

Said said . . .

Was it the banging that woke me or just the anxiety of the last few days? We were out late—Cairo never sleeps—and anyway, that’s when the women are more relaxed, more willing to talk to me and my translators, young women from the American University in Cairo (AUC). Through the peephole I saw two men, Western-looking but in army fatigues. Then I heard Hebba, the hotel owner, yelling a bit angrily because they had woken her up, too, “Get up, your government wants you out.”

It was late March 2003 and the U.S.-instigated, much-protested-around-the-world-but-to-no-avail third war in the region was well under way.¹ It began soon after I arrived. A week later, while the rest of the world seemed to settle into an uneasy acquiescence, there were riots at the AUC that the government could not quell, even though protesting is illegal. Edward Said had just spoken to an overflow crowd, and I had run over to the other campus to hear him, inbetween mounting a small exhibition of my work at the school to fund my real reason for being in Cairo: to research women’s lives in this so-called Middle East (East of what? . . . not Asia, not Europe, and so “East”? . . . Near East, Middle East, Far East . . .). The students were increasingly agitated and for several days they had been burning U.S. flags in the streets.² But never mind, right now, I had to leave: so said the two men whose State Department badges ID’d them as working for culture, not the military, which didn’t explain their choice of camouflage gear—was it leisure attire? Solidarity with the U.S. soldiers? A new look for cultural workers? Two hours later I was on the plane as the sun rose over the desert, out of Cairo, off the project, done for now, but not finished . . . like so many of my projects. For the last few years I have been trying to get back to Cairo.³ Finally, late last year, I was able to resume this project.

1. This is the third Gulf War: the first was the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88; the second was between Iraq and Kuwait, 1990–99; and the third is the current one that began in March 2003 with Operation Iraqi Freedom.

2. See, for example, Lisa Anderson, “Outrage Worldwide: Demonstrations Trigger Deadly Gunfire: In Egypt, Muslim Cleric Calls for Holy War in Support of the Iraqi People,” *Montreal Gazette*, March 21, 2003, p. A33.

3. Egypt, and Cairo in particular, occupies a pivotal place in the increasingly delicate series of relationships (hegemonies) that make up the “Middle East.” Not only is Egypt the gateway for much of the USAID and NGO work in the region, but it has become, arguably, the most stable capital in the area as civil wars in Beirut and their threat elsewhere and the on-going Israeli/Palestinian conflict plus the disaster that is the U.S. war in Iraq have rendered the surrounding countries even more volatile. While Mubarak’s regime keeps a tight rein on the Muslim Brotherhood, which is illegal, the group now has 88 seats in the 454-seat Parliament. Cairo’s official population is around 16 million, with an undocumented population estimated at 2 to 4 million living in shanty-cities beyond the suburbs. Composed of refugees and people from Upper Egypt, these people are essentially stateless.

How to respond to this war? What can I do? What can “art” do? Tentatively titled in so many ways, my response to this war is the project *Not Reconciled: Cairo Women’s Stories*. It is something I can do beyond attending underreported antiwar demonstrations in New York City and filling out yet another e-mail petition.

Even before the war broke out, this project had already started. At the 2001 Cairo Biennale, I noticed that not only was I a stereotype of a Western tourist (“a dollar with legs”), but that my status as a woman alone meant something different here to the many Cairene women I met from varying class backgrounds.

As Said was the among the first to point out in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, the construction of the terms “Oriental” and “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” to describe the people living in this region is the Occidental discourse’s attempted to impose the hegemony of the West over its many disparate cultures with the aim of specifically devaluing them for subjugation; hence, not Western is not rational, not trustworthy, and not capable of self-government, and the specificity of any and all differences is erased. One antidote to this erasure of difference, as Said argued, was to employ narrative rather than visual strategies as a means of both empowering local voices in particular places and of representing the complexities of specific experiences throughout the region. The events post-9/11 have only made such strategies even more urgent. Now, more than ever, we need to understand what we are seeing.

If Scheherazade (or more properly, Shahrazad) had to tell 1,001 stories, one a night, to entertain and simultaneously reeducate and transform an angry Sultan, how many stories will it take to put a human face on the Middle East? If Scheherazade’s often fantastic tales involved magical beings who could resolve irresolvable conundrums simply by wishing, I wonder what powers of storytelling might be brought to bear against the violent spectacle of this continuous war? Could these stories, in some very small way, do the same? Can the documentary tradition and artistic license provoke a way of getting at some of the truth in Wittgenstein’s claim that ordinary language is unable to convey the extraordinariness of the world’s existence? Documenting what is at the margins of experience, the stories we tell each other bear witness to how what is subjective and what is objective in history are always a multiplicity of representations. How can stories of daily life counter the spectacle? Do the stories we tell each other more accurately reflect who we are than the facts of our lives? What about the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves?

In Cairo, I constantly met people with stories to tell; even journalists who came to interview me told me all about their lives. I couldn’t figure out why. It hadn’t happened when I was collecting stories for other iterations of this project—so why now?⁴

4. For a description of earlier iterations of this project, see Judith Barry, “Not Reconciled,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995), pp. 55–70. I use an interview methodology to collect stories, which I synthesize into very short narratives. Then I film them employing actors who tell them in their own language and in English.

