



## A Border Passage: From Cairo to America--A Woman's Journey

By *Leila Ahmed*

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In language that vividly evokes the lush summers of Cairo and the stark beauty of the Arabian desert, Leila Ahmed tells a moving tale of her Egyptian childhood growing up in a rich tradition of Islamic women and describes how she eventually came to terms with her identity as a feminist living in America.

As a young woman in Cairo in the 1940s and '50s, Ahmed witnessed some of the major transformations of this century—the end of British colonialism, the creation of Israel, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the breakdown of Egypt's once multireligious society. Amid the turmoil, she searched to define herself—and to see how the world defined her—as a woman, a Muslim, an Egyptian, and an Arab. In this memoir, she poignantly reflects upon issues of language, race, and nationality, while unveiling the hidden world of women's Islam. Ahmed's story will be an inspiration to anyone who has ever struggled to define their own cultural identity.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

As in her widely admired scholarly book *Women and Gender in Islam*, Ahmed addresses how historical and political forces shape personal identities, particularly those of Arab Muslim women. Here, however, the subject is Ahmed's own identity as a scholar, a woman, a Muslim and an upper-class Egyptian at home in both East and West. In elegant prose, she tells of her childhood in Cairo, her college years at Cambridge and of teaching in Abu Dhabi and America. In Ahmed's nuanced rendering, politics are not the backdrop to people's lives but their fabric. The internalization of colonial attitudes, the 1952 revolution and Arab nationalism, class issues, the effects of Zionism and the politics of gender roles are woven into her life and the lives of those around her. 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. Indeed, throughout this fluid memoir, she provocatively reformulates the terms by which men—Western and Arab—have defined women through her own cross-cultural comparisons of women's communities, as when she describes the all-female Girton College (at Cambridge) as a harem—"the harem as I had lived it, the harem of older women presiding over the young."

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From Library Journal

Ahmed, a professor of women's studies at Amherst and the author of such scholarly works as *Women and Gender in Islam* (Yale Univ., 1993), writes a personal memoir of her childhood in 1940s and 1950s Cairo, education in England, and teaching work in America. Like the most skillful and subtle of teachers, she entices you with what seems like an afternoon chat over tea; only when it is over do you realize how much you have learned and how fascinating the journey has been. She imparts a great deal of Egyptian history, culture, and sociology, including some background on the concept of "Arabness," as well as a brilliant introduction to the difference between the Islam of men and the Islam of women. The descriptions of her grandmother's salon will no doubt strike a chord of memory with any Western female who spent time listening to mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in the kitchen at family gatherings. A delightful read; recommended for libraries that collect in intercultural, gender, or Middle Eastern studies. Julie Still, Rutgers Univ., Camden, NJ

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From [Booklist](#)

Questions of identity engage Ahmed in this gracefully written and deeply felt reflection on her Egyptian Muslim childhood, Cambridge education, and life in U.S. academia. Born into Cairo's upper class during the 1940s, Ahmed, professor of women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was taught to value all things European, an orientation discredited by the revolution, Nasser's ascent to power, and the emergence of Arab nationalism. Ahmed's confusion about her place in the new Egypt was further exacerbated by her engineer father's bold opposition to Nasser's pet project, the Aswan High Dam. She was also profoundly affected by her observations of the great divide between the sexes, and she uses her carefully parsed memories of her extended family and friends to introduce striking insights into the radically different ways Islamic men and women interpret their faith. Poetic and questing, Ahmed brings the same perspicacity to her musings on the experience of being seen as a woman of color in England and the U.S., ultimately illuminating the malignancy of so many of our assumptions regarding gender, race, culture, and who has the power to declare what is right. *Donna Seaman*

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