Border & Identity: A Trajectory Leila Ahmed's A Border Passage

Nehal EL-Naggar
Associate Professor
Ain Shams University
Egypt

Abstract

In her memoir A Border Passage, Leila Ahmed attempts to uncover and re-examine her identity by delving into historical, political, social and cultural aspects of her life, and re-viewing them from a distance through the processes of migration, travel, displacement and exile, while crossing different kinds of borders. The study of geographical borders and identity in different fields of knowledge have acquired academic acknowledgement in contemporary scholarship due to a notable increase in trans-national movements. Ahmed grew up in an interstitial space questioning where she belongs and who she is. She grew up crossing borders with a confused sense of identity as a result of her brush with colonialism and the contradictions she faced trying to figure out her identity. Thus, and while crossing borders from Cairo to England, to Abu Dhabi, and then to America, Ahmed looks towards the constructedness of an identity that for a long time she is unable to build and understand. Ahmed deftly weaves history within her personal narrative, and shows how events on the macro-scale trickle down and affect her, and influencing her understanding of the world around and of herself. Ahmed finally attempts to harmonize, instead of battle with, the distinct differences of her culture and other cultures in relation to her own, reaching a point where her identity ceases to be a single, clearly definable being, but instead, a wealth of diverse cultures, traditions, values and experiences that make her as complex as the country which she comes from.

1. Introduction

> *'…the song of the reed as the metaphor for our human condition…'(Ahmed 5).*

According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary, border means "frontier of country" or "frontier of civilization" or "intermediate condition", or "debatable ground". Borderline means "line of demarcation". Borderer means "dweller on or near frontier" (136). Hence, traditionally the concept of border is related to geography. It is a geographical concept developed in the nineteenth century contemplating borders as separating lines between nations:

> The geographical concept of border as first developed in the nineteenth century envisages borders as physical and visible lines of separation between political, social and economic spaces, often charged with nationalistic energy. (borderpoetics.wikidot.com)

Furthermore, the Collins, Thesaurus of the English Language defines identity as "individuality, self, originality" (496) and according to Oxford Wordpower it means "who or what a person or a thing is. … Children of immigrants often suffer from a loss of identity (=they are not sure which culture they belong to)" (391).

In *A Border Passage (*1999), Leila Ahmed (1940-) tells 'her-story', by delving into historical, political, social and cultural aspects of her life, and re-viewing them from a distance through the processes of migration, travel, displacement and exile, while crossing different kinds of borders in search of her true identity. These paradigms along with her upbringing, and the impact of the West on her consciousness, whether through the British colonization she experienced during her childhood or through the academic and social racism she experienced in Britain and the US in her later life, are brought together in her memoir as she attempts to uncover and re-examine her identity. Ahmed has lived a life constantly crisscrossed by different kinds of borders. Thus, there is a multi-layered reading of 'border' and its manifestations. This raises the important question of whether borders have aesthetic dimension or not and whether they have a relation to identity formation.

Actually, Ahmed experiences 'border', perceives it and renders an evaluation of it within different contexts and various structures. On her crossing of different borders, Ahmed examines various concepts that help in her identity formation where she combines "her child's-eye account of Egypt's twentieth-century transformation and her later account as an enlightened Egyptian scholar after travels to the West, Ahmed examines her identity as an Egyptian woman" (Abdelrazek 20).

2. Meeting Place of Many Cultures

From the vivid descriptions of the wailing cry of the *karawan* and the early morning calls of the street vendors of Cairo and the reed piper to the soothing images of the lush meadows, vast woods, and red roofs of London, Leila Ahmed's mesmeric memoir, *A Border Passage* never fails to communicate to the reader the significance of the idea of identity and culture while living amidst and across different borders.

