

BORDER-CROSSING VS EXILIC CONTAINMENT IN LEILA AHMAD'S MEMOIR: A BORDER PASSAGE

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ABSTRACT

Grown up in a world of incessant transformations, Leila Ahmad decided to begin her journey of self-definition. As an Islamist feminist, born in Egypt and now living in the United States of America, she had to carve herself a niche amid those streaming waves of cultural notions. In her memoir, *A Border Passage*, she shifts back and forth to narrate how she overcame all hindering walls for a better positioning. In her desperate attempts to do so, Ahmad had to cross vast distances of differences and disputes in fields like education, religion, gender, and politics. The study aims at determining the strategies she adopted to overcome those mounting walls in the light of the concept of 'borders' and the idea of 'exile', that is presumed by Said to "cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience". The study also observes Leila Ahmad's journey from patriarchal oppression, state repression, intellectual colonization, liminality and injustice to personal salvation, survival, freedom, balance, centeredness, and outspokenness.

KEYWORDS: Borders, Exile, Crossing, Nepantla, Mestiza, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

In his *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said defines exile as the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home".(138), and refers to the achievements done in the exile as "efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement" (138), highlighting that "exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience"(147). Thus, exile might connote a forced separation or migration from homeland or it might also signify an involuntary geographical displacement for a variety of reasons : political, social , or economic. In this sense, exile seems to be not only a forced "territorial break" (Ilie 11), but also a "state of mind"(11) that refers to a sense of loss, homesickness, and uprootedness. In addition, Paul Ilie suggests two types of exile: "territorial" and "nonterritorial" (11) whereas the former is associated with persons who depart their homeland while the latter with those who stay, and both cases represent a "condition of otherness" (11). In like manner, Abdul JanMohammad (1993) introduces two types of border:"a syncretic intellectual" and "specular border intellectual" :

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In this context, Gorgia Anzaldua (1987) argues that "the borderlands are physically present wherever two or more

cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where the lower, middle and upper classes touch"(Preface). The existence of these borders led people to construct binary categories such as "us" and "them". Thus, borderlands have become "a metaphor for processes of many things, psychological, physical, and mental". (Anzaldua and Keating 176). The first of these processes is what she called "nepantla" which she specifies as an "in-between place".(*now let us shift*). She views those who are living among foreign cultures as "seeing double" sometimes from the perspective of the indigenous culture and other times from the exogenous one, an act which renders those cultures "transparent"("now let us shift"). Those "nepalteras", as Anzaldua conceives, are "the supreme border crossers. They act as intermediaries between cultures and their various visions of reality"(*Speaking Across the Divide*). Moreover, Anzaldua argues against binary opposition frames of us/them through her theory of "Nosotras" in which she affirms that "living in a multicultural society, we cross into each other's pockets, occupy each other's territories, live in close proximity"(*Interviews/Entrevistas*). Keating (2006), highlights Anzaldua's belief that "nos" implies "us", "otras" implies otherness, but when joined together they hold the promise of healing as we contain the others and the others contain us.(10). Thus, Anzaldua's theory, Keating argues, does not imply sameness because differences still exist, but function dialogically, generating previously unrecognized commonalities and connections as "unmapped common ground" (*Now Let us Shift*), and those living on this common ground "juggle cultures"(Anzaldua,1987:74) creating the "new mestiza". The new 'mestiza' :

has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode- nothing is trusted out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only she sustains contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else". (74).

Consequently, the concept of 'borders' has become a buzz word in postcolonial discourse, sometimes as a distinctive mark, and other times as a consequent symptom. In its concrete sense, 'borders' have become preserved among nations with an aim of establishing the sovereignty of those nations. In their abstract sense, so many attempts have been made to melt those borders into the pot of globalization, regardless the hazards that might have endangered the independence of the identity. Thus, while borders have been viewed as "something disturbing, as something dividing and separating" (Häntsch), they have been similarly assumed as "barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory" (Said 147). In the third world countries, colonial powers, in a process of re-mapping, imposed barriers that widened the gap between peoples and their neighbouring peoples, deepened the sense of alienation and scattered the remains of nationalism, as it has been the case in the Arab states. Henceforth, the essence of borders has no longer been that of borders on land, but has become of a mutable sense that made it so "kaleidoscopic" (Jiménez).

