

American University in Cairo

## AUC Knowledge Fountain

---

Faculty Book Chapters

---

1999

### Inside/Out: The "Native" and the "Halfie" Unsettled

Heba El-Kholy

Nadje Al-Alfi

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_book\\_chapters](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters)



Part of the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

##### APA Citation

El-Kholy, H. & Al-Alfi, N. (1999). *Inside/Out: The "Native" and the "Halfie" Unsettled*. American University in Cairo Press. , 14-40

[https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_book\\_chapters/1254](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1254)

##### MLA Citation

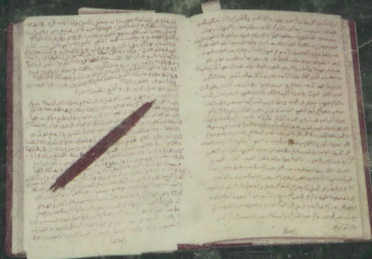
El-Kholy, Heba, et al. *Inside/Out: The "Native" and the "Halfie" Unsettled*. American University in Cairo Press, 1999.pp. 14-40

[https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_book\\_chapters/1254](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1254)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact [fountadmin@aucegypt.edu](mailto:fountadmin@aucegypt.edu).

# Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science

Seteney Shami  
Linda Herrera  
Editors



## Contributors

Nadje Al-Ali  
Iman Bibars  
Anita Fabos  
Farha Ghannam

Sari Hanafi  
Heba El-Kholy  
Hania Sholkamy  
Mohammed Tabishat



HN  
786  
A85  
B48  
1999

CAIRO PAPERS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE  
Volume 22, Number 2



## INSIDE/OUT: THE "NATIVE" AND THE "HALFIE" UNSETTLED

HEBA EL-KHOLY AND NADJE AL-ALI

### Motivations and Aspirations

The impetus behind writing this paper arose almost three years ago when we started our respective PhDs in the department of anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. During this first year, we were both struck by prevailing essentialisms and generalized assumptions about the anthropologist's identity and its impact on the research process. Questions about ascribed identities of the researcher and her self-perception and the links between identities and power relations continued to occupy our minds during the period of fieldwork and the writing-up process.

In this paper, we would like to share some of these reflections rather than to review the current debates in the literature on identity. In doing so, we hope to provoke discussion and further the debate on the politics of anthropology, specifically as they relate to issues of the researcher's identity, and the limitations of binary oppositions of 'the self' and 'the other.' Thus we hope to challenge essentialist concepts such as the "native," the "foreigner," and the "halfie".<sup>1</sup> Our purpose is not to suggest that research generated by natives is inherently better or worse than that produced by foreigners (generally read as 'Westerners') or halfies, nor to obliterate the often significant differences between these various types. Rather, we simply want to question the assumptions behind those definitions, as well as their political effect in perpetuating a sense of hierarchy among anthropologists.

An argument throughout the paper, which we illustrate through examples of how we were differently perceived, is that a researcher is rarely distinguished by those researched as either an 'insider' or an 'outsider'

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "halfie" was originally coined by Kirin Narayan, but it became widely known through Lila Abu-Lughod's article "Writing Against Culture" in which she categorizes halfies as "people whose national or cultural heritage is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (Abu-Lughod, L. 1991).

(even though the researcher him/herself may identify this way), but that perceptions shift depending on the particular context. Moreover, we argue that insider/outsider is not synonymous with native/non-native. We will also address a further complication, that is the gap between how we were perceived by our interviewees and how we perceived ourselves in different situations during fieldwork. While there might be some overlap at times, in other cases, ascribed identities and self-perceptions do not match at all.

In writing this paper together comparing, contrasting, sharing, and reflecting on each other's experiences we hope to strengthen our individual abilities to critically analyze our specific field situations as well as engage in a dynamic and dialogic debate. Rather than to forge assent, this project is meant to further the spirit of joint writing and team work which, as feminists, constitutes a mode of work in which we believe. Unfortunately, institutional incentives to pursue such collective endeavors within academia are not only weak but even hindered by structures calling for competitive 'one-woman shows.'

After a series of informal encounters, during which we shared our thoughts and discussed our respective research, we engaged in a focused brainstorming session at the end of which emerged a tentative outline for our paper. Subsequently, we each wrote separate drafts, which we then merged rather easily and enjoyably given our previous exchanges. During several sessions in London and Cairo, we edited jointly the final draft.

