

***Playing Cards in Cairo* by Hugh Miles:
The Other's Insight into the lives of Others : overturning
notions of superiority**

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Hugh Miles¹, an Arabic speaking, English free-lance journalist finds himself returning to Cairo, not just because Cairo is a place *where it felt as if you could live on lotuses but get by on pennies* while London where, ironically, he leads a slothful (lotus eater's) life, *bleeds money out of you at every step* (p.9), but because he cannot forget the beautiful young doctor, Roda, unveiled and *open-minded* (p.29), whom he had met at a farewell party for another expatriate in Cairo.

This work is based on his insights into the world of middle class women in a relatively affluent section of Cairo where he meets Roda's card playing women friends at her flat. In a culture where it was not easy for an *unmarried Egyptian Muslim woman in Cairo to spend time with a foreign man alone* or be in a *position to invite a foreigner to their house especially a male one*, (p.45), the writer is presented with the opportunity to learn about the lives of Egyptian upper middle class educated women at first hand as he drinks mint tea and plays cards (Tarneeb) with them, and listens to their stories of their lives and desires.

How does one begin to imagine the other? To imagine the other is to be *where the other is*².

¹ Son of a British diplomat who worked in the Middle East, he learnt Arabic and later continued his studies of the language at University. He is known for his well-researched reports on the Middle East

² Black, p. 2

A patriarchal society implies the superiority of the male, this idea is overturned/subverted as the women and their lives dominate the pages of the book. Thus we are confronted with the question : Can a white man, an Occidental, not in his own milieu, a Christian write about coloured, Oriental, Muslim women in their own terrain without being accused of insensitivity, misguidedness, arrogance? How can Miles escape being accused of misrepresenting the full complexity as humans of these others? Stepping outside his ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender category to write about those whom he is not raises the question of the ethics of responsible representation. One asks whether the work reveals a genuine interest on the part of the writer to know about a dissimilar or unfamiliar group?

Theoretically, the creative imagination has the entire field of human experience at its disposal. Practically, the exercise of this creative imagination is intertwined with other forces.³

Playing Cards in Cairo is not a romance, nor a piece of fiction, it is based on selected real life experiences of the writer, a perspective coloured by his journalistic lens. The stories of the women and their status and experiences in their Islamic society are given through their own words or stated factually. Miles presents the cultural differences he notices either by repetition or elaboration and an occasional overt statement as we have seen earlier, when he speaks of the difficulty of dating.

Furthermore, by using the sub-genre of journalism, *Playing cards in cairo* escapes accusations of being an excessively sentimental description as the writer intersperses the stories of the frustrations and fallibilities of women with issues that were of topical interest at the time of writing,

I have chosen to focus this paper on the lives of Roda's friends as seen by the privileged Hugh Miles.

³ Srikanth

Thus there are several levels of border crossing: I, as a Hindu woman, look at Cairo through the reactions of a Western Christian male to Egyptian Islamic women. These several layers of cultural differences colour my paper.

In many developing countries identity is inseparable from the family into which one is born. It is also intertwined with one's social class, religion, ethnic background and to some extent with one's education. Incorporated into these and dominating the others is the gender factor. Reading *Playing Cards in Cairo*, the deeply ingrained societal norms that place restrictions on women seem similar in both Indian and Egyptian societies. For educated working women in both societies crossing the threshold means walking the tightrope between modernity and escape from traditional restrictions and a return to traditional roles once they return home to be submissive housewives, mothers, sisters. Traditional repressive norms follow them into the working space as well. Hugh Miles says

Family pressure to conform to impossible rules had turned all the women I knew into polished liars.... It was the only way to cope with the massive gulf between their private lives and the face they were obliged to show their families and the rest of society. (p82)

Although the book narrates the lives of Cairenes of different classes: caretakers of buildings, their quarrels, their wives eternally peeling garlic outside the building, taxi drivers, the lower class districts, the foreign enclaves, the shisha cafes, all come under Hugh Miles gaze. I have chosen to concentrate on his descriptions of upper class women. All the limitations of perspective are, therefore, mine.

Most of us are familiar with the under-mentioned issues, I shall mention some of the aspects of women's lives discussed by Hugh Miles. In the Arab world, he says, *women are viewed either as*

married, virgins or prostitutes' (p148). (Many of the incidents that he narrates involve a character called Yosra, a friend of Roda's.)

- 1.) Relationship with the family: the importance of the Brother. Obedience to the demands of the family; mother-daughter relations
- 2.) Importance of marriage _ (Urfi, Sunni)
 - a) Beauty: the dangers of cosmetic surgery
 - b) Virginity : hymenorrophy
- 3.) Divorce (does not favour women)
- 4.) Conversion : Egyptian and non Egyptian
- 5.) Work: Clash between capitalistic and Islamic norms
- 6.) Traditional healers
- 7.) The Veil

As a student on a placement in Cairo, Hugh Miles observed

Family relationships in the Middle East are different to those in the West. In Arab families a girl cannot leave home when she is still a teenager; women are not autonomous individuals who can run their own lives independently of the rest of the family. (p.5)
Honour is too fragile to be left to handle alone. If she erred her whole family would be blemished. He adds, A brother is forever, while husbands come and go.

(The relationship between Yosra and her policeman brother is discussed in detail, one incident (p.130...) in which Hassan asserts his authority is when Yosra returns late from a party having invented an excuse that she was going to a wedding. In order to escape the policing of the brother, Yosra has become 'a practised liar' (p. 60). Yosra as the only daughter was expected to stay home and look after her ailing father and is terrified that her brother would find out that she had been to party where there were men. On her return, she begs her friend Roda to accompany

her into the house. It is left for us to imagine whether her brother physically chastises her. Yosra is not young, she is a working woman, unmarried, she is excessively policed by her brother. Her situation leads her into depression and an addiction to prescription drugs. When Yosra finally decides to leave Cairo for Dubai, she is told that

a daughter's duty is to stay and look after the family

Marriage

According to the writer there seem to be two kinds of marriages: a formal Islamic one where the girl and boy do not need to be present in the same room as their elder male relatives stand in for them and an informal Urfi marriage.