OBJECTIVES

Leila Ahmad (1940-), is an influential Arab–American Islamic feminists, has lived in a world of various borders: familial, educational, political, ideological and religious, and has been exposed to different upheavals .The aim of this paper is to examine the case of exilic containment and the strategies she followed in crossing those hindering borders. The paper also discusses the forms of borders and exiles Ahmad had to face up to in her memoir. Next, the paper will shed light on the borderless world Ahmad has been trying to create.

Ahmad's *A Border Passage* reflects her obsession with the concept of borders and exile, rather, how to cross them into new horizons; keeping, at the same time, her origins deeply rooted at home. Having fathomed the essence of her day's terminology: Arab nationalism, imperialism, racism, oppression, exploitation (5), she had to resist her father's "colonized

consciousness"(5). Her crossing strategies have been formulated out of her family's "multiple shifting consciousness" in which they "embod[ied] a convergence of traditions"(5). To Ahmad, the truth was that "[they] were always plural" (5) at home.

Early Seeds of Crossings

Born at the last days of the British empire in Egypt, Ahmad had acquired a pressing stimulus to cross the surrounding conditions and break the hindering barriers. Having crystallized the status of her family as cultural "brokers" between the colonizing force and their native land, she had started to recall the significance of speaking English at home and at school instead of Arabic, the mother tongue. Her memoir reflects on her crossing advances: being born and educated in Egypt, a student of literature at Cambridge, education consultant in UAE, and later an Islamist feminist and a resident in USA. She, as such, was destined to cross through geographical, cultural, social, and religious borders and to become a 'syncretic intellectual' and a 'specular border intellectual' at one and the same time.

Ahmad's sense of border-crossing began to sprout in this turbulent environment; she was educated in Egypt through the means of English language, English teachers, and English curriculum. The colonial force imposed a 'nonterritorial' exile through its culture at the expense of the indigenous one. In addition, Egypt underwent many social and political changes that reshaped its position. Ahmad states that her "childhood fell in that era when words 'imperialism' and the 'west' had not yet acquired the connotations they have today" (*A Border Passage* 5). Those connotations, she argues, had become "mere synonyms for 'racism', 'oppression' and 'exploitation'"(5).

Leila Ahmad's life divulges a background of sundry stances that made her sense of border-crossing conceivable and liable to sprout. She dates her formative years back to "those years and their upheaval and with the politics that framed [their] lives".(5). In the same vein, Ahmad's home approved English as the tool of communication, regarding Arabic, at the same time, as "inferior". She states that "English was valued above Arabic"(23), and was considered as "superior language"(23). It was the language she spoke at school whereas they were "prohibited even in the playground from speaking Arabic"(23). Thus, her sense of colonialism has deepened with a "major concomitant of such an upbringing"; namely, her "difficulty in formal Arabic" (Nash 363) which she attributes to her father's "neglect" (*A Boder Pasage* 26). Even, her sense of identity has been sought over years and she highlighted president Sadat's quest for identity in like manner in his biography.

Education

Education, in a colonized country like Egypt, was one of the areas that represented a 'nonterritorial' exile in which Ahmad's sense of border-crossing began to find ground. Her experience of attending a school under the British occupation heightened her inner conflict with borders and exile. She was educated in a school where English was the main, if not the only language, and where Arabic was forbidden and despised. She viewed this as one of the negative aspects of colonialism that caused an 'unhealable rift' between herself and her native place. In this respect, she deplores her mother's case: "her children's growing up speaking a language she did not understand" (*A Border Passage* (111). Worse, the impact of the school extended to an attempt to "Christianize [them]" (137).