Finally I began to understand that as a woman traveling alone I represented something unusual, someone who might be seen as not having a particular point of view, whose identity, especially at this moment in Cairo, wasn't fixed or easily ascribable to a particular cultural milieu, and certainly not to a judgmental point of view from an Egyptian societal perspective. As an outsider it was a good bet that I was liberal and liberated: two things in short supply for women all through the Middle East. It was safer to confide in me than in an Egyptian from a similar class or social stratum. I also began to realize that some of these women thought that I might be able to help them because they still looked to the West for direction, especially in terms of women's rights. And I was perceived as possessing some survival skills, skills that enabled me to get sort of far (from home at least) with very little, since, like them, I am a woman . . . the unasked question being, how did I get so far with so little, since I, too, am a woman.⁵

I was intrigued by the contradictions that shaped the daily lives of the women I met; even the Western-born women, married to Cairenes, seemed to have a difficult time. Not exactly "Oriental"—those discourses were never about women per se—this terrain is molded by competing points of view where class and social station are not tolerant of deviance from proscribed mores, and most

5. First Lady Suzanne Mubarak supports the rights of women and children. While there are a number of reforms to women's rights that are currently being discussed, few have been signed into law. Women's rights—marriage, divorce, inheritance, employment—conform to Islamic law and not to the rest of the Egyptian legal system, which is based on the French civil law. In January 2000, the parliament revised the Personal Status Law to provide women with the opportunity to divorce their husbands without proving mistreatment. During fall 2000, Egyptian courts struck down statutes that prohibited women from obtaining passports, but an earlier law that women could travel without permission of their husbands was struck down when women obtained the right to divorce their husbands in return for giving back the dowry (given by the husband's family) and exempting the husband from any further (future) financial obligations. Previously, women did not have the legal right to demand divorce. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men, and non-Muslim women who marry Muslim men are subject to Islamic law. Men still have the right to obtain divorce easily. The new law also had a setback for women's rights; women no longer have the right to travel abroad without the husband's consent. According to a report issued by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2002, 35 percent of Egyptian women have been beaten by their husbands. A 2002 study reported by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development found that 47 percent of all homicides with female victims were cases of "honor killing," in which relatives murder a woman suspected of sexual impropriety, which includes being raped, in order to rid the family name of the perceived slur. The Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (1997) shows that 97 percent of ever-married women have been subjected to female circumcision. Ignorance, conservatism, illiteracy, and poverty, among other things, have been blamed for the persistence of the practice. In 1994, the Minister of Health allowed its performance in public-sector hospitals, but later issued a ban on female circumcision in 1997. Despite public initiatives, the practice persists. Women have 9 seats in Parliament, 5 of which were appointed. The first female judge was appointed in 2003. Unprecedented in Egypt's history, the Supreme Judicial Council appointed 31 female judges out of 124 female candidates in March 2007. Thirty of them took legal oath before the Council on April 10, 2007, and one declined her new post. The new female judges will assume their jobs at the courts of first instance. Human rights and women's associations welcomed their appointment, while some male judges and Islamist activists objected to this appointment on the pretext that Islam does not allow women to preside over the judiciary. However, Egyptian constitution and law do not prohibit women from occupying judicial positions. See the United Nations Development Programme: <http://www.pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?cid=5>.

importantly, where Western values and the difference between Egyptian law and Muslim law are, by definition, in conflict for women.

When I was first in Egypt seven years ago, it was unusual to see a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf on the streets of Cairo in the tourist areas. Now it is unusual to see a Muslim woman who is not covered by at least a headscarf in these areas as so-called Islamization has taken hold. Yet wearing a headscarf does not necessarily mean that a woman is conservative; wearing the scarf can mean many different things, and in one sense—outside the home and especially on the street—it functions more like a uniform, protecting against unwanted attention and street harassment while allowing women to work outdoors without any risk of perceived immodesty. We consider our streets to be our public property, to be shared space. In Egypt, the street belongs to the state, and because most people feel disenfranchised from this state, the street in essence belongs to no one, and everyone, especially women, is fair game.

Today it is not atypical for a woman working in government or the tourist industry to be veiled on the street, transform into Western-style clothing for her job—which is required by law—and then return home as a veiled wife or daughter, where, by law, she must submit to her husband's or father's authority. Since coming to Cairo I have heard about two different types of deviant women; both are probably urban myths. The first are women who dress and live as men. They are said to frequent the Groppi Café in downtown and rescue women who get into trouble on the square. The second are women who are professional insulters, who can be hired to publicly harass particularly offensive men. Despite many hours in Groppi and many false leads, I have never been able to make contact with either of them.

As I have continued to interview many women from all classes—175 so far—I have discovered some surprising differences among them. While the stories that will comprise the project will be in the form of first-person address, I will here briefly describe some of what I have discovered. Nothing has been as I first imagined. For instance, upper-class women seem to suffer from a kind of schizophrenia as they try to reconcile the conflicting values of a Western education with the expectations of their families. Especially among younger women, the conflict they feel between their education (which suggests that they think for themselves, be independent, and build their own lives) and the requirements of their families—including the lack of rights for women in general in Egyptian society, the patriarchal condition for women particularly among the wealthy classes, what is expected of daughters versus sons—is seemingly irreconcilable.