### **The History of a Dialogue**

After 13 years of working in the field of social development and women's rights activism in Egypt and the Middle East, Heba returned to academia in order to pursue a PhD in anthropology. She was partly motivated by the desire to deepen understanding of her own society, so as to more efficiently further efforts to address Egypt's local and national crises. She very much identified as an indigenous anthropologist, as an Egyptian doing anthropology in Egypt. Doing anthropology in her native country, and in the city where she was born, raised, largely educated, and to which she was committed, was to her the most obvious and politically meaningful thing to do:



*You can thus imagine my disillusionment when some of the first questions asked by professors and fellow students, sometimes innocently and sometimes not so innocently, were variants of: "Oh, so you are doing anthropology at home? How very interesting!" or: "Well, keeping your distance will certainly be a challenge, won't it!" While subtle, the tone of such questions and comments about my identity often betrayed a belief that doing anthropology 'at home,' was a questionable undertaking, specifically in terms of its validity and objectivity. Although fully aware of the colonial history of anthropology, its historical dependence on 'the other' for its existence, the initial comments and questions I received at SOAS were nonetheless unsettling for me. They certainly made me feel that I was of a different breed from what anthropologists normally are and that I carried the additional challenge of proving my objectivity.*

Heba had assumed that the major theoretical shifts over the previous 10 years, as well as the emergence of the so-called "new anthropology," which has attempted to critique some of the basic premises of the discipline, would have rendered some of these dichotomies and colonialist assumptions, if not obsolete, then at least seriously questioned. What she found though was rather different:

*I attended some sessions of a research methods course at SOAS that, although quite thoughtful, confirmed to me that the dichotomies between native and foreign anthropologist are alive and well and that, implicit in such dichotomies is an assumption that native anthropology is somehow of a more dubious nature and of lesser quality. For example, one of the essay questions for the course was: "Is doing fieldwork at home possible?" Just think for a moment how inconceivable and outrageous it would have appeared if the question had been reversed: "Is doing anthropology anywhere else but at home possible or meaningful?"*

*When discussing the identity of the anthropologist in various courses, the assumption was generally that of a Western anthropologist studying a non-Western society despite the fact that numerically, the number of anthropologists in the department who were studying or planning to study their own societies was quite significant. Yet somehow their existence seemed to be overlooked in such discussions. Questions of the divided self had become*



standard discussion in the post-modern movement and had supposedly had a major impact on anthropology. However, notions of the anthropologist as a united, non-shifting self, generally a Western and outsider, continued to hold sway. Crucial questions about who constituted the native or the 'other,' the gaps between ascribed identities and self-identities, the issue of mixed identities, and the links between the researcher's identity and power relations were never explicitly addressed in the research training seminar nor in the methods or theory courses.

*In several departmental seminars, students, largely natives, sometimes engaged in what was termed "reflexivity." To me, however, this often sounded like apologetic confessions about them being native, as many were basically trying to argue that in spite of their insider status, their work would nonetheless be objective. It was interesting to note, as both Nadjé and I did, that the 'courageous' students who questioned their data were very often native anthropologists, those who were born and raised in a country to which they would be returning to do fieldwork. It was also those students who felt most compelled to demonstrate in their proposals the ways in which they proposed to overcome the fact that they were natives. In the PhD research seminar, the 'non-natives' were not as compelled, or expected, to justify and explain how they proposed to do research in settings with which they were linguistically and culturally completely unfamiliar and, in some cases not even fluent in the language of the people they were going to research. While distance was emphasized, the importance of language as a verbal resource and a basis for communication, understanding, and generating meaningful analysis was under-emphasized. There was only one native PhD student, Albert from the Philippines, who was both unapologetic yet reflective about his own identity and its implications for the research process, as well as bold enough to talk openly about these issues and to challenge the implicit hierarchy underlying some of the discussions in the departmental seminars, something that my nativeness initially prevented me from doing despite my outrage.*

Heba shared her concerns and questions with Nadjé, a friend and colleague. Nadjé, unlike Heba, was perceived in SOAS generally as a Western researcher<sup>2</sup> but Nadjé herself entered SOAS being quite aware of

---

<sup>2</sup> Nadjé had officially been classified as an overseas student. Despite her German



her mixed identity, a subject that had preoccupied her for some time:

