

WRITING ARAB WOMEN'S LIVES

When I started work on what became my recently published book, *Teta, Mother and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* (London: Sagi Books, 2005 and New York: Norton, 2006) it never occurred to me that in writing a triple family biography I was embarking on an enormously difficult task that would take almost several years to complete. Why did it take so long? Some of the reasons are entirely personal, and some have to do with matters beyond my control. But there are also public and intellectual reasons that I would like to discuss in this paper. First, however, there is an urgent question to consider: why should we write about Arab women at all?

Why Write Arab Women's Lives?

When I raise this question I am talking about ordinary Arab women, not the well-known writers and political movers. God knows there have been some— not nearly enough, but some — writings about notable women: writers, activist members of the great political families, and so on. But how much is known and documented about ordinary women like my grandmother, or my mother? How much do women know about their own grandmothers, their mothers and their aunts?

Because women are almost entirely excluded from the political collective

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consciousness, and their problems and view points are rarely included in the national debates, it is necessary to write about them to make them part of the public awareness, and to enter their situation into the debates. A glance at the pictures of some recent political events – the last Arab summit meeting, the recent (spring 2006) pan -Arab meeting in support of the Arab Resistance held in Beirut, or, even closer to home, the meetings of the *hiwar al watani* (National Dialogue), meant to plant the social and political seeds for future generations of Lebanese society -shows that in all these important events not a woman was to be seen.

This was true in spite of the great visibility of women in the various wars with which our region is only too familiar. In the recent Israeli assault on Lebanon, women were as usual almost totally absent from the political debate, but their presence on the ground was of huge importance in defining the spirit of the resistance. Those women who suffered the direct impact of the war expressed their defiance of the massive force that had been unleashed against them, and their pride in participating in the resistance as their homes and villages were being destroyed, and their sons killed. Many women received and helped look after the almost one million people displaced by the war, and it was these women, who, by volunteering their time, services and resources to their fellow citizens, more than the obligatory speeches of sympathy made by seasoned politicians, that expressed the profound national solidarity with the victims.

Yet, not only this time, but always, while there has been some grumbling, there have been no serious complaints from women about their exclusion from the affairs of the nation, and to me this absence of complaint is almost as serious a problem as the fact that women were excluded in the first place.

But it is not only political debate that has excluded women. Women are excluded from the history books as well. If you read any of the standard histories of our region there is scarcely a mention of women other than the wives and daughters of the Prophet, or, in histories of ancient times, great queens like Hatshepsut, Cleopatra, and Zenobia. In histories of more modern times, we might find a reference or two to some notable women, but hardly anyone else. Indeed, in these histories, social life is scarcely mentioned, and what life was like for ordinary people, men and women, simply does not form part of the historical narrative or public consciousness.

Albert Hourani's last book, **A History of the Arab Peoples**, came out when I had just begun work on my triple biography. I found it especially

fascinating in its analysis of the Ottoman Empire, because like so many others in this part of the world I had been taught to see the Ottomans as an evil, brutally repressive force, with no virtues to speak of. The Ottoman period was important to me because my grandmother was born and grew up in it, and it formed the background to her ancestors' lives. From Hourani I learned of the great civilization of the Ottomans, their great skills in governing, their tolerance, their poetry, their arts, their great cities. Reading Hourani taught me how distorted our knowledge of our own past is, and this lesson, once learned, made me sensitive to the other errors in our self-understanding.

When I saw Hourani soon after I read his book, I thanked him for rehabilitating the Ottoman Empire in my eyes. Then I shared with him my problems in researching my foremothers' lives. He admitted to me that the lives of women were left out of his narrative. But, he said, there is one paragraph on women in my book! It is true. There is, and, though it is a single paragraph in a very large book, it is an excellent one, and most revealing. I shall refer to it a little later in this discussion.