Although Ahmad treasures her European education, she confronted racism and stereotyping from her instructor, Mr. Price who told Jean, Ahmad's classmate, that he was "sorry....to see me [Ahmad] ahead of her [Jean] in anything"(145). Out of his bias, he wondered how a Muslim girl could surpass a Christian one (145). Even worse, he

accused Ahmad of plagiarism (144) and advised her "against sciences because [she] was Egyptian" (145), and justified his attitude as "a relic of the old days when the British did not want Egypt to have its own scientists" (145).

Colonialism adopted various forms of discrimination that increased Ahmad's sense of borders, exile, and the necessity to cross them. At school, cultural borders have been established by other means than language such as the Royal British anthem Ahmad and others used to sing (139) and only American and British films were to be watched, while Arabic ones have been "looked down on" (142). Even, Ahmad's western school name, 'Lily' stuck in her throat when she met president Nasser as she could not speak it out in his presence owing to his deep hatred of all what was British.

Thus, Ahmad realized that she was on the borderline between two cultures which 'edge each other and where people of different races occupy the same territory'. She felt the 'unhealable rift' between the colonizing British culture, and the colonized Egyptian one: "...we read about the history and geography of Europe but not the history and geography of Egypt. I knew all about the flora and fauna of the British Isles.....but nothing about the Nile and the ancient valley where I lived". (*A Border Passage* 151). Moreover, Ahmad reflects on the colonial concept of the colonized school children of the middle and upper classes. She believed that native children were intended to be toyed by the imperialistic forces to an outrageous degree: "We were intendedto be the brokers of the knowledge and expertise of the west, brokers between the two cultures.....we were intended to be the intermediaries, connecting and mediating between this society and culture". (152)

In Cambridge, Ahmad's sense of loss has developed into a 'condition of otherness' that resulted from a 'territorial break' and a very specific 'state of mind'. Her sense of borders and otherness underwent a new turn and she "felt at home" (*A Border Passage* 180) inspite of her 'territorial exile'. In reality, she created for herself an ideological space and started to 'see double' through her previous love for English literature. There, she could temporarily ignore the encroaching cultural and social expectations and only sought emotional refuge. The new place seemed to her "as if...located exactly on the edge and borderland between imagination and the ordinary world" (181). Racism was repeatedly practiced against Ahmad and other colleagues of hers coming from the former British empire, "from the places once shaded pink and deeper pink on the map- British colonies and protectorates"(189). In addition, Ahmad, in a later phase, believed that in America she became a "woman of color" (232). Thus, in a resisting move, she and her "colored" colleague thought of sending a cry of S.O.S to a newspaper that had uncovered their humiliating state in Girton whereas they were held as prisoners. Like other feminists from the Arab world, Ahmad shifted her identification from the false universal of 'whiteness' to the politicized model of 'woman of color' upon confronting the deeply ingrained anti-Arab and anti-Muslim attitudes of mainstream American feminists." (Andrea 14)"

Moreover, Ahmad's sense of cultural borders and 'territorial exile' and the necessity to cross them is stimulated when she remembered how "a man spat at [her] on a bus once when, thinking [she] was Israeli, he discovered [she] was an Arab" (*A Border Passage* 189) and when she recalled how frustrating, insulting, and unfair Harriet Martineau's impression about the Egyptian women when she visited them. Martineau wrote that Egyptian women were "ignorant.... worthless...mindless" (193) albeit she did not speak Arabic, and those women never spoke English, a fact that robbed her evaluation much of its credibility.

Consequently, Ahmad believes that there has been "a steady stream of Europeans who looked down on and thought of Muslim harem women as mindless" (193). This brutal cultural separation created by the colonial system of education had its negative burden on Ahmad as it imposed on her a 'nonterritorial exile' and a separating borderline. For

this reason, she turned into a 'specular border intellectual' as she felt the urge to cross cultural borders in an attempt to build bridges of understanding. Her cry: "I wanted to be out of Egypt" (206) represented a single move in the direction across those borders towards a 'territorial exile'; leaving behind her a culture she rejected to be a part of:" In the fabric of my own consciousness the women among whom I lived and most of all my mother were everything that I didn't want to be. The only escape from this, the only way out, I must have concluded at some level, would be for me to grow up to become either a man or a Westerner." (194).