*Looking back to the past, I recall many instances when there appeared to be a gap between my ascribed identity, that is the way people perceived me, and the way I identified myself. As a child, I so much longed to be like everyone else around me and exerted great efforts to be a 'real German' Somehow though it never quite worked out. Aside from my looks, there was this name, Nadjé Al-Ali, often deliberately mispronounced, which constantly gave away my 'otherness.' Those who entered my home soon noticed many other traces of difference: my father speaking a strange language on the phone, the frequent presence of people (friends or family visiting from Iraq), smells of unknown spices from the kitchen, strange paintings and artifacts decorating the house and then, of course, the photographs of my Iraqi relatives. Neither my father nor I will ever forget the moment when two school-friends looking at a picture of my grandmother, wearing the traditional black garment called habay, asked me: "Who is this?" Even today I can feel the sense of embarrassment triggered by this question and my muttered answer: "I don't know," not realizing that my father was standing just outside the room. When our eyes met, I could see his hurt, even if he never actually said anything. I still feel pangs of shame when I think about this incident.*

*As an undergraduate student in the United States, I experienced a similar 'gap' whenever my Arab student colleagues reacted with disbelief or even disapproval when I introduced myself as German. My initial rejection of being labeled Arab because of my name, looks, and father's origin was slowly replaced by the desire to fit in with what had been so bluntly offered to me Arab identity. This desire grew while living, studying, and working in Cairo.*

*By the time I did research on contemporary Egyptian literature and writers, I had abandoned my original idea of doing fieldwork in Iraq. The obvious reason was the Gulf crisis and the subsequent war, but on an earlier visit to Baghdad I had also realized that any*

---

passport she was not granted 'Europeanness' by SOAS administration as she had not lived inside Europe for eight years prior to entering the PhD program. After finishing her PhD at SOAS, Nadjé applied for a temporary lectureship at SOAS (anthropology with special emphasis on the Middle East and gender). During the job interview she was asked about the 'implications of being a native anthropologist.' A North-American male got the job.



*kind of research was a rather delicate and dangerous undertaking considering the political situation inside the country. My visit to Iraq and the events cumulating in the horrific Gulf-War certainly increased my emotional affiliation with Iraqi people. It also altered the way many Egyptians perceived me. At the Cairo airport it meant being singled out and motioned to wait while my German passport with my Arab name was checked. The 'special treatment' given me by the authorities at the Cairo airport was an expression of the level of suspicion towards Arab nationals in general and Iraqis in particular. Negotiating my identities during the airport proceedings was a mixture of arbitrariness and strategizing.*

After her return from fieldwork in Egypt, Nadjé felt that perceptions of her 'type' shifted at SOAS toward the native or indigenous researcher. She herself became more sensitive to the prevailing assumptions of anthropology entailing the journey from the West to the 'land of others.' Nadjé was thus able to relate on a much more profound level to Heba's initial concerns about the entrenched power relations within the discipline, which has resulted in overlooking and marginalizing the increasingly common reality of anthropologists conducting research in their own countries.

Some researchers who, like Nadjé, strongly identify with a bi-cultural identity have tried to find a way out of the native/Western binary for themselves. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, has utilized the term "halfie." This conceptualization is problematic too, as Nadjé and Heba realized when they were trying to contemplate on their own identities as researchers and individuals. Nadjé reflects:

*However people perceive me, it is generally as either one: Western or Arab, German or Iraqi, always a "wholie," not a halfie. I actually never liked the label "halfie" (the term always reminded me of some dietary product). However, I do recognize and identify with some of the problems and dilemmas described by Lila Abu-Lughod:*

Halfies' dilemmas are ...extreme. As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists, mostly Western. Identified also with communities outside the West, or subcultures within it, they are called to account by educated members of these communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with respect to two communities, but because when



they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception (Abu-Lughod 1991:142).

Unlike Nadia, who identifies with both Western and Arab culture, Heba identifies largely as an Egyptian and Arab despite her exposure and closeness to Western culture, through both class identity and residence in the USA and England as well as her undergraduate studies at the American University in Cairo. Although Heba can also relate to some of the issues and dilemmas raised by Abu-Lughod, she is uncomfortable with the way she uses the term "halfie" and "native" almost synonymously.