At one point in my early research I came across a book published by AUB in 1981 and based on a conference held there entitled **Intellectual Life in the Arab East, 1890-1939**. I turned to it eagerly, hoping to learn something that would shed light on my grandmother's intellectual development, but found no mention in it of women. I was stunned and angered by this blatant omission. Were women then not intellectual beings like men? Had they nothing to do with intellectual life? Had they said nothing, written nothing, contributed nothing to the intellectual life of the area? How could they be ignored in this manner?

I was especially sensitive to this issue because I had been formed, not only socially but intellectually as well, by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. During that time, and as a direct result of the feminist movement, the academic field known today as "Women's Studies" was just beginning. The mainstream academic areas – theology, history, sociology, psychiatry, language, literature, even medicine and its practice - were gradually being revolutionized by the feminist perspective, and an entirely new vision of each was being created. The Arab world, it seemed to me, had not sufficiently engaged in this new perspective and vision.

Yet another reason to write Arab women's lives has to do with the amount of nonsense that has in fact been written about them, not so much as individuals but as a group, and as a problem. If you go to any library you will find a large number of books on the subject, and while some of them

are valuable, most of them are full of generalities that are invalid because generalities often are, especially when deductive and reductive thinking are attached to them. Many of these books deal with theological and legal issues, but not with the actual lives of real women, which would cast an altogether different light on precisely those same issues. And it is especially true that many - though by no means all - of those books on Arab women written in English are based on racist assumptions, cultural misunderstanding, or a deliberate attempt at misrepresentation.

There is yet another reason, however, for writing Arab women's lives, and this is perhaps the most important one. In the single paragraph in Albert Hourani's book devoted to women that I mentioned above, he describes the interiors of houses as an aspect of his discussion of the cultural changes that took place in the Levant in the nineteenth century. This is a matter of vital importance. Culture is an aspect of politics; politics and culture are equal reflections of power structures; as power structures change, whether through imperial invasions and colonialism, through wars and revolutions, or through subtler means like schools and universities and what is considered knowledge, so does every day, quotidian culture, including such matters as clothes, interior designs, the definition of beauty, the songs people sing, and the languages they sing them in, the dances they dance, wedding and funeral customs, and so on.

All of these are especially reflected in the lives of women, who provide much of the substance of these matters. So if we study the lives of ordinary women, we not only learn about social life and the culture they live in, but we learn to see them as creators of culture, and therefore as major participants in history. Instead of perceiving them as mute, deaf, blind - in other words as an absence - we learn to look at women, especially the ordinary women with whom I am concerned, as active people with a voice of their own, acutely aware of historic shifts in power structures and adjusting their daily lives and the lives of their families accordingly. Every decision we make in the design of our own homes; every decision we make about what to wear or what not to wear, about food, about diet, about beauty and its signs; about whether to nurse our babies or bottle-feed them; about how and where we give birth - all these details of our apparently unimportant lives say a huge amount about cultural development and the economic and political power structure, not only of our own societies, but of the world.

Arab (and Muslim) women are probably the most stereotyped people under the sun, not only stereotyped in the continuing misunderstanding or

misrepresentation of Arab and Islamic culture, but by Arabs themselves, and here I am including Arab women who stereotype themselves mercilessly. We have learned to see ourselves as others see us, instead of seeing ourselves as we are, with all the variety of specificity – class, region, individual character, intellect, education, and so on. We talk about “the eastern woman” (*al mar'a alsharqiyya*) or “the Arab woman” (*al mar'a al arabiyya*)– whoever she is – very often indeed, so much so that the phrase has for years, ever since I found that I had to delve much deeper than I had thought into the lives of my female ancestors, irritates me beyond words, because of its vagueness, its corruption of language and history, and its assumptions of uniformity. Whenever we apply the assimilated generalities to ourselves without any basis except that we have heard them before, over and over again, we are complicit with our own stereotyping, as well as with our own exclusion. I shall discuss this issue in more detail below.

