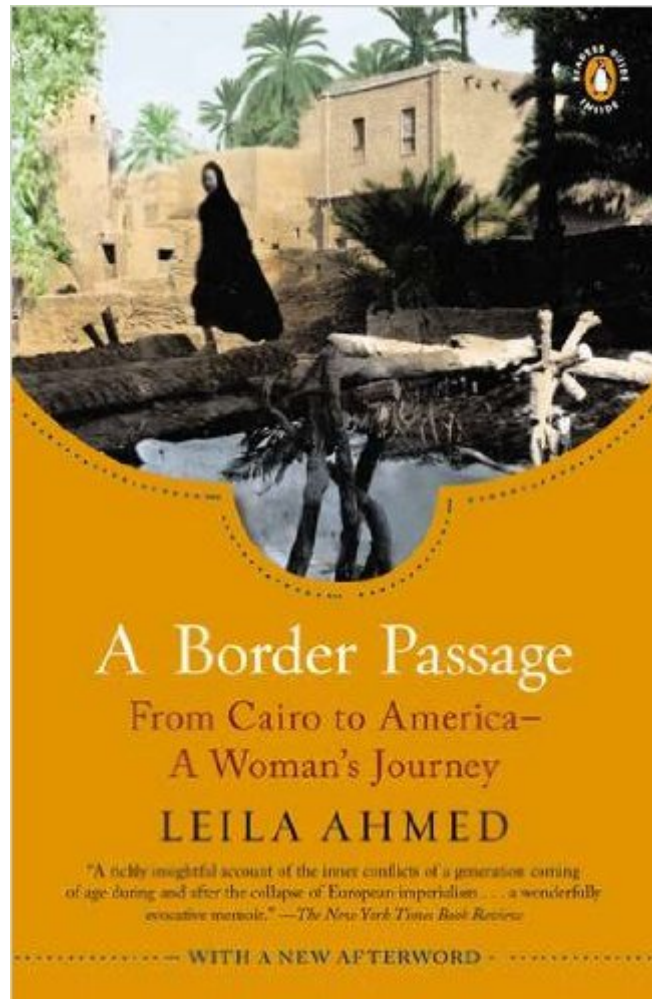


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A Border Passage: From Cairo To America--A Woman's Journey



Synopsis

An Egyptian woman's reflections on her changing homelandâupdated with an afterword on the Arab SpringIn language that vividly evokes the lush summers of Cairo and the stark beauty of the Arabian desert, Leila Ahmed movingly recounts her Egyptian childhood growing up in a rich tradition of Islamic women and describes how she eventually came to terms with her identity as a feminist living in America. As a young woman in Cairo in the forties and fifties, Ahmed witnessed some of the major transformations of this centuryâthe end of British colonialism, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the breakdown of Egypt's once multireligious society. As today's Egypt continues to undergo revolutionary change, Ahmed's inspirational story remains as poignant and relevant as ever.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A Border Passage is not a typical autobiography. It has many elements of an autobiography, but it is also a book of well reasoned essays on some of the most difficult aspects of the history of Egypt and its culture. Essays on Islam, imperialism and on the identity and language of Egypt Leila Ahmed recount of her childhood and upbringing in Cairo and Alexandria is beautifully written. Her complex relationship with and her views of her mother are an important theme in the first half of the book. Her analysis of the social impact of the colonial and post colonial on her own family and the events that surrounded her is particularly insightful. In writing this book Leila Ahmed clearly has done a considerable amount of sole searching with objective detachment. She describes that process and articulates clearly her reasoning. You can actually sense the struggle and pain she went through to reach a particular conclusion. This is the work of a sensitive person with a superb analytical mind

and an ability to reflect. I particularly enjoyed her pointing out of what was a recollection and knowledge in retrospect, in her process of understanding an issue or an emotion. The book contains a very well researched and argued section on the "Arabization" of Egypt. Here, she presents why she is not an Arab, but rather an Egyptian, from a historical, cultural, linguistic and social viewpoint. She illustrates with significant historical substantiation Arabism in Egypt as a colonial invention. Yet, she appears to be willing to accept an Arab identity as well as an Egyptian one in the west, because of what she shares with Arabs in the west. She talks of two "Arabnesses", I think I understood her correctly, but I am not sure.

A very intimate autobiography because it's not an autobiography at all, it's about 'border passages' -- from child to adulthood, women's communities to patriarchal ones, citizenship to immigrant, and has stirred in me a strong desire to learn more about Islam. It blew a lot of my misconceptions out of the water, but in an incidental fashion: not, "You all think Muslim women are like this, you're wrong, here's the truth", but "when I was a child, I grew up this way, in a woman's community filled with the oral teachings of Islam, oral culture, oral tradition..." lots of wonderful and instructive reminiscences about her family and culture and growing up in Egypt during the time that Nasser came to power, the era when the word "Arab" was redefined, and the impact of her parents, her immediate family, and their beliefs on the sum and substance of her own life. In the course of this discussion is embedded a course on Egyptian history from the eyes of both a child, and the adult scholar who turned her attention to her own home and history. Ahmed's comments on coming to America at the height of '60s feminism', when white middle-class women were questioning fundamental tenets of their society, yet being discouraged from asking similar questions of her own society's tenets, a pressure many 'feminists of color' experienced, was of particular interest to me. I think there may be an interesting parallel between that experience and the pressure on Third Wave feminists by some older feminists to not stray from the path established by them in the 60s, to not ask our own questions.

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