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EXAMINING MULTIPLE CRITIQUE VIS-À-VIS MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF LEILA AHMED'S MEMOIR, *A BORDER PASSAGE*

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ABSTRACT

This article will study the memoir, *A Border Passage* (1999) by the eminent academic Leila Ahmed, the Harvard professor of Egyptian descent. Implementing Homi Bhabha's concepts of 'Third Space' and 'hybridity', it will be investigated how the memoirist, positioned in the conflict-torn interstitial space or what Bhabha calls the Third Space, between the cultures of her homeland and host land, productively used this border-zone to develop an empowering hybridized identity. In the light of Miriam Cooke's theory of 'multiple critique', it will also be argued that from the Third Space she conducted a multifaceted critique of the different issues like Western racism against the Arabs and their tradition, the authoritarian regime in her homeland, the misogyny and sexism in official Islam, Western imperialism in the Middle East, white imperial feminism and Islamophobia; issues that affected her struggle for acquiring agency. Finally, it will be shown how her hybrid identity enabled her to rise above cultural dualism in the diaspora. But at the same time it will also be demonstrated how she resisted the pressure from her host society to give up her indigenous culture and thus to assimilate; her hybrid identity made it possible for her to be at ease with her diasporic identity and also to affirm her cultural heritage as an Arab Muslim.

Keywords: Arabs, conflict, Islam, women, West

Heidegger observed, 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*' (qtd in Bhabha 1). His observation can be said to be quite applicable to the diasporic predicament of Leila Ahmed, the Egyptian-American Harvard professor whose memoir, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999) is to be studied in this article. Her memoir revealed, as had been contended in this article, that her location in the cultural boundary between her country of origin and her host countries was a source of acute dilemma and psychological crisis for her but ultimately the boundary did not hinder her from making her individual presence, as an Arab Muslim, known in the diaspora and from voicing herself as an active agent. The boundary, indeed, had a liberating impact upon her. Employing Miriam Cooke's theory of 'multiple critique' together with Bhabha's theory of 'hybridity' and 'third space', this paper will argue how Ahmed productively used this boundary-zone, this border-ground or the threshold space to transform herself from a liminal subject to an autonomous agent.

A review of the research works on the memoir will follow to frame the research-questions this article will probe into. In her doctoral thesis, *Mosaics of Identity: Reading Muslim Women's Memoirs from across the Diaspora* (2012), Leila Pazargadi studied several memoirs and one novel written by diasporic Muslim women like Leila Ahmed from the Middle East. Her chosen texts included the memoirs of Firoozeh Dumas,

Marjane Satrapi, Rabih Alameddine and the semi-autobiographical novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf. Studying these texts, Pazargadi investigates how the women writers are forging cultural identities after crossing cultural borders, how they are negotiating their religious identity in the face of the alienation they experience in their host country and trying to reach a global readership through the means of their memoirs. Another dissertation, *Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings in Contemporary Literature by Arab-American Women* (2008) by Amal Talaat Abdelarazek is focused on four different texts among which one is the memoir, *A Border Passage* by Leila Ahmed, that my paper also concentrates upon. Abdelarazek endeavoured to explain what it was like for her selected writers to adapt to a nation that tried to carry out imperialist agenda against their home countries, regarded their men as terrorists and pitied them as oppressed victims. Then, in his work titled *Contemporary Arab-American and Middle Eastern Women's Voices: New Visions of "Home"* (2011), Abdullah Kheiro Shehabat addressed three memoirs, *The Complete Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi, *A Border Passage* by Leila Ahmed and *Between Two Worlds* (2005) by Zainab Salbi. In this piece, Shehabat explored how these memoirists broke free from the authoritarian patriarchal cultures of their homelands by traversing cultural borders. He also investigated how they developed distinct feminist identity in the diaspora by creating what he termed 'imagined spiritual home'. Leila Aouadi's article, *The Politics of Location and Sexuality in Leila Ahmed's and Nawal El Saadawi's Life Narratives* (2014) also studied her selected texts from a feminist perspective. She examined the way the positioning of her chosen memoirists in their immediate societies and their gender-awareness informed their autobiographical writing. What I aim to study and what is unexplored by the other researchers in their study of the memoir is the complex dynamics between the memoirist's urge to critique her homeland for its authoritarian practices and her concern to defend it against outside imperialist aggression, her defiance of Islamic dictates and her adherence to Islam and above all her will to retain agency over her life. My study will explore how such multi-valent negotiations have taken place in the world of the memoir. The questions I have asked and attempted to answer in this paper are—how did the memoirist reconcile the aforementioned apparently contradictory concerns in her memoir? Second, how did she deal with the social stigmatization of being an Arab Muslim in the west specifically when the cultures of her home country and host countries are hostile to each other? And finally, how did she address the issues which impeded her struggle for attaining agency in the diaspora, as revealed in her text?

Born in 1940, Ahmed finished her schooling in Cairo before she moved to the United Kingdom for pursuing higher studies at the University of Cambridge. After obtaining her graduate, post-graduate and doctoral degrees from the University of Cambridge, she joined the newly established faculty of Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts in 1981. In 1999, she was appointed as a professor of Women's Studies and religion at Harvard University where she currently works. In the 1940s and 1950s, when Ahmed was growing up in Egypt, she passed through major historical transformations; Egypt achieved political independence after years of British colonial rule, the state of Israel was created in 1948 and the notion of Arab nationalism was on the rise under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt. These events occupy a significant part of Ahmed's writing in her memoir. Besides, the author also reflects in the text upon her life in the diaspora, first as a student in England and then as a professor in the United States. *A Border Passage*, however, does not just relate the author's journey between different lands but it also depicts her journey taken to the self. Indeed, her border-crossing from the Eastern part of the globe to its Western part led her to reconsider issues pertaining to her identity as an Arab and Muslim in the West specifically when she found out that she could not identify fully either with the existing culture of her motherland or with the cultures of the lands that hosted her. Several issues and events engendered the sense of alienation in the exilic consciousness of the author, both in her homeland and her host lands.