To sum up then, it seems to me necessary to write Arab women's lives to press the lives of women on the consciousness of the ruling political and intellectual elites, to undo the damage done by stereotyping, generalization, racism, and lack of research. Indeed, in my judgment the most important thing of all is to press the history of women onto the consciousness of women themselves, because if we have a sense of our own history, of our foremothers' role in history, we will have a prouder sense of ourselves in the present, and therefore we will be in a better position to impose ourselves and our demands on to the cultural, social, political, and economic scenes, and thus achieve a fairer status in our society.

In order to write about ourselves, about our mothers and grandmothers, our sisters and cousins we need to collect as much detailed, concrete, sure, information as we can about the lives of our foremothers.

The Problems Facing the Biographer of Women, and Some Solutions

What are the problems that I encountered as I worked on my book? There are many but I shall mention only a few. I shall also say a little bit about how I overcame these, or at least how I tried.

1) Sources

The first problem is one I have already mentioned. It concerns sources, and how to find out about the past. When I started to work on my grandmother's life, I soon found out, with a terrible shock, how little I actually knew about her and her connection to historical events. I knew she

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was born in 1880 in Hums; I knew her father was from Schweire, and that he was the pastor of the Protestant church in Beirut; and I knew that her Palestinian husband, my grandfather, was also a Protestant pastor, that his church was in Nazareth, where my mother was born. I knew my grandmother had been widowed at a young age, and that she had no home of her own. That was about all I knew, and that is not enough to write a biography with! Even those facts that I did know were just that, facts, and I had no explanations for them or their contexts, nor could I explain my own ignorance of the life of a woman whom I knew - or thought I knew- as well as I knew my grandmother, whom I loved deeply.

So I turned to the history books, and that is when I encountered some of the problems I discussed above. One example of how the historians disappointed me is that they write a great deal about the increase in number and influence of schools as the nineteenth century progressed, but I wanted them to tell me precisely what was taught in them, what my grandmother learned. I wanted to know how she might have been affected by the political changes that took place in the region that they describe at such length and in such detail.

Most of all, I wanted to know what she wore as a child. I could only visualize her as I knew her, a bent, frail, old woman, and I wanted to place her visually in her own context. I could not see her as a child, or even a young woman. I could not imagine how she was dressed, could not imagine her home, what and how she ate, how she cooked, how her house was lit, how she and her family slept. What songs did they sing? What kind of music did they like? What, I asked myself, was the place of her father in her family? her mother? her eldest brother? her eldest sister? her husband? What kind of relationship did all these people have with each other?

Other questions arose as I thought about her, and tried to recreate her life as an independent being, not just my own Teta, that Teta who was part of *my* childhood, *my* memories, *my* understanding of my own life. Why did she lose her home? Why was she dependent on her children as an old lady?

I had one priceless source to help me in my effort to understand her life, though it applied almost entirely to her as a woman, as a wife and mother. I had asked my mother, who was growing more and more depressed and lonely as the Lebanon war progressed, to write down her memories of her childhood. With some trepidation she did so, but not for long, as she found the task increasingly onerous and painful, and eventually gave it up. Still, I have in my possession a journal in her own handwriting of her childhood and youthful memories, her education, engagement and

marriage, her young adulthood, up to the birth of her third child. And of course her own mother played a major role in her childhood memories, and it created for me a vision of her so different from the one I had that it took my breath away. Later, after my mother died, I found letters that she and others in the family had preserved, some from the 1920s and 1930s, others from the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

As I worked on my book, however, I found that my mother's memories did not tell me all I needed to know about my grandmother, especially her childhood and schooling. Indeed, they raised as many questions as they answered, so I turned to my mother's two surviving brothers (she had no sisters) with many questions, and each of them in turn wrote for me their childhood memories, and what they knew about the background to their parents' lives.