Marriage is the only legitimate way to get sex (p.92).

Egyptian tradition requires the bridegroom to shower the bride with expensive gifts. With a high unemployment rate in the country, (Miles quotes statistics) most young people stay with their parents and scratch together a living. Hugh Miles (p125)

Urfi marriages are a controversial Islamic practice *a bit like a common law marriage, permissible under Sunni Islam* (p93); the marriage is not registered, the marriage contract is drafted often by the couple themselves. These marriages are not socially binding. They provide a means to have sex. But may lead to prostitution as parents sell their daughters under the guise of marriage.⁴

⁴Miles cites a famous case in which the woman, Hind el Hinnawy filed a paternity suit against the father of the baby in a civil court where a woman and man are valued equally unlike a sharia court in which a woman's testimony is worth only half of that of a man's. The case caused consternation for many reasons: Hind's father supported her, the child's father refused to have a DNA test done. The child's mother needed acknowledgement of paternity in order to get a birth certificate for the child so that an identity card could be issued, without such a card one does not legally exist. (The case raised many debates. (p95). A court ruling declared the marriage legal on the

Many marriages are arranged by parents/In Yosra's case, her mother arranges a date with a prospective partner. Nothing comes of it. Yosra's mother attempts to find out why and calls the man only to be answered by the mother and a ritualistic conversation with enquiries about family members health ensues, interspersed with many exclamations of *what god wills, what god wills* (p77). and later when the man gets in touch again, Yosra finds out by meeting his ex-wife that the man was impotent.

Salma, Yosra's mother, is supportive of her daughter from the time she was young. She took her away from the village to avoid the traditional cutting of the clytoris, and now she takes her to see a mystic healer to find out why her daughter, at 33, was still unmarried.

Virginity

Hugh Miles statement that virginity

is a severe case of double standards: if a boy loses his virginity it is something smugly to brag to his friends about the next morning; for girls it is an unforgivable transgression and can cost her everything

certainly applies to India as well.

He refers to double standards when Amira talks about her husband's angry reaction to seeing his sister in a man's car. (p.237).

evidence of witnesses and ' women's rights in Egypt took another small painful step forward' says the writer.)

'A child without a father legally has no religion, which leaves it in a bureaucratic and legal limbo' . the implications for single mothers are also bleak as they face ostracism and perhaps death.

The requirement of showing that one is a virgin by bleeding on the first night with one's husband leads to hymen repair doctors being much in demand. *it is remarkable that something so biologically useless has come to carry such a burden*(p124), says the writer. In order to satisfy their biological urges, women indulge in 'dry sex' or anal sex so as to keep their hymen's intact.

Related to the issue of marriage is the pressure to look good which leads to plastic surgery sometimes performed by unqualified persons with unexpected results. (Reem has the fat drained out of her thighs only to find that she becomes top heavy.)

Another aspect of the search for beauty is the hairdressing salon, which offers haircutting, henna dying, hair removal etc.

Divorce

Under Egyptian law there are (p122) two types of divorce that a woman can seek, neither of them very favourable to women. We are given the example of Nadia, Roda's sister who does not leave her abusive husband because of her child. She could lose the child or alimony or both..

Conversion

Islamic marriage requires that both parties be Muslims. In the case of Reem, another card playing friend, her fiance is a Christian who is studying Islam to convert. He is constantly threatened by other Christians and so is Reem.

When Miles and Roda decide to marry, he has to convert but conversion for a foreigner is relatively easy. And as he says at the end of the work: *I had changed my religion but not my culture*

The stories of the women Hugh Miles meets are interlaced with direct speech, using the local idiom, and one can hear the women's voices throughout as they drink mint tea, smoke cigarettes, and play cards, listen to Arabic music channels and

condemn some men as being *lower than razor blades lying flat on the ground* or say that *life is like a cucumber*'

Hugh Miles' statement that 'today Egyptian women are better educated than ever before, but they are still expected to do the child rearing and domestic chores, to abstain from social interaction outside their families and to compete on an unequal basis with men in the workplace' can apply equally to women in the developing world as well as in developed countries. Stepping beyond the threshold literally and figuratively remains traumatic. This work is not a novel, there is no attempt at character development. He focuses his gaze on a social class similar to his own⁵.

Interspersing comments on women are comments on politics and social life,.

Semi auto biographical, the story of his love for Roda (Dina in real life) is relatively discreetly presented.

Hugh Miles view point is that of a cosmopolitan liberal upper class other who feels that he has sometimes stepped through the looking glass.

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⁵. In real life he is married to Dina, depicted as Roda in the book.

- Shameem Black, **Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth Century Novels**, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009
- Hugh Miles is an award-winning freelance journalist and author, a presenter, producer and consultant specialising in the Middle East. Miles is contributing editor of Arab Media and Society, a media journal published by the American University in Cairo's Centre for Television Journalism.[1]
- Hugh Miles is the author of two books:
 - "Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World"[6]
 - "Playing Cards in Cairo"[7]
 - Kingdom of the Ice Bear: A Portrait of the Arctic
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- Nicholas Lezard
- The Guardian, Saturday 5 March 2011
- This is unusual not only because he is a westerner but mainly because he is a man; and even these educated, middle-class Cairene women would be beaten up by their brothers or fathers if they found out he was in the apartment, however innocently, with them.

- So Miles manages to see the society within a society, in a way few western men, if any, have ever seen, and the revelations are fascinating