An Open Letter To Our Readers

The transition from the old to the new editorial board was not as smooth as one would have liked it to be. It has affected the satisfaction with which some of our reviewers and readers regard our operation. Our special apology goes to Marilyn Giorgio-Poole, whose review of Elizabeth Fernea's *Women and the Family in the Middle East* was submitted last year but was received by the new editorial board in late February, after our first issue had appeared.

The second issue of AMEWS NEWS comes to you in July, instead of June, because the review books solicited by the previous editorial group were received by the new book review editor late last May. As a result, we have had to wait for publishers to send us books to be reviewed. Then, we quickly appealed to some members and supporters to review these books in an unreasonably short period of time. Their responsiveness enabled us to put out the summer issue in a timely fashion.

We would like to correct an oversight in our listing of the membership of the committee studying the feasibility of publishing an AMEWS journal which appeared in our last issue. The members of that committee are: Suad Joseph, Munira Charrad, Leila Ahmed, Margot Badran, Judith Tucker and Hamideh Sedghi. Hamideh Sedghi's name was inadvertently left out in the previous listing.

The new editorial board has retained, for most part, the format followed by our predecessors. However, in this issue we introduce a new section. It includes Marilyn Booth and Margot Badran's responses to Mervat Hatem's review of their books, which appeared in the last issue, and her reply. We propose to continue this forum into a permanent section where issues of intellectual and political concerns will be regularly discussed in a critical fashion. We suggest that this section be entitled "Critical Forum."

For the Editorial Board
Mervat Hatem, Editor

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Past Events

Reported by Afaf Mahfouz.

The above two-day meeting explored the theme of "Poverty, Development and Collective Survival". Six workshops presented exchanges of specific experiences of projects involving women in development and reviewed the implications of these experiences for development programming and policy. Several hundred women—decision makers, union organizers, students and women form the professions and business—from five continents were the predominant participants in this international sharing of experiences and thoughts.

A focus of the full conference and principal framework for the Society's work for the period 1988-91 was the report, Our Common Future, prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations and chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Bruntland. Her commission called for the sustainable development based on environmental realities and stressed the importance of recognizing and further exploiting women's productive potential.

The Bruntland Report and the conference discussions provide hope that many development problems thought to be "women's issues" will be addressed in the future by leaders and specialists in the heart of major development areas; such as, in economic development strategies, population issues, environmental problems, cultural identity, education and health.

The Society for International Development is a non-governmental organization with 8,000 active members working through 55 chapters in 42 countries. For further information, write to: The Society for International Development, Palazzo Civilita del Lavoro, 00144, Rome, Italy.

Upcoming Events

The Ahfad Journal: Women and Change (published by Ahfad University for Women, P.O.B. 167, Omdurman, Sudan) is planning the publication of two special issues on the following:
1. Issue vol. 5:2 will follow the theme of women and nutrition.
2. Issue vol. 6:1 will follow the theme of women and energy.

Your valuable contribution to either issues will be appreciated. We would like to receive manuscripts before the following deadlines.
1. Manuscripts on women and nutrition will be reviewed in January 1988.
2. Manuscripts on women and energy will be reviewed in August 1988.
Authors of articles will receive a free copy of the relevant issues.


Fall 1988: Lecture Tour by Fatima Mernissi (submitted by Susan Schaefer Davis)

Moroccan sociologist and author Fatima Mernissi will be in the United States October 1 -November 15. She will speak at several institutions to raise funds to finance an independent research setting, in which she can work without any obligation to state or international agencies. She is eager to discuss her work, and to see old friends and new trends.

Two possible topics of talks are her newest books. Le Harem Politique examines the sacred text as a harem for women by investigating the historical background for three years of the Prophet's life at Medina during which there was a debate on sex equality (published by Albin Michel, 22 Rue Hyghens, Paris 14). Doing Daily Battle contains interviews with eight women of different classes describing their lives and survival strategies (published by the Women's Press, 43 Great Sutton Street, London ECIVOX; may be republished in the U.S.).

As of early summer, her schedule is: Trinity College Hartford, CT about Oct. 1-7; Cornell University, NY, Oct. 8-10; Cambridge, MA Oct. 10-23; the University of Illinois in Urbana and Chicago, Oct. 24-28; and the first half of November on the East Coast, with perhaps a stop in the Philadelphia area. (We would love to have her at MESA, but unless some really generous funding is found, that looks unlikely.)

She would like to arrange more talks in those areas, and as far south as Washington. Please contact:
1st) Susan Schaefer Davis, 218/562-4904 until 8/30; 215/649-7717 after that. She can discuss the details of funding and let you know if the time you want is still available.
REVIEWS


From its opening page, it is obvious that this is no ordinary collection of scholarly articles on women of the Mediterranean going over once more the familiar variations on extended families, honor and the control of sexuality, motherhood and the meaning of the domestic in sexually segregated societies, Christian and Muslim. Giving these predictable themes only a passing glance, the editor sets the tone for the articles to follow in a brief introduction that stresses two issues: capitalism and feminism. Capitalism divides the countries of the Mediterranean and the difference it makes to women whether they are on the developed or underdeveloped end of this divide is one important theme. The complex relationships of domination between North and South (of the Mediterranean) make for ambiguities and ambivalences in women's attitudes toward feminism. The tensions and often unstable accommodations women in various parts of this region experience and make feminism and nationalist politics on the one hand, and feminism and traditional family life or religious ideals on the other, are perhaps the most constant themes of the paper. With mutual misunderstanding or ignorance being the rule between women of the North and South, Gadant explains, "We therefore thought it useful and necessary to put together a few guidelines for studying the ways in which feminist ideologies are articulated with the various social realities with which women are confronted" (p.3).