The study of geographical borders and identity in different fields of knowledge have acquired academic acknowledgement in contemporary scholarship due to a notable increase in trans-national movements. In the humanities, geographical borders are represented in narrative or symbolic form. Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage* is an important example for such kind of study. Ahmed was born amidst a transitional political period of her country, Egypt. During the most impressionable time of her life, Ahmed grew up swinging between the two conflicting ideas of anti-colonialism and reverence for the colonizer's culture and inventions:

> It would be decades before I would come to reflect on these issues in my own life. When I began to look in my academic work at issues of colonialism and began to unmask the colonialist perspectives and racism embedded in texts on Arabs and on the colonized, steeping myself in writings on internalized colonialism, I began to realize that it was not only in texts that these hidden messages were inscribed but that they were there, too, in my childhood and in the very roots of my consciousness. (Ahmed 25)

Thus, Ahmed grew up in an interstitial space questioning where she belongs and who she is. She grew up crossing borders with a confused sense of identity as a result of her brush with colonialism and the contradictions she faced trying to figure out her identity. Her search for identity coincided with her nation's struggle for liberation; and her experiences in England gave her a unique perspective on the interaction between the colonizers and their subjects. Using her British education to portray her Egyptian memories, she creates precisely what Wa'il Hassan describes when he writes that "the negotiation of identity in minoritarian autobiographical discourse tends to perform a double operation: contesting the identity assigned by the dominant majority discourse while at the same time utilizing its sanctioned narrative procedures in order to enter into its regime of truth" (9). In doing so, she illustrates a personal, political, and national struggle for identity. Ahmed, thus, re-interprets the events in her life that she believes are basic to the re-construction of her 'self'. These, she selects as she crosses borders. The outset for her self-construction begins when her ideal life at her family house is disrupted by political and social upheavals:

> …in these halls, in this house of memory, it is not in those days and those moments that my story begins. Rather, it begins for me with the disruption of that world and the desolation that for a time overtook our lives. For it was only then that I'd begin to follow the path that would bring me – exactly here. And so it is with those years and their upheaval and with the politics that framed our lives that I must begin. (Ahmed 5)

Ahmed sees herself within history that she is re-constructing after "the music of being" (5) of this prior existence was destroyed once and for all. In this prior existence her world was once alive. She comes to understand her-self "by looking inward [not] in the Romantic tradition… but rather by focusing outward with an intense gaze on one particular community as it is located in time" [Walker 329].

Thus and while crossing borders from Cairo to England, to Abu Dhabi, and then to America, Ahmed looks towards the constructedness of an identity that for a long time she is unable to build and understand. Later, she describes her life and her likes in America as "community in exile", [and compares it to] "how lovely our lives, our countries, our ways are" (Ahmed 253). While in England, she comes to the realization of the beauty of whatever is 'ours'. This revelation takes place after she listens to a talk by the Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh when hosted by the Oriental Studies Faculty in Cambridge. The recurrent question of her Arabness is very disturbing for Ahmed because she cannot figure out its truth from its falseness:

> If I didn't live where I live, I thought to myself, if I were still living in Egypt, I probably wouldn't feel it was so absolutely necessary to extricate myself from the enmeshment of lies. In Egypt, the sense of falseness and coercion would be there in a political sense, but at least in ordinary life I'd be just another Egyptian, whereas in the West it's impossible for me to escape, forget this false constructed Arabness. It's almost always somehow there, the notion that I'm an Arab, in any and every interaction. And sometimes it's quite grossly and offensively present, depending on how bigoted or ignorant the person I am confronting is. (Ahmed 255-56)

Evidently, Ahmed's is a memoir of a "migrant consciousness, caught and liberated, in a non-space where allegiances are shed, but commitments are virtually assumed" (Shereen108). As a migrant consciousness, Ahmed has this privilege to view retrospectively her past experiences and to incorporate them in her memoirs, while keeping a critical stance as an outsider from within. Thus, presenting "a new configuration of the individual consciousness in diaspora, functioning as 'historical and social actor' in the world it represents" (Shereen 118). This kind of re-reading 'her-self' from a distance after living in different lands gave her what Edward Said calls "contrapuntal vision" (Said) of the exile, where the latter renders a different perception of past and present. She becomes the conductor of the orchestra of her life where she brings together all the different tunes, sounds, threads and instruments. In her text, the reader has to distinguish between two narrators or two Ahmeds; the young girl and the mature woman who travelled and crossed different borders all through her life. In an interview she "suggest[s] that there being so many lenses is a very worthwhile thing" (Shereen 121). This pluralistic vision, Ahmed professes:

> …was excruciatingly hard to find myself having to conclude that my father, whom I had admired for his integrity, clarity of vision, and open-mindedness, had after all, and in spite of himself, had a colonized consciousness, cherishing things European and undervaluing the very heritage that had shaped him. Now I no longer struggle with this. I have been through many revolutions in my understanding of my father, my mother, and my own consciousness – understanding them now this way, now that, convinced at one moment that they are this and at another that they are that. For the truth is, I think that we are always plural. Not either this or that, but this and that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousness a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us. And I know now that the point is to look back with insight and without judgment, and I know now that it is of the nature of being in this place, this place of convergence of histories, cultures, ways of thought, that there will always be new ways to understand what we are living through, and that I will never come to a point of rest or of finality in my understanding. (25-26)

This very quotation sums up Ahmed's understanding of 'herself' that will never come to a definite conclusion, whether regarding her identity or where she actually belongs no matter the crossing of borders that she is incessantly undergoing, or even when settling. Ahmed moves back and forth between different times and different spaces and each return tells us more about her life. As she moves from Cairo to Cambridge then to Abu Dhabi and finally to Boston, Ahmed carries different identities along with different cultural baggages of the woman, the student, the intellectual, and the politician who seeks to "to interrogate, reinterpret, and reevaluate" (Ahmed 33) the colonial and post-colonial times. Moving back and forth enables her to tell more about her life and the lives of those whom she lived among. She is the outsider who can look within at these different cultures within her. Thus, tying them together and then untying them, then tying them again in a new way "to look with new eyes at the lives of our parents and our grandparents, the generations in which our own lives were rooted, and to see what they apparently had not seen, the psychological consequences of colonialism and that silent, insidious process of internalized colonialism" (Ahmed 33-34). Ahmed is the meeting place of the stories, memories and judgments which "we know them to be products of false perceptions and old, unexamined prejudices – prejudices even against our own and the most cherished people in our lives" (24). These judgments change as she grows up and matures to become something else. While she regards and judges her mother as "not a professional anything" (24) early in her life, she later admits regrettably:

> How would I have known the time would come, and not once but over and over, when I would think back to that moment in her room, the breeze rustling the curtains, her eyes looking luminously toward me, and wish that I could return to it, taking with me,… a tape recorder. Or at the very least I had once sat down with pad and pencil and said, “Mother, speak, I want nothing more in life right now than to take down your words, to know what you lived, what you thought, how you saw your life.” How would I have known then that those who bring into their lives and into the shaping of the consciousness of others their own deepest thoughts and feelings and moral imagination, create out of their own lives texts, oral, evanescent texts that are every bit as rich and sustaining as rich and sustaining as the most celebrated written texts? How would I have known this then?
>
> I did not know, I did not know, I did not know.
> What wouldn’t I give now for the gift of my mother’s passing on to me, in her voice, her own and her people’s story. (74-75)

Ahmed is regretting what she had lost and what she did not value later in life. She regrets all of this later in life. Looking back she hopes she could have recorded her mother’s voice to tell ‘her story’ and the story of many who were unheard. This retrospective understanding and appreciation of her mother, amongst other instances in her life, adds to her multiple sense of awareness. This allows Ahmed to give “value to an experience that had been ignored” (Scott 18). Her memoir is a writing of ‘her-self’ that voices other Egyptian/Arab Muslim woman who are silenced and forgotten or did not have the opportunity to speak up, whether in the East or the West. Her memoir acts as a kind of “self-writing [that] tends to …establish and reestablish this ‘self’ ”(Hite xv). There will always be the question of where to belong.