The memoirist grew up revering the British culture, largely as an aftermath of the colonial influence upon the Egyptian society, or to be more specific, upon that class of Egyptian society to which Ahmed belonged—the upper-middle class. Her father, a civil engineer who himself was educated in the West, had a profound admiration for the Western culture even though he supported the nationalist cause of Egypt's struggle for political freedom from the yoke of British colonization. Besides, the English school in Cairo, that Ahmed attended, followed an exclusively British-curricula. The author explained that they were taught all about England and Europe but next to nothing about Egypt or the Arab culture; rather, their British teachers often talked disparagingly about the cultural heritage of Egypt. The concept of the superiority of the European culture and the inferiority of the indigenous culture was, thus, instilled in the mind of the memoirist in her very childhood. Her irreverence for the native tradition led her to depreciate her mother too because, unlike Ahmed's father, her mother kept cherishing her own cultural heritage and distanced herself from the European culture which many members of the Egyptian upper and middle classes, including Ahmed and her father, considered worth following. So, it can be said that at this point the memoirist had a thoroughly colonized

consciousness. She developed a deeper appreciation of her mother's resistance to the culture of the colonizer once she overcame her fascination with the Western world and when she realized that she had undervalued the very tradition that shaped her. A turning point for the memoirist in her transition to developing a postcolonial consciousness came with the Suez-crisis¹, when the British and the French invaded Egypt in 1956 after the Egyptian President, Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal which was formerly under the joint control of Britain and France. Looking back upon the incident, the memoirist recalled how her child-mind felt betrayed:

I remember feeling grown up saying this, how I had believed in them and trusted them, and yet they had done this to us, a small country like us, bombed us, invaded us. I felt, I said, that I could not believe anyone or anything anymore. My sense of having been betrayed was deeply personal. I was hurt the way one is when one has trusted and been betrayed by a friend, when one had believed in the goodness and uprightness of someone and then discovered that they have after all been deceiving one' (170).

Part of her disenchantment with the Western world also resulted upon learning in her childhood about the death-camps under the Nazis in Germany and America's dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the biggest revelation for the self, however, comes through one's own experiences. The years she spent at Cambridge contributed, for the most part, to her disillusionment with the European culture. At the time of studying at the university of Cambridge, she, as a Third World person of colour, felt entirely 'othered' in the predominantly white Academia. Like those students who were black or with working-class background or came from Third World countries like herself, she found no connection between her lived life and the theories she was obliged to master in order to advance academically:

For, obviously, it was not the concerns of black or working-class Americans or Britons that defined our agenda in the Academic world or that we needed to learn about to get on with our studies...Blacks and working-class people and others on the margins of Western societies who joined the Academic world had, just like us [students from the Third World], to scramble to learn the experiences and histories and perspectives of others—of the Western white middle class, which set the Academic agenda—and to learn to put those first, intellectually. We *had* to do this, *needed* to do it to make our way in the Academic world (Ahmed 212).

Furthermore, the prevailing dogmatic and aggressive secularism of the white elites, that the memoirist encountered at Cambridge University, deemed those with religious inclinations as intellectually less mature and, thereby, inferior. This extremist, anti-religion stance, on the part of the Cambridge elites tended to affect people like the memoirist who was raised in a society at the foundation of which lay religious principles. The author recounted the bitter experience of her Indian friend at Cambridge, Veena who was a practicing Hindu; Veena was perceived with disdain by her secular-minded, 'liberal', white peers for worshipping an idol of Ganesh and eventually, the persistent denigration she received from her white fellow-students on account of her religious orientation led to her nervous breakdown. The memoirist herself began to suffer from a vague, unknown illness that had a debilitating impact upon her body. What they experienced was, in fact, covert racism but civilized Cambridge, the author reminisced, tenaciously refused to acknowledge its existence in the academia even though students like Ahmed, her friend, Veena and others like them experienced it with alarming regularity. In the words of the memoirist:

Veena and I (and thousands of other non-white women immigrants into the academic societies of the Western world) were living through our own version of the experience of Betty Friedan's generation of women in America, what Friedan called "the problem that had no name". We too were living in a society that insidiously and pervasively undermined our own experience, our own perspective, and our own sense of reality, and in ways that we too did not know how to speak of, and that undermined and denied too, in our case, our own histories and cultures and the foundational beliefs of our societies. (226)

In addition to the covert racism that students like the memoirist were subject to inside the Cambridge academia, outside it they often received outright racist treatment. It was the time of the late sixties when large number of people from the former British colonies immigrated to Britain in search of better job opportunities. Incensed by the arrival of these people who were looked down upon by the whites as infinitely inferior to them, extremist British politicians like Enoch Powell advocated for forced deportation. According to people like Powell, the author wrote, '...the presence of these "niggers", these savages—us—threatened not only British jobs but the very fabric of civilization' (Ahmed 207). The memoirist narrated an incident when a stranger on the bus spat at her upon learning that she was an Arab and not an Israeli Jew as he enthusiastically assumed. Support for Israeli occupiers of Palestine and contempt for Arab Muslims have always run deep in the West. These circumstances in which she found herself in the diaspora, triggered an intense psychological crisis for the memoirist, which led her to feel that she inhabited a realm of invisibility that her host society had forced her to: 'By the end of my graduate days I had essentially acquiesced in and accepted my own proper

invisibility from scholarship and the proper invisibility and object status of my kind' (Ahmed 237). Due to these issues, the memoirist gradually became alienated from the culture she once adored.

