

Be Independent and Decide Freely

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Azza Muhammad Ali* was born in Cairo in 1950. Disabled from birth because of delivery complications, Azza suffered from brain paralysis and endured poor health throughout her life. She died on December 20th, 2004.

Azza was her parents' only child. They separated when she was two and her guardianship was entrusted to her father. She lived with him until he sent her to boarding school in England where she stayed for nine years. Throughout that period she did not see her mother, not even once. However, she used to see her father once a year. Even though she loved him dearly, she still missed her mother whom she could no longer remember given that she hadn't seen her since she was two. Whenever she asked her father why they divorced he would answer that he would tell her everything when she was older. In England she felt lonely, but this helped her develop an independent personality. She felt happy whenever her father visited her even though his visits lasted a week. After some time abroad she returned to Egypt to live with her father who traveled a lot since he was a consul general.

Azza always asserted that her father treated her very well and took her feelings into consideration. While growing up she often wondered why her father never remarried, and when she asked him, his answer was that he wasn't sure whether she would be upset if he did. Azza explained to him that it wouldn't bother her at all and so after her father got her blessings he remarried.

Although Azza's father didn't change towards her after he remarried – he loved her just the same – her relationship with her stepmother was not an amicable one. Despite the fact that she was unkind to Azza, they both tried to accept each other and get used to living together. Azza lived with her father and his wife for around five years, during which time her stepmother gave birth to two boys, Omar and Ahmad. She confessed that her relation with her brothers wasn't a close one.

Azza recounted that after her first stepbrother was born, her stepmother started encouraging her to contact her mother and visit her. Azza's mother had remarried because the traditions at the time did not encourage a woman to remain unwed. The first time she met her mother was in 1968, and Azza started visiting her once a week thereafter. Azza admitted that on her first visit to her mother she did

not feel that they were related. She affirmed: "The blood that ran in her veins was not the same as mine." She felt a strong estrangement. Azza's mother, on the other hand, admitted that she was very happy to finally meet her daughter after so many years. Yet, she admitted that she did not dare touch her for fear of her leaving and not returning. With time and after repeated visits to her mother, Azza started loving her more and more and they became friends. At first, her stepfather did not accept her and was very nervous around her.

Azza's parents were very supportive when it came to education. She was enrolled in a normal school and both her parents used to help her with her homework. She said that it was thanks to her mother that she learnt Arabic. Azza recounted that while she was bedridden as a result of an operation, her mother brought in a teacher to help her with her Arabic. Moreover, her parents provided her with a domestic worker who used to accompany her to school and remain by her side in case she needed anything.

Azza recounted that her school years in England were completely different to the ones she spent in Egypt. In Egypt she felt completely isolated. Even though her teachers at school were very understanding, treated her well, and gave her the extra time she needed, she still felt different and isolated. At first she did not mix with her classmates and avoided going to the playground. However, thanks to her science teacher, who encouraged her to take part in one of the school trips, she started making friends and participating in activities. Azza's university years were very pleasant. The atmosphere was different and she had an excellent relationship with her colleagues; she never felt discriminated against and made many friends. Azza obtained her first university degree at the age of 26, three years older than the normal age due to her poor health.

At the age of 17 and after Azza started having health problems, she moved in with her mother. She felt it was her duty to look after her daughter following a brain operation that left her half paralyzed. The brain surgery was meant to improve her ability to use her hands but instead of healing them she suffered from hemiplegia. The doctors had not foreseen that the operation would have such results, and she started natural cures in order to regain her capacity to walk, but her hands never regained their mobility.

Her stepfather did not complain about her moving in with them. He accepted the idea because he had no children and considered Azza his daughter. She continued visiting her father after that, spending a day with him every week. He tried very hard to foster a stronger relationship between her and his other children but failed. Azza believed this was her stepmother's fault although she said her brothers loved her in their own way.

Azza worked in several institutions for the disabled before she decided to go for a doctorate degree. When she started working she had many ideas she wanted to put into practice about how to develop and modernize the organizations that deal with the disabled. She was very excited about making a difference and bringing about change but was extremely disappointed because no one was interested in reform. With time Azza got used to the situation. Before she passed away she was teaching English to a group of children with brain paralysis.

An important event in Azza's life was her falling in love with one of her classmates at university. She was 21 at the time and he was her first love. He was gentle and kind to Azza and their relationship was platonic despite the fact that it lasted for five years. Even though they talked about marriage, the relationship ended because he was Christian and wanted to travel to Canada. Azza being Muslim couldn't marry him nor could she leave her mother alone. In Azza's words: "Had he been Muslim I would have married him and traveled with him." After they broke up and he traveled Azza was very miserable. They stayed in touch for a couple of years, yet, given that they had no future together her first love decided to get married. He invited her to his wedding and she attended. It was a difficult experience for Azza. She knew he was bound to get married and she considered it to be his full right but going to the church and seeing him marry another woman was very painful.

After a while she became close to a colleague at work. He was disabled because of a brain injury and had a paralyzed hand and leg. He suffered from denial given that he tried to reject his disability and refused to accept his situation. Azza tried to help him and their friendship developed. At a certain point he asked for her hand in marriage and she accepted on condition that they live with one of their parents given that they both needed help. He refused because he wanted them to be independent. The relationship didn't work out and they stopped dating.

At the age of 38, Azza got engaged to a classmate at university. She decided to take the plunge not out of love but because she felt she had to settle with a man. However,

after she got to know him better she realized that he was unsuitable in a lot of respects. He was very lazy, he refused to work and was expecting Azza to be the sole breadwinner. He lived off the money he received from his brothers and had no intention of changing. Azza ended the relationship after four months and was convinced that marriage without love is bound to fail.

This incident was a big blow to Azza because she could not fulfill her desire to be romantically involved with a man. It made her give up the idea. Azza's view was that it is difficult for an Eastern man to accept a disabled woman even if she is intelligent and successful. All this changes nothing for him. She believed that no matter what a disabled woman achieves in life she will always be stigmatized as a disabled person because what attracts men in this era is not the intellect but a sound body.

After the failure of her engagement Azza knew that the only thing that would help her regain her sanity was organized study. So she decided to prepare for a Ph.D. She obtained a Doctorate in English Literature with Distinction from the American University in Cairo and dedicated it to "All those who find life difficult."

Azza regretted not getting married and was gravely disappointed for not having given the matter more thought. She knew that she would leave this earth unmarried and with no children. She admitted that with age she became more demanding and refused to get married to anyone. She wanted a husband with the qualities she desired in a lifelong partner. Azza managed to compensate for not having children of her own through her work with children. She loved her students and treated them like her own. Moreover, she taught them how to independent and encouraged them to think for themselves. Azza insisted that the most important thing in life is for a person to be independent and take his/her own decisions.

One of Azza's most painful experiences was dealing with the death of her father. She was greatly affected by his sudden death. Her mother was a great support and helped her overcome the terrible shock. Two years later her stepfather died, but his death did not have the same effect on her. Her mother was the only person able to fill the void left by her father.

END NOTES

* This article was written before Azza died on December 20th, 2004.