*I find the conflation between the terms halfie and native problematic, as it glosses over what may be important differences between two types of researchers, differences related to issues of early socialization in a different culture (whose impact on shaping one's perspectives should not be under emphasized), being in touch with and grounded in a culture, fluency in the local language, and sense of responsibility toward the community studied.*

Lila Abu-Lughod's discussion of halfie and feminist researchers doubtlessly challenges many of the conventional premises of the anthropological canon and has also opened up many fields of discussion that had been taboo issues within the discipline. However, the term 'halfie' itself does evoke a sense of abnormality, a missing part. Rather than conceptualizing the situation of being both 'here' and 'there' as a state of incompleteness, we prefer the concept of "hyphenated identity" (Visweswaran 1994), which better expresses the movement between **wholes** depending on the specific situation. Both Nadia and Heba, in differing degrees depending on the situation, found themselves in motion between different worlds throughout their fieldwork.

## Markers of Identity in the Fieldwork Process: Class, Language, and Names

With this baggage of concerns, which were articulated in different ways in our proposals to the anthropology department, we both departed for the seemingly 'unified field,' that is, Egypt, in 1995 to start our fieldwork. Nadjé worked with mainly middle and upper class Egyptian women's rights activists whereas Heba worked with mainly lower class urban women. Many of these low income women were first generation migrants to the city and most lived in a state of dire poverty with few economic assets. As we compared notes in the field, we were continuously struck by the fact that, contrary to our ascribed identities at SOAS, Nadjé was more of an insider than Heba was. Heba recalls:

*As I compared field notes with Nadjé, I was struck with the complex interplay of language and class and their relationship to insider/outsider identities in the field. In some ways I was more engaged in attempts to fit into my research community, my own society, than Nadjé was. For example, I dressed much more conservatively during my fieldwork than I normally do, and I had to sometimes wear a head scarf that is, adopt the dress of some of the women I was interviewing. Nadjé, however, never had to change her way of dress in any significant way during her interviews, which were largely with women from a similar social class. In this sense she felt, and was considered more of an insider, than I was. However, Nadjé was mainly doing her research in English, in which she is much more fluent, but is not the native language of those she was interviewing. What effect did this have on her perceived identity? How different would it have been if her interviewees had been from the same class but did not speak English, so that she would have had to work through an interpreter? What difference would it have made if she was fluent enough in Arabic to conduct all her interviews in that language? While class and language often go together, they may not, and they pose different issues for perceived identities.*

Nadjé also considers language and class as crucial elements in both ascribed and self-perceived notions of insider/outsider. Even though most of her interviews were carried out in English, she tended to speak Arabic to



the activists when introducing herself and explaining her research project:

*Many women seemed to appreciate it very much that I made the effort to talk in their language rather than assume that everyone would speak English. Those who were not fluent continued in Arabic, but most switched to English at some point during the research. My Arabic, however inadequate, was an important tool in actually convincing many women to spend time with me. This is where class also played a role. I generally did not feel big gaps with regard to living standard and income, but I often felt less educated and less eloquent in the various languages spoken by my interviewees (English, French, or Arabic). Among some of the upper class activists, I had a sense of "studying up" what social class standing was concerned. In all cases, my research involved a phase of trying to convince the individual activists that it was worth it to spend some time with me and my project.*

Names also emerged as significant markers of identities during our fieldwork. Heba, herself a member of the women's rights movement in Egypt, emphasizes the significance of names:

*I was once asked about Nadjé's nationality by an activist, and when I responded that Nadjé was partly Arab and partly German, that person asked me: "If her name was Barbara Jones, even if she was partly Iraqi, would she still have been able to access us in the same way?" This comment demonstrated the importance of names to me, their link with identity, and it raised the issue of the point at which one is able to go beyond names during fieldwork. The insight into the importance of names was also clear in my own fieldwork among lower class women. While my name, previous knowledge of some of the communities studied, and fluency in Arabic granted me a degree of insider status, issues related to my name were more complex.*

*The relevance of my name came up in a different way. It was linked to religion as a marker of identity and insider/outsider status in my research community. Although I was working in predominantly Muslim communities, there was a significant minority of Coptic families. Relations between both groups were complex. While modes of cooperation, common identities, and alliances predominated, there were also tensions and frictions that are part*



*of the increasing tensions along religious lines in the country. In retrospect, it is clear to me that I may not have had the same access and intimacy with women if I had not been perceived as a Muslim. Although some women asked me directly whether I was a Muslim or a Copt, many did not, and my name, unlike some others in the Egyptian context, did not indicate my religion. I think for at least some women, I moved to a real insider status only when they found out, sometimes through subtle ways, that my husband's name was Amr, a clearly Muslim name. This established my religious identity and 'located' me more clearly for them. It also increased my intimacy with most of the women and enabled us to discuss religious issues in a way that may have been difficult had they not been able to establish my religious identity through my family names.*

