society where women were segregated; and finally in the United Sates where the

marginal space of white feminism struggled to move to the centre of academia, but nevertheless marginalized Muslim women of colour.

Her return to Girton College as a graduate student did not bless her with the same sense of security and fulfillment she had experienced as an undergraduate. As graduate students no longer had rooms in the college itself, she was given lodgings outside the college where the daily involvement in the rhythms of a female community were no longer possible. Ahmed emerged from the harem into the public sphere of men. This engagement with the European world of progress and enlightenment proved to be a singularly painful and insecure period. She had an unhappy marriage, developed a curious disease that incapacitated her most of the time, underwent a religious crisis and experienced racial discrimination. Her release from both marriage and England came when she went to Abu Dhabi, where another marginal space of harem life was offered in a male dominated society. Much of her work was to attend meetings with men in order to formulate new courses and draw educational policies, but she also had to meet with the local women to find out what their needs were. It was with the women that she felt at home. For all its being the harem perfected, Girton's academic seriousness was missing the creative force of laughter that was necessary for the regeneration of life. In Abu Dhabi, the segregation of women and traditional dress were at first strange to Ahmed, but soon she discovered that it was still a "deeply familiar" (*BP*, p. 286) life, especially as the women had the gift of laughter that had characterized the Zatoun/Alexandria women:

> Soon it became ordinary for me to be in the company of these extraordinary women, to observe the clarity and forthrightness with which they expressed their opinions and went about their lives, and also the sense of humor and laughter that they frequently brought to their gatherings and to their perceptions of their situation. (*BP*, p. 275)

Though to a great extent segregated and deprived of the mobility and engagement in the public sphere that men were allowed, the women of Abu Dhabi managed to impose their own perspective upon the educational policy that was being managed by the men. Their laughter did not detract from the seriousness of their mission, just as the laughter of the Zatoun women contributed to the sustenance of the community's life. In a similar fashion, Ahmed drew strength from the Abu Dhabi women. Ahmed adds that her life in Abu Dhabi was sustaining and prepared her for the ordeal ahead, when she would participate fully in the world of men when she went to the States:

> It was also a place of respite and sanctuary that, I am sure, must have helped sustain me when I had to venture once more into what was the very visibly and palpably masculine space of the public world. (*BP*, p. 192)

While she was in Abu Dhabi she had begun to read more deeply into women's studies and feminist criticism, and she believed that this new field of study would provide, like harem life, a "vantage point on the margins" (*BP*, p. 192) from which she could make sense of her own place in the world. Surprisingly, though, it is in America that we witness her most difficult battle. She claims that from Abu Dhabi she went to the "visibly and palpably masculine space of the public world", but it was a space dominated by women. That public world she entered was the world of white feminists, not male academics. And it was in the departments of feminist studies that she encountered a community of hostile women who were more aggressive than supportive of this Muslim woman of colour.

At Girton, Ahmed believed that the college provided "a kind of transitional space" (*BP*, p. 192), where women could pursue a male occupation. She expected that studying at a women's studies department would be a continuation, if not refinement, of that experience. She was aware that despite the globalization that the end of the twentieth century was witnessing, "cultural production has remained largely the

monopoly of the West" (Maumoon, p. 269), and that if she was going to study feminism, even if it was related to the East, the sources for research and possibilities of publication were best found in the States. She was full of optimism that she would at last find the space in which she could realize her potential and meet kindred spirits, where the harem would be perfected because of the exciting work that was being done on feminism. But she discovers that this "new world, surprisingly, is not without its own lack of tolerance" (Short, p. 423). As she begins to participate in feminist studies, she is horrified by "the extraordinary barrage of hostility and ignorance with which I found myself besieged as I moved among this community of women" (*BP*, p. 292). This was a purely female battle, and the men – to change the gender in Conrad's famous sentence – were "out of it altogether". It had become a purely religious and racial battle fought amongst women. This was a situation Ahmed had never found herself in, and the harem had turned into a jungle where women were pitted against women. While Arab and Muslim women were trying to understand their position within their religion and traditions, they came under attack from white Christian and Jewish women, who could only criticize Arab/Muslim women rather than allow them the same freedom they enjoyed in re-assessing their own heritages. For Arab/Muslim women to be accepted, they had to give up their heritage, not try to understand or change it. Only the white view point was acceptable:

> In contrast to their situation, our salvation entailed not arguing with and working to change our traditions but giving up our cultures, religions, and traditions and adopting theirs. (*BP*, p. 292)

It was in this hostile women's environment that Ahmed now had to find a place for herself.