Her estrangement from the contemporary culture of her homeland, on the other hand, stemmed from several other causes. Among those, one was president Nasser's rhetoric of Arab nationalism. Nasser became the ruler of Egypt after the Egyptian revolution² of 1952, which also dovetailed with Egypt's political independence from Britain. The new state that the revolutionaries, Nasser and his group of young army-officers, formed in Egypt was not a democratic one but it was fashioned after Soviet Union, a socialist state. The author acknowledged that the president enacted several progressive policies like free schooling and free college-education for all Egyptians irrespective of gender and class, which brought class-mobility and the improved status of Egyptian women. His attempt at democratization of wealth was also commended by the memoirist. But, like Soviet Union, the newly-formed Egyptian socialist state gradually turned into an authoritarian regime. Whoever opposed the President was silenced: 'Political repression became the norm and Egypt's prisons began to bulge with political prisoners. The *mukhabarat*, a Soviet-style network of informers and secret police whose purpose was to ferret out critics and dissidents, became a pervasive presence in society' (Ahmed 12). The author's own family was persecuted for years by the Nasserite government till her father died. The memoirist pointed out that her father, who was the chief of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Egypt and served formerly as the chairman of the Nile Water Control Board, was not against the political leadership of Nasser but he opposed the president's decision to build the Aswan High Dam on the Nile for ecological reasons. When he kept defying the president's order of silence on the subject, government-persecution started, which brought devastating consequences for Ahmed's family. In the meantime, the notion of Arab nationalism was being regularly circulated in the country through the state-controlled Egyptian media. At the heart of the aforementioned concept was the idea that all the people in the various Middle Eastern countries constituted one nation, that not only the people of Arabia but all Middle Eastern people are Arabs; hence, these countries should be politically unified into one. Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism further emphasized that his agenda was to fight Western imperialism and Zionism³ and he declared his undying support for the Palestinians to regain their land from the Israeli Jews. The memoirist, however, passionately resisted the notion of being defined as an Arab in the early years of her life. The memoir related an incident that took place at the English school where the author studied in her childhood. A Palestinian Muslim teacher, Miss. Nabih slapped the young Ahmed in front of the whole class for Ahmed's lack of mastery in standard written Arabic. The teacher's accusation against her was that Ahmed is not adept in the language while as an Arab, she was supposed to have perfect knowledge of standard written Arabic. In response to this accusation, the memoirist defiantly replied that she was an Egyptian and never an Arab. Standard Arabic, however, was not the mother-tongue of the memoirist but the state-authority included it in the school-curriculum to promote their agenda of Arab Nationalism. This incident with the teacher would significantly shape the intellectual development of the author in the later years of her life when she would take a journey into the forgotten history of Egypt to learn what caused her to reject intuitively the idea that she was an Arab. At the time she only sensed that there was something terribly wrong in the idea of 'Arabness' as espoused by the propagators of Arab nationalism though she could not consciously pinpoint what it was that made her feel in this particular way. Apart from the continuous state-propaganda of Arab nationalism and the prevailing dictatorship, the other issue that alienated the memoirist from her mother-culture was its underlying sexism. Gender-discrimination and a preference for male-children could be witnessed in many Egyptian family. Clitoridectomy was often practiced. An instance of sexism that was traumatizing for the memoirist was, when her beloved maternal aunt, Aida committed suicide being unable to get a divorce from her abusive husband. Under the excuse that Islamic law did not grant women the right to initiate divorce, the husband of her aunt refused to divorce her even though she desperately sought it. Later in her life, the memoirist critiqued this patriarchal interpretation and distortion of Islamic law upon learning that Islam did permit women the right to initiate the process of divorce.

Her inability to identify fully either with the prevalent culture of her homeland or with the culture of her host lands initially gave rise to a sense of acute liminality in the mind of the memoirist. Her diasporic existence placed her in the interstice between two antagonistic cultures. In this interstitial space that Bhabha defined as the Third Space, she developed an exilic consciousness owing to her sense of non-belonging. But eventually this exilic consciousness had a liberating effect on her. Standing in the threshold space between two cultures, the narrator of *A Border Passage* could drift in and out of cultural borders and, thereby, enjoyed the privilege of being inside and outside of both cultures simultaneously. Edward Said contends that when most people are 'principally aware of one culture, exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions' (11). With her plural vision, the narrator could now look critically at the different dimensions of the cultures she straddled and could, thus, detect the merits and

limitations of those cultures. The critical distance that she acquired from her location in the Third Space also enabled her to examine critically those identities that both cultures imposed on her. In the memoir, she deconstructed the discursive construction of her Arab identity as defined by the narrative of Nasserite Arab nationalism on the one hand and by the narrative of the racist Western portrayal of Arabs on the other hand. Her purpose, therefore, was to contest the epistemic violence committed against her by the hegemonic representations in both her homeland and her host lands. She refused to accede to any ascribed essential identity and forged her own plural identity. She also reinvented her own sense of Arabness defying the constructed notions of who an Arab woman was. Her understanding that many of the ideas that were taken for granted were actually politically charged and were used to construct and justify the world around her led her to adopt the strategy of multiple critique for questioning and challenging the cultural constructs in both her home country and her host countries, which are upheld as the 'natural order' of things. Besides, the strategy of multiple critique enabled her to liberate herself from the entanglement in those limiting hegemonic discourses that tried to silence her by defining her identity authoritatively.