Nadje was aware of the meanings attached to her name, which often differed significantly from the weight she gave to it herself:

*Sometimes I felt uncomfortable with the way some women identified me as Iraqi and therefore good and trustworthy, just because of my name, 'blood,' and my father's original nationality. It often felt like the other side of the coin of being treated badly because of my Arab name. One of the Nasserite women, who on several occasions cursed Western conspiracies and Western researchers implicated in them, put it most bluntly when I asked her why she talked to me: "But you are Iraqi. I would not have talked to you if you had been just a Westerner!"*

Throughout her fieldwork, Nadje experienced a constant sense of "shuttling between two or more worlds" (Visweswaran 1994:119), but regarding the significance of 'Iraqiness' and 'Germanness', which varied greatly between the Cairo airport and the context of her actual research. Among most women activists, as well as among leftists and Islamists, Iraq has become the epitome of resistance to imperialist violence and injustice. Others see Iraqis as one of the most recent and acute victims of both their own government and US hegemony:

*At times, the specific attribution of 'being Iraqi' was replaced by a more generalized perception of me 'being Arab.' "You are one of us," on rare occasions, could even mean Egyptian, but here it was*



*not an attribute related to my background as much as a designation based on my involvement in Egyptian women's rights struggle. While I often felt uneasy and irritated by perceptions of who I am based on primordial elements of blood and heritage, I very much cherished the moments in which I became an 'honorary Egyptian.'*

*In specific situations, like discussions about feminisms, the debates and contents of its struggles, my education at the American University in Cairo, my upbringing in Germany, as well as during conversations about relationships, the adjective 'Western' was often ascribed to me. On some occasions, like discussions about feminisms, for example, I felt that the attribute of 'Western' was used as an easy tool to discredit my opinion if it happened to be different. These could be rather frustrating moments in which I felt unfairly reduced to the category 'Western feminist,' or rather its cliché (radical man-hating woman who wants to take over the world). I did not identify with the cliché, nor did I agree with the conflation of all the different trends of Western feminisms into one category.*

*At other times, however, I actually experienced a sense of essential difference in attitude and outlook with most of the activists with whom I spoke these I attributed to my socialization in Germany and university education in the United States. In other words, I do not want to gloss over my differences with the women I interviewed, but these discrepancies were often much more complex than generally perceived. As Heba also pointed out to me during our many discussions, my interest in secularism, for instance, certainly reflects a Western world view and concern. However, it is also influenced by my experiences in Iraq where religion, until very recently, has played a less significant role than in Egypt.*

What must be stressed is that how we were perceived, either as outsiders or insiders, was continuously shifting throughout our respective research, depending on the situation. At times, there was even a gap between the way we perceived ourselves in specific contexts and the perceptions of us by those we were interviewing.

## Familiarity and Distance

One of the main arguments against native anthropologists, and one which still holds sway, is their lack of 'foreignness,' that is, their senses are dulled by the familiar, they are unable to keep the necessary distance during the fieldwork and thus do not see the 'strange' or 'new,' they take things too much for granted, and so on. In a similar vein, the issue of "hybridity" has been addressed by problematizing the effects of prolonged exposure to a specific culture. Rosemary Sayigh, for instance, argues that: "While culturally enriching, hybridity perhaps induces a half-conscious adoption of the research community's ethos; and this, while enhancing rapport, may block of certain questions and inquiries" (Sayigh 1996:2-3).

Heba's and Nadjé's respective fieldwork experiences shed light on the complexity of issues on familiarity and distance. The native Heba very much felt as a stranger and outsider at times:

*I was considered an Egyptian and I usually felt like a Egyptian. Yet there were times when I felt like a complete stranger but tried to play the role of the Egyptian. This was most apparent when I started researching spirit possession. I became aware of the extent to which I was an outsider to the group of women I was interviewing. Not only were practices new and unfamiliar to me, but I was also not able to easily decipher the very heavily coded language and symbolism of the spirit possession discourse. This was a totally different communication system, embedded in a sub-culture that I could not understand. I felt like I was literally outside a linguistic group: women were speaking a different language. Spirit possession idioms provided an understandable code of cultural expression for them and they were reading each other's messages. I was cut off, however, as I did not know the rules of the language and felt rather illiterate. I was such an outsider that I had difficulties initially believing some of what was going on, particularly when spirits manifested themselves during an interview and started talking to me and to other women in an altered voice. It was not so much that I did not believe it, which would have been fine, it was more that I even had doubts that anybody could believe this, including the women involved. I had to nudge myself to let go of my 'reality' and live in that of the women*