In addition to these memoirs and letters I turned to other relatives, including especially a cousin of mine who had done some research into the family background. I interviewed a great many people, many much older than myself, mostly, but not exclusively women, and asked those who knew my grandparents and parents about their lives and their surroundings in Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon. I asked all those older people questions about their own up-bringing, their childhoods, the historical backgrounds to their lives and their interaction with such events as World War I, the departure of the Ottomans and the coming of the British and French, World War II, the Palestine question and what all this meant to them. I spoke with village women, colleagues, friends, and collected from them anecdotes about grandmothers, aunts, neighbors.

I also found out about the details of everyday domestic life, so important to the lives of women, by talking to people in villages, where the past has not been obliterated as it has in the cities, by looking at old pictures and postcards, reading a great many books on architecture, histories of fashion, recipes, and so on.

As I worked, I learned what a wealth of knowledge that could transform our understanding of the past is waiting to be collected and written about. I found that the memories and reflections of ordinary people could bring the past to life in a way no ordinary history book could. In the end, all of these apparently unimportant details about apparently unimportant people helped me to draw up a picture of the past into which I could place my grandmother and also my mother.

Among the information I gathered from her children's memoirs was

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the fact that my grandmother had been a teacher, a "modern" woman at the turn of the twentieth century; that though I knew her as old and frail and apparently socially insignificant, she had had a major influence not only on all their lives, but on the life of her community. I found that she had enjoyed a romantic, loving relationship with her husband to a degree unusual even in our own time. This changed my view of how marriages were made in the past: I had always assumed, based on those same misleading readings I discussed at the beginning of this paper, that Arab marriage relationships had been made entirely for social and economic benefits, and had little to do with romance and love.

I found too something that shook me deeply, that my grandmother had lost her own home and her place and status in society as a direct result of the Palestinian revolution of 1936-39. For me this was a massively important discovery, because it placed my grandmother squarely in the heart of political development, of modern Arab history. I had always seen her, though quite unconsciously, as entirely outside of, and unrelated to, history and politics, but this discovery made me see the direct connection between her apparently insignificant life and the earth-shaking events of the Palestinian drama. It changed my view of her entirely: and not only my view of her, but of my mother and myself, and all other women of our times, because it made me look at the whole issue of women in history in a new light.

But I made other important discoveries through these memories of distant childhood written decades later by my mother and her brothers. I discovered that my great-grandmother was a tyrannical matriarch in her last years, and had been in her youth a famous horsewoman. This fact also shook me, because it showed me that our notion of Arab tradition, and of the place of women in it, is entirely invalid. Our foremothers were not the subdued, miserable wretches that we had been taught they were: they were in many ways freer and more powerful than we are today.

I cannot stress enough how important it is for us to collect private and unpublished, letters, memoirs, diaries, interviews. They add a dimension of paramount importance to our understanding not only of the past, but of the present as well, and point to a more interesting and complex vision of future social possibilities.

2) Public-Private, Important-Not Important.

Another problem I faced is common to all memoirists or family historians. Where does one draw the line that divides the public story,

which reflects society, from the private, which is entirely personal and particular? When writing about women there is an extra nuance to this question, because you are often writing about the banal details of domestic life. Therefore you must make decisions about what constitutes matters of public interest, what is common knowledge, and what has been forgotten.

I found nothing about the domestic details of my mother's and grandmother's lives that bored me, and so I wrote about whatever I could find, and somewhat to my surprise, my readers reacted enthusiastically to household matters that they remembered from their own childhoods. The *mubayyid*, for instance, the *munajjid*, the *hassira*, the *youks*, the primus stoves, the charcoal irons - all those things have disappeared from our urban lives but we cling to them in our memories, as we cling to the pictures of our mothers and grandmothers, of whose lives they were a part.

But in questioning the line between public and private there are more delicate matters than those I have mentioned. How can one write about women and not talk about engagements and marriages, sexual relations, childbirth, or even such details as depilation and other beauty habits? Where does one draw the line between delicacy and indelicacy, between what is required by a refined writing style and serious content, and the sometimes crude matters of everyday life?