One wonders if Ahmed's experience was unique. Were other minorities made as unwelcome as Arab Muslim women? Undoubtedly early feminists who were

establishing women's studies had to struggle to make their voices heard and to gain credibility within male dominated academic circles. They were, in a sense, themselves minorities, and eventually they learned to bond with each other and to create space for other minorities of colour and religion. Testimonies of the founding mothers of women's studies reveal that at the beginning the battle was hard and lonely for Afro-American women. Nellie McKay describes how hostile her graduate studies at Harvard were:

> I found the university environment much more inhospitable than I was prepared for and was soon experiencing a sense of personal insecurity that lasted for a long time. … Living in Cambridge, unlike living in Queens, New York, I felt far away: far from home, far from New York City, and far from family, friends, neighborhood, church, and the professors whom I knew and who knew me. In Cambridge, alone in my first apartment, surrounded on all sides by unfamiliarity, I was unprepared for the isolation I felt. (McKay, p. 207)

This loneliness eventually dissipates when she is introduced to the women's studies programme, and it is there that she gets accepted and both sides work hard to bridge racial gaps. Another founding mother, Nona Glazer, never refers to her Jewishness as a handicap; on the contrary, she bonds immediately with other feminists and finds that women's studies gave her support for "the multiple-discipline approach" of her intellectual style (Glazer, p. 337). Clearly, then, Ahmed faced this kind of animosity on account of her Arab identity and Muslim religion.

Ahmed herself was not a staunch Arab nationalist or a zealous Muslim. Long parts of *A Border Passage* explain how alien the concept of pan-Arabism was to her. And while in Cambridge she experienced a religious crisis and was about to convert to Catholicism. When she went to the States, however, she focused in her studies on women in the Arab and Muslim world. Though "an ardent feminist advocating multiculturalism and religious pluralism" (F. Hassan), America was simply not

prepared to accept her as an Arab Muslim. The Islamic Revival that had started in the mid seventies involved women as much as men. In Egypt, the women's mosque movement accelerated to the extent that by 1995 "there were hardly any neighborhoods in this city of eleven million inhabitants [Cairo] that did not offer some form of religious lessons for women" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 3). But the Revival went beyond classes held in mosques or at private homes to teach women the Koran and the *hadith*; women were now exploring Islam to discover women's rights and even to criticize the abuses of Islam by the patriarchal establishment. In addition, there was another type of feminist discourse, one that "sought to critique exoticized, reductive representations of Oriental and Muslim women oppressed by their culture. … This scholarship extended feminist analysis beyond the bounds of liberal Western feminist discourse" (Saliba, p. 1087). There is undoubtedly today a distinct area of scholarship called "Islamic feminism" whose proponents range from those "who come out of Islamic backgrounds … [to] some secular (this term is becoming increasingly contested) Muslim women" (Badran, 2001, p. 50).[xiv] But when Leila Ahmed went to the States in 1980 to engage in this debate and participate in this scholarship, it was a relatively new discipline. Unexpected though the hostility of American academia was, coming as it did from women rather than men, it can be explained. Afro-American women and Jewish women were accepted because they related in one way or the other to America: the Afro-Americans were in the end native to America, while Jews (even if they were immigrants) belonged to the Judeo-Christian tradition that was the foundation of the Western world. Arabs and Muslims were by all standards outsiders and did not belong to the local culture.