*I was studying, if I was to proceed any further with my research.*

*Another instance in which I was also clearly identified, and felt, like an outsider was during my extensive discussions of the 'ayma' The ayma, a written inventory of furnishings, equipment, and jewelry brought to the marriage by both the groom and the bride, is a crucial part of the marriage contract in the community studied<sup>3</sup>, but is an uncommon practice among upper/middle class Cairenes like myself. My admission that I did not write an ayma myself initially provoked reactions of disbelief, pity, shock, and strangeness. "But how is this possible?" said one woman. "Is there a house without an ayma in this country? How can you protect your rights? Without an ayma your husband can throw you out of the house any time. If you do not have an ayma, you must not be really Egyptian, then you must be a khawaga (foreigner), or maybe you are married to a khawaga?"*

*I do not want to overemphasize my 'otherness' and thus fall into the common trap of anthropologists 'othering' the communities they study so as to claim more objectivity and distance (see Abu-Lughod). It is thus important to stress that while I felt, and was perceived, as an outsider at times, there were many other instances in which I was clearly perceived as an insider (although I did not necessarily feel like one). One striking example was during a heated discussion in the Mosque during a religious lesson. Some of my questions apparently aggravated the woman who was giving the lesson and she began questioning my identity and rationale for attending. Two of the women whom I had accompanied to the lesson surprised me by immediately standing up to 'protect' me, and speak on my behalf. I was "one of them," they said, an Egyptian and a Muslim, and had a right to pray in the Mosque and attend classes if I wanted. I was not "a khawaga," they explained, "or a gaya tetfarag (voyeur)," but a "real Muslim." Another women whom I had accompanied to the Mosque also volunteered spontaneously that I was a distant relative of hers who had been working in Libya for many years and was here on a visit.*

As discussed earlier, Nadjé was sometimes more of an insider than

---

<sup>3</sup> My research revealed that the *ayma*, an essential component of marriage negotiations, serves as an important tool with which women negotiate for better terms in their marital relations.



Heba and that, arguably, made her more familiar and less able (or even blind) to see the new, strange, the contradictions, and so forth. When she presented her first paper in Cairo, she was indeed accused by some activists at the seminar, including Heba (as well as her supervisor later on), that she had 'gone native.' This was based on sense that her paper displayed a blur between her own perspective, her point of view, and those of the women she had interviewed. It was taken as an example of not being able to maintain the necessary distance. Heba, however, does not think that the problem was Nadjé's lack of distance or 'strangeness.' Rather, she thinks that it was related to a much broader issue of 'studying up,' with the associated problematic of gaining and maintaining access, and the knowledge that what you have written will be read, and perhaps contravened, by those you have researched.

*I think this blur of perspectives may have been partly a result of Nadjé's attempt to be fair, to please some groups, and to maintain and gain access to different activists in an often suspicious and competitive context. More importantly it was related to her anticipated audience. Knowing that what she wrote would be read by some of the women she had interviewed, women she had consciously invited to the seminar, is in retrospect what I think made Nadjé lose her own voice and perspective on some issues. I do not think it was because she was too close and thus blinded.*

Nadjé agrees with Heba's assessment to a large extent:

*My blind spots were also, and to an extent still are, related to the wish to do justice to everyone and please everybody. A project bound to fail, yet very difficult to overcome when knowing that the activists I interviewed would not only read my work, but also challenge it. But I think that it was also more than this. It has become clear to me that, at the point I gave my first paper, I had spent quite some time with one particular group and had carried out more interviews with its members than other activists. Obviously, this particular paper was biased toward the women I had actually interviewed at length. Maybe my lack of distance from what they were saying was related to my previous involvement with the women's movement and to the fact that even during my period of fieldwork I was still participating in events as a women's rights activist and not just as a researcher. In this context, lack of*



*distance had less to do with going native and more to do with my mixed roles of being both researcher and women's rights activist.*

The sense of knowing (and even fearing at times) that what you write will be read by other natives is of critical importance. For Heba, this was reflected in her unwillingness to write about a specific form of 'everyday resistance' that women use for delaying or refusing a marriage, referred to as *tatfeesh*<sup>4</sup>.