The advantage of this explicitly political and politicized perspective is that it allows for the inclusion of many sorts of women and experiences which anthropological collections, for example, would be silent about. For instance, the first chapter is a short personal memoir called "Becoming Liberated in Beirut" by a Lebanese woman (Mokhtar) who describes not only her early desires for education and her university years of feminism and nationalism but the grim realities of civil war and then the bombs and fighting as the Israelis laid siege to Beirut in 1982. In traditional collections, village studies might prevail; here only a few of the women interviewed live in rural areas and many of the women live outside their own countries as emigrants and exiles. They must deal with bureaucracies, work, school, and political organizations and decide how to live and think. The kinds of lives they live and the ideas they espouse vary by class background and circumstances as much as nationality. Immigration, emigration, exile, war, consumerism, work, education, politics--
these are, as the articles in this book show, just as important to women of the Mediterranean as marriage, virtue and motherhood, not to mention women's rights.

If anything marks this collection, it is its fairly consistent concern with feminism and women's possibilities, raised about or by women from most of the countries that border the Mediterranean: Lebanon, Algeria, Palestine, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Corsica, Italy, France and Spain. But as someone accustomed to reading the work of anthropologists, who try to understand the lives of women within the social, cultural and political contexts in which they live, I found jarring the occasionally judgmental condemnations of "traditional" women and their lives in the name of a feminism that accepts uncritically the valued of individual freedom, companionate marriage and the nuclear family. With the exception of an excellent piece by Minicucu on a village in Southern Italy, not one piece showed any sense of the complexity of sex and gender in "traditional" settings or in the past. Petek-Salom and Hukum end their survey of the history of the women's emancipation in Turkey with a question they posed to the Turkish immigrant women they interviewed in Europe: "We asked them what was the most important thing for women's liberation and what they wanted for Turkish women and themselves" (p. 107). They interpret their respondents' confusion as follows: "Some didn't know how to reply to this last question. They are so unused to being invited to speak..." (p.108). Yet this is a question that presumes much. Perhaps they were silent because the question was alien, as were those educated researchers who saw them as "living evidence of the anachronisms of Turkey" (p.105). This is not the only piece in which applying the standards of Northern feminist worlds narrows the authors' understanding of the complexities of other women's lives.

For the most part, though the pieces are not marred by this sort of attitude. The most interesting articles tend to be the memoirs and long interviews. One of the memorable women who speaks in this collection is Pepita Carpena, a sixty-three year old militant Spanish anarchist who had been active in a working-class feminist movement in the late 1930s. She talks about what the Free Women's Movement wanted, including sexual liberation for both sexes, but she also talks about her political sympathies with the French student movement of '68 and her troubles with her daughter who has discovered, through psychoanalysis, that she can blame all her troubles on her overbearing mother. At the opposite extreme is an equally memorable young woman, Sekine, a sixteen year old Iranian activist devoted to Khomeini. She has undergone an "inner revolution" and so quits her degrading job as a domestic servant and rebels against her father whom she criticizes for not being a revolutionary or Muslim enough because he will not allow her to participate fully in the cause for fear of her sexual reputation.
The extraordinary range of lives described, analyzed or recounted also contributes to the weakness of the collection, which is a translation of a special issue of *Peuples Méditerranéens* published in French in 1984. The 18 chapters were written by a diverse group composed of academics, social workers, psychologists, journalists, students, activists and even one potter. The mixture of genres is as complex as the backgrounds of the authors and their subjects. Political tracts jostle brief personal/political memoirs; long candid interviews are followed by reports of attitudinal surveys. Canned histories of women's place in socialist Yugoslavia or defenses of Corsican women's loyalty to national identity in the face of their physical flight and rejection of its language seem dry and general next to a former midwife's prose-poem evoking the disappeared women's world of childbirth amongst incense and angels in an Algeria where hospitals have now taken over. A matter-of-fact account of a mother's search for her fifteen year old son who has disappeared to help fight the Israeli invasion of Lebanon shares space with a grand ahistorical meditation, in the tradition of some of the well known French feminists, on women's culture and the possibilities for their developing an identity that is not just negative.

This mixing of disciplines and genres as well as subject matter and emphasis makes the book seem even less unified or coherent than most edited collections. The unevenness of the articles (and a uniformly stilted translation) exacerbates the problem. But the main problem this collection illustrates is that one can no longer, if ever it was possible, use "women", whether across cultures or within somewhat defined geographical area, to delimit a subject. It simply covers too much.