3. Family & Identity

The search for identity and belonging is a universal one; but rarely is identity, once found, a matter of static black and white boundaries. Rather, identity is often composed of shifting shades of gray, and it is through this muted prism that we situate our experiences and ourselves. In the memoir, *A Border Passage*, Leila Ahmed explores her history - of her family, of her country, and of her ideas - in an effort to understand the “deep uncertainty... and sense of ambiguity” (10) that resulted in part from growing up on the fractured borders of the post-colonial world:

> I grew up in the last days of the British Empire. … In Cairo it was entirely ordinary, among these classes, to grow up speaking English or French, or both, and quite ordinary to attend an English or French school. It was taken for granted among the people who raised us that there was unquestionably much to admire in and learn from the civilization of Europe and the great strides that Europe had made in human advancement. No matter that the European powers were politically oppressive and indeed blatantly unjust; nor did it seem to matter that the very generation which raised us were themselves locked in struggle with the British for Egypt’s political independence from the European powers and deeply admiring European institutions, particularly democracy, and Europe’s tremendous scientific breakthroughs. (5-6)

Evidently, and as a scholar, Ahmed deftly weaves history within her personal narrative, and shows how events on the macro-scale trickle down and affect her, and her family. Indeed, the story tells not just Ahmed’s story, but that of her parents who remain enigmas to her. She writes as an “outsider from within” (See Hill-Collins). Ahmed’s relationship with her family, especially with her parents, provides much of the early conflict in her life. Her father is a high-ranking engineer whose criticisms of the Aswan High Dam ultimately ruins his career and puts the family in danger. He educates the family in the ways of the West. In contrast, her mother, who “cherished and honoured her own heritage”(25) comes from a rich Turkish family who is very much part of the traditional mold, proves to be stronger at resisting the “colonized consciousness” (25) that marks her father’s sense of self. And yet her mother is bound, and ultimately trapped into place just as her father is by the roles that they are forced to play both by society and their understanding of (or lack thereof) of self. Whilst she eventually understands some of their actions, she is ultimately at a loss to explain or comprehend their struggles and actions:

> I had grown up, I came to see, in a world where people, or at any rate my father, had not merely admired European civilization but had probably internalized the colonial beliefs about the superiority of European civilization. My mother, who always distinctly kept herself at a distance from Europeans and their ways and who always also explicitly cherished and honored her own heritage, never became suspect in my mind for having had a colonized consciousness in the way that my father did. (Ahmed 25)

Ahmed lived in two spaces while a child: the father's European space and the mother's Egyptian space. She lived, as a young girl, negotiating between the father's colonized consciousness and the mother's clinging to her heritage with all its manifestations and nuances. This idea of European superiority that molded the mindsets of all those around her, as well as the traditions and customs that British imperialism had left in Egyptian society had a grave impact on how she saw herself and her country. Her culture was of mixed, yet equal parts, Egyptian tradition, and European influence, making it difficult for Ahmed to identify fully with one culture or the other – her first struggle with identity and trans-culturation. Her mentality and mode of living were not completely Egyptian, but at the same time there were Egyptian elements to her way of life, epitomized in her mother and her family, that prevented her from being fully Westernized, leaving her feeling perplexed about her heritage and how it answered her question about who she was. For her, the reconciliation with her parents (and her past) comes only as an adult, and long after her parents had passed away. Thus the questions that she might have asked remain unanswered and this loss is one of many that haunt the book. Unable to truly identify 'her-self', Ahmed keeps living on the 'border' whether an actual territorial one or generated from an inner conflict. These controversial feelings were emphasized through her school education and the languages she used in talking with her father on the one hand and her mother on the other.

4. Language & Identity

Education becomes as a refuge for Ahmed, but also cause some of the major issues of 'self' and thus with identity. However, the language of her education, which is English, becomes the first dividing line, or/and border between her and her parents. Her mother doesn't speak English, the main language of instruction for Ahmed; and for a good portion of her childhood, she looks down on her mother whom she regarded as "…not a professional anything!" I find myself involuntarily thinking, in a thought that is really an echo or ghost of an old thought that I once harbored intensely and angrily as an adolescent. Such thoughts live on and shape how we see our past, even when we know them to be products of false perceptions and old, unexamined prejudices – prejudices even against our own kind and the most cherished people in our lives" (Ahmed 24). Her mother thus becomes the foil to her father, representing tradition and the old ways while her father epitomizes science, western education and progress. And yet as an adult, her lack of formal Arabic prevents her from reaching an understanding with her father's diaries. In his last days, he writes his memoirs, but unable to easily read the handwritten Arabic letters, Ahmed must forgo this bond with him as well. Ahmed and youngsters of her class who were fluent in English or French "were intended to be the intermediaries, connecting and mediating between this society and culture and that" (152). British schooling of these young Egyptians had an impact on their attitudes, theirpersonalities and their perception of their culture as a whole. This kind of education which alienates individuals from their native culture and language breeds individuals not at ease with their indigenous heritage. This is evident in her mother's attitude and understanding of having this kind of English education:

> For my mother, these were some of the hidden, uncounted costs of colonialism: her children growing up speaking a language she did not understand and going off in their teens to college in a faraway land and a culture that would eventually steal them away. (Ahmed 111)

The unheard voice of her mother represents a true understanding of the effect and consequences of education in foreign lands and neglecting ones own native language and by consequence heritage and roots. Thus becoming border citizens who live swinging between cultures not knowing where to belong. Hence, they remain nostalgic for a once upon a time life/culture that they could not figure out or appreciate its worth back then when they were living it because the books they read were "peopled with children called Tom and Jane and Tim and Ann,…[and] believing that some world over there was better, more interesting, more civilized than this world here"(Ahmed 154). Hence, this kind of education succeeds in alienating the individual creating a feeling of inferiority to native culture and language. However, when Ahmed revises herself later in life after listening to the Lebanese writer Hanan Al-Shaykh, she admits of "How lovely our literature. What a fine thing, whatever it is people say of us, what a fine thing it is, in spite of them all, to be Arab; what a wonderful heritage we have. Something that would sustain them. Sustain us"(253). Ahmed finally, comes to an understanding of the beauty of whatever is really hers whether it is her Arabic language or the Arabic songs which she did not appreciate when her mother listened to. She admits that "hearing the famous Egyptian singer live, I finally understood how truly marvelous her singing was" (177).

5. Crossing Harems

Leila Ahmed experiences different kinds of harems. A harem is women's quarters. The first is that of her maternal family in her grandmother's home of Zatoun or in Alexandria where "we had crossed into some other world"(Ahmed 100). The second harem is the "harem perfected" of Girton College at Cambridge which "was a version of the community of women – the harem - as I had lived it every summer in Alexandria"(Ahmed 181). She felt at home there due to the many similarities between Girton and her home "where women, presiding over the young in their charge, were the authorities" (181). The Girton "harem" bears some similarities to the one she grew up in Alexandria. Moreover, Ahmed felt that the students of Girton were "marked off from others as special, privileged people"(181), evoking in her a sense of superiority that she had grown accustomed to, a consequence of growing up in an affluent upper-class Egyptian family. In addition, Girton girls "were sustained…by a troupe of others"(182), which, to her, was very reminiscent of her days in Egypt, where she was waited on in a similar fashion by servants. Thus, perhaps it is not her deep familiarity with English culture that makes her so comfortable in her new surroundings, but actually her innate love for Egyptian traditions, and the striking coincidence that her new place of residence bears resemblance to her past Cairene life that makes her feel at home. However, she discovers that in the Cambridge harem she was identified as 'black' (237) In a similar manner, and as she draws the book to a close, she enters another harem - that of American academic feminism where she "became woman of colour" (238). In these two harems she was an exile, living on the margins or the border. Later she comes across another kind of harem with the local people of Abu Dhabi "which was a community that, just as Girton's had been, was at once new and unfamiliar but also, in its underlying ways and rhythms, deeply familiar"(Ahmed 286). The connecting element among these different harems is her grandmother's in Egypt, as she reminisces it whenever she is in another one.

Zatoun and Alexandria harems represent a liminal, freeing space for Ahmed, and indeed, create a sense of community between the women that allows her to refashion her fractured sense of self. Both harems also provide her with much of her education and growth. Zatoun and Alexandria teach her about the pluralistic nature of Islam, and the importance of oral traditions, whereas Girton gives her the academic framework upon which to contextualize and critique her understanding of colonialism and trans-culturation. The harem in Egypt was, for Ahmed , a source of empowerment and freedom for women, where men were not allowed to step in. Hence, these gatherings were "no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and pleasure. It was a way of sharing and renewing connection, of figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and the people who worked in their homes. … everyone's issues and problems had to be analyzed, discussed, and resolved" (Ahmed104). Ahmed explains how in women's space problems were solved and children came to understand the true spirit of Islam which was different than men's:

> Islam, as I got it from them, was gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical – just as they themselves were. … Religion was above all about inner things. The outward signs of religiousness, such as prayer and fasting, might be signs of a true religiousness but equally well might not. They were certainly not what was important about being a Muslim. What was important was how you conducted yourself and how you were in yourself and in your attitude toward others and in your heart. (121)

Islam that we learnt from the women was about good intentions and good actions. They depended upon their own interpretation of Islam as "there is no priesthood in Islam" (Ahmed 125). On the other hand, men's Islam depended upon ancient texts that were written by men. The harem experience in Egypt offers Ahmed a form of knowledge that is shared among women where "individuals and groups" [use religion to] "negotiate collective identity [and] imagine the group's shared space" (Tweed 97).

Retrospectively, Ahmed internalizes this shared harem experience to modify her collective sense of identity amongst these women who codified their own understanding of Islam which was "a way of being in the world. A way of holding oneself in the world – in relation to God, to existence, to other human beings. This the women passed on to us most of all through how they were and by their being and presence, by the way they were in the world, conveying their beliefs, ways, thoughts, and how we should be in the world…"(121). This explains "the different ways in which men and women understand religion" (123). The Islam that Ahmed was best schooled in, as a child was not the blind memorization and Qu'ranic school of her father, but through the harem and the oral tradition of her grandmother. Oral traditions are nurtured and fed by the very fact that they are spoken and lived. They are kept from becoming static and final because they are felt and embodied in ways that the written text cannot be.

In the oral tradition, themes of peace, of understanding and oneness with everything abound and come clear to the listener. To Ahmed, this is the true heart and soul of Islam. Ahmed professes that "Living differently and separately and coming together only momentarily, the two sexes inhabited different if sometimes overlapping cultures, a men's and a women's culture, each sex seeing and understanding and representing the world to itself quite differently"(100-101). As a result, "women's and men's cultural histories are different"(Warren 26) because "what one perceives as real depends on ones situatedness, and gender as well as race and class are important factors in determining ones perceptions" (Warren 4). Obviously, in her stepping in and out of these different harems, Ahmed is not only telling the story of herself but of other women sharing the same status in these different spaces. Sometimes she assumes the position of an outsider to reflect upon her position as an insider. Thus her identity among these different harems becomes like a chameleon that keep changing without falling into a static state.

6. The Music of Loss & Remembrance

Ahmed has lived her life in a constant state of nostalgia as she was negotiating among different borders:

> Our house, then, standing as it did at the intersection of country, desert, and city, stood also at the edge and confluence of these many worlds and histories. It seems entirely apt now, as I look back, that Ain Shams was in this way quintessentially a place of borders and that even geographically it was so placed as not quite to belong to any one world. Or rather to belong, at once, to all of them. (16)

Ahmed is nostalgic all through the text. She lived in different lands and countries, crossing borders; yet she has always been like the reed nostalgic for her motherland. The bamboo shoot is nostalgic for the land it was cut from, nostalgic for its roots. Leila Ahmed has positive memories of her land of origin, reminiscing this original space with all its details. She is experiencing a feeling of loss upon remembrance; thus forever nostalgic. This nostalgia is inspired by the music of the reed. Despite, her constant crossing of borders and her settling in another land, Ahmed is always swinging between borders. Describing her house in Cairo, it seems she is describing herself and her life. Her house, as "a place of borders" is not limiting but is regarded as a space of contact. It is dynamic "having dynamic transitional character" (borderpoetics.wikidot.com). Moreover, she could also be regarded as a border subject:

> The border subject inhabits the borderland or comes into being while crossing the border. There are many names and categories by which the border subject may be referred to: the hybrid, the creolized, the GrenzgangerIn ("border walker" i.e. someone who purposefully lives on the edge), the GrenzverletzerIn ("border wounder" i.e. somebody who transgresses the border), the interpreter, the go-between. (borderpoetics.wikidot.com)

