

Afaf Mahfouz Oral History Content Summary

Track 1 [duration: 1:14:24] [Session one: 11 January 2013]

[00:00] Afaf Mahfouz [AM], born Minya, Egypt. History of hometown, as place of refuge of Akhenaten, founder of Monotheism and his wife Nefertiti. Reflections on growing up as Arab Moslem with diversity of history of pharaohs, Arab invasion, Egyptian Cops, Ottoman Empire, British occupation, and influence of many cultures. Middleclass family, mother landowner. AM eldest of five, mother very young, large age-gap with father. Loss of two brothers in infancy before AM, loved by parents and seen as bringer of luck. Father conservative, wanted strict Catholic education for daughters.

[05:20] French curriculum. Comment that children were sent to French schools in defiance of British colonialism, education guaranteed for boys so sent to British schools, girls' education private so choice of foreign education. Explanation of dynamics of political and socio-economic setting on education, Medicine in 1950s Egypt studied in English, government imposition of Arabic language within French system. Story about clash with Sister at Catholic school over reading material. Mother's support of AM's wish to study Arabic and AM taking the First Diploma two years early and Baccalaureate aged 14.

[11:47] Story about negotiating with father to be allowed to go to university. Entire family's move to Alexandria for AM's university education.

[13:25] Reflections on Catholic school, positive impact of discipline, the developed sense of guilt and anxiety.

[15:00] Early eligibility for university and start of Law School without understanding magnitude of undertaking.

[16:21] Description of school punishment system. Member of basketball team. Reading class.

[20:43] Banned books, Emile Zola, later first book read in France. Describes friendship with nun in charge of school library, school curriculum Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, everything related to France only, 'reputation for civilizing the world'.

[22:52] Every May vow of silence made for four weeks to honour the Virgin Mary's month, pupils given violets for number of hours. Continues explanation of Friday reading sessions, André Gide and Émile Zola banned, only plain subjects about people converting, as selected by the Sister. Example of Maximilien Robespierre, presented as evil, and AM's realisation in later years that he was virtuous. Discussion of religious perspective, understanding now that the sisters were missionaries. Story about AM wanting to become a nun, conversation and influence of grandmother, teaching about Islam, began reading interpretations.

[28:00] Interest in history of women in Islam, overwhelming feeling that society unfair to girls from own experience of boy's having all the rights while girls 'obey'

and stay at home. Story about AM and sister's resentment of brother, AM's refuge in books.

[29:47] Started reading about Palestine, AM aged ten in 1948. Story about deal set up using pocket money with newspaper seller, lending AM leftist material not found at home. Describes reading to father, and family dynamics. Mention of mother giving up land after revolution and agrarian reform. Summers in Alexandria where discovered book shop with more diverse books than nuns authorised.

[34:35] Attempted assassination of Gamel Abdel Nasser by the Muslim Brotherhood and members jailed, story about AM being approached to donate to families of jailed, giving money and becoming involved in religious education with the Brotherhood ideology. Complemented legal studies and interest in Shari'a particularly personal status law, marriage, inheritance. Graduated age 19, engaged to be married.

[36:52] Account of meeting husband and arranged marriage, enabling study abroad with move to France. Explanation of community's outrage when family moved to Alexandria 'for a girl' and cultural expectation, brother's anger towards AM. Story about sister's graduation from Agricultural School as a chemist but lack of acknowledgment on the land, when recognized sick cotton crop.

[42:00] Influence of grandmother's character of tolerance and gentleness, above mother's non-discursive authority. Description of history of arranged marriages in family and Circassian Turkish links, own parents' marriage and relationship.

[47:21] Story of own marriage to lawyer and sense that good match. Study in France, first interest in psychoanalysis, attending Jacques Lacan seminars and eventual change from own studies after PhD.

[50:36] Description of life in Paris in the 1960s, study during the day and theatre and concerts in the evenings with student discounts, Edit Piaf, Yves Montand, Sunday double bill at the cinema. Describes relationship with husband as two classmates helping each other, eating in university canteens. Brief return to Egypt and difficulties with mother-in-law. Return to France and AM eventually staying alone to complete prize-winning PhD on 'Socialism and Power' published in France.