With this issue of *Khamsin*, the publication announces its transformation from a journal into a series of books. The title of its first volume, "Women in the Middle East" is a refreshing change from those titles that include the phrase "Muslim Women" or one of its variations, as if the most salient element in understanding the status, struggles and concerns of women of the region is their religion. Unfortunately, however, the cohesion usually required of a volume of articles is strikingly absent from this collection. The six contributions are of uneven quality in terms of scholarship and readability, vary in approach, and are weighted heavily in favor of discussions of Palestinian and Israeli women.
The first article, "The Arab Woman" by Majida Salman, was presumably intended to serve as a general introduction to the articles that follow. The need to generalize in such a presentation is understandable, but at times it leads the author to overstate her case. The result is a discussion that fails to distinguish or, at very least, hint at class and regional differences that condition the position of women in the Middle East. For example, she treats Islam as if it were an independent variable, the most important conditioner of developments in Middle Eastern society, at least as far as women are concerned. She also seems to argue that the "Islamic state" (which she never defines) will, because it is Islamic, implement policies dictated by Islam (which she treats as undifferentiated) and which affect women (p. 11). This sort of reductionism is useful for neither student nor specialist. The important points Salman does make, particularly regarding women and sexuality in Islam, are lost in what is, on the whole, a discussion that appears to be filled with anger. Her anger may well be justified; but is out of place in an academic presentation.

Selma Botman's article, "Women's Participation in Radical Egyptian Politics 1939-1952," the only historical piece in the collection, is a useful contribution to the literature on women's political activism in the Middle East. Focusing on Egypt in the 1940s and early 1950s, Botman traces the evolution of activism among a certain group of Egyptian women, particularly communists, and discusses the difficulties they encountered both from Egyptian society and the Egyptian state. While she states at the beginning of the discussion that much of the information in the article is based on interviews, footnotes would, nonetheless, have been a valuable addition to the article. More problematic, however, is Botman's thesis: that women's activity was able to flourish because the power structure of the Egyptian state led, during this period, to the state's "vulnerability and ineffectiveness" and that once Nasser came to power that activity stopped. The thesis is an interesting one, but in this discussion it is assumed, not proven. Without more information on the nature of the Egyptian state at the time, it remains unsubstantiated.

Moreover, although not to discount the importance of the struggle in which these Egyptian women engaged, the author hints at—she notes that their numbers were few—but does not fully develop the extent of their marginality. Presented in this way, almost out of context, their role and the significance of their activism within the larger Egyptian society is exaggerated. Nor are the reasons for their marginality—which presumably also derive, at least in part, from the nature of the state power structure—examined.

The other four articles deal with Palestinian and Israeli women. Hamida Kazi's article, "Palestinian Women and the National Liberation Movement," is in large part an uninspired review of the
history of Palestinian women's political activity and the current body of accepted wisdom on Palestinian women. The piece does not read smoothly and contains errors on the history of the Palestinian women's movement. For example (p. 28) the women's organization founded after the establishment of the PLO was the General Union of Palestinian women, not the Palestinian Women's Association (as Kazi calls it) and could not have been the vehicle of women's participation in the first Palestinian National Council (PNC) because that PNC created the PLO in 1964. In fact, the General Union of Palestinian Women was created in 1965 in Jerusalem, more than a year after the creation of the PLO.

And, while the article claims to focus on the West Bank, the reader is at times uncertain as to which Palestinian community (ies), the author is referring. Even though there is much that Palestinian women share across the diaspora, the community in each country has developed its own characteristics; as a result, women's experiences have been by no means uniform. A more serious problem, however, concerns the author's form of citation: there are several instances in the article (pp. 36 and 38) in which it is fairly clear that Kazi has paraphrased from Julie Petest (Merip, 1986, pp. 23-24), but has not properly cited her. At very best, this is sloppy scholarship; at worst, it may constitute plagiarism.

The second article on Palestinian women is "A Palestinian Woman in Prison," by Laila Hamdani. A personal account of the time al-Hamdani spent in prison, this piece includes many fascinating (as well as at times frightening) details of prison life, among them, stories of Palestinian women's interaction with Jewish women prisoners.

The fifth article, by Nira Yuval-Davis, entitled "The Jewish Collectivity," is the best of the collection. It is well written and thorough; the only properly documented piece in the book. The author examines the concept of a "Jewish state" versus a "state for the Jews" as background to a discussion of the "ways in which Jewish women and the issue of childbearing have been ideologically constructed to play certain roles in the definition and reproduction of Jewish identity" (p. 60). Within the framework of the Jewish state's need first to establish and then to maintain a Jewish majority in Palestine, Yuval-Davis elaborated on the plans for the "transfer" of Palestinians out of the country as well as the related concept of "national reproduction as national security."

The final piece, by Debbie Lerman, is a brief presentation—not really an article—on some of the obstacles to increased cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli women on women's issues.
In addition to the various problems mentioned above, this book suffers from poor editing. Salman's article has no conclusion, it simply ends. Kazi's article contains numerous grammatical errors, and Yuval-Davis' piece, while the strongest in the collection, devotes too much space to background material rather than focusing the bulk of its attention on the critical issues she raises.

In short, this is a disappointing book. Because of the conservative nature of the predominant discourse on the Middle East, the fact is that radical scholarship must be superior in presentation, documentation and style to mainstream scholarship if it is to have any chance of being heard. This volume of Khamsin will do little to convince a mainstream audience that radical scholarship has much to offer.

Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change, Elizabeth Fernea, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). Reviewed by Marilyn Giorgio-Poole, English Department, Westmoreland County Community College, Youngwood, PA.

WOMEN AND THE FAMILY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NEW VOICES OF CHANGE continues nicely the title theme of Fernea and Bezirgan's earlier anthology MIDDLE EASTERN MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK (1977). That is to say, in several instances, this recent text presents writers previously unheard in English. It also offers in every instance contemporary writers from or on the Middle East—those of the younger generation now taking their turn to speak out and be heard not just by countries, but their own countries, but well beyond such confines. Thus not only is the motif of speaking/voices internal in each book, but it also acts as a unifying element from book to book.

