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Locations of Memory

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Elizabeth W. Fernea has done it again: she presents a topic that is so self-evident that everybody else overlooks it or does not bother to focus on it, and thereby opens a new vista. After earlier introducing into the scholarly-ethnographic debate the experience of “being there,” then the voices of Middle Eastern women, and then children in the Middle East, she now gives us growing-up reminiscences of thirty-six people from the Middle East. If the past books’ effects on scholarly interests are an indicator of developments to come after this book, we can expect that the genre of reminiscences of childhood will become much more popular and that we will gain a deeper understanding of the social history as well as of the psychosocial processes of growing up in the Middle East. The University of Texas Press is to be thanked for publishing this experimental work.

Fernea achieves her success in this book by fortuitous timing, by a sense for what is missing and what next might become important in the social science of the Middle East, rather than by offering new theoretical or analytic insights. (R. Fernea addresses this lack of scholarly sophistication in his introduction.) Indeed, it is not even quite obvious for whom the book is written: it seems too long and disjointed for the average reader, and too unsystematic and too shallow methodologically and theoretically for social scientists. It is a hodgepodge of shortish (three to fifteen pages long) essays by thirty-six different authors who were born and raised in the Middle East,

and who write on childhood topics of their own choosing. Each essay is prefaced with a photograph and a short biographical note on the author. The essays are grouped in four general historical periods: “The End of the Ottoman Empire”; “European Colonial Rule and the Rise of Arab Nationalism (1830-1971)” and “Establishment of the State of Israel (1948)”; “New Nations (1952-1962),” “Oil Wealth and OPEC (1973-),” “Israeli-Palestinian Wars (1967, 1973),” “Camp David Treaty (1979),” and “Iranian Revolution (1979)”; and “The Post-Colonial Middle East (1971-).” These headings are, however, not really relevant. In most cases, the political/historical realities behind these headings furnish only a vague background to the narratives—expectably so, as the authors were children then, living in the shadows of their parents’ political experiences, and thus the reminiscences do not furnish new insights on the political processes themselves. They give the book a somewhat artificial structure. Most of the essays are “just so” stories, glimpses of the past, shreds of memories, written haltingly, pedantically, humoristically or sadly, charmingly or matter-of-factly, as the case might be. They provide insights on an intuitive level, through sheer volume, especially if one reads the book cover to cover without many interruptions, which is a heroic feat, given its length.

The contributors are not meant to be typical for “Middle Easterners,” although Fernea obviously has taken pains to find contributors from various countries (fourteen in all) and from several ethnic/religious groups over the fourteen years of her collection process. R. Fernea

addresses this fact, too, in the introduction: the contributors are not representative in any statistical sense; they are friends of the editor, and friends of friends, and all have a little something to say—let’s see what happens. As the book is not based on a theory or a hypothesis, and is not meant to offer material for comparison and analysis, I will not even try to compare, analyze, or discuss it in terms of a theoretical frame or of what it “ought” to have provided, especially given the many disclaimers in the preface and the introduction. Rather, I briefly will take up a few points that strike me as noteworthy in a social scientific/ethnographic sense.

Most of the contributors are educated, middle- or upper-middle-class urbanites no longer living in the countries of their birth. Many are social scientists and known well among scholars of the Middle East. Most write in English, and clearly for a Western readership, as R. Fernea also notes. Not surprisingly, most essays read “edited”—edited and self-censored by the authors, not by Fernea—and as such pose the question of the ethnographic immediacy (not to mention the no-no word, veracity) of “native” authorship and written-down memories. In writing for us in the English-speaking world, and after a long exposure to the values and conventions of Western modes of writing, surely the authors lost many culture-specific details, edited out others, and squeezed yet more into formulations that would make sense to us. They have become self-conscious in a psychological as well as a cultural sense. Nowhere is this more evident than when, after having gone through many more or less elegant, fragmentary, wistful vignettes, one gets to the translated notes of an interview with a woman from Tunisia in “My Story”: this text is vernacular, in a distinct beat, and filled with the kind of raw emotions, facts, and ambiguities that have to be expected in all honest memories but are lacking in most other essays (p. 149). Tellingly, this woman is presented under a pseudonym. Another example of writing that affords access to the inner workings of another world is an essay by Gueneli Guen (“On Quarantine Island”)—longer than most, and the one outstanding literary delight in the volume—which is translated from the Turkish. Not originally composed for Western readers, it reads a little off-beat, but in all its quirkiness lets one feel what being a child meant to her.