I made a point of writing about some of these things, describing, in her own words, my mother's first experience with *sukkar* just before her marriage, and my experience with it as an adolescent. I wrote about bras and girdles, and even in school being excused from Sports if you had your period. Surely these are legitimate subjects in a book about women.

That most private of private realms, sexuality, was a far more problematic issue, however, and I dealt with it cautiously. Especially because of the stereotyping to which Arab society has been subjected, investigating social as well as physical relationships between the sexes was for me a matter of vital importance. Yet a friend of mine who read my book berated me for not mentioning sexuality in it. She was right and totally wrong at the same time. I perhaps do not use the word, but I feel that the subject is very present in my book. For instance I emphasize the fact that my mother and her brothers in their memoirs mention my grandparents kissing and hugging a great deal, and together with the fact that they produced many children, this surely indicates the nature of their private relationship, even though out of delicacy I did not go into this matter directly. And if I wrote, again in my mother's words, of her family's

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puritanical attitudes towards pregnancy, and that as a bride she knew nothing about "the facts of life" as she called it, and that my father was very considerate to her as a bride, are the implications of this not clear, even if I do not spell out the details? Have we become so blasé by the movies and modern scholarship that we can only talk about sex in graphic terms to be understood? Surely not.

In the 1960s an extremely influential scholarly book was published by Steven Marcus, a professor of English Literature, entitled **The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England** (New York: Basic Books, 1964) which I read as a graduate student writing my thesis on the great English novelist Thomas Hardy. This book changed forever the way we read Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Hardy, and all the other English novelists of the 19th Century, and by extension the great French and Russian novelists of the same period. In his book Marcus shows, among other things, how the sexual content of these novels, while not explicitly expressed but only hinted at, would have been clearly understood by the Victorians themselves as sexual in nature. Thus what we had thought of as a stodgy, puritanical society that frowned on sex and all things sexual was revealed to us in an entirely different light. The apparent absence of sex in these novels, unlike those of later times, is not an absence at all, merely a subtler presence than that we have become accustomed to in twentieth century literature.

Perhaps I had **The Other Victorians** on my mind as I worked on my book. In any case, I felt that though I did not wish to discuss sexuality explicitly, I had made matters quite clear implicitly. At least I hope so.

I dealt in some detail over childbirth customs in my grandmother's and my mother's day, but not in mine. Writing from my own perspective, it seemed clear to me that childbirth in our own time has been sufficiently globalized for me not to write about my own experiences in the modern hospital and with the modern medical establishment, which most of my female readers would have shared, but about the experiences of the past, which I researched.

But there is another matter having to do with privacy that is almost equally sensitive to a family biographer. What about quarrels within a family, what about the little secrets that all families have— what should I do with those? I found this a very difficult matter to handle, especially in our closely-knit society where anonymity is a rare commodity. I saw two choices: I could just tell things as they were, regardless of who I hurt or

offended, or, out of sympathy and respect for dead or distant relatives or friends, or their living children, ignore these matters altogether.

I felt I could do neither. To be honest as a biographer I had to tell about those quarrels that were of significance to the lives of my subjects. Even insignificant family quarrels tell a great deal not only about personalities, but also about social values, about familial structures and relationships. On the other hand, I did not want to show disrespect to the dead, or needlessly offend living relatives or old family friends. So I handled this question rather as I handled sexuality: the strained relationships are there, in my book, though they are not necessarily spelled out in full detail, and the full stories are not necessarily revealed.

I told about one old family quarrel explicitly and in great detail however, because all those involved were long since dead, and because the quarrel had been forgotten and forgiven even during their lifetimes, and because I found it enormously significant while deeply amusing. This was the quarrel between my mother's and my father's families over where their wedding should take place: her family wanted it to take place in their family church in Nazareth, his wanted it to take place in his family church in Jerusalem. The protagonists of the quarrel were mostly the women in both families, though it was a quarrel over the place of the men in their lives, and I traced it through my parents' letters to each other during their engagement. They tell of turbulent scenes, tears, temper tantrums, and veiled threats to end the engagement. In the end my mother's side won, but only because my father, over whom the quarrel was fought, gave in to his beloved fiancée's wishes, rather than to those of his sister and her best friend, the family priest's wife!

