

A border passage: from cairo to america – a woman`s journey

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



In *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America - A Woman's Journey*, the story of a little girl named Leila Ahmed and the troubles that she encounters as she tried to reconcile her gender, her ethnicity as well as her religion into three different and distinct cultures. Even growing up in Egypt, Ahmed felt foreign in a foreign land. Her desire to have a career was depressed as it was contrary to the rigid interpretation of Islam that was prevailing during that time in Egypt.

Ahmed finds it difficult fitting in when she goes to Britain but finds a momentary respite during her time at Cambridge and even more so in the United States although she is not free from struggle as she attempts to establish a Women's Studies program during the 1980's when such ideas were in still in their infancy. Not only does Ahmed's account of her troubles in fitting into a foreign society, she also speaks to the current perception of Islam among the West and that the version of Islam that is portrayed as the norm, is really on the fringe of society and not representative of the true teachings of that peaceful religion.

While in Egypt, Ahmed searches for her identity as a woman and as a Muslim. Even at this young age, she is aware of the different cultures that there are in the world. Her father does not send her to a Muslim school but rather to an English school where she comes in contact with both Jews and Christians. Her early attempts to search for an identity are being pulled by multiple different forces including the different faiths and beliefs about Western superiority white at the English school as she decides how much of her identity to keep and how much she needs to let go of.

It is here that she starts to learn that the negotiation of one's cultures and social borders may have serious consequences as one gets older and the questions of assimilation and to what degree resonate throughout her life. As a young child, Ahmed becomes more and more aware of the differences in this world. She is introduced to Christianity by her deeply religious governess where she is told stories from the Bible and of the angels and the supernatural. But Ahmed is able to take these stories and learn from them without, in her mind, being forced to compromise those relationships with her faith in Islam.

One of the relationships that she does seem able to reconcile at this time in her life is that of her mother. Ahmed aspires to be a career woman and looks upon her mother with disdain to the fact that she does not work. This aspiration to be a career woman meets resistance, not only in the lack of support from her mother but from her society as well. In her English school, she receives a degree of resistance towards her goals when she makes them known but they are nothing compared to the resistance that she gets from the Egyptian and Muslim culture of 1950's Egypt.

She blames this, not on Islam, but only the version of Islam that is taking over Egypt during the reign of Abdul Nasser, the long time leader of Egypt. "The devastation unloosed on Muslim societies in our day by fundamentalism . . . seems to be not merely the erasure of the living, oral, ethical, and human traditions of Islam but the literal destruction of and annihilation of the Muslims who are the bearers of those traditions. In

Algeria, Iran, Afghanistan, and, alas, in Egypt, this narrow, violent variant of Islam is ravaging its way through the land. (Ahmed, 1999)

But this quote also speaks the larger and contemporary problem that, in her mind, is being perpetrated as the true teachings of Islam. Not only does it teach complete submission of women and the relegation of ? of the population to the role of 2nd class citizens but also the restriction and hostility towards women and non Muslims alike. Ahmed will fight these restrictions and the erroneous perceptions that she feels the West as well as Muslims have in her own country has about Islam.

It is a fight that she will have to make for the rest of her life. Ahmed finds a degree of respite when she goes to Cambridge University in England, there to a greater degree than she has ever experienced before, woman and foreigners are encouraged to learn and to express their own ideas. She befriends women role models in the Mrs. Madge and Miss Bradbrook, two teachers at the university as well as a budding friendship with Veena, an Indian woman whose feelings of displacement while in England, are mirrored in each other.

Even though England is a much needed respite to the oppression and conflict that she received while in Egypt, Ahmed still experiences a less obvious form of racism. She feels lumped together with every culture and race that is not British and therefore, not equal. This is during a time when the importance and size of the British Empire was fading fast but was not so far gone that

lingering shades of imperialism did not force pockets of the culture to look down on other cultures with a degree of xenophobia and plain racism.

In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed reveals what it means to move across from one culture to the next. Her identity is not shaped by who and what she connects with but the degree in which she fails to make those connections. Her race, gender and religion, while in Egypt, Britain and the United States all serve as an impediment in one way or another. Her life was better in Britain than in Egypt and in the United States, her life was better than it was in Britain, but she accounts for the fact that even in the United States in the 1980's she finds resistance to her attempt to establish a women's studies program.

The role of religion in her life, in the context of her desire to be accepted and given a free range towards her goals and aspirations serve as an unmistakable impediment. Her gender to some degree as well as she strives to be taken seriously in both Britain and the United States. This is less likely in Egypt as the Muslim culture is so overwhelmingly against the rights of women at that time, that it is almost impossible, then as well as now, to overcome the prejudice that the ruling class has regarding women and their ability to contribute to the culture.

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Islam is ravaging its way through the land. "(Ahmed, 1999) In Egypt, her desire to become educated was met by strict opposition by the Muslim fundamentalists.

She was taught in an English school but there was no expectation to put that knowledge to actual use. Her family was a source of contention that was eventually eased as Ahmed got older and learned to respect her mother and her father to a larger degree. Her problems with her culture, religion and social consciousness did end when she came to America. Roughly, 3-6% of the population is Muslim and even before 9/11, the religion was misunderstood, if the average American understood the religion at all.

For somebody who identifies herself with her religion to the degree that Ahmed did, this served as an impediment to being totally assimilated into American culture. In that way, there were similarities in how her religion affected her acceptance into the culture in both Egypt and the United States. Egypt, then as well as now is overwhelmingly Muslim as is Ahmed. But the type of Islam that is practiced; rigid and absolute, is not the version that Ahmed embraces and in that way, she is at odds with her Egyptian culture.

In America, Islam is misunderstood as well to perhaps the same degree but in a different way. Ahmed fights these misconceptions of the West as well as the Muslim scholars who, in her opinion, have abused the peaceful teachings of Islam: " We all automatically assume that those who write and who put their knowledge down in texts have something more valuable to offer than those who simply live their knowledge and use it to inform their lives.

(Ahmed, 1999) The presence of religion in politics in America is not the same degree as it is in Egypt, but laws that favor the Christian religion, pushed by the majority of voters who are Christian, would serve as a further impediment to Ahmed as she tries again to find a connection in this new world. Where there is one of the biggest differences between America and Egypt is the role of women within education.

Even though Ahmed finds resistance towards her desire to start a women's studies program at the university where she teaches, she still finds her new world exciting and intellectually stimulating as she is given more freedom to learn and to express her ideas than ever before. In this comparison, the United States gives much more freedom and opportunity to women of any color than Egypt does to women within their own culture.

There is an obvious improvement in one's standard of living as well as one moves from a developing culture in Egypt to the richest country in the world when coming to America. As an adult, Ahmed is finally able to embrace the different labels placed on her. She is a woman, a feminist, a Muslim an Egyptian, and Arab and an intellectual and her attempt to reconcile the contradictions that each may bring is what forces her to embark on her journey of self discovery within three distinct places and cultures.

In a post 9/11 world, Muslims, women and people wishing to find a more gentle and peaceful Islam will find Ahmed's journey as exciting as well as inspirational as in this global society. Many people find themselves on the outside looking in because of the fact that their gender, race, social class,

religion or upbringing is not similar to the majority of the population that they are a part of or wish to become.