Religion

Ahmad's early understanding of Islam began to crystallize and to take shape in her childhood. During her stay with her mother at Zatoun, Cairo, she found herself surrounded by a community of women whose concept of Islam was so moderate, and could consequently conceive Islam as a pacifistic faith: "Islam, as I got it from them [women], was gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical" (121).

What is noteworthy in this respect is Ahmad's reference to Zeinab Al Ghazali, the prominent Muslim woman leader of the then time, who founded a Muslim women's Society with affiliations to Muslim Brotherhood¹. In her life, AlGhazali adopted a belief that justifies violence in the cause of Islam (122). Ahmad found this sort of Islam quite the contrary of what she personally received from her mother: " AlGhazali had been initiated into Islam and had got her notions as to what a Muslim was from her father, whereas I had received my Islam from the mothers, as had my mother" (123). Thus, she ended up with two kinds of Islam: "women's Islam and an official, textual Islam, a men's Islam" (123). In a later stage of her life, Ahmad continues 'seeing double' in her 'nonterritorial exile' as she realized the originality of Islam and the authentic aspect of its core in spite of the diverse "backgrounds" and "subcultures" (125) of its holders. What has been striking to her not "how different or rare the Islam in which [she] was raised" (125), but "how ordinary and typical it seems to be in its base and fundamentals" (125).

More importantly still, Ahmad argues that the Islam she received at her mother's home, which is the Islam of "ordinary folk generally" (125), is opposed to the Islam of Sheikhs and clerics in terms of the manipulation of the text. The "lay Islam" emphasizes the "moral conduct" and the "ethical code" (125), while "established Islam" highlights the "ritual and formal religious practice" (125). This diversity combines the aspects of Islam as "an aural and oral heritage and a way of living and being" (125). On the other hand, the other Islam; which is dubbed by Ahmad as "textual, written heritage", is categorized as "men's Islam".

In the same vein, Ahmad proceeds to differentiate between the "lived" Islam and the "textual" one in an age which deforms the "oral and ethical traditions"(128) of the former, and stipulates the "fundamentalism" (118) of the latter. Even worse, the western academic world contributed to a so-called legitimacy of textual Islam and to a suspicious silencing of other relatively tolerant forms of Islam.

In short, Ahmad culminates her vision concerning Muslims, who crossed the borders and now living in the west as immigrants, in the shape of fighting segregation and marginalization. She believes that they take for granted the right to "believe whatever they wish, speak and write openly" (131). Only under such conditions, Islam will continue, being the "lived', "lay" Islam:" Islam will become in this new age, surely it will be something quite other than the religion that has been officially forced on us through all these centuries." (131).

Ahmad's Identity and the Concept of Border Crossing

The question of identity to Leila Ahmad has persistently been resonant since her early years at home, passing by her experience as a young woman witnessing the rapid changes Egypt passed through and by her consultative experiences in Dubai, till she has recently settled in America. Through this crossing journey, Ahmad realized that "borders are an integral part of identities" (Madsen 72) and could determine that people are in continuous "bordering processes" (72). She also believed in Madan's idea that "every culture needs others as critics so that the best in it may be highlighted and that held out as being cross-culturally desirable" (6). She also came to terms with Said's view that "exiles feel.....an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.... a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology.....is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world" (142)"

The duality of Ahmad's identity began to sprout as early as her early years of childhood. She has been in an incessant quest for a feminine inside herself, a figure who is not like her mother "who entered the fabric of [Leila's] own memories in the negative" (*A Border Passage* 193), but who belongs to somewhere else. Thus, she felt marginalized and contained in her local microcosm on the one hand, and colonized and degraded by the occupying force on the other. For this reason, her identity has been shaped to "resist genre boundaries as well as geographical borders" (Saldivar-Hull 211), and to reject that "liminal zone" (Alaimo, Stacy 61) imposed on her by various forces, indigenous or exogenous. She also determined to construct her identity outside the prevailing values. This determination put her at odds with the rest of her society and intensified her sense of exile and homelessness. In this vein, she rejected education in Cairo university and American University in Cairo (*A Border Passage* 178), and wanted to go to England, the land of the "fading empire". (178), and later to America, the "symbol of hope" (JanMohammad 98).