Therefore, Leila Ahmed's journey from Cairo to America is not only a crossing of territorial borders, but of political, social, cultural, historical, psychological, mental, gender and intellectual crossing as well. There is an intersection between the territorial and the aesthetic representation. Ahmed is reconstructing her life in the context of history and across borders while crossing boundaries: national, class, racial, and gender. Although her narrative is a border-crossing one, yet it is nostalgic to a great extent until the end. The great Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi is referred to and quoted more than once from the outset till the end of her border crossing narrative:

> Years later I'd discover that in Sufi poetry this music of the reed is the quintessential music of loss and I'd feel, learning this, that I'd always known it to be so. In the poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi, the classic master-poet of Sufism, the song of the reed is the metaphor for our human condition, haunted as we so often are by a vague sense of longing and of nostalgia, but nostalgia for we know not quite what. Cut from its bed and fashioned into a pipe, the reed forever laments the living earth it once knew, crying out, whenever life is breathed into it, its ache and its yearning and loss. We too live our live haunted by **loss**, we too, says Rumi, remember a condition of completeness that we once knew but have forgotten that we ever knew. The song of the reed and the music that haunts our lives is the music of loss, of loss and remembrance. (Ahmed 5)

She remains like a reed all through. Ahmed's border narrative crosses the trajectories of identity, language, colonial/post-colonial, east/west, and migration/exile. Nostalgic and living on borders, no matter how she settles in another land, she admits that she is at the present of writing this memoir in U.S she is at home; yet, Ahmed does not come to a resolution for the paradoxes generated by living in this interstitial space.

However, other paradoxes emerge, whether consciously or unconsciously, and she comes to the conclusion that she “had little time for nostalgia or for comparing how things had been good and how different it had all was now – which was probably all to the good” (Ahmed 300).

However, there is a fascinating integration of the private and the public self of the heroine, Leila who brings alive a comprehensive self-portrait invigorated with the insight of a luminary. She is always connecting with her Egyptian civilization – Pharaonic, Coptic, Mediterranean, Islamic/Arab – without renouncing her acquired western education, values and experiences:

> Cairo, of course, is not New York. With its medieval core, its ancient sites, and its great spiritual hubs - shrines to which people have flocked over centuries as they flock to Lourdes- it is a city whose geography, spiritual and historical, is complexly layered; and all of this somehow, even if subliminally, is part of the experience of growing up in Cairo. At Ain Shams we had, each within ten minutes' walk of our house, the obelisk of ancient Heliopolis, standing in the place in which it had stood since it was erected thousands of years earlier, and the ancient tree, … where, legend has it, Mary halted to rest with Jesus and Joseph on their flight to Egypt. (15-16)

Retrospectively, Ahmed decides that “my native Cairene culture, was perhaps above all that it so richly and easily blended into its own unique Cairo brew a wealth of traditions and provenances and ways and histories and memories: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Morocco, Istanbul, Alexandria, a village in Croatia” (282). Evidently, it is after many years later that she is able to fully start processing her life and many facets of her identities.

Amidst all of this, she moves to the gulf country of Abu Dhabi, and it is this change that both inspires her to move back toward her roots, and onto the ideas of feminism. She comes to the realization that “the local culture bred people who were intellectually strong and unafraid, including confident, clear-minded, utterly tenacious women who needed no instruction from anyone in the qualities of strength, clarity, vision, understanding, imagination” (276). It was from “this 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). Through the examples of these incredibly strong willed and powerful women that she works with that inspires her to look into not just her history as a Muslim women, but that of Muslim women in general. In doing this she comes to peace with being “betwixt and between” loss and remembrance.

However, Ahmed's nostalgia for a once upon time life and memories remain till the end of her text. She mentions “human restlessness” (155) and she quotes Rumi time and again saying that “The day is coming when I fly off”(155).

7. Conclusion

'*I think we are always plural' (Ahmed)*

Ahmed finally attempts to harmonize, instead of battle with, the distinct differences of her culture and other cultures in relation to her own, reaching a point where her identity ceases to be a single, clearly definable being, but instead, a wealth of diverse cultures, traditions, values and experiences that make her as complex as the country which she comes from. Thus, although a large part of the memoir deals with the idea of defining one's self and the importance of understanding one's identity, the ultimate message that Ahmed tries to convey from her own experiences with trans-culturation is not one that advocates tearing one's heritage apart in an attempt to find one's true self, but instead she encourages the internal reconciliation of the assortment of disparate identities that make up who she is when she admits: “I will never come to a point of rest or of finality in my understanding” (Ahmed 26).