One theme that stands out in the volume is the enormous difference in lifestyle between classes and also between boys and girls. These differences rarely are addressed directly but appear in most essays clearly between the lines. Indeed, the various experiences described in the book by men and women from quite differ-

ent places in the Middle East strike me as being related much more to social class, poverty and wealth, and status of the family in question than to cultural differences among the various countries or ethnic groups. These observations do not come as a surprise, but it feels good to have one’s assumptions and expectations supported by true insiders, especially so as they talk about their experiences in all innocence rather than trying to make a point.

A variant of this observation is the difference between male and female authors in the main orientation of the memories they decide to recall and to describe: women talk mostly about family relations, men talk more about school, work, and their place in the larger picture of their world. These differences are so great that they made me almost wonder to what extent men, including male scholars, can observe and report at all on the intimate history of small happenings which are characteristic of life on the ground.

There is a remarkable—if unsurprising—emphasis on schooling and on education in the essays. Given the various historical and geographic contexts, school must be taken as a class-specific experience—all but maybe one or two of the contributors who were not born into the middle class obviously made it into the educated middle class, and the others are not heard. We still lack childhood accounts from illiterate, low-class, or rural people who have not only no school-experiences but not even aspirations to a middle-class life. Of course, not being able to write, such people can “give voice” only through others. As the interview mentioned above shows, such recordings easily surpass those of autobiographic literary efforts in depth and density, but they might be hard to come by. For example, whenever I tried in Iran to elicit childhood memories from illiterate village women, I got either “edited” speech about good mothers, dear brothers and sisters, and fun games, or else lists of strings of hardships endemic in the village while the women were growing up. All too frequently the women cut short such discussions by declaring them “uninteresting.” The only ones who came up with memory stories were teachers, and they tended to frame them in comparison with the experiences of children today. I think the willingness to talk about childhood memories may be in itself a class-specific trait or else a sign of unusual extroversion in individual people.

Reading this book I, once again, marveled at the changes which modernity—schooling, health care, jobs and income, infrastructure in towns and cities,

emigration—has brought to children’s experiences, especially those of girls, in many parts of the Middle East over the past generation, all problematizing of “Western” influences notwithstanding. While the women reminiscing in this volume mostly are from privileged, not to say exalted, families with lifestyle orientations patterned by modernity and “the West” long before others could afford them, and while they had adults around them who put them on a road to self-articulation and success in our sense, more and more young women in the Middle East today have such aspirations, even if they are not from the elite but from middle-class or even lower social strata. Compared to the potential reminiscences of young people today, the memories in this book speak of a quaint and antiquated life.

These are not great new insights into the sociology or psychology of Middle Eastern people. Taken individually, the anecdotal glimpses do not amount to much in

any respect—not ethnographically, analytically, psychologically, or literarily. They cannot be compared and they provide too little information to be useful as historical sources. But together they create an atmosphere, a feeling for a place, and empathy for the children and their joys and luxuries or their hardships—and what hardships in some cases—which is lacking in most accounts of life in the Middle East. Profitably, the volume follows recent literary trends (such as writing in a minimalist style, emphasis on self disclosure and the inner workings of family life, and a serious interest in the history of intra-family relationships). Yet I do not think it can be taken as a model for others to follow—a more systematic approach to the memories of growing up, one grounded in a theory of biographic/autobiographic writing, for example, will be much more revealing and more satisfying in the end. But as a wake-up call to anthropologists to take children and their memories and histories much more seriously, the book cannot be praised enough.

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