Recent developments in the world have not endeared Arabs and Muslims to the USA, regardless of the issue of feminism. The situation in the West is now, as Lila

Abu-Lughod points out, very clearly one of "Are you with us or against us?".[xv] The animosity and ignorance that Ahmed faced when she first went to the States still exist in the third millennium. Anti-Islamic feelings are still rife in America, especially after the 9/11 events. It is not strange to come across such statements in articles entitled "Islam and Women": "We must understand radical Islamism if we are ever to counter its *malign* force" (Weiner, p. 49, italics mine) and, as Lila Abu Lughod pointed out in "Do Muslim women really need saving?" the West has chosen to understand and criticize Muslim war zones through its women, but does not do so when it covers wars in Guatemala or Ireland, for instance. Even the left is not sympathetic to Islamic feminist discourse. Nayereh Tohidi, the Iranian feminist, complained of a situation similar to the one Ahmed had experienced upon first arriving at the States, that to believe in Islam was considered stupid, and that for a woman to be a feminist she had to abandon her Islamic faith: "Surprisingly, some opposition came from the left. "I was arguing mostly with some of my secular feminist friends in the West who dismissed Muslim women, as if whoever is religious is stupid," Tohidi said" (Morin and Deane, p. A27). The fact is that, neither in the past nor now, "has Arab feminism had a positive reception in the West" (Golley, p. 521).

Such antagonism towards Arab/Muslim women in feminist circles and women's studies departments naturally meant that the sense of belonging to a women's community, the sustaining power of the harem that is sanctuary, was replaced by a racist environment where she was criticized rather than supported. Nor was this animosity directed at new arrivals only. Carol Haddad, a third generation immigrant, recounts that she felt alienated every time she stepped into the streets, and that she spent a lifetime looking for home: "Little did I know … that my search for home would be a lifelong quest. Each time I left the security of my family house, I

experienced the oppression of being darker and different" (Haddad, p. 218). It was only when she attended the 1981 National Women's Studies Association that she met her first Arab-American feminists, and with them she "took several important steps towards finding home" (Haddad, p. 220). This home was not the society of white feminists in general, but the Arab-American ones who, with people of their own kind, had set about creating their own community apart from that of white female academia.

A Border Passage does not tell us whether Leila Ahmed, too, eventually found home and sanctuary with Arab-American feminists. Nor does it tell us whether Ahmed was happy or not in her new American home, regardless of white feminist attacks. But the indications in the memoirs point to an acute sense of loneliness verging on despair. Descriptions of her house or domestic life, or of settings where there are friends, are entirely missing from the narrative. These omissions contrast starkly with the numerous pages she devotes to the women who gather at Zatoun or Alexandria, descriptions that have elicited from reviewers praise for the "carefully parsed memories of her extended family and friends" (Seaman, 1999, p. 1489), or for the "descriptions of her grandmother's salon" (Still, p. 108). One passage deals with her emotional state in America, especially during those first few months after her arrival. The house she lives in is picturesque by all means: "I lived in an apartment with stupendous views of meadows and hills, views that were always present to me because one entire side of the living room consisted of glass and sliding glass doors" (*BP*, p. 90). Yet there is no hint that Ahmed finds any happiness in it, nor does it serve as a sanctuary. Her mother's ghost appears to ask for forgiveness, which Ahmed bestows and thus is reconciled with this particular grievance. The setting is appropriate for the appearance of a ghost, but it does nevertheless indicate the extent of Ahmed's misery in America:

> I was living in western Massachusetts shortly after I moved to America. It was at a time when having to start life all over again in a new country, in a new job in a new field, had come to seem insuperably difficult. The work was hard and the cold bitter, my students were demanding in ways that I was not used to, and my colleagues absorbed in their own lives. Besides finding America unfamiliar, I felt altogether at sea in women's studies and had no one to talk to about it. (*BP*, p. 90)

Deprived of the laughter and companionship that had characterized Zatoun, Alexandria and Abu Dhabi, and finding only the seriousness of academia that is unrelieved by the possibility of even academic discussions, Ahmed did not find a "home" in the harem sense she had belonged to in the old world. She may have eventually found a home in the way Carol Haddad did, of finding common interests with Arab-American feminists and in combating "the malignancy of so many tacit assumptions about gender, race, and power" (Seaman, 2002, p. 1084), but she does not seem to have found the kind of space and companionship that had given her so much happiness in a harem setting.

