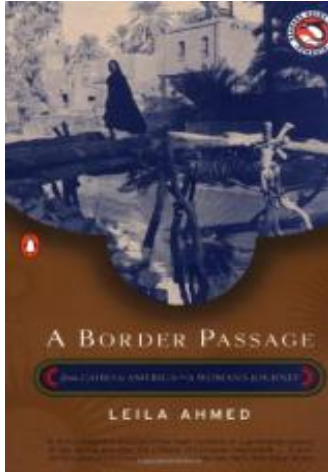

A Border Passage: From Cairo to America, A Woman's Journey

by Leila Ahmed



About the Book

In language that vividly evokes the lush summers of Cairo and the stark beauty of the Arabian desert, Leila Ahmed tells a moving tale of 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 1940s and '50s, Ahmed witnessed some of the major transformations of this century—the end of British colonialism, the creation of Israel, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the breakdown of Egypt's once multireligious society. Amid the turmoil, she searched to define herself—and to see how the world defined her—as a woman, a Muslim, an Egyptian, and an Arab. In this memoir, she poignantly reflects upon issues of language, race, and nationality, while unveiling the hidden world of women's Islam. Ahmed's story will be an inspiration to anyone who has ever struggled to define their own cultural identity.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the core issues addressed in **A Border Passage** is the process by which our identities are constructed. Discuss what you think were your own "defining" moments or "formative" years. What made them so crucial? Were they politically driven?
2. Chapter 11 opens with these words from Zora Neale Hurston, "I remember the very day that I became colored." Why is this quote significant to the book?
3. After Ahmed's father died, she experimented with what she called "automatic writing." What did you think of this passage? Was she really tapping into another realm?

4. Ahmed said that she learned about religion through watching "hidden messages: attitudes, posture, a glance of approval." How did you learn about religion? Discuss what types of "hidden messages" influenced your spiritual development.
5. Before reading **A Border Passage**, what were your feelings about Islam? What were some misconceptions about Muslim women dismantled by Ahmed in the book? Similarly, what did you discover about the feminist movement in America?
6. Although many cultures thrive through oral traditions, educational systems continue to emphasize the written literary tradition. In short, "if it isn't written down, it didn't happen." What are the implications of assigning more credence to the written word than to oral traditions? How did this affect Ahmed's experience in Abu Dhabi? How do you think it affected your own education?
7. Do you think Ahmed succeeds in objectively disentangling the controversial political, religious, and cultural conflicts explored in her book? Can you pinpoint which narrative techniques were most helpful to you?
8. "I think that we are always plural. Not either this or that, but this and that." What does Ahmed mean by this? What different traditions, cultures, and histories converge to make you who you are?
9. Did the cultural backgrounds of the women with whom Ahmed grew up in Egypt inform her childhood opinions of them? Consider especially how her perception of her traditional Arabic speaking mother was utterly transformed throughout the course of the book. Have you undergone similar evolutions in how you perceive your own parents? If so, what do you think caused them?
10. Were any of Ahmed's childhood memories similar to your own? If so, please describe.

Author Bio

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