Throughout one's lifetime, one is, indeed, confronted with multiple identities, one of which takes precedence above the others as per the demand of specific moments. But what instigates this multiplicity or fragmentation of identity in the first place? People, as social creatures, are needed to adopt different community-identity according to what serves their interests at that particular time. In Spivak's words, 'there are many subject positions that one must inhabit' (qtd in Ameri 73) and this results in fragmentation or plurality of identity. One can be an Arab, a Muslim, an American, a woman and a feminist but which of these identities will be predominant over the others will depend on what the subject's priority is at the time. The subject's multiple identities propel her to develop multiple consciousness which enables her to practice what Miriam Cooke has termed 'multiple critique' which is in Cooke's view 'a fluid discursive strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions' (113). Exercising 'multiple critique' she can embrace her feminist identity when she wants to subvert the patriarchal values both in Arab and American cultures; she can identify with her Arab heritage when she wants to condemn the increased bigotry against Arabs and the racial profiling of Arabs in American society; she can adopt her Muslim identity to fight Islamophobia and to enlighten fellow Americans and Islamic fundamentalists about the ethical and humanitarian message of Islam; and she can even question her own various stances towards the social discourses in which she finds herself entangled in her life. The memoirist's use of multiple critique also made it possible for her, as Cooke has put it, to 'belong to a number of different communities simultaneously while retaining the rights due them in all spheres, including the right to criticize these same communities' (109).

In her critique of Arab nationalism, the narrator first interrogated herself why she was so opposed to accepting that particular Arab identity as promulgated by the ideology of Arab nationalism. She intuitively felt, as she did in her confrontation with her school teacher, Miss Nabih, that something awfully unjust was inherent in this idea of Arabness as preached by the advocates of Arab nationalism. To find out what that injustice was, she began to analyze her own childhood memories alongside delving into the history of her country, that could not be found in official Egyptian historiography. She came to learn that Arab nationalism was a relatively recent phenomenon in the Middle East. She also recalled that most of their Jewish acquaintances in Egypt, including the family of her best friend, Joyce, decided to leave Egypt because, the Egyptian Jews no longer felt safe in there. Her study of history revealed to her that since the late thirties onwards, Jews of Egypt had begun to be persecuted inside the country. Sometimes, their synagogues were vandalized, sometimes their shops were looted. But what caused this animosity against the Egyptian Jews on the part of the many Egyptian Muslims who identified themselves as Arab nationalists? The community in Egypt had been a multi-religious one comprising Muslims, Jews and Coptic Christians who lived in harmony for ages. Egypt's succeeding governments had persistently endeavoured to preserve this pluralism in Egyptian society. But with the rise of Nazism in Europe, Jewish immigration into Palestine surged and finally Zionist activism instigated the displacement of millions of Palestinians. Watching this happen, the common Egyptians began to feel sympathetic towards the dispossessed Palestinians. The rulers of Egypt then cleverly started to manipulate this sympathy of the Egyptian mass for the Palestinians for furthering their own political interest. Nearly all the Middle eastern countries have shown themselves to be supportive of the Palestinian cause of regaining their land from the Israeli occupiers and at times militaristically aided the Palestinians to attempt to achieve this end. This possibility, therefore, has always existed that the Palestinian cause could unify all the Middle Eastern countries under the leadership of some strong ruler against the common enemy of Israel. This political union of all the Middle Eastern countries against Israel had been central to the notion of Arab nationalism. Like the other previous rulers, Nasser also intended to unite the whole Arab world under his leadership with the agenda of fighting for the Palestinians. And with his political shrewdness and ambition, he even convinced the Syrian leaders to unite with Egypt in 1958. He, thus, governed for a time both Egypt

and Syria. Throughout his political career, Nasser furthered the notion, as espoused by leaders before him, that Egyptians are Arabs, that all the Middle Eastern people are Arabs. Meanwhile, even prior to the rise of Nasser, Egypt officially became an Arab country by accepting the membership of the Arab League that was founded in 1945. Arab nationalism, thus, became a code for displaying solidarity with the Palestinians and for showing opposition against Zionism and the Jews in general. The memoirist observed:

Our new identity [the Arab identity as promoted by the Arab nationalists] proclaimed openly our opposition to Israel and Zionism—and proclaimed implicitly our opposition to the “Zionists” in our midst, Egyptian Jews. For although explicitly Zionism was distinguished from Jewishness, an undercurrent meaning “Jewish” was also contained in the word. The word “Arab”, emerging at this moment to define our identity, silently carried within it its polar opposite—Zionist/Jew—without which hidden, silent connotation it actually had no meaning’ (245).

But the Jews of Egypt were not a faceless mass for the memoirist. They were her and her family’s friends and neighbours. Her best friend, Joyce, was Jewish herself. The author’s point was that she had full sympathy for the displaced Palestinians but it was insensible that, to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinians, Egyptian Muslims had to persecute the Egyptian Jews as they did, specifically when Egyptian Jews were not the ones to oppress the Palestinians. The oppressors were the Israeli Jews and, even, not all of them were hostile against the Palestinians. So, the memoirist defied the ‘Arab’ identity as defined by upholders of Arab nationalism because this particular brand of Arabness connoted hostility against the Egyptian Jews. In the wake of Arab nationalism, all the Jewish people of Egypt including those whose ancestors had lived in that land as contemporaries of Egypt’s earliest Muslim and Christian inhabitants, were, in the end, compelled to leave the country, faced by severe persecution at the hands of the Arab nationalists. The narrator grieved: ‘The new definition of who we were unsettled and undercut the old understanding of who we were and silently excluded people who had been included in the old definition of Egyptian’ (244). Time and again in the memoir, the narrator mourned this loss of the multi-religious, plural Egyptian community when, along with Muslims and Christians, Jews were also part of the Egyptian social fabric. She began her memoir invoking, in one of the epigraphs, the words of the Persian poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi, that are largely evocative of loss: ‘To hear the song of the reed/ Everything you have ever known/ must be left behind’. Offering her interpretation of the lines, the memoirist wrote:

...the song of the reed is the metaphor for our human condition...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 sense 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 (5).