The detailed portrayal of the traditions, customs, habits, and eccentricities of each nation makes her work truly a memoir – without it, the book would be reduced to a mere historical account of the times, and would lose all elements of profundity. This is because the inclusion of lengthy narrative that centers on culture and identity and crossing borders is not just for the sake of offering the reader a clearer view of what it was to live in that era, although this is inarguably important. The question of identity is pivotal in the book due to the intense effect it has had on Ahmed's life. She has continuously reflected on, and struggled with this notion of identity; all stemming from the assortment and amalgamation of cultures that she has experienced crossing borders, while growing up.

To many, culture may be distinct from country to country, but to Ahmed, there was nothing simple about defining herself according to the nature of the world around her, simply because there were so many elements of different cultures that made up her surroundings, and thus, her identity. Egypt and the West have societies that are inherently very different, sometimes almost stark opposites, but her life in Egypt was an inextricable mixture of Egyptian and Western traditions and views. Therefore, the book explores the concept of identity formation and trans-culturation, while seemingly separate sets of cultures mesh together and intertwine. This phenomenon is always a focal point in Ahmed's life. Rather than just an in-depth look at one culture, or a comparison of many, Ahmed makes the idea of culture and its impact on identity much more personal. Culture and identity cease to be a set of rules that society must adhere to, or traditions that generations pass on to their offspring. She is incessantly re-defining herself. Her experience with colonization, traveling, and crossing borders, among other things, all highlight new perspectives on this issue of who she really is, and what is it about her that makes her so. Ahmed's questioning and transcendence of conventional ideas of defining herself according to archetypal labels that have been passed on from generation to generation – Arab, Western, black, white, Muslim, Egyptian – is what makes her memoir, so gripping and engaging. How does culture have an impact upon her sense of identity? Why does it do so? How does she identify herself when her life consists of more than one culture, if society has not given her a clear-cut set of guidelines about who she is and who she should be? It is these questions that plague Ahmed throughout her life and her answers to them, are in the form of this memoir, that allow the reader to delve deeper into her perspectives on identity, trans-culturation, and, ultimately, the world:

> For thereafter, my life becomes part of other stories, American stories. It becomes part of the story of feminism in America, the story of women in America, the story of people of color in America, the story of Arabs in America, the story of Muslims in America, and part of the story of America itself and of American lives in a world of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders. (296)
>
> We are on the point of a new beginning. (297)

And she ends her memoir as she has begun it with Jalaluddin Rumi:

> *A great silence overcomes me,*
> *And I wonder why I ever thought*
> *To use language.* (306)

Bibliography

Abdelrazek, Amal Talaat. Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities & Border Crossings. New York: Cambria Press, 2007.

Ahmed, Leila. A Border Passage. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Border Poetics. Ed. Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe. 03 12 2016 <http://borderpoetics.wikidot.com/>.

Fowler, H.W. and F.G. Folwer, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Hassan, Wail S. "Arab-American Autobiography & the Reinvention of Identity: Two Egyptian Negotiations." Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics (2002): 7-35.

Hill-Collins, Patricia. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Social Significance of Black Feminist Thought." Social Problems 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

Hite, Molly. Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth Century Women's Fiction. Ed. Janice Morgan and collete Hall . New York: Garland Publishing, 1991.

Said, Edward. Out of Place. New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1999.

Scott, Joan. Gender and the Politics of History. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Shereen, Faiza. "The Diasporic Movements Saidian Itinerant Intellectual: A reading Of Leila Ahmed's Border Passage." Studies in Humanities 30.1-2 (2003): 108-30.

Tweed, Thomas A. A crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Walker, Barbara. "On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the Contemporaries." Russian Review 5.3 (2000): 327-52.

Warren, Joyce. Challenging Boudaries: Gender & Periodization. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000.