This anthology is reminiscent of a walk through a Middle Eastern bazaar. Just as the shopper will find something to interest, delight, intrigue, or inform everyone, so, too, will the reader. Like the bazaar, there is spread before the reader enticing samples from great diversity. Indeed, diversity is a key virtue of this text—diversity of authors, fields of study, topics, political, philosophical, religious views. Contributors are journalists, poets, anthropologists, medical professionals, literary critics, historians to name only a few. Many of the writers wear at least two hats and writers of both genders also appear.

The six major sections of the book cover these topics: The Family; Health and Education; War, Politics, and Revolution; Religion and Law; Work; Identity. A Preface, Introduction (Part I), a Postscript (Part VIII), and helpful Notes on the Contributors round out the text. Each of the major sections consists of
an overview and three to six selections made up of literary
works, scholarly studies, journalistic pieces, and interviews.
In most cases, fine sets of end notes follow the selections.

The overviews for the sections Part I - Introduction, Part V
- Religion and Law, and Part VI - Work are particularly informa-
tive as are the sections themselves. Also worthy are the
selections Part II - The Family and the articles by Baghdadi and
De Frugis and Sayigh in Part IV - War, Politics, and Revolution.
In general, the weakest selections are the literary efforts.
This may be the case not because they are weak per se but because
of two problems. Some selections are excerpts from novels, so
the reader is missing important background. Second, translating
literary works is a more difficult task than translating
straight, workman-like prose because of the matter of aesthetics.
Choosing the right tone, style, and words to accurately reflect
the original often becomes a delicate balancing act.

While this book is excellent and useful, it is not without
flaws. Happily, they are mostly minor ones consisting of the
typographical error here and there, a few confusing word choices,
some rather dated statistics in two selections, and two instances
of incorrect alphabetizing in the Contributors list. However,
some problems are not so minor. End notes which obfuscate rather
than clarify (note 3, p.132), a poorly executed chart (p.146),
and an interview that is seemingly so taken out of context as to be
virtually meaningless (pp. 308-09) only hinder the reader in
the quest for understanding and detract from an otherwise superi-
or effort.

As a college text, it can be used in many courses both
introductory and upper level. Sociology, anthropology, women's
studies, and Middle Eastern studies courses come quickly to mind.
It will serve well as one text in a multi-text approach and
because it is an anthology, it will give plenty of opportunity to
trigger research ideas in the students. As interesting as most
of the selections are, in some cases, it is the end notes that
really cause the reader to want to investigate further.

What will be eye-opening for students is the inevitability
of identification with the women they read about in this book.
Problems such as day care, health issues, transportation, educa-
tion, career options, family conflicts, etc. have far more that
connect Western women with Middle Eastern women than either might
think at first glance or that so-called liberated Western women
might be willing to admit. The shock of recognition will occur
even to students who are only aware of current events. Greater
recognition will occur in those students who also have a sense of
history.

A good text does not give all the answers; it tantalizes by
the questions it generates in the reader's mind. WOMEN AND THE
FAMILY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NEW VOICES OF CHANGE offers much valuable information that will cause the reader to then seek out further knowledge from other sources.

Reviewed by: Suha Sabbagh, Visiting Scholar, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

Soraya Antonius first historical novel, The Lord, describes conditions in Palestine between 1918, the beginning of the British Mandate, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1936. The author has a remarkable ability to bring back to life a world that has long since disappeared. Through a style that focuses on the seamliness of life in Jaffa and in rural Palestine, the reader is informed about the measures taken by women in preparing the Muni, the winter provisions of grains, onions, oil, and other supplies necessary in the days prior to supermarkets; the practical side of sleep accommodations, whereby, the Lahaf, a thin cotton quilt which doubles as both mattress and covering could be rolled up during the day and stored in Youk, a sort of wall closet; and a description of objects that constitute most peasant dowries, including the Sini (meaning Chinese) which refers here to porcelain imports from China. Born in pre-1948 Palestine, the author has a first hand experience of the world which she describes and, in so doing, preserves for posterity.

The narrative is told mainly from the point of view of Miss Alice, a British missionary who arrived in Jaffa at age 17 — before there was any construction that would merit calling Jaffa a port — to a woman who is recording her story many years later when Miss Alice is seventy years old. The plot centers on the events that led the British authorities to hang a young magician called Tareq, who was also a nationalist rebel and, before that, a favorite student of Miss Alice in the missionary school run by her father in Jaffa. A biblical parallel is drawn between Tareq who is fighting British injustice in Palestine and Jesus, who also stood for justice and peace. Tareq is hung at the end of the holy month of Ramadan, an unprecedented insult to local custom which dictates that no public hanging will take place during the holy feast. The symbolic analogy between his death and the crucifixion illustrates the irony of the colonial encounter, whereby, atrocities were sanctioned in the name of bringing Christianity to the people.