It seems like the memoirist intended to say that she too had been cut off from the world of her childhood, that she cherished—the world of the plural Egyptian community. And in her own song of the reed, her memoir, she mourned the loss of that world, which was lost as an aftermath of the propagation of Arab nationalism. The Arab identity that she eventually embraced was not how the Arab nationalists had originally defined it. The ‘Arabness’ she adopted was much more inclusive than the Arab nationalists meant it to be.

Ahmed’s memoir critiqued the Western notion of ‘Arab’ too. She argued that the Western colonial forces in the Middle East shaped the word ‘Arab’ to suit their own purpose and profit in the area. They changed, to quote Ahmed, ‘it [the word ‘Arab’] from within, as if the European meaning were a kind of virus eating up the inside of the word “Arab” replacing it with itself—leaving it unchanged on the outside’ (268). Just as the Westerners associated a negative connotation with the words, ‘African’ or ‘Negro’, the word ‘Arab’ also became ‘internally loaded in the negative’ (266) with a racist undertone. Majority of the people in the West, indeed, harbour Orientalist attitude against the people from the Arab world. They view the Arab people in terms of the binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’, which depicts the Arabs as uncivilized, fanatic and barbaric and the West as rational and civilized. This explains why the memoirist, despite her personal detestation of Nasser, could not support the British diatribes against him and the Arab nationalists because she knew that British condemnation of Nasser and his peers stemmed from racist sentiments against the Arabs and also from British imperialist concerns. Nasser impeded the British imperialist project in the Middle East by nationalizing the Suez Canal on the one hand and aiding the Palestinians in their struggle against the Israelis, who were backed by the West, on the other hand. The memoirist pondered how the Western imperial powers have persistently used the Arab lands as suited their convenience, caring the least about the people who inhabited those lands, because, to the Euro-American imperialists, the narrator argued, ‘Arabs’ meant

‘...people with whom you made treaties that you did not have to honour, Arabs being by definition people of a lesser humanity. It meant people whose lands you could carve up and apportion as you wished, because they

were of a lesser humanity. It meant people whose democracies you could obstruct at will, because you did not have to behave justly toward people of a lesser humanity' (267).

The fact that the author's Western students confided to her that they decided never to think of her as an Arab out of respect for her because they thought the word was an insult, signified that the Western notion of the word, 'Arab' is profoundly steeped in negativity. It is with this knowledge that the memoirist set out to conduct her dual tasks—critiquing the stereotypical views Westerners had about Arabs and their tradition; and humanizing Islam and the Arab people, that are routinely demonized by the West.

One of the Arab traditions that Western people are heavily prejudiced about is that of the harem and the life of Arab women inside it. Bouachrine says: 'While in Arabic, the word "harem" derives from *haram*, or forbidden by religious law, in the Western imagination it was transformed into a space of sexual excess' (63). In her essay, *Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem* (1982), Ahmed described harem as 'a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters—share much of their time and their living space, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically, across class lines, as well as horizontally' (524). According to Ahmed, this place is forbidden because 'it was women who were doing the forbidding, excluding men from their society' (529). The author's definition of harem did not originate only from her theoretical and historical studies but from her own lived experiences as well; she participated in the harem life on a daily basis all through her childhood and early teenaged years. The harem she visited daily was at her maternal grandfather's house in Cairo. The memoirist reminisced how her mother and maternal aunts met at their mother's house regularly after their husbands left for work in the morning. Ahmed's grandmother was the presiding figure in that harem. It was a women's space where the men including Ahmed's grandfather were forbidden to enter, otherwise the privacy of those women not related to her grandfather would be violated. The narrator explained that this space was a source of empowerment and emotional sustenance for the women. Here they discussed the troubles and worries in the lives of all the women present there, offered tentative solutions to those problems while all their discussions were enlivened with humour. The memoirist noted that this assembly of women were — '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...everyone's issues and problems had to be analyzed, discussed and resolved [in these gatherings]' (104). When the memoirist went to study in Britain, she felt alienated in the broader white racist Academia but she felt perfectly at home at Girton, the college under the University of Cambridge, where she studied and which was, at the time, a women's college. In the memoir, her loving reminiscences of her professors and her friends at Girton, all of whom were women, showed that the narrator went through no difficulty connecting with this world of women. Elucidating why she felt about Girton the way she did, the author wrote:

'...it was a deeply familiar world to me. In some ways, indeed, Girton represented the harem perfected. Not the harem of Western male sexual fantasy...but the harem as I had lived it, the harem of older women presiding over the young. Even the servers here—gyps, cooks, staff—were women, and from these grounds, these precincts, the absence of male-authority was permanent' (183).

Even the work they did at Girton, 'analyzing, discussing and taking apart words, meanings, motives, characters, consequences' (191), was similar to what the women in her grandmother's harem did; the only difference was, the discussion that the scholarly women of Girton conducted was directed at fictional events and literary characters whereas the analysis undertaken by the harem-women was based on real events and real characters. The memoirist observed:

That same activity essentially, practiced at Alexandria and Zatoun [the name of her grandfather's house] orally and on living texts to sustain the life of the community, was called by outsiders to the process—by men of the official Arabic culture and by Westerners, men and women—idle gossip, the empty 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' (191-192).