And how does a daughter write about her mother - no matter how much she loves and respects that mother - and yet ignore all the little disagreements, irritations, and even open quarrels that all mothers and daughters have with each other? Can one paint an honest picture of one's mother and at the same time idealize her? I found this impossible. For though I loved, admired, and respected my mother enormously, I was not blind to her faults, or to the little irritations between us. We quarreled sometimes, and sometimes got very angry at one another. I was writing a memoir that I also saw as social history- for that is how I see my book- I would have been dishonest to portray her as unfailingly wonderful. This for me was a huge problem. I hope I handled it like the others I have mentioned, with a certain subtlety, but also honestly, without rosy glasses.

3) Subject Matter: The Patriarchal Definition of Family and Writing About a Minority

When I started to write about my mother, and more especially about my grandmother, I found myself feeling that I was treading on delicate ground. I was writing about families that were not "mine," because I did not carry their names: "my" family, as it is normally defined, is my father's, whose name I do carry. Although nobody complained about this, I felt awkward. I am sure that in writing about their mothers and grandmothers others must feel the same way. The patriarchal definition of family is a very heavy burden for women in many ways, and this was one of them.

There was no solution to this problem, however, except to go ahead and do it anyway. In doing so I feel I have claimed my rightful place, and the place of my other female relations, in all the families to which we belong—my grandmother's, my mother's, my father's, and my husband's—no matter what name we carry.

Another problem arose. In writing about my family, which is not only Christian but Protestant as well, I was writing about a small minority among the religious groups in our part of the world. No one can be living in the Arab world today and not be sensitive to the political use being made of minorities, and to the risk one takes of collaborating with this political use if one writes about them. Stressing the dissatisfaction of, or the discrimination against, minorities has been done on the whole with no beneficent interest on the part of those interfering in Arab society, but rather with a view towards creating more division and strife. This is not to say of course that such dissatisfaction is unreal, or that the movements within society to redress wrongs is in any way invalid: merely that it has often been difficult to tell to what degree these movements are autonomous and authentic, and to what degree manipulated by outside forces whose interest is in undermining Arab society rather than improving it.

The more I thought about the question however, the more I came to see that I did not, and nor did anyone in my family of birth or the family I married into, think of ourselves as having a minority view of life, politics, and history in the Arab world. On the contrary, though we are proud of our heritage and birthright, we see ourselves as much directly involved in the social, political, and historical life of the region as the members of any majority group. In other words, I refuse to accept the fact that the only women worth writing about in our part of the world are Muslim women, or those of any other majority group: I refuse to think that my history, and

specifically my feminine history, is any more, or any less, worth exploring than any one else's. Quite the contrary, I think that in writing about my family's place in history, I am adding to our knowledge of the cultural wealth of our region.

Besides, it became clear to me as I worked that the real subject of my book was the rise of the modern, urban middle class. I have received comments from many who read my book, including Muslim and Christians of the majority sects, remarking on how they found their own memories of their mothers and grandmothers reflected in it. I believe that we share, Christians and Muslims alike, all of the social and economic issues of our time, and have much more in common than is generally assumed. We need to think more on this. Tracing the specific threads of our rich cultural heritage need not lead to conflict or separation, but on the contrary to a better understanding of our common history.