The role of woman within Palestinian society and in the colonial encounter constitutes an important aspect of this work. Even as colonization pits occupiers and occupied against each
other, a certain affinity is formed between Miss Alice on the one hand and Tareq's mother and the neighborhood woman who teach Miss Alice how to accumulate her Muni for the winter months. The author suggests here that, in the early part of occupation at least, European women were more likely to overcome racial prejudice since their position was less imbued with power. In her recollection of Tareq's hanging, Miss Alice, generally reserved in her condemnation of her own people, speaks with overtones that question British motives in Palestine. In retrospect, she is willing to concede that the British lied and made two conflicting promises regarding the future of the country. While the reader may dispute this rather overly positive portrayal of the role of British women missionaries, the important thing is that the novel forces a discussion of the role of gender in the colonial context.

The same idea linking gender this time with basic instincts of nurturing and the hunt as these relate to colonization presents itself in the opening and in the last scene, both linked to the narrative structure on a symbolic level. In the opening scene we encounter a European couple touring the ruins of a castle in Syria where they come across local children selling a bird tightly wrapped around the neck with a string. It becomes evident later, that the woman is the interviewer to whom Miss Alice will confide her story. Partly out of pity, the woman purchases the bird believed to be a pigeon and raises it against objections from Nicholas, her partner, who has no regard for domestic animals or woman it would seem: "There was only one domestic animal that Nicholas wanted at home: a well-buttocked admirer/slave who cooked well and abased herself. On none of these counts, except possibly one, could I qualify" (7). But the bird turns out to be a hawk and refuses taking a symbolic reference to Tareq and through him to all colonized. In the last scene the bird is liberated and soars high only to be shot down by a male hunter who then shares his wine with Nicholas in celebration of their prey. Sexism, colonial relations, crusader history and Tareq's death are all depicted symbolically in those two scenes. But the principle statement pits the nurturing and apathetic side of woman verses the more aggressive behavior of men giving this relation a new meaning in the colonial context.

The author's views regarding the role of women in rural society are depicted in an episode of substantial length recounting the life of Buthaina, a childless peasant woman who is helped by the magician Tareq in overcoming her problem. The author describes here the details that constitute one woman's lot in rural Palestinian society with much honesty and simplicity. Buthaina's beauty and strength of character win over her father's heart. He expresses his love by marrying her to a man who is very much her senior but who has the means to provide for her. Her relation to her new husband, her relation to his children from his departed wife whom the old man still misses, are explai-
ned from within the consciousness of the period and the culture. While the author is critical in her assessment of the role of woman, she is conscious not to judge this world through present consciousness and through the values of a different time.

Finally, the novel proposes that the injustice committed against woman in rural patriarchal society cannot be singled out for discussion and must be understood against the far greater devastations visited on the population as a whole in occupation. A certain parallel is drawn between these two forms of oppression throughout. While life in rural Palestine has not been particularly kind to Buthaina, yet it is the British authorities that are the principle cause behind the destruction of her world: first, when the British soldiers search and then turn her house into rubble and second, when in an effort to discredit the nationalist rebel the British employ the concept of female honor against the population and circulate a rumor of a relation linking Tareq and Buthaina. As a result, Abu Ramzi repudiates Buthaina and marries again. This episode is narrated in the sequel to this novel, Where the Jinn Consult, published in 1987.

As a first novel, *The Lord* has several technical problems. The plot sometimes meanders aimlessly (a problem which is overcome in the second novel) and the emotional distance of the author sometimes interferes with the relation between the reader and the text. But the author's ability to render life in Palestinian villages so totally believable through the smells and the colors of the countryside makes reading this work a worthwhile experience. *The Lord* is a must for anyone interested in the social history of Palestine during the early years of the British mandate.

**Critical Forum**

AMEWS NEWS received the following responses by Marilyn Booth and Margot Badran to Mervat Hatem's review which appeared in the last issue.

**Marilyn Booth's Response:**

Reviewing Nawal El-Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (AMEWS News II no. 6, Feb. 1988, pp. 7-8), Mervat Hatem criticizes three aspects of my translation. I thank her for correctly pointing out one careless mistake (p.105), although to label this as a "significant failure" seems misplaced, as it is tangential to the narrative. She also claims an omission of fact in my translation of the narrator's memories concerning her mother's death; in fact, the passage she criticizes is ambiguous in the original, and I felt it important to preserve the ambiguity in the translation.
More serious is Hatem's statement "Sometimes nigaab is translated as a veil (p. 124) which is very inaccurate and does not alert the Western reader to the differences between the veil and the nigaab." Hatem fails to note that throughout the translation I consistently use the Arabic terms nigaab and higaab [the Egyptian pronunciation seemed most appropriate for transliteration], after explaining each (p.28). Similarly, I use the term m.naggaba (first on p.46) throughout. I use "veil[s]" occasionally when the Arabic referent, having just been used, is clear (e.g., pp.39, 67, 87). The single example to which Hatem refers (p.124) occurs in direct reported speech. Not only would nigaab have been awkward here, I (and the author) felt, but - more importantly - the reported speech act itself makes the Arabic referent clear, especially since the reader cannot fail to be familiar, by this point in the book, with the nigaab and higaab, the distinction between them, and the imprecision of the term "veil". In balancing readability and accuracy, and striving to sacrifice neither, the translator must consider how the text will be read as a whole; each word occurs in a context, and I believe my use of "veil" is appropriately contextualized by the consistent use of the Arabic terms.

