

Elizabeth Fernea in Beirut

Interview conducted by *Wafa' Stephan Tarnowski*

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Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, author and editor of two feminist classics, *Women and the Family in the Middle East* and *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (both published by the University of Texas Press), visited Lebanon in June with her husband Robert, a renowned anthropologist, to update their book, *The Arab World: Personal Encounters* (Anchor Press). The book, first begun in 1956, when they initially visited Beirut as young academics, is a personal narrative of their travels in the region, travels which took them to Egypt (1959, 1983 and 1995), to Morocco (1971, 1983 and 1995), as well as to Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Iran, Yemen, and the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. The updated version of the book will conclude with an article on post-war Lebanon.

Elizabeth Fernea, who learned Arabic in a "total immersion" program in the mid-1950s at Georgetown University, has lived for extended periods of time in Iraq, Egypt and Morocco. She has written books on her experiences in all three of these countries: *Guests of the Sheikh*, *A View of the Nile*, and *A Street in Marrakech*, respectively. These books have been exceedingly popular with the American public, perhaps because they are part autobiography, part travel writing, and part ethnography. Although these books were informative and entertaining, they were not as crucial to feminist scholarship and Middle Eastern studies as were her subsequent books, which were among the first to use a documentary and oral history approach to-

wards Middle Eastern women. Fernea's later books marked a departure from the usual western treatments of Middle Eastern women, which relied exclusively upon essays based on second-hand accounts by western scholars. Her work is also significant because it includes materials not previously available in English, sources which had never before been translated from Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Fernea was also one of the first scholars to examine the paradox of Middle Eastern women's low status and segregation in some countries, and their rise to political and intellectual eminence in others. She chose to "speak" through Middle Eastern women's voices, rather than impose her voice on theirs, and in that, she is much re-

spected and often emulated. Fernea stated that originally she had no orientalist training; in fact, she still teaches English at the University of Texas at Austin in addition to Middle Eastern Studies. But her sensitivity towards her host culture and her desire to fill in the gaps between academic and lay people with regard to knowledge of the Middle East has made her a much-respected scholar of the region. Fernea notes that, although there are many specialists on the Middle East in the academic world, there still remains a great deal of ignorance on the subject among ordinary people.

She recalled that, in 1966, when her husband Robert became Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Center at the University of Texas, there were only three faculty members. Now, thanks to an increasing interest in the region, there are 35 faculty members teaching subjects as varied as anthropology, geography, literature, and sociology of the Middle East. Fernea's first anthology on women (*Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*) was undertaken as a supplementary reading list for her students, who had no access to original Arabic sources. She started translating from the original Arabic "after dinner, when the kids were in bed" and her students loved it, as did the general public. English speakers were able to read and enjoy poems by the famous pre-Islamic woman poet, al-Khansa', and the

Andalusian poet Wallada bint al-Mustaki. Biographical sketches of the Prophet Muhammad's favorite wife, Aisha, as well as the famous 20th century Egyptian singer Umm Kulthoum and contemporary writers such as Leila Baalbaki and Ghada Samman, also touched and intrigued English-speaking readers.

After writing about women in the Middle East, Fernea then turned to children's issues, and edited a resource book entitled *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, which was also published by the University of Texas Press. This book, unlike the book on women, is organized into sections on childhood, growing up, health, work, education, politics, war, play and the arts. It includes essays in history and social science, poems, proverbs, lullabies, games and short stories from all over the Middle East: Tunisia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Yemen and Afghanistan.

In addition to her literary

productions, Fernea is also an accomplished filmmaker. She has made several successful documentary films about women's issues in the contemporary Middle East, one of which this interviewer saw, which was entitled "A Veiled Revolution." Fernea wrote an article with the same title for Bowen and Early, eds., *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* (see review in *Al-Raida*, No. 66, Winter, 1995, pp. 30-31). Fernea's film introduces the viewer to various women in Cairo who have decided to wear the veil again. The film explores the ironies surrounding this symbol of submission which has now become a tool for attaining wider social freedoms and a way of making a statement of one's own respectability and cultural and religious identity in the face of westernization. Fernea says that "westerners are more worried about the veil than Middle Easterners, for their own agendas," and she believes that in 1995 there are fewer women wearing the *hijab* in Egypt than there were in 1985. When asked if women's situation in the Arab World has changed, Fernea

answers that it has indeed, but that women are first and foremost concerned about their economic situation, then about family pressures, then about laws governing their personal status. She adds that "women don't mention the *hijab* as one of their main concerns."

Ferneia believes that, in general, women in the Middle East today have more opportunities than their mothers did. They can work outside the home and there is "more scope for them to negotiate." Her firmest belief, however, is that Middle Eastern women's status is never fixed, but constantly changing as women grow, learn and develop and feel the impact of political and economic events beyond their immediate control. Thus, she says that scholars of the region must always pay attention to the many factors which affect women's lives and the important decisions which shape women's present and future in the Middle East.

When asked to name some of the Middle Eastern women she most admires, Fernea cited Umm Kulthoum, the late Egyptian singer; author Leila Abou Zeid; Sheikha Fatima, wife of the ruler of Abu Dhabi; Aziza Hussein of Cairo Family Planning; Salma al-Jauyyusi, the Jordanian literary critic; and Huda Na'amani of Lebanon. Fernea went on to say that there are many other women in the Middle East whom she admires and that she has a large number of Arab women friends. However, rather than naming all of them, she prefers to mention that the important point for Arab women today is that "women are becoming reflexive about themselves and taking control of their own destinies" as much as their circumstances allow them to do.

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Elizabeth Fernea with her husband and collaborator, the anthropologist Robert Fernea.