Ironically, Ahmed had not always admired her mother. The contrast she drew between her Europeanized father and her "native" mother always favoured the father. Her mother's preference for Arabic as a language, and Om Kulthoum as a culture, lowered her in Ahmed's esteem. Ahmed went as far as write her mother off as an inferior person, because she was only a housewife who "had 'done' nothing, pursued no profession" (*BP*, p. 21). Significantly, Ahmed holds her mother in this poor regard only when she is in the context of Ain Shams, the house dominated by the father's values of progress. At Zatoun, she belongs with the other women who, apparently, lead a life not much different from hers. Ahmed does not criticize her in this context; rather, it is this life of "being" rather than "doing" that is glorified in the descriptions of the harem system. The older Ahmed goes as far as criticize her younger self for not having appreciated her mother's attachment to her heritage. By the time Ahmed turns

to her memoirs, she has proceeded from criticism to admiration, and "writes beautifully and with deep understanding of her mother and the other women of her extended family" (Crossette, p. 50). This is the most noticeable change in her consciousness, as one reviewer has pointed out: "Most poignant is the transformation of Ahmed's disdain for her "traditional" Arabic-speaking mother, who spent her days with female relatives, into an understanding of how these women made sense of their lives" (*Publishers Weekly*, p. 1). One reason for this shift in attitude could be her loneliness in America that sharpened her sense of loss, which would cause her to look back on those days as having been idyllic. Her inability to find a similar set up in America makes her look "fondly on her days in her grandmother's receiving room, a woman's space she has never been able to re-create in America" (Leiblich). If the absence of a harem community in America causes her to recognize how valuable its presence had been in her life, the actual process of writing the memoirs would have helped her come to terms with her mother and reconsider how seriously she had wronged her by juxtaposing the father's western style against the mother's eastern style, and condemning the latter. The genre of memoirs allows for contemplation and reconsideration. In the first instance, memoirs record memories, which, as Ahmed says, are "the stories of our consciousness rather than just objective facts" (*BP*, p. 15), so her impressions of how things were become more important and valid than how they really were. Whether or not things really were as happy as she makes them out to be becomes immaterial – it is worth noting that Ahmed's grandmother died when Ahmed was ten, bringing an end to those idyllic scenes that may well have been exaggerated by Ahmed's imagination and memory. Through a return to the past in memoirs and autobiographies, women create "alternative realities" (Booth, 2002, p. 249) and present their world as they perceive it. But memoirs also allow writers to

examine the self deeply and honestly, and thus criticize it and reconsider earlier judgments. In this sense, the "memoir has the potential to be both a narrative and a discursive analysis. The process of self-discovery unfolds in the memoir as a result of conscious and critical self-representation" (Shereen, pp. 112-113). The sense of loss, coupled with a rigorous self examination undertaken in the process of narrating, would reconcile Ahmed with her mother and teach her to appreciate more fully the harem life that had produced her mother.

Mona Mikhail remarks that the "last decade or so has witnessed an explosion of writings, particularly by Egyptian women who have chosen to lead expatriate lives" (Mikhail, p. 514). She goes on to say – citing Leila Ahmed as an example – that most of them "belong to a class of highly educated professionals, and left Egypt primarily in pursuit of more education and/or better opportunities" (Mikhail, p. 514), and that most of their works were autobiographical.[xvi] That the writing of those particular writers is autobiographical doubtless has to do with the fact that they were highly educated and that their expatriation had caused them both to feel nostalgic and to try and negotiate new selves that would hold on to the culture of their homes while accommodating that of the adopted homeland. But perhaps their expatriation influenced the genre of their writing in a different way, too, by freeing them from the psychological segregation that discouraged confessions. Leila Abouzeid writes in the introduction to her memoirs *Return to Childhood* that women's autobiographies were frowned upon in Morocco because they were contrary to Islamic traditions. In Islamic culture, "a Muslim's private life is considered an *'awra* an intimate part of the body), and *sitr* (concealing it) is imperative" (Abouzeid, p. iii) The architecture of Arab and Islamic houses, and the wearing of the veil, are measures taken to ensure this concealing and *sitr*. She narrates the story of the man who sued his neighbour for