The author cited the example of the nineteenth century British intellectual, Harriet Martineau who went to visit an Egyptian harem, much like the one at the house of the author's grandfather. She was hospitably received by the women at that harem but afterwards Martineau wrote 'how ignorant these Muslim women were and how worthless and mindless their harem talk' (193). The interesting point here is that Martineau did not know Arabic and the women at the Harem did not know English and there was no interpreter. And still, the First World white feminist, with her 'superior intellect' assumed the same racist attitude towards those Third World Muslim women as Western men did towards Arab Muslims for ages. The reason behind her writing in that disparaging way about those Muslim women was, of course, that the White feminist wanted to feel superior to those women by representing them as inferior to her. Chandra Mohanty argues that white feminists define the Third World woman as 'ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated,

family-oriented, victimized' (337) in order to facilitate their portrayal of themselves 'as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the "freedom" to make their own decisions' (337). Mohanty further argues that in this way white feminists erase the vast diversity among the Third World women in terms of class, ethnicity and nationality and homogenize them as immature, helpless and having no agency. Belittling third world women, the intention of white feminists like Harriet Martineau is, therefore, to show how superior they are 'who-have-made-it' (Minh-ha 86) compared to their inferior 'sisters' 'who-cannot-make-it' (Minh-ha 86). Without the construction of Third World women in this derogatory manner, their privileged self-representation would have been problematic.

The memoirist witnessed the pervasiveness of prejudiced views about Muslim women and Islam even in the Women's Studies department at the university of Massachusetts where she joined as a faculty-member. She moved to the United States in 1981 drawn by the feminist revolution that was in progress there. A few years before she arrived in America, the seminal works of American feminists like Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Mary Daly et al had been published. Studying these texts before going to the U.S, the memoirist had been highly optimistic about American feminism. But upon her arrival, she found out that the feminist norm for white American feminism was the white, female subject and that white feminism routinely racialized Islam and portrayed it as a monolithic and uniformly violent religion. About Muslim women the white-feminists had, as the memoirist discovered, only preconceived and unfounded prejudices which led them to believe that the only solution for Muslim women to achieve gender-equality lay in the full abandonment of their native culture and Islam and in their whole-hearted adoption of the Western culture. Confronted by this racist and Islamophobic perspective of the white feminists, the memoirist contended:

We could not pursue the investigation of our heritage, traditions, religion in the way that white women were investigating and rethinking theirs...And the further implication and presumption was that, whereas they—white women, Christian women, Jewish women—could rethink their heritage and religions and traditions, we had to abandon ours...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...They were women who were engaged in radically rejecting, contesting and rethinking their own traditions and heritage and the ingrained prejudices against women that formed part of that heritage but who turned on me a gaze completely structured and hidebound by that heritage; in their attitude and beliefs about Islam and women in Islam, they plainly revealed their unquestioning faith in and acceptance of the prejudiced, hostile, and often ridiculous notions that their heritage had constructed about Islam and its women. (292-293)

Another reason why the white feminists attempted to sideline Third World feminists like Ahmed might be that their assumed superiority to Third World women was threatened because the memoirist was now well-versed in the discourse of the First World; she was now aware of all those discursive tools the First World used to construct the Third World as inferior to it. Besides, her location in the Third Space, had enabled her to develop a hybridized subjectivity combining her Arabness and Americanness. Hence, she was an insider in the American Academia while examining it critically like an outsider; she, thus, unsettled the very notion of insider and outsider or self and other. Bhabha said: 'The paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside' (165). So, this might have been the case with the white feminists in their attempt to silence Ahmed, the Third World feminist who can now disrupt, using the power of her hybridity, the grand narrative of white feminism that presents the Third World women as inferior to them. Refusing to be silenced, the memoirist decided to challenge the stereotypical views of the white feminists about Islam and Muslim women. Just as black, American feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks were emerging from the margins and making their voices heard as black women in the American academia, the memoirist too subverted the hegemonic white feminist discourse about Muslim women. She rejected her invisible status that she earlier accepted as a student in Cambridge: 'Placing Muslim women at the heart of my own work was in a way, and among other things, (as I see it now) a refusal of our invisibility' (237).

The outcome of Ahmed's endeavour to dismantle Western prejudices about Muslim women and to enlighten Westerners and other non-Muslims about the position of women in Islam, was her seminal texts on these subjects. In one of these texts, *Women and Gender in Islam* and also in her memoir, she introduced the concept of 'women's Islam' as opposed to, what Ahmed called, official Islam or 'men's Islam':

...there are two quite different Islams, an Islam that is in some sense a women's Islam and an official, textual Islam, a "men's" Islam. And indeed it is obvious that a far greater gulf must separate men's and women's ways of knowing, and the different ways in which men and women understand religion, in the segregated societies of the Middle East...and we know that there are differences between women's and men's ways of knowing even in non-segregated societies such as America' (123).

The memoirist learnt her first lesson in Islam from the harem-women at her grandfather's house. This Islam was 'gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical' (Ahmed 121). These women, generally, did not have the formal education to read the textual Quranic interpretations, nor did they attend the Friday congregational prayers at the mosques where men passively assimilated 'the official (male, of course) orthodox interpretations of religion' as propagated by some sheikh who taught the men 'what it meant to be a Muslim, what the correct interpretation of this or that was' (124). Those women, on the other hand, worked out their own understanding of Islam from the recitations of the Quran, that was frequently held at different occasions. An Islamic dictum exists, that states — 'There is no priesthood in Islam', which signified that every Muslim has the right to understand and interpret Islam in her own way; that she does not have to rely on the interpretation provided by some religious intermediary like the clerics. The author explained that the Islam those women derived from the Quran was living, dynamic and not the fixed, stagnant 'Islam of sheikhs, ayatollahs, mullahs and clerics' (125); this 'women's Islam' was concerned with justice, equality and ethical conduct. This Islam is essentially oral and aural in nature, which does not undermine its validity, especially in light of the fact that the Quran originally was an oral and aural text recited by Prophet Muhammad to the earliest community of Muslims. And the text remained in that way, oral and aural, even several years after his death. And much, much later, spanning even centuries, it was codified into Islamic jurisprudence by male clerics who lived in rigidly patriarchal societies and whose interpretation of Islam was, therefore, highly influenced by the patriarchal tradition of those societies. Religious interpretation is, for the most part, culture-specific. While religion influences a culture, religious interpretation, in its turn, is also influenced by the existing norms in a given culture. Therefore, if a religion is interpreted in a patriarchal culture, it is bound to be coloured with patriarchal conventions. And that is what happened with Islamic exegesis. The patriarchal, intolerant version of the religion, derived from the Quranic verses by the male clerics who were against gender-equality, became the textual, official, 'men's Islam'. Commenting on the rigid, stifling nature of this Islam which largely bypassed the ethical message of the Quran, the memoirist wrote: '...it is the Islam of the arcane, mostly medieval written heritage in which sheikhs are trained, and it is "men's" Islam...a minority of men who made the laws and wielded (like the ayatollahs of Iran today) enormous power in their societies' (125-126). The author also argued that the reason why this rigid, official Islam remained dominant throughout the centuries up to the present age, was because it was the Islam of the politically powerful who had always used the religion to entrench their authority as can be witnessed in present day Iran, Saudi Arabia and the other Islamic countries. Throughout history they outlawed and eradicated those readings of Islam, that could undermine their authority. They had branded those readings as heretical. That the ethical spirit of Islam, which is the source of spiritual comfort to Muslim women and also to the ordinary, believing Muslim men, is intrinsic to the Quran, has been maintained by the author:

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. And yet it is exactly these recurring themes and this permeating spirit that are for the most part left out of the medieval texts or smothered and buried under a welter of abstruse "learning" (126).

What the memoirist argues about 'women's Islam' is in alignment with the Islam advocated by the Islamic feminists—a modern interpretation of Islam that is not androcentric and misogynist but is accommodating of gender-equality. The author is aware about the temporality and context-specificity of cultural texts including the Quran itself. That is why she called for a newer reading of Islam, that would not be viewed through the prisms of patriarchy but would be in favour of an egalitarian social-order. It can be argued that her unique position in the middle ground between different cultures in the diaspora, that is the Third Space, made her all the more conscious about the contingent nature of cultural symbols and signs. Bhabha said: 'it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meanings and the symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (55). The memoirist undertook precisely this task in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992). Evaluating and historicizing Islamic culture in relation to women since ancient times, she re-read the Islamic texts and symbols and re-examined the different cultural contexts in which those texts and symbols took the doctrinal shape of institutional Islam and its rigid rules about women; in this process, she showed that, contrary to the claims of Muslim patriarchy, there was not any finality or normativity associated with the meaning-making process in Islam and that the symbols and signs in the Islamic texts could be reinterpreted from a feminist point of view. In underscoring the fluidity of the Islamic exegesis and its inherent ethical spirit, her aim was to contest the Islamophobic perspective of the mainstream West. While Ahmed productively used her hybridity and the language of the First World to write about her own heritage and thus to counter Western vilification of Arab Muslims, it is to be noted that she was

not a blind apologist for her culture. In her critique, she spared no ill-practices and beliefs in her culture as was manifest in her criticism of the monolithic nationalist ideology of her homeland and the patriarchal aspects of her culture.

The memoirist critiqued the West and the Western stereotypes about Arab Muslim culture on many occasions in her memoir. Her writing, however, did not show a uniformly oppositional stance against the West. Her postcolonial consciousness led her to write back to the racist and imperialist narratives of the West; but her position in the Third Space endowed her with a vision that enabled her to perceive the positive aspects of her host country and that of the West in general. To clarify that the American society is not monolithic, the author explained in her memoir that in the post 9/11 era, while the bigotry against the Arab Muslims was rampant in the U.S, there were many Americans who came to the aid of the persecuted Muslims. The memoir detailed how in the face of the attacks against Muslim women who wore the veil, non-Muslim American women's groups organized escort services for those Muslim women and how some two thousands of non-Muslim Americans rushed to a mosque and formed a protective circle around it when the mosque was fired on by some fanatic Americans. The author noted that even at the time of British and French imperial aggression against Egypt in 1956 after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, all the Western countries except the aggressors, were in support of Egypt and finally the United States, with the help of the UN, forced Britain and France to retreat from Egypt. Pointing out that even inside the British parliament two of the ministers resigned in protest of Britain's invasion of Egypt, the memoirist underscored the fact that no community, no culture was homogeneous. Positive and negative elements are to be found in every culture and the memoirist appreciates the positive sides of each culture—both her native one and the host one. She, in fact, combines in her consciousness traces of both of these cultures as her diasporic life made her a culturally hybrid subject; and finally, she comes to celebrate this hybridity especially in view of the interdependent, interconnected, hybridized world of today. That the author is not in favour of any pure, cultural tradition but have positive faith in global cultural hybridization can be seen when she observes:

Ideas, ideals, hopes, desires, expectations, strategies in pursuit of the cause of justice, all now—like everything else today—easily cross borders as if borders are scarcely relevant, scarcely even discernible demarcations tracing differences and separations across our globe. Their easy flow across these now vanishing lines quietly and powerfully underscores the fact that we are inextricably and inescapably one world—a reality we ignore at our peril' (317).

So it can be inferred that the middle ground or what Bhaba calls the Third Space between two cultures, that is inhabited by the memoirist, eventually turns into a source of great strength for her, because, as Bhaba argues, the Third Space is a border zone where cultures can come together for a dialogue and from this dialogue emerges a 'hybrid identity' which is made up of traces of both cultural identity and which celebrates the state of not being rooted in either culture but belonging to both. Bhaba says, 'It is the 'third space' of enunciation, a distinct space of its own where 'interdependence' and 'mutual construction' leads to the formation of a new cultural identity' (37). This new cultural identity which is 'hybridity' does not regard 'authenticity of identity' as important; rather it valorizes mixed identities and rootlessness. In the words of Bhaba, the 'interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (4). The memoirist was finally able to celebrate her hybrid identity as an enrichment and not as a lack after a period of agonizing negotiation between the conflicting cultures. Drifting in and out of the two cultures she is positioned at that undetermined threshold space where she unsettles the notion of cultural purity and revels in her hybridized identity. Through the exploration of this identity she could rise above the polarized binary of 'us' (Arabs) and 'them' (Americans) and expressed her concern in her memoir as an Arab American who had been able to resolve her identity-conflict.