4) The Problem of Language

Because of historical reasons that I will not go into here, but which is one of the themes of my book, English is the language in which I do most of my writing. For some time I felt embarrassed and ashamed of the fact that I did not feel as comfortable writing in Arabic, and so did not write at all. This embarrassment was augmented by the fact that some of my earlier studies, especially those on feminism, were not widely read in the Arab circles whose opinion I value. Then I made an enormous effort to write in Arabic, and published several papers in that language. But there was no question that when it came to a writing style subtle and nuanced enough to deal with the subject of my new book, I could do so to my satisfaction only in English.

The problem I faced with writing in English, and therefore by definition addressing a foreign audience - though hopefully also a local one - is that I had to overcome a tendency to be defensive about Arab culture in the face of the huge hostility it is facing today. Arab and Muslim women have historically been used as an excuse for interventions by imperial powers in the affairs of our worlds. I felt that if I were writing in Arabic I would have been freer to criticize those aspects of our culture that I feel deserve criticism. I had to take a conscious decision not to be defensive, and to write as honestly as I could of our culture, in all its aspects.

Eventually I came to see another side to the problem. Readers in the English speaking world, after all, have no access to such biographies and autobiographies of Arab women as are written in Arabic, to the many

Arabic novels and poems written by women, or to the various debates about women and their status going on today in the Arab and Muslim worlds. I hoped that my book, written in English, could make a contribution, however small, to the understanding of Arab culture, and especially the women in it, in the face of the stereotyping and generalization that has plagued us in recent times.

5) Theoretical Problems

The thorniest problem I faced as I worked was theoretical. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper so much has been written about Arab women in general, and so little about the lives of real women, that the theories developed in academic and theoretical writing, and even in the public discourse, have imposed a view that I found myself questioning more with each progress in my narrative. This was especially true of the question of tradition and modernity, and of that strange creature called in Arabic *al mar'a al sharqiyya al taqliddiyya* (the traditional Eastern woman). I found myself questioning these terms at every turn as I uncovered the small details of the lives of my mother, my grandmother, and even my great-grandmothers, and thought about them from the vantage point of my own life, and the feminism to which I have long been committed.

As I wrote in the conclusion to my book, I first became aware of the problem when I started to write about my mother,

[I] found that I had written the words: "She lived the traditional role of mother and wife." No sooner was the ink dry on the paper than I paused, feeling the sticky threads on my cheek. What, I asked myself, was the "tradition" to which I had mechanically referred, as I, and everyone I knew, had referred to it thousands of times before? What were its definitions? Whose tradition was it? How did I know that such a tradition existed? On what evidence was I basing my use of this heavy word, which brought with it such a long trail of meanings and connotations?⁽¹⁾

As I worked, I gradually became convinced that, because we know so little about the past, about the actual lives and practices, customs, relationships of our foremothers, we are misusing the terms "tradition," "turath" and "taqaleed". To my mind, these vague terms have become totally meaningless. Undefined, unrefined, and often entirely fictional, it

(1) *Teta, Mother, and Me* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 390.

seemed to me they were made up for ideological purposes, or simply parroted without much thought.

The notion of "tradition," as a single, unchanging body of relationships, beliefs, customs, and practice, simply by having been endlessly repeated, has acquired an authority of its own, and has become an essential element in the stereotyping of Arab women with which all of us have to one degree or another been complicit. Our past is far more complex and important than we have been taught to believe, and we have a far more complex inheritance than this "tradition" that everyone talks about.

And this brings me to the question of our modernity, and its origins. In the Arab *mashreq*, and even more specifically in Lebanon, we have become so used to thinking about foreign missionaries and other foreign educators as having brought in modernity and modern education, especially to women, that we do not understand, or even think about, our ancestors' role in bringing our world about. We dismiss them as though they had no role, and were mere consumers of a modernity brought in by others. This is not true; it cannot be true. It is part of the problem surrounding "tradition" that I have been talking about. The fact is that much more research has been done about the missionaries than about the parents who sent their children to their schools, the students themselves, the teachers, those who gave the land on which those foreign schools were built, those who built the buildings, etc. Furthermore, the missionaries documented themselves very thoroughly: they were prolific writers of memoirs, letters, reports, and all these have been endlessly sought out by historians. Not so the local people who one way or another supported these schools, who have been under-researched, under-studied. On the whole their memoirs, letters, and reports are not as widely known. Very few of them have been published.