Through her identification process, Ahmad falls within Anzaldúa's frame of 'nepantla' where she duplicated her vision 'in-between' two cultures and is no longer in the "center" ("*now let us shift*") but rather "removed" to an "in-between place of nepantla" where she could "see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white race" ("*now let us shift*").

Ahmad's major question in the realm of identity has been: "is there a distinctly Egyptian identity?" (*A Border Passage* 11). In this respect, she emerges as if on a borderland between her indigenous culture and her personal demands of self-determination. The Arab identity is thought to be changeable to "serve political interests" (10). The word 'Arab', which is used by Ahmad in the sense of 'Egyptian', "hammered home in the media" (10) under Nasser's nationalism, who replaced 'Egypt' in the name of the country, before Sadat had brought it back later. In addition, Ahmad believes that Egyptians sometimes view themselves as Africans and Mediterranean, or Islamic, Coptic and Nilotic some other times. This blurred vision enhanced Ahmad's sense of crossing in lieu of the fragility of her domestic identity.

Moreover, as a 'nepantlera', Ahmad "glimpsed the sea in which [she] has been immersed" and out of her sense of "oblivion" she views borders as "projects of resistance and liberation". (Orazco 69). Ahmad's identity glaringly reflects that spirit of resistance and the patriotic attempts of liberation. She writes: "I became more nationalistic towards issues like: politics, justice, and truth" (*A Border Passage* 172). Thus, when president Nasser declared that the Jews are welcome in Egypt after 1956 war provided that should stop their false claims of Egypt as their own land; a declaration which "sounded fair" (174) to Ahmad.

Furthermore, the image of her mother's indigenous culture remained in Ahmad's consciousness as a symbol of the rejected world and 'nonterritorial' exilic containment. Through her rejection, Ahmad could formulate her sense of crossing and rebellion. She believes that the ethos of her mother's world regarded women as "inferior creatures, essentially sex objects and breeders, to be bought and disposed for a man's pleasure" (100). For this reason, she found their home at Zatoun, which is her mother's preferred locale, "quite known and familiar to [her] mother.....this was Mother's true home, her true and native land" (100), while, on entering the house, she felt that "[she] had crossed into some other world" (100).

Ahmad's identity witnessed a new turn in Abu Dabi whereas she realized that "the term borderlands not only refers to the 'liminal' areas that mark a divide between nations but has also become "widespread metaphors for doing feminist work". (Aquino 21). Ahmad was entrusted to plan a new strategy for girls' education in United Emierates, concurrently observing the reservations of the society. Soon, she realized that the space in Abu Dabi was "mens' space" (*A Border Passage* 284) and felt like an "intruder" (284). The masculine domination was sweeping and quite notable. Surprisingly enough, this same visit has been the a turning point in her journey to a considerable degree : "Her experience of confronting her own hidden prejudices about traditional women in a gender-segregated society consequently leads her to an understanding, if not an endorsement, of western European women traveling to similarly dissonant cultural space of Egypt in the nineteenth century". (Andrea 12)"

Similarly, it was Ahmad's connection with the community of local women and her acquisition of their "perspectives.....clear-sightedness.....and determination". (*A Border Passage* 288) that she "had begun to have [her] consciousness raised as a feminist" (288). Still, on the Arabian soil, Ahmad "began to see the point of theory" (288). It was from Maria; the woman of Abu Dabi, that Ahmad began to learn that: "It was from here, from the vantage point on the margins, that I could begin to examine, analyze, and think about the world of which I was part in a way that finally, for me, would begin to make sense". (288).

Having reconsidered her status under the various burdens in Abu Dabi, Ahmad's journey of crossing the social, political, religious, and educational had taken steps further, giving voice to Said's notion that "exile is something better than staying behind" (141).