[55:26] Move to Washington D.C, 'turning point', pursuit of psychoanalysis and parting of ways from husband.

[57:49] Offered position of Cultural Counsellor by Ambassador of Egypt, coinciding with International Women's Year, 1975. Opportunity to travel and speak about Arab women, Muslim women. Mention of being offered job as French, Arabic and English speaking lawyer during the sudden rise of oil prices, passed to husband. Contentment in job and freedom from marriage, learning a great deal. Training as psychoanalyst. Return to Egypt with more maturity, meeting American husband. Mention of project with the National Endowment for the Humanities in Egypt.

[1:05:13] Describes involvement with women's groups and human rights in Egypt, France, United States of America (USA). Discussion about childhood and family life preparing the ground, 'trauma' of being 'half of the boy'. Inspiration of grandfather

leaving land equally to boys and girls. Shock of mother as beneficiary, not following this example, instead Shari'a. Discussion about pragmatism in society.

[1:10:52] Story about mother's religion activated reluctantly with AM asking parents to pray. Acknowledgment of manipulating her parents as a child by taking refuge in religion as a route to autonomy.

[1:12:54] Introduction to current work in Egypt to give back to country, working with group of men and women to provide supervision and psychoanalysis in university, expanding to Jordan, Qatar, Yemen.

Track 2 [duration: 5:05] [Session one: 11 January 2013]

[00:00] Circumstances of moving to Washington D.C in 1985, representing Arab Lawyers Union at United Nations (UN). Initiative to campaign with men for women's rights, linking to human rights. Mention of Nawal El Saadawi and Hoda Badran's groups. AM's focus at time more on human rights. AM and painter Inji Aflatoun only members not imprisoned. [Telephone rings]

Track 3 [duration: 31:03] [Session one: 11 January 2013]

[00:00] Describes women's group, The Women and Memory Forum, Egypt, re-telling classical stories from a woman's perspective, group attending Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) this year.* (* See Track 5) Describes early work in women's movement in Egypt and necessity of connection with global movement.

[01:51] Primary concerns of the time, women's health and women's education, also understanding about reproductive health. Propelled enormously by UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994 [Cairo], influx of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization), women's groups alerted and joined. 'Turning point' for movement, followed by UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995 [Beijing]. Remark that Cairo helped at grassroots level and Beijing helped Chinese women. Comment that men 'on the defensive and joking' and long way to go for women. Mention of husband's participation at Beijing with African women's group.

[04:29] Discussion about change in the NGO community, more empowerment at grassroots level. AM spokesperson for Nafis Sadik at Cairo. Gay and Lesbian rights one of issues, continued to represent at Beijing, lobbying for demonstrations to be heard. Story about image of AM with banner on The Cable News Network (CNN), seen in Egypt and heavily criticised. Example that 'things sink in' over time.

[07:51] Discussion about religion taking over in Egypt today and working with young people to explore concepts. Comment on resurgence of religion and Muslim Brotherhood. Discussion on people's hopelessness after three decades of Hosni Mubarak. Comment that Muslim Brotherhood financed by the United States, AM's own growing awareness from study of socialism and power. Comment on women's groups in the Arab Spring, and their significance. Rise of migration for work in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, women creating security outside Egypt.

[14:05] Discussion of donor-NGO relationship, gap in understanding, problem when 'try to imitate governments', example of female genital mutilation. Story about preparation for Beijing as member of organizing committee of NGO Forum, and clash with Bella Abzug of The National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). Mentions Charlotte Bunch, mentions Women's Environmental and Development Organization (WEDO).

[20:58] Balancing personal beliefs regarding Israel and representing Jewish organization. Experience of obstacles in women's movement at the UN. Mentions United States, Qatar, Egypt, Libya.

[22:57] Reflects on value of collaborating with women, example of marriage contract in context of learning from different countries and legal systems. Evocative account of Beijing, and women at NGO Forum coming together against physical obstacles. Vivid description of scene and resourcefulness from poverty and survival. Mentions The New York Times, Barbara Crossett.