I would also like to comment briefly on Hatem's discussion of El-Saadawi's narration. As Hatem suggests, one of the strengths the book is its presentation of El-Saadawi's own background and how that shapes her reaction to the experience of prison. However, the author's skillful interweaving of past life experience and present (according to the narratorial structure) prison experience does not lead us merely to a dead end, as Hatem implies - to the "slogans and cliches" and "irreverent [sic] attitude to what others view as serious issues" with which the reviewer dismisses El-Saadawi's attempts to communicate with officials within the prison and without. One of the important motifs of the book is the distinction between different levels of officialdom, founded on the intersecting bases of gender and class and maintained in the prison and government hierarchies, and the resulting differences in communication with representatives of "the system" which the prisoner encounters (a motif found elsewhere in prison literature). Of the two examples which Hatem names as representative of El-Saadawi's failure to communicate with the prison guard (pp.69, 96), only first in fact concerns the guard, and it initiates a monologue which echoes some of El-Saadawi's own musings, with the added specificity of long observance of the prison system. The second example concerns the (also female) prison warden, who is utterly unable to respond to El-Saadawi; it is the distinction between these two prison officials which is significant. And, when El-Saadawi tells the National Conference of Popular Forces that "A peasant is the one whose urine is read" (p.111 not p. 11 as in Hatem's review), we see that in fact it is this "irreverent" comment which hits the mark. As Hatem says, the "rebel" in El-Saadawi is
appealing. Yet such incidents chronicle more than the rebel confined.

Margot Badran's Response:

Nervat Hatem in her review of Huda Shaarawi, HAREM YEARS: THE MEMOIRS OF AN EGYPTIAN FEMINIST which I translated, introduced, provided historical notes and an epilogue for levels--without substantiation--the serious charge that I have violated the integrity of the text. She writes that my translation "backfires," she alleges, "for a number of methodological reasons."

Hatem who seems to conjure up some sacred text chiseled in stone, does not appear to have read my preface. Huda Shaarawi towards the end of her life began to dictate her memoirs to her secretary, Abd al-Hamid Fahmi Mursi who copied them down in a notebook now in the possession of her cousin, Hawa Idris. As I explained in my preface, Shaarawi, before she died, entrusted Idris to oversee the publication of the memoirs specifically mentioning matters of language and arrangement. Shaarawi explicitly did not regard what was written down by dictation as THE violate text. Why then should Hatem insist upon this? When Idris gave me permission to publish an English version she made Shaarawi's position clear to me and I accepted her conditions. This seems to be what Hatem calls my defining of my role as translator as aggressive.

Hatem's problems stem from the way SHE chooses to see the memoirs. She is disturbed that I did some reordering of the dictated text. She writes, "Badran decided to place a section written by Sha'rawi to defend the nationalist credentials of her father (Muhammad Sultan Pasha), whom she lost when she was five years old, in an appendix in order "to preserve the natural flow of the chronology"--the word I used was narrative--and I was referring to Shaarawi's own recollections, not second person testimony. The section in question was NOT written by Huda Shaarawi as Hatem says but by Qallini Fahmi Pasha (see p.148); this was not part of her reminiscences but added, albeit important, material.

Hatem is distressed by what she calls "Badran's decision to focus on the harem years, which were more complete than the section on the nationalist events and feminist activities that followed the 1919 revolution." Nationalist and feminist activities of 1919 and after through 1923 were part of the harem years. Hatem seems to have missed the point that harem years was not simply about "the harem" (is this a sign of orientalist myopsy) but the years Shaarawi spent adhering to harem conventions which her continued veiling signalled. Hatem writes "Had Badran used the more detailed and complete accounts of the 1919 revolution,
which constituted the bulk of the published Arabic version, the English version would have been a substantially different kind of book." For the record, accounts of the 1919 revolution did not constitute the bulk of the published Arabic version—but the point is that I translated the memoirs in the possession of Hawa Idris as I made clear in my preface. The arabic version was published by Shaarawi’s secretary, Abd Al Hamid Fahmy Mursi, without the consent and approval of Idris and indeed to her consternation. As stated in Amina Al-Sa'id's introduction Mursi himself, "arranged" the text. He also inserted a great deal of materials (articles, etc.) written by others into Shaarawi's "memoirs."

Hatem says that in the epilogue my voice and Shaarawi's "become one." It is amazing that she cannot see quotation marks and italicized print clearly indicating Shaarawi's words, let alone grasp the distinctly different styles. The epilogue, the product of extensive historical research, and a legitimate historical enterprise is scorned by Hatem: "It is not possible for Badran, or any other research, to tell us how Sha'rawi experienced the events described or how she felt about them...unfortunately Badran...attempts to tell us precisely that." I was actually providing an historical account of this period and was not engaged in psychohistory (though that is a valid enterprise).

Mervat Hatem Replies:

As editor, I welcome Marilyn Booth's and Margot Badran's responses to a review that had appeared in the last issue of the AMEMS News. I hope this exchange will allow the Newsletter to develop into a forum in which a variety of theoretical, methodological and political issues are seriously debated. It is in this spirit that I will now proceed, in my capacity as the reviewer concerned, to address some of the points they raise.

As more translated works of Middle Eastern authors begin to appear in English, these will inevitably raise for specialized readers in the field a number of methodological and political issues. For students of Middle Eastern women studies, who were trained and are working in the U.S. where the debates have reached an impressive degree of sophistication, it is important that we begin to ask some of these questions in our own field.