The discussion of the memoir demonstrates that the author looks at the issues she addresses in her memoir from multiple perspectives. When she is critiquing Arab nationalism, she is taking the standpoint of an Arab/Egyptian who strongly supports the old, multi-religious, Egyptian social-order; when she is censuring racism and Western imperialism, she is speaking from the point of view of an Arab postcolonial subject; when she is criticizing the sexism in her home country, her position is that of a feminist; at the time of subverting racist white feminism, her stance is that of a Third World feminist and when she is contesting Islamophobia, she is voicing herself as a Muslim. Reflecting on her plural and culturally hybrid identity, the author remarked: '...I think that we are always plural. Not either this *or* that, but this *and* that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousness a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us' (25). The memoirist, however, emphasizes that in this convergence of traditions and cultures, there should not be any hierarchy. Her point is that all the cultures are worth knowing and they should be approached without any predetermined perceptions. This belief of hers was

also expressed when, in an interview, upon being asked what was the most important contribution she could make as an American writer, she answered: 'I would like to, in some way, make it possible to make them [Americans] aware...that the cultures they are unfamiliar with are not inferior and may be as rich and as worthy of getting insight into...Another thing is to suggest that there being so many lenses is a very worthwhile thing' (qtd in Abdelarazek 30). In the end, the choice of the memoirist, therefore, is to persist in her Arab Islamic roots while embracing her American identity too. She is appreciative of her host country for it has provided her a platform to carve an autonomous space for herself. Her affection for her host-country can be seen when by the end of the memoir, she stated that she no longer considered America her host land but it had become one of her two homelands (312). Commenting on her life in America, the memoirist wrote on a finishing note:

...thereafter my life became part of other stories, American stories. It becomes part of the story of feminism in America, the story of women in America, the story of people of color in America, the story of Arabs in America, the story of Muslims in America, and part of the story of America itself and of American lives in a world of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders. (296)

So, it can be concluded that the memoirist has finally been able to reconcile her Arab and American identity transcending cultural borders in the Third Space and, thus, to form an empowering hybrid identity which enabled her to retain her difference but also to rise above cultural polarization.

NOTES

¹ The president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 when Britain and America withdrew their offer to finance Nasser's project of building the Aswan High Dam on the river, Nile. The reason that caused Britain and America to withdraw their financial offer was Nasser's growing affinity with the Soviet Union with which the two countries were involved in the Cold War. In response to this breach of promise by Britain and America, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal which was owned by Britain and France. Along with avenging the insult, his aim was to finance the building of the Aswan High Dam with the revenues generated by the canal. Combined with their fear of losing the canal-revenues, Britain's and France's greatest apprehension was that their shipment of petroleum from the Persian Gulf through the Suez Canal would now be obstructed if they lost the ownership of the canal to Nasser. So, allied with Israel, Britain and France attacked Egypt to regain their control of the canal and to overthrow Nasser.

² A group of nationalist young army officers who were known as the Free Officers in the armed forces of Egypt, started the Egyptian revolution of 1952, led by Mohammed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser, to depose King Farouk. The revolutionaries had strong pro-Palestinian sentiment and their principal accusation, among others, against King Farouk was that, owing to his and his army establishment's corruption, Egypt lost the 1948 war against Israel. So, the revolutionaries held King Farouk and his government responsible for Israel's victory and the subsequent wretched fate of the Palestinians. They also announced their agenda to be anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist through their advocacy of Arab nationalism.

³ The term, 'Zionism' was coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum, a Viennese-born Jewish journalist and writer. The ideology of Zionism took shape towards the end of the nineteenth century. Centuries of anti-Semitic persecution caused several Jewish intellectuals to reach the consensus that Jews need a safe homeland where they can establish a sovereign state of their own. According to them, only the establishment of a state exclusively for the Jewish people, can enable the Jews to have access to a safe life free from persecution. These intellectuals finally decided upon the land of Palestine to be this designated homeland for the Jews because Palestine was stated to be the ancestral land of the Jews who were uprooted from this land time and again by foreign invaders. This ideology, that pivoted upon the idea of restoring the Jews to their ancestral land in Palestine so that they can found a sovereign Jewish state there, is called Zionism. There are several forms of Zionism like political secular Zionism, messianic religious Zionism, cultural Zionism and even Christian Zionism. But all forms of Zionism are based on the core idea of returning the Jews to their ancient homeland of Palestine where they would create the Jewish state of Israel. One of the most prominent proponents of Zionism is Theodor Herzl who founded the Zionist organization in 1897 for the advancement of the Zionist cause. The Zionist aspiration was realized with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 in the land of Palestine. After the creation of the Jewish state, the goal of the Zionists has been to ensure and consolidate its existence by removing the threats that might jeopardize the security of the Jewish state. It should be noted here that the two terms, 'Zionist' and 'Jew' are distinguished from each other. Somebody who is not a Jew can also be a Zionist. On the other hand, if a Jew does not support Zionism, s/he cannot be called a Zionist. But majority of the global Jewry, especially after the Holocaust, are in favour of Zionism. The countries in the Middle East are generally against Zionism because they consider the formation of Israel

as the usurpation of the homeland of the Palestinian Muslims and Christians, more than 700,000 of whom became homeless refugees after the creation of Israel. In terms of human rights, the condition of the Palestinians who live in the occupied territory of Israel is deplorable as they are constantly persecuted by the state-authority of Israel.

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