[26:09] Reflection on role, as AM sees herself, psychoanalyst, lawyer, women's rights activist. Comment on importance of listening to younger generation.

[27:55] Describes client nationalities as psychoanalyst, patterns and interest in women above men.

Track 4 [duration: 44:32] [Session two: 9 March 2013]

[00:00] Describes involvement in UN conferences, Beijing, Cairo, World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993 [Vienna], World Conference Against Racism, South Africa, 2001 [South Africa], facilitating committees with representatives from each region, process for selection.

[02:30] Detailed example of process for facilitating committee of the Commission on the Status of Women [CSW] at Beijing, meetings, successes and limitations, lack of marketing system.

[05:25] Discusses NGO community in Cairo before and after 1994 conference, energized throughout Arab world. Description of approach to funding for Beijing. Mentions World Bank. Tax and legal framework with treasurer. Discusses what attracted funders. Mentions Ford Foundation. Suspicion at the time regarding international donors, rejection of American feminism. Mentions Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug.

[11:33] Discusses government interference in African, Asian and Latin American countries, varying issues in each country and cultural taboos. Remark that for the first time a reciprocal learning. Story about African women at Beijing being providers, prepared with candles in blackouts, recovering collapsed tents.

[14:13] Describes interaction between NGO groups and official country delegation, support from 'friendly governments'. Mentions Saudi Arabia and Scandinavia. Describes system of NGO preparatory meetings, and one in The Hague where

government official was ‘on loan’ to the UN Secretariat. Mentions proactivity of Ambassador of Bangladesh and how success depended on individual.

[17:56] Reflects on advancement in area of violence, rape and harassment, perhaps since formation of CSW. Still behind regarding equality in raising of boys and girls in the home, mentions courses in parenting as an equalizer.

[20:45] Brief mention of attendance at UN Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, 2009 [Copenhagen], and UN Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court, Rome, 1998 [Rome] as milestone for women. Overview of UN conferences, mention of World Conference on Women, Nairobi, 1985 [Nairobi]. Began work after First World Conference on Women, Mexico City, 1975 [Mexico] but assigned to speak in several of the United States to talk about Arab and Muslim women’s rights. Remark that United States a ‘continent’.

[22:40] Reflection on personal development over the years. Reflections on experience of divorce, first marriage and rights and Shari’a. Reflections on male perspective of marriage.

[26:34] Describes difficulty of encounter with conservatives at the UN conferences, and efforts to create alliances among male government representatives of various countries. Mentions Saudi Arabia.

[29:00] Discussion on conflict of interest at conferences, example of abortion and Arab-Muslim acceptance but clashes with Vatican representative, controversy of Gay and Lesbian issue for Muslim world. Story about NGO meeting in New York, attacking Catholic Church regarding abortion, and Vatican representative’s request to AM to attend. Story about pro-life campaigners coming to Cairo with dolls and graphic presentation.

[34:47] Describes meeting Mahnaz Afkhami through Sisterhood is Global, and support for her contribution to organization and later joining Women’s Learning Partnership [WLP]. Perspective on WLP and reflections on organizational meeting in Ukraine. Remarks that collaboration enabled witnessing interactions between NGO work and the establishment, negotiation and compromise involved. Criticisms of NGO modus operandi and simultaneous protective spirit.

Track 5 [duration: 10:15] [Session two: 9 March 2013]

[00:00] Describes work of The Women and Memory Forum based in Cairo and publication, ‘Hajer’. AM board member. Aim to reconstruct history through women’s stories and way of describing things. Productions of Egyptian legends from a feminist, Arab-Muslim perspective. AM’s vision of what is called for today in the movement, use of popular television to reconstruct history through women’s experience and needs. Mention of use of soap operas to fight anti-Semitism and racism.

[07:15] Describes childhood storytelling by often illiterate, women, making jam in AM’s home. Story about experience in Indonesia of initiative by poor women in community taking turns to cook.