As I researched my own family, I discovered something that should have been obvious, but is not. In each of the mission schools that I studied I found a local prime mover, whose name is never mentioned with the same reverence paid the foreigners. I discovered for instance that my great-aunt, my grandmother's sister, had played a major role in the founding of one of the most important modern schools in Cairo, the American College for Girls. Though the American woman with whom she worked is called the founder, and my aunt, Emelia Badr, is referred to in school documents as her "friend," and "associate," I discovered that she played an enormously important role not only in creating the project, in gathering support for the school in the community, but also later in mediating between the American teachers and administrators and their Arab students.

Far more important than her administrative work or her post as teacher of Arabic language and literature is the fact that her students, many of whom became members of the feminist movement or were otherwise active in Egyptian society and intellectual life, testified she taught them to take from the foreigners what was useful to their advancement, while maintaining their personal self-respect, and valuing and protecting their own Arab culture. And I had discovered already that in almost all the mission schools, at least the ones I looked at closely, there were natives who played that same kind of role. It was they who bridged the cultural distance between the foreigners and the locals, and it was they who should be credited at least partly with the creation of modernity, with carving out a new space between the old and the new, between the east and the west: for it is in that collaboratively created space that I believe modernity lies. Without Butros Boustany, Nassif Yazigi and others like them there would have been no AUB; without Selim Kassab there would have been no British Syrian Training College; without my aunt Emelia there would have been no American College for Girls. And without all the nameless parents, teachers, and students there would never have been that famous surge in modern education in the nineteenth century to which all histories refer, because I found in my research too that the schools were often, if not always, opened at the request of the local people: they were seeking that modernity which they helped create.

All of this especially applies to women. If we were treated then – and still are in many traditional historians' accounts – as insignificant ignorant people, wallowing in “darkness and degradation,” (a phrase often used by the foreign missionaries to exaggerate their contribution to the history of female education) brought to enlightenment by foreign educators, that is no reason to believe that about ourselves. We are bearers of the most ancient civilizations, and should not see ourselves as people in total dependence for modernity. As you see yourself, so do you behave. If we see that we had a lot to do with the coming of modern education, much more than is ever mentioned in the traditional history books, we shall see ourselves as creators of our own modernity. We will thus be able to act more like creators, rather than mere consumers, of that same modernity. And if, basing our claim on the study of history, and especially the role of women in it, we can claim a role in the creation of modernity then we can with greater confidence claim a role in the creation of the future.

Conclusion

I have tried to show why I think it is important to write about women's lives, and the difficulties faced as one does so. But what about the lives of ordinary men? I can only conclude that more or less the same importance applies to them, and probably the same, or similar, problems. Ordinary men have no more been credited with shaping and moving society than ordinary women have, and their lives deserve to be told as much as women's do. If my grandfathers, my father, my uncles, and my brother influenced my life as much as my grandmothers, my mother, my aunts, and my sisters did, they have an obvious and important place in my history.

I am, however, a woman, and in writing about my female ancestors it is clear that I am also writing about my life, my consciousness, and my situation in society. I do not know, and therefore cannot identify with, the consciousness of men. I do not know enough about what constitutes the important in their lives, or the quotidian details which they cherish, how they feel about sexuality, what they do and feel while their wives are giving birth, how they feel about the female-dominated customs at marriages and funerals. I do not even know whether they think about the same things I do, and therefore I cannot write a book about the intimate thoughts of men. It is up to men to do that, to collect stories, to collect information about their fathers' lives, to redefine the past of Arab men.

It is only when we have both, men and women, done our work that we will begin to better understand social life in the past, that we will have a truer sense of our tradition, and our modernity, and how both were made.