Obviously, translators must constantly contend with important decisions regarding how to present the particular details and events of a book written in a different language. While I have sympathy with that difficult process, my task as a reviewer is to assess whether those technical decisions succeed in their delivery of what was presented in the original work.
Booth recognizes having made one careless mistake when she translated that the prison doctor converted to Christianity to marry his girlfriend when the Arabic reads he converted to Islam. She argues, however, that my calling this a significant failure is misplaced even though the discussion of changing one's religion is important in determining how Arab and Western readers will react to the character and the struggle between him, as a representative of the official and the prison hierarchies and the author. These encounters Booth sees as one of the main contributions of the book and this genre.

In response to my second criticism, i.e. her translation of El-Saadawi's description of how she administered an overdose of painkillers to her mother, Booth argues that the passage is ambiguous in the original. I disagree. In the original, El-Saadawi offers an explicit description of her action. "I filled the syringe with a quantity of painkillers that was larger than any other time" (p.162). In contrast, the translation reads, "I filled the syringe with painkillers, a bit more every time" (p. 121). The readers of the original know and understand what El-Saadawi has done in the incident described and are simultaneously shocked and moved by what follows. The same clarity is lacking in the translated description which makes it difficult to understand the exaggerated reactions of those involved. It has the effect of sanitizing the incident even though El-Saadawi's honesty in sharing this with fact with us is something we admire her for.

Finally, Booth discusses how she was careful and sensitive to the differences between the veil, hagaab and nigaab. While I agree with her that she has attempted to make a distinction between all three, the general effect was still confusing to the reader. I should also add that the problem one is dealing with here is a general one requiring an appreciation and understanding of how foreign languages are constrained by existing concepts that describe an old phenomenon as they approach the definition of similar but new ones. Booth's definition of the nigaab, "all enveloping face-veils with small holes" (p.28) provides a useful example. In using the word veil to define the nigaab even on pages that she cited as evidence of her success in distinguishing the two (pp. 39 & 87), she does not eliminate the source of confusion which I alluded to. It would have been more helpful to point out that the nigaab covers the top half of a woman's body and not just the face and that it is usually of heavier material. What one wants to avoid is confusion among the English readers regarding the old veils described by the European travellers and which are their only frames of reference and the nigaab, which is a new and more strict interpretation of the acceptable Islamic mode of dress. This may sound to some readers like a great deal to do about nothing except that these are two different modes of dress which represent two different social and historical phenomena. I suspect that the interchangeable use of veil and nigaab
has led some to believe that the latter represents the return of the old veil which, of course, it is not.

Lastly, I want to address myself to Booth's comments on my review of El-Saadawi. As a confirmed believer in the usefulness of different readings of the same text, I read with interest Booth's interpretation of the Memoirs, which is different from my own political reading. While she presents her reading as offering a greater appreciation of El-Saadawi (than mine), her arguments confirm my general contention. Booth cites the motifs characteristic of prison literature and "the distinction between different levels of officialdom on the bases of gender and class and maintained in the prison and government hierarchies" and how it affects communication with the prisoner as El-Saadawi's main contribution. With this, I have no problem. I must add, however, that these are basic insights which most readers have come to expect from women writers whose works fit into that genre.

Does this mean that I am dismissing El-Saadawi as Booth claims? It is impossible to dismiss Nawal El-Saadawi or her work in the study of Middle Eastern women. She is one of the venerable figures of Egyptian/Middle Eastern women's history. She continues to be socially and politically active in Egypt and as a result, all students of Egyptian women must address themselves to her work as part of their study of the divergent women's groups that operate presently within the Egyptian arena. Having said that, I must also emphasize the importance of approaching Nawal El-Saadawi's writings critically precisely because her work represents a very important part of the intellectual history of Middle Eastern women. This is a simultaneously critical and a political task. El-Saadawi claims, in her prison memoirs as well as in her other writings, to be a political theoretician of change. My review attempted to evaluate her use and analysis of such key concepts and phenomena like solidarity, democracy and revolution during a very important period of her life and ours. My purpose was to begin a critical discourse on her views of change, whose key goal was neither to praise nor to dismiss, but to define for some where one needs to go from here.

It is very important to guard against the uncritical acceptance of our "mothers" which can be as problematic and oppressive as the uncritical acceptance of our "fathers". Furthermore, a less critical approach to key figures can be condescending because it does not consider El-Saadawi, her readers and reviewers as capable of using their disagreements to develop in even if in different directions.

Let me now turn to Margot Badran's response. Her response confirms the problems I raised in the original review and adds some new ones. I have argued that the personal memoirs of key historical figures are historical documents and must be treated as such. Badran does not agree with me that Sha'rawi's memoirs
constitute a historical document whose integrity needed to be preserved on the grounds that Sha'rawi did not consider her text to be inviolate. This raises the separate but very important question of how she, as an American historian, needed to regard it differently. Since Sha'rawi never got to edit her memoirs herself, it was important to publish them as is with minor stylistic changes. This way the memoirs, as a historical document, could be preserved for all students of Sha'rawi to interpret. All of us have an interest in being assured that the text we are dealing with is Sha'rawi's and not a text that is altered by Badran and Hawa Idris's views of Sha'rawi. While their interpretations of what Sha'rawi intended may be interesting and deserve space in academic journals, the reordering of the text under discussion as well as attempting to "correct" its fragmentary character changes the text.

