

Madkhal ila qadaya al-mar'a fi sutur wa suwar

An Illustrated Introduction to Women's Issues

Hoda Elsadda et al.

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Nur/Nura and the Fluidity of Cultural Politics

In the first endeavor of its kind in Egypt and, to the best of my knowledge, the Arab world, *Madkhal ila qadaya al-mar'a fi sutur wa suwar* (henceforth *Nur wa Nura*) is much in keeping with its internationally acknowledged forebear — the "For-Beginners" series. As such, I would like to deal with it both as a first step as well as one among many on the long road delineated and trodden by feminists in their historical struggle for both spreading awareness and documentation. And it is precisely these two concepts that illuminate this review of *Nur wa Nura*, it being a simultaneous act of awareness and documentation.

True to its feminist (read gender-sensitive) ideology, the book is a fluid combination of the written and the visual, of written, historical, documentary and archival material coupled with cartoon illustrations mapping out the history of the women's movement in Egypt and relating it directly to its descendant, the need to offset current misguided concepts pervading Egyptian society at present, from segregation, through stereotyping, to rigid gender roles, etc. Thus, from the outset the reader is aware of the book's serious material as well as attracted to its not-

so-serious format. And it is precisely this combination of the informative and the delightful that constitutes a potential for a wide readership, for a book which veers away from the dryly academic toward the attractively popular. This is further enhanced in the book's choice of characters, for the book is essentially a dialogue between Nur (male of any age) and Nura (female of any age).

It is precisely in Nur and Nura that the book achieves one of its subtlest purposes. For in presenting the reader with a man and woman (possibly a boy and a girl, it being difficult to situate the two characters within a specific age group due to the elusiveness characteristic of the visual comic medium), the latter is encouraged to identify with one or both characters. In addition, the choice of a male and a female for the discussion further highlights the book's underlying ideology, i.e., gender equality. It must also be noted that in choosing the names of the two characters, the book demonstrates its own lucid approach as well as the careful thinking process that went into its preparation, the two names being (as any reader familiar with the Arabic language knows) a play on the language's tendency to feminize a word through the addition of the equivalent of an "a" sound at the end of the masculine word (thus male "doktor" becomes female "doktora," for the English term "doctor"). As such Nur and Nura become two sides of the same coin, the same subject displaying its feminine and masculine manifestation. They are simply "named" differently, a process that echoes that of social naming, assigning male and female roles. No more elaboration of the gender-sensitive politics underlying this choice is needed in this context.

It is particularly interesting that in seeking to counteract the socially prevalent role divisions, the book does not assign its two characters any socially dictated gender roles. In other words, Nur and Nura equally make assumptions and misjudged conclusions as well as correcting such mistakes in each other. In so doing, the book is in fact counter-balancing the socially prevalent mode of thought whereby a man knows and a woman does not. In making Nura often correct Nur's concepts and vice versa, the book shows that it is more a matter of the individual who errs/reaches acceptable conclusions than a matter of the "nature" of man and woman, further throwing into relief the counter-possibility of a woman's "knowledge" instead.

"Nature" brings us to the content of the book. The book is divided into a number of sections, each dealing with one of the following pivotal aspects: current issues; nature; the public and the private; education; the women's movement; resistance; and legal segregation.

Again, a cursory look at the "Table of Contents" would convince any reader that the content was most suited for academic research, a fact that might make the book off-putting to a number of readers. However, the fact that the book does not include one page that is not illustrated soon attracts the reader to its content. The book is, in fact, suited to children and adults, equally informative and entertaining for both. It is through this combination that the book achieves its two major tasks, spreading awareness and providing documentation. For in thus enticing the reader into reading the material presented, essentially for its comic, entertaining potential, the authors take the opportunity to provide her/him with the most serious and essential information about the history of the Egyptian women's movement and major feminist figures, whose grouping together in this context is a necessary act of documentation. Even though the reader might be well aware of most of the concepts presented and the names provided, the cumulative effect of the book is a necessary archival venture. (The book could be seen as an act of well-intended cheating, sugar-coating its own potentially dry content to attract a larger number of readers, a fact both integral for spreading awareness as well as characteristic of all ideologies, propagated or refuted.)

There is not much room in this review to familiarize the reader with the content of the book itself. For here what really matters is the precedent--the fact that the book has been produced, and in this intelligent combination of serious content coupled with entertaining format. The content could vary as much as there are issues to dispute

or enlighten the public about, a fact that makes one hope for the production of more examples of that same undertaking. Nevertheless, the book remains a precedent in both its historical context and endeavor. The book, moreover, reflects its content — stressing a more tolerant and fluid attitude toward gender issues — through its own fluidity of form, which refuses to assign the verbal a more prominent role than/at the expense of the visual, an act that would be lauded by many a feminist pioneer seeking to counter the logocentricity of chauvinistic thought.

Finally, it must be noted that *Nur wa Nura's* most praiseworthy achievement is providing a context for the underlying kind of work of which it is a manifestation. This becomes clear when one notes the essentialist, traditionalist views of some in this society who routinely equate "feminist" with "western." By situating the Egyptian women's movement in its proper historical and (current) social context, the book refutes precisely such a view and gives legitimacy to its own work and ideology establishing the latter in relation to its cultural heritage and precursors. As such, the book is another step (to return to our initial analogy) along the path mapped out by the Women and Memory Forum's serious effort in the field, effort that has made of that newly-born institution a landmark in the history of feminism in Egypt, one that awaits documentation in its own turn by future generations. And the work goes on and on.

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