intending to add one floor to his house, using the argument that the neighbour would now be able to overlook his courtyard. He won his case. Writing autobiography is considered the same: it "allows everyone to overlook one's private courtyard" (Abouzeid, p. iii). Ahmed does more than that – she takes the reader right into the innermost rooms of the harem, and that not to make what was private public, but to privilege readers by allowing them to share a sacred sort of life that was sustaining but that has now ended, leaving behind loss and remembrance.

NOTES

[i] See also Sara Powell, who calls the language of the memoirs "lyrical", p. 106, and Barenblat, who asserts that Ahmed is "capable of exquisite lyricism". The anonymous reviewer in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* remarks that Ahmed's writing is marked by "grace and fluidity" (p. 126).

[ii] The Sura that Qasim Amin refers to enjoins Muslims to address the wives of the Prophet from behind a curtain or partition (in the Koran called *hijab*): "And when you ask of his wives anything, ask from behind a *hijab*" Sura 33: 53. Amin further argues that seclusion has bred an unhealthy psychological condition in men and women, which is not the case with societies where men and women mix freely with each other, such as "in Europe, in Istanbul, in Egyptian rural areas, and among the desert Bedouins" (Amin, p. 47). In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Fatima Mernissi goes further and argues that this particular verse "descended" to put a barrier between two men: the Prophet and Anas Ibn Malik. (Mernissi, 1987, pp. 85-101). All these sources explain that the verse descended on a particular occasion, when the Prophet was impatient to be alone with his new wife while three boorish guests refused to leave. In another chapter, Mernissi plans for the reader the architecture of the Prophet's house, which comprised nine rooms adjoining the mosque. Aisha's room opened directly to the mosque. Mernissi takes this to mean that the Prophet's wives were not segregated but took an active part in public affairs: "the Prophet's architecture created a space in which the distance between private life and public life was nullified, where physical thresholds did not constitute obstacles. It was an architecture in which the living quarters opened easily onto the mosque, and which thus played a decisive role in the lives of women and their relationship to politics" (p. 113).

[iii] It is not only Egypt that is problematic. It is unclear when and how segregation was enforced in general: "Gender boundaries clearly varied over place and time, but research has yet to explain fully how and why. Preliminary evidence suggests links to class and state formation" (Thompson, p. 54). Thompson argues that, according to historian Hoda Lutfi, "the clear division between the public domain of men and the private domain of women" was imposed in fourteenth-century Cairo (Thompson, p. 53).

[iv] This paper will use the term "veil" in the nineteenth century sense of face cover that was referred to as *hijab*.

[v] In her *Dreams of Trespass* Fatima Mernissi gives a similar interpretation of the word harem. This is how her grandmother Yasmina explains it to her: "The word 'harem,' she said, was a slight variation of the word *haram*, the forbidden, the proscribed. It was the opposite of *halal*, the permissible. Harem was the place where a man sheltered his family, his wife or wives and children and relatives. … One thing that helped me see this more clearly was when Yasmina explained that Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a place where behavior was strictly codified. The moment you stepped inside, you were bound by many laws and regulations" (Mernissi, p. 61).