This brings me to another point. In the preface of Haram Years, Badran tells us that Sha'rawi entrusted Hawa Idris to oversee the publication of the memoirs (p.2). On pp. 3-4, Badran also tells us she arranged and rearranged the text and takes responsibility for those decisions. Now, in her response to my review, Badran claims that Idris and even Sha'rawi were responsible for the decisions. Which of those two claims should one believe?

Obviously, it is imperative that one works with the families of historical figures in publishing important documents. It is clear, however, that the researcher who publishes these documents under his/her name must take responsibility for the final product and for the important research decisions in that process. In addition to rearranging Sha'rawi's text, Badran chose not to interview Abdal Hamid Fahmy Mursi, Sha'rawi's male secretary, to whom the memoirs were dictated. She chose to consult only Idris, who had the memoirs in her possession, about the manuscript. One wonders why Badran did not think it was important to cross check and see if the changes suggested by Idris were also changes that Mursi confirms. In her response, Badran suggests that she identified with Idris's dismay with Mursi for having published the Arabic version of the memoirs without her consent. Without condoning Mursi's action, one must still recognize that Mursi was a very important informant to consult in the preparation of the English edition of the manuscript. This cooperation between the publishers of the Arabic and the English editions would have helped answer many of the questions which we have about both.

Badran is correct in pointing out that the Arabic version has been reordered as well. In that respect, Mursi is also guilty of not having respected or preserved the integrity of the document. A complicating factor, here, is the fact that Mursi was the person to whom Sha'rawi dictated her memoirs. This raises a different set of questions regarding the Arabic version. As Sha'rawi's secretary, did Mursi have more clues about what Sha'r-
awi wanted to include and exclude? Which sections of the manus
script reflect his input and what possible biases did he con-
sciously, or unconsciously introduce? For the most part, howev-
er, Nursi uses Sha'rawi's published articles to let her speak to
us through a different type of record. He also alerts us to
articles she was distressed or flattered by.

On the question of how the title and the focus on the "harem
years" does not depart from the Orientalist focus on the private
world of the harem, Badran surprises us by arguing in her re-
sponse that the nationalist and feminist activities of the 1919
revolution constitute part of the harem years! She identifies the
"harem" with "harem conventions which Sha'rawi's continued
veiling signalled." This, of course, raises even more problems.
This is another example of Western obsessive identification of
the harem with the veil. Suffice it to say, here, that women's
participation in the 1919 revolution contributed a significant
challenge to the harem as an institution which emphasized women's
seclusion, sexual segregation and their noticeable absence from
the public domain. It is true that Sha'rawi continued to be
veiled until 1923, but the doors of the harem had been forced
open in 1919 and more importantly, the institution itself had
significantly disintegrated by 1923. A formalistic definition
that reduced the harem to the veil contributes very little
usefulness in our appreciation of the significant social and
political changes taking place at the time.

There are two minor points which Badran makes and which I
will briefly address because they provide the readers with
greater details about the Arabic version. Badran states, for the
record, that my claim that the events of the 1919 revolution
constitute the bulk of the published Arabic version is not true.
Let me put it this way: that part of Sha'rawi's text, which
constitutes the bulk of Badran's Harem Years (pp. 23-111) repres-
ents the first 159 pages of the Arabic version of 457 pages. The
events of the 1919 revolution, its political developments and her
relations with Sa'id Zaghlul (i.e. the period from 1919 to 1924)
are covered by pp 160-322. The activities of the Egyptian
Women's Union from 1924 to 1935 are presented in the remaining

Badran's appendix, which deals with Sha'rawi's defense of
the role that Muhammed Sultan Pasha, her father, played in the
'Arabi revolution is very different from what is presented in the
Arabic version. The Arabic text relies not only on Qallini
Pasha's testimony, but also on what a leading Egyptian historian,
Abdel Rahman al-Refi'i had said as well as the counter claims
made by Abdel Sami 'Arabi, Ahmed 'Arabi son. As I have noted in
the original review, the whole section shows the extensive
research which Sha'rawi had done on the subject and how it had
personal significance for her. It also appears at the beginning
of the Arabic text providing one with another form of evidence about its importance.

Finally, I want to make one last comment on what Badran describes as "my inability to see quotation marks and italicized print... let alone grasp the different styles in the epilogue." Actually, I saw all of the above and still had problems with the epilogue. By providing paragraphs that defined the context and/or the interpretation within which Sha'rawi quotes needed to be understood, Badran distorts our reading of Sha'rawi and/or her intent. I will only give one example to prove the point. On page 116, Badran argues that the nationalist movement brought husbands and wives into closer contact and that this was "the moment of greatest collaboration between Sha'rawi and her husband." In corroboration, she offers the following business like quote from Sha'rawi: "My husband kept me informed of events so that I could fill the vacuum if he were imprisoned or exiled." Amal al-Sobki, an Egyptian historian who studied this particular period in Sha'rawi's life, provides evidence to demonstrate that this was a period of great tension between the two. In an interview I had with Amina al-Said early this year, she informed me that Sha'rawi Fasha divorced his wife during this period and was very upset by her political activities.

My point, here, is a straightforward and a simple one. The attempt to fill in the gaps of a fragmentary text is a tricky enterprise, which using the example that I have cited, reduces the readers' confidence. The only way, I know, of guarding against the distortion of historical documents, like Sha'rawi's memoirs, is to preserve them in the way they were left to us. We can debate and interpret them in other forums, but we need to agree on the importance of minimum intervention if these documents are to continue to be important sources of evidence about the period and its important figures.
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