*It seemed so common and familiar that I could not help assuming that other Egyptians, who are probably very familiar with these tactics of tatfeesh, might trivialize my findings. Thus I did not initially include the data on tatfeesh in my formal chapter but put it in my rough notes and discussed it with my supervisor (who is not a native). My supervisor's reactions to the concept of tatfeesh as novel and interesting is an excellent example of the complexities of familiarity and strangeness during both the fieldwork and the writing up process. In my case, the issue was not that I did not see or record these types of resistance but that I censored myself in writing about them because of my concern that other Egyptians would not consider it interesting data.*

This takes us to the related and rather complicated issue of audience, which appears to be largely ignored in more recent anthropological discussions about ethnographic writing and reflexivity (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Strathern 1986). Questions that should be asked are: For whom are you writing? Who are you excluding? What are the risks involved? And how do these risks differ for a native, a foreigner, and a halfie researcher? But again, the issue is not merely being indigenous and currently doing research in that culture (that is, past and present), but also relates to ones' **future** relationships to that specific country or context. For anthropologists who are planning to continue living in that context, regardless of whether they are native or not, the risks are quite different.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Tatfeesh* literally means "drive away" a strategy that many women used to get rid of prospective suitors whom they did not want to marry. The underlying logic is that it is more acceptable for a prospective husband to say no himself to a prospective bride than for her to insist on refusing a specific person.

## Self-Disclosure and Reciprocity

Lack of self disclosure was for Heba an unsettling issue, particularly given her commitment to a feminist methodology. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that an insider is more burdened with the issues of hypocrisy. However, we are not sure this holds true, as we believe it depends on the specific configurations of that particular insider. As Heba recounts:

*I was 'forced' into concealing many aspects about myself, both because of my inside status (being Egyptian) and my outside status (being distanced by both education and class). I found myself much less engaged in self-disclosure and reciprocal exchange of ideas, experiences, and information than I had hoped or expected to be. As a researcher claiming to be using a feminist perspective, which at best requires exchange of experiences, honesty, openness, and reciprocity in relationships with those researched, I have been continuously struck with the various ways I felt compelled to dissimulate aspects of my self.*

*For example, I often concealed some of my beliefs, particularly when talking about issues related to sexuality, which formed an important part of my research. It was hard to be truly reciprocal and honest with personal information because it may have seriously jeopardized my relationship with the women I interviewed. I had purposefully tried to project myself as a respectable Egyptian woman by dressing conservatively, 'flaunting' my motherhood, and talking often of my husband and family. My beliefs on some issues related to sexuality did not fit with the image I was projecting and may not have been tolerated. Fearing that I would be dismissed as a loose, wayward woman, I did not volunteer much information about my beliefs concerning sexuality, except in the context of my marriage and marital relations.*

*I also often felt uncomfortable when women started grilling me about my husband's and sister's salaries, the cost of my son's nursery, the value of my apartment, and other such topics. I dissembled throughout. Of course, women knew that I was of a different socioeconomic standing, but it became clear to me that*



most had no idea of how huge the gap was. Although cognizant that it may have been more 'empowering' to make them more aware of the steep class divisions and discrepancies of lifestyles that exist in Cairo and in Egypt, I did not do it.

As a non-practicing Muslim, I also felt disingenuous at times. The moment I said that I was a Muslim, women automatically presumed that I am a practicing Muslim and that I share their religious framework and beliefs. As mentioned earlier, I was asked many times about my religion, usually subtly (like asking for my second name or why I did not name my son Mohammed), and sometimes not so subtly. I sensed that saying I was a Muslim gave me more immediate and intimate access to the overwhelming majority of households. I exploited this and, of course, never dared to venture that I am a non-practicing Muslim. I joined in Friday prayers, particularly during Ramadan. I sometimes felt that this was indeed part of my own self-identity that I could **call upon** when needed. Other times, however, I felt I was performing at being a Muslim.

In addition to being personally unsettling for me, the type of self-censorship in which I engaged, based on my assumptions of what would be acceptable in discussions, could have also affected my data. It could have precluded discussions of some sensitive issues that women may have voiced had I been more open on my views on some topics. While it may be true that in general issues of disguise are more pronounced for insiders as Abu-Lughod argues, I am not sure that the issue has to do only with being a native or a non-native. For example, a more socially-conservative, less middle class, practicing Muslim woman from Pakistan (an outsider?) would probably have felt more able to be open and honest about her own personal beliefs and experiences on some issues than I was.