[vi] However, her father had at the beginning of his life followed traditional mores. He had refused to marry a young girl he had proposed to because he felt a rustle behind the *mashrabiyya* as he left the house, and assumed that it was the bride peeping at her future husband. While the young girl was exercising her right to see whom she would be living with for the rest of her life (*mashribiyyas* were designed "to guard families' and women's right to privacy – that is the right "to see" but not to "be seen" – and are not about seclusion and invisibility" (El Guindi, p. 94)), Ahmed's father took this act as a violation of propriety and dropped his suit. Yet this is the same man who allowed his wife, Ahmed's mother, to go about uncovered, to smoke, and to mingle with men in society. This seems to be a contradiction in the values he believes in, yet maybe this change in character is due to the European influence he had eventually come under.

[vii] Hassan bases his comment on Ahmed's own words, when she writes that her story begins not with the music of childhood, but "with the disruption of that world and the desolation that for a time overtook our lives" (*BP*, p. 5). However, the clash between her father and Nasser was not the first cause of the disruption of her life. It may have ended a particular kind of lifestyle they had followed at Ain Shams, but the really traumatic incident that disrupted her childhood occurred much earlier, when the Freddie incident brought an end to whatever happiness she could remember of early childhood: "This event with my mother, and everything that followed from it – the end of playing in the garden, of having playmates at home, of feeling that I belonged and was wanted in that home – was the great fracture line dividing my life: it marked the end, in my mind, of my childhood. Everything thereafter, in my thoughts, was marked Before and After" (*BP*, p. 83).

[viii] Care for domestic help, and their treatment as members of the family, is a continuation of the Ottoman tradition of raising the slaves to be part of the harem. In Soheir el Qalamawy's account of her grandmother's narrative of the British occupation in 1882, she writes that when the British soldiers entered Cairo, all her grandmother's domestic help left her service and went to join their families. However, the slaves had no one to go to, so they stayed with the grandmother, who asserts "those poor people had no family or relatives except me and my children" (el Qalamawy, p. 44). Translation mine.

[ix] In his *The Political Language of Islam*, Chicago: 1988, pp. 11-13; 22-23.

Translation from the Arabic mine. [x]

[xi] Critics find that when Ahmed compares Girton to a harem, she "neatly overturns Western expectations" (Booth) and evokes "Western stereotypes in order to undermine them, in this case by boldly suggesting a structural similarity between what tends to be regarded as "medieval" Islamic institutions and modern Western ones" (Hassan, 2002, p. 27).

[xii] Women in the imperial Ottoman harem derived and exercised power by virtue of their age. Peirce points out that one feature of the harem was "a generational distinction, in which juniors were subordinated to both male and female elders. One aspect of this generational divide was the control by the senior generation of the sexual activity of the junior, reproductively active, generation" (Peirce, p. ix).

[xiii] The educational value of these conversations was not limited to family members in a harem. More contemporary situations, where neighbours could equally function as female communities, provide similar opportunities where the older generation could educate the younger ones, and where this form of talk could guide younger girls along the path of marriage. In *Khul Khaal*, the narrator Suda finds that listening to other women talk is beneficial to her: "One way I learn the responsibilities toward the man I marry is by listening to the problems of other women" (Atiya, p. 73).

[xiv] The debate continues among Muslim feminist theorists, between those who are labeled "Islamists" and the others labeled "secularists". See Mahmood, (2001) p. 202, and Valentine M. Moghadem (2002), p. 1135.

[xv] In Lila Abu-Lughod's article "Do Muslim women really need saving?" she criticizes the ignorance of the West about Islam, and the way Muslim women are being brought forward to demonstrate the way Muslim regimes terrorize women, and how cultural anthropology seeks to "liberate" Muslim women from traditions that may seem alien to the West but are perfectly in character with the local practices (pp. 783-792).

[xv] Recently, there has been a growing distinction between the two terms "autobiography" and "memoirs". Heilbrun points out that "Autobiographies have been renamed memoirs, … [a]nd the writers of these memoirs are frequently, if not exclusively, women" (Heilbrun, p. 35). *A Border Passage* has been called both. It is not the aim of this paper to enter the debate of the differences between autobiography and memoirs. The term "memoir" has been used simply because that is how most critics and reviewers refer to *A Border Passage*.

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