Geoffrey Nash in his article, *From Harem To Harvard: Leila Ahmad*, asks: "why write in a second language?"(352). He argues that Ahmad's text *A Border Passage* directs our attention to cross-cultural issues, and its title "juxtaposes cultural origin and destination"(352). In addition, through English, Ahmad "advertises her deficiency in standard Arabic" (352). In her memoir, the issue of language "is linked from the beginning to a biculturality that derives from the author's Egyptian-Arab family upbringing and colonial education" (353). Ahmad herself draws on the heart of the matter that uncovers the largest space of her identity and justifies her border-crossing when she contemplates:

Whatever school my parents sent me to, Arabic or English, I would have found myself imbibing a culture and studying a language and learning attitudes that were different from those of the world in which I lived at home in Cairo and Alexandria. The choice either way entailed alienation from my home culture and home language and from the language and oral culture of other Cairenes. (283).

Her last choice, after all, has been to settle in America whereas she is "exiled by exiles" and made to "relive the actual process of up-rooting at the hands of exiles" (Said 141). There, her identity began to step into phases of maturity and

recognition. In that closing phase of her journey, she affirms that the story of her border-crossing has been a single story in a chain of other stories. In America, the world became "of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders". (296), and she became a true 'mestiza' who accepts the 'plurality' of living and who 'changes ambivalence into something else'.

A Border Passage through Conceptual Framework

Rooke believes that "if autobiography is primarily concerned with the individual, memoirs concentrate on communal history". (354) Accordingly, it has been Ahmad's multifaceted identity that had a major impact on her concept of border-crossing in *A Border Passage*. Hers has not only been a didactic, informing, or even a historical memoir, but also one that celebrates specific psychological and intellectual levels. Through her memoir and her intellectual power, she could narrate the history of Egypt and the tremendous transformations Egyptians witnessed. She never forgets, in the process of tracing to record, through lively images and rhetorical style, the tiny occurrences that formulated the early seeds of her fabric.

Ahmad's memoir has been structured in a manner that symbolizes her fascination with the concept of border-crossing and uncovers her agonies under exilic containment. Her chapter-headings could convincingly refer to various degrees of her obsession as they variously signify: 'In The House of Memory', 'From Colonial to Postcolonial', 'Transition', 'School Days', 'Running From The Females That Lit The Sky', 'On Becoming An Arab', 'From Abu Dabi to America', and 'Cairo Moments'. In addition, "the text openly draws attention to cross-cultural issues." (Nash 352) through a very significant title that maps out Ahmad's route. Moreover, Ahmad's ideas and her intellectual framework have been chronologically surveyed under concepts like: 'harem', 'veil', 'Travel', 'west', and 'Quest'.

One of the strategies of border crossing Ahmad adopted, as a 'supreme border crosser', was to "foreground those aspects of Arab/Muslim women's lives that indicated a more advantageous treatment than that received by their Western sisters" (361). *A Border Passage*, accordingly, represents a development of Ahmad's concept as an 'intermediary between two cultures' that began in *Women Gender In Islam* whereby she, in *A Border Passage*, could affirm her identity as a feminist. The text is viewed as one

that personalizes Arab women's issues by elucidating the journey of one woman-its subject- beginning with her escape from the restrictions of her native culture via unconscious assimilation into colonial culture; their passing through later feelings of guilt (especially with respect to her relationship with family, friends, and former servants), and concluding with her desire to return/find roots in her homeland. (Nash 362)

The memoir becomes an arena where Ahmad adopted a second strategy of her "encounter with the West and the Westerners"(366) through which she could "reformulate her judgments of her mother and female forebears through reconstructing Arab/Muslim women's histories" (366). The memoir, in this respect, abounds in typical feminist figures that Ahmad found eligible: Huda Shar'awy² and Malak Hifni Nassef.³ In processing her stimulus of border-crossing, Ahmad draws on both of them as two women representing indigenous and exogenous dimensions. In her attempt to reposition herself, she determines the vast distance that separates both figures and could, consequently, materialize her sense of feminism. The comparison held between them is meant to be her point of departure towards new horizons. At a time she views Malak Hifni Nassef as "articulating the basis of a feminism that did not automatically affiliate itself with westernization".(Ahmad, 1992: 179), she regards Sha'arawy as one who "promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability

of progress toward western-type societies" (174).