Should they really marry for love, reject an arranged marriage, choose a profession that requires long hours, travel the world alone, or live alone and defer marriage or children or both? Will they ever really be able to come back to Cairo and fit in again? Will they find liberated men of their social class who will love them and let them continue to develop professionally?

Until recently, it was impossible for a woman to travel abroad without her family's permission if she was unmarried. If she is married, she needs her husband's

permission—even now. Several of the young women I interviewed from the upper middle class, not upper class, have decided to leave the country in an attempt to forge a different kind of life, one without these conflicts. Unlike daughters of the wealthiest families in Cairo, these women are not so wealthy as to be completely invested in the city, and they recognize that their daughters might be able to construct a new and better life elsewhere. They also want family ties in another country, somewhere in the West, in case the situation in Cairo deteriorates and they need to flee. Upper-class women have their money to protect them, and many of them already have dual and triple citizenship in other Western and Gulf countries, but there is no place where they can go to completely escape the demands of their families to conform to what is expected of them.

In fact, wealthier women have far less power within their families than middle, working-class, and poor women working outside the home, because they don't control the family wealth.⁶ Yet, middle, working-class, and poor women have far fewer opportunities, hence the dilemmas described above are not available to them. For the most part, they still have arranged marriages, and hope for the best about them. But they don't have the expectations about "personal happiness" or "self-fulfillment" that wealthier women have. However, this translates into a sense of empowerment in many other ways. In fact, I found these women to be much more secure in their sense of themselves and much more content with their choices than the wealthier women. Among these women, I also noticed a stronger storytelling tradition; they seem to have a parable or allegory for many of the moments in their lives that resonate with them. Storytelling gives them, as one woman, Ma'shari, said to me, the power to feel that their life matters and that they are connected to a larger world, a world that is not outside the family, but which includes many families . . . even mine. "You make movies, but we have this and it lives on, as I live on, through how I am remembered by my children and my children's children, over time."

Many of the undocumented women I interviewed were from upper Egypt. They came to Cairo because their husbands had too many wives to provide adequately for them, and/or because they were abused. In Cairo, they reinvented themselves and the lives of their children, finding work as street or bazaar vendors, stall cleaners, tea girls, or maids. None wanted to marry again. While life was hard, you could sense how the circumstances presented by a new life in the city produced a palpable joy. It reminded me of Arjun Appadurai's notion of how "the work of the imagination" creates the ability to aspire to a better life. Through

6. Across all classes, women are the ethical and moral centers of their families and as such wield a great deal of power within the family. With high unemployment, there are many fewer jobs for men, especially undocumented men, and as women will work for less money, it is easier for women to gain employment than men. These women are not embarrassed to be maids, whereas many of their husbands see menial work as demeaning, especially if they were trained for something more skilled. Often the woman is the only one bringing in any money. When she is the sole earner, then she has more of a say in how the money is spent and in the other facets of family life as well.

practice—by thinking of ways to get from “here” to “there”—they had gone to Cairo and their lives had changed. He calls this “the capacity to aspire.” Meeting these women, I saw this process at work.

When I began this project seven years ago, many of the women I met could not clearly imagine that their futures would turn out, as I have discussed above, but they were cautiously hopeful that they could aspire to their desires and that their contradictory expectations would somehow be reconciled as their lives unfolded. They hoped that how they were able to live their lives—combining their culture with what they wanted to take from the West—would be productive of a synergy between the specificity of their culture and ours. As I have reconnected with many of them over the last year, I see dramatic changes, but not in ways I would have imagined seven years ago. They are fearful that their culture as a whole is turning extremely conservative; many no longer espouse any desire to chart an unknown future. They seem anxious to find Egyptian husbands who are sympathetic to their education and earlier desires, but they have few expectations about an interesting career. Moreover, they worry that they won’t truly be accepted because of their former radicalness and the fact that their country, having turned more conservative, now sees them as pariahs. This is an effect of the Islamization of Egyptian society, of which the increased wearing of the headscarf is only one of the most visible symptoms. It extends across class and economic divisions and permeates the entire culture. While it is very definitely a rejection of Western values, how it is being internalized is a form of self-censorship, and this is exacerbating an already difficult situation. It is not that everything from the West is being rejected—most still support a benign confluence of capitalism+socialism+democracy—but Western social values are certainly being questioned and with them the role of women and women’s rights. Publicly it is “no” to most things associated with American pop culture, and “yes” to what appear to be more conservative personal values. No one with whom I have spoken espouses a return to Islamic law. However, everyone is deeply affected by the politicization of religion and its potential effects on the question of how they as women will be allowed to live their lives. Into the contradictory *mélange* from which these women are constructing their identities, the question of Islamization, and further, how they should interpret this, looms large. Over and over I heard the same question, “Now, where can I look?”

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