Nadje, on the other hand, found that if she had been Egyptian, she may have been more open on her views of certain subjects, like homosexuality, for example:

*These were the most likely moments during which I chose to conceal my real opinions and outlooks, precisely because I knew they would be considered Western. This occurred on several occasions concerning debates about homosexuality in general and*



lesbianism in particular. As Western feminists are often associated with radical feminism and lesbianism, I often refrained from expressing my sympathy and solidarity with homosexual men and women. If I had not been worried about being labeled Western, if it had not been for my 'background,' it would have been much easier to express my opinions on this issue. This instance shows quite clearly that it is not merely the native anthropologist who is being burdened by moral and ethical dilemmas related to social and cultural expectations. It was only with very few women who did become close friends that I had the courage to express my opinions about homosexuality freely.

In England, on the other hand (where I wrote up my dissertation), I occasionally feel a sense of uneasiness when lesbian rights are discussed among the members of the feminist group I joined after living in Egypt for six years. This is certainly not because I dismiss lesbians' struggle against various forms of discrimination, but because I seem to have internalized the sense of moral superiority of issues such as poverty or imperialism, which are constructed to constitute wider and more basic issues in the context of contemporary Egypt.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

How you are perceived in the field, and how you perceive yourself have tremendous implications for the kinds of roles in which you find yourself engaged. While Nadjie mainly experienced difficulties in distinguishing between her roles as the researcher, women's rights activist, and friend, Heba was continuously shifting between being a researcher, a resource person, a confidante, and a mediator<sup>5</sup>:

*I had not been prepared for all of those often conflicting roles. Being perceived, and acting, as a resource was an important role during my fieldwork. It had something to do with my being Egyptian, but it was a case in which fluent knowledge of Arabic was not enough. Rather, this role ascription was based on the presumption that as an educated, middle-class Egyptian, I must be knowledgeable about the mysterious workings of the bureaucracy*

---

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed discussion of conflicting roles in the fieldwork process, see Heba El-Kholy (1996).



identity; during the Gulf war, for example, I actually felt Iraqi. Most of the time though, while finding my way out of the airport, I performed at being German or Iraqi. Parallel to, but not always in harmony with, the various ascriptions of my identity, I frequently sensed the 'hyphen' between Iraqi-German or Arab-Western, Insider-Outsider.

*Being an Iraqi-German doing research in the Arab world suggests more than an accidental academic trajectory. Moreover, the tension between my roles of researcher and women's rights activist in Egypt further increased the sense of uneasy traveling between "speaking for" and "speaking from" (Lila Abu-Lughod 1991:143). It becomes obvious that the very subject matter of my PhD dissertation is related to this "hybrid subject position." Throughout my research among secular-oriented Egyptian women activists, I have been particularly interested in exploring the intersections, tensions, and creative innovations between Egyptian women's rights activism, nationalist aspirations, and international agendas and constituencies. Because the Egyptian women's movement is often accused of being Westernized, women activists are constantly challenged to reassert their authenticity without giving up their struggles and visions, or their links to regional and international organizations.*

For Heba, the issue of 'hyphenation,' shuttling between two worlds and juggling an insider/outsider status and identity did not so much result in the feeling of "being born over and over again." Rather, it made her more aware of her own multiple identities and, more importantly, sharpened her understanding of the importance of class as a variable for determining gender interests and priorities:

*My reflections on the 'situated self' have led me to become much more aware of my own urban and class biases and to argue for a more nuanced and situated theorizing of gender relations, women's rights, and resistance strategies. Conceptually, this issue has become central to my own academic endeavors, as I have become more profoundly cognizant of the huge discrepancies that exist between many of the strategies and priorities of Egyptian activists (who are largely middle class like myself) and the low-income women I studied. On a practical and strategic level, I have become a more vocal advocate for the need to forge stronger links and alliances between women **across class lines**. I have come to*



whether she may have been similarly perceived as a resource (she mentions several times how she used to regularly distribute gifts of clothes and food in the community) and the extent to which this may have influenced her findings as they have influenced my own early findings and impressions of the community she studied.

Managing multiple roles in the field is not always easy. Heba reflects:

*Managing my role as a perceived resource was a difficult matter. In general, I feel that I have been able to maintain the balance of being useful providing advice, health information, connecting people, mediating through the bureaucracy on behalf of women who wanted to obtain an identity card or to register a child in school without feeling overwhelmed, overloaded, or