Ahmad further believed that Sha'arwy, as a child, "felt rejected because she was a girl, a rejection that bred feelings of exclusion" (186), and only through her connection with the Europeans that she regained "a sense of herself and a sense of wholeness" (186-87), thus, could "create" (187) herself. In like manner, the intensity of Ahmad's "relation with the West in English" (Nash 356) refers to the fact that her connection "is no longer conducted primarily from within the boundaries of national culture" (356), but rather it "goes beyond these and traverses cultural borders" (356). In addition, Ahmad "reverts to a Sufi frame at the close of *A Border Passage* in an attempt to "recuperate global rootlessness.....into traditional notions of wholeness and connectedness". (Nash 356-66). This existential journey has symbolically revolted against her mother's type in search of the so-called 'wholes':

The title's first two words foreground the journey as an accomplished act, the next four emphasize the distance travelled. However, in gendering the traveler, the final segment ensures that Ahmad's narratives shall not be wholly devoid of.....obstacles. A notably feature.....is the attempted abortion of the subjects of [her] mother, and [her] struggle to come to terms with this fact well into maturity. (355).

As a feminist, Leila Ahmad could accurately diagnose the case of her forerunners in the Middle East under the pushing forces that led to their crossing experiences, either geographically or intellectually. She quotes Mai Ziada⁴ who voiced her sense of isolation having crossed the borders of Palestine into Egypt: "despite my immense love for the country of my birth, I feel like a displaced person, a refugee with no homeland" (Ahmad, 1992:187), and Virginia Woolf, who despises the state of women in England: "while England was the country of Englishmen, Englishwomen had no country" (187). Having assimilated those experiences, Ahmad's would have never been less daring an experience. The situation, to Ahmad, seemed to have

Fostered feelings of psychological alienation.....isolation....exclusion, even internal exile, for breaking the bounds of feminine conduct- being a writer or an intellectual- and for advocating feminism, thereby placing themselves explicitly, by advocating feminism, in opposition to the dominant Arab andocentric culture. (187)

The symbolic act that invigorated Ahmad and consolidated her crossing stance was that of Huda Sha'arawy when she returned from an international conference in Rome whenever she "set aside her veil as she stepped off the boat" (*A Border Passage* 94). In reality, she did not set aside a mere face cover, but rather sidelined other misconceptions and rotten habits among which Ahmad strived to re-position herself. She was torn between two groups: those who have decided that "all backwardness and ignorance has its source in the veil and that hence it is essential that Egyptian women unveil immediately." (181), and those who claim that "veil was essential and that education would corrupt women. (181).

Furthermore, *A Border Passage*, being a sequel of *Women and Gender in Islam*, concisely traces those issues of women and veil and highlights its remarkable figures. This extended and recurrent trace crystallizes Ahmad's innermost intention to cross all sorts of walls, be them geographical or intellectual. For one thing, Ahmad believes that it was the colonial force in the person of Cromer that found veil as a synonymy of degradation. Cromer argued that it was where 'veiling' and 'segregation' prevail that the "inferiority of Muslims could be traced" (Ahmad, 1992: 153), and that it was this degradation that represented an "obstacle" (153) to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character

which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization".(Guerville 154). For another thing, Ahmad, ironically enough, highlights the figure of Cromer who, in Egypt, has been a "champion of unveiling". (Ahmad, 1992:153), has concurrently in England been a "founding member and sometimes president of the men's League for Oppressing Women's Suffrage".(153).

In her anti-Cromer argument, Ahmad argues that the old concept of veil as a hindering wall is no longer existing, and the Islamic code of dress crossed that short-sighted evaluation practiced by the colonial force. Shortly after her return to Cairo, she was astonished by the new Islamic dress which she dubbed as modern. The old fashions that were used to differentiate classes died out. In general, "The veil no longer meant what it had in my days.... did not connote.... confinement to the home... it meant exactly the opposite" (*A Border Passage* 300). In the same vein, Ahmad believes that "the feminist agenda set by Europeans was incorrect and irrelevant". (Ahmad, 1992:166) on the grounds that "Muslim woman need to reject the androcentrism and misogyny of whatever culture and tradition they find themselves in".(166). She, moreover, objected to the Western focus on the issue of veil because veil, is now "pregnant with meanings".(166).

A Border Passage has further been a journey that was enriched by numerous occurrences recalled from Ahmad's vast memory. Those occurrences contributed in the completion of her conceptual framework and in stimulating her into a crossing stance. Those memories reflected historical and social events that had their impact on the Egyptians. Ahmad, consequently, fell in a state of imbalance and started her quest for her shadowed identity. In her crisis, she began to refer to her being and belonging: "I belonged in the category in which cats also belonged, the category of small beings. Or may be somewhere between them and people?".(*A Border Passage* 57), to question her existence: "why should my existence have meaning only in the scheme of some else's life"(86), to enquire about their status under occupation: "How were we intended to be brokers of knowledge". (152), and even wonder at the wisdom of God creating us different: ".....all believed in the same God but had different religions" (141). Under this grim reality, Ahmad realized that under occupation you "either to be a man or a westerner" (194), and the choice has always been between "the colonialism and colonialism or domination and domination" (283). Thus, her desire to be "out of Egypt" (206) has been a cry against all forms of suppression, aggression, and racism. Consequently, her intention of crossing borders has been formulated in a form of sweeping generalization:

....many people, and not only "natives" long to flee, to get away, to roam. Look at all the Americans of my generation who went to India in search of gurus and all the people before them, Westerners away, who went off hoping to find another culture, another way to live, a different way to be. (155)

CONCLUSIONS

In her memoir, Leila Ahmad could cross several kinds of confinements and could overcome her sense of exile. Through the development of her crossing experience, her identity transgressed numerous ruling tenets and imperatives of her society. Her formidable task has been how to tune in contradicting waves of traditions and to produce a finer one that receive unanimous approval everywhere. Thus, the result of her experience has not been "an announcement....of the victory of Western culture, but a celebration of the resourcefulness and potential of Eastern women through reconstruction of their lives and histories"(Nash 369).

By the end of her journey, Ahmad has become a 'mestiza' in its broader sense. When she settled in the United States, her identity has converted into a 'plural personality' who neither accepts all nor rejects all. She believed in the necessity of 'cross[ing] into each other's pockets' and in sidelining the "unrecognized commonalities and connections" (Keating 2006) to an area of 'unmapped common ground'. Consequently, in narrating her life story, she migrated from one exile to the other, from one space to another, and from a tradition to another. Her exiles varied from the very abstract geographical and physical relocation, to the emotional and intellectual estrangement. In like manner, her crossing strategies witnessed several turns back and forth from her native land till she chose her self-imposed exile in America. In her exile, Ahmad avoided herself the sense of loss. Instead, she redefined her exilic experience as "placement rather than displacement, advancement rather than confinement, affiliation rather than dissociation" (Chang 11), and exalted values of forgiveness, tolerance, and global co-existence.

Endnotes

- The Muslim Brotherhood is an organization with affiliations to Islamic radicalism, founded in 1928 by Hassan AlBana, and has been categorized as a terrorist organization very recently in Egypt and other countries.
- To Huda Sharawy,(1879-1947) the early Egyptian movement of women liberation owes much. She represents the first real feminist link with the west
- Malak Hefni (1886-1918) is an Egyptian feminist, came from the middle class, and worked as a teacher with an aim of rejecting the idea that states that work is confined to feminists from poor families. She is the writer of *Feminist Issues*
- May Ziada (1886-1941) is a Christian Lebanese-Palestinian poetess, essayist. She is also a writer for newspapers and periodicals. She has been a remarkable figure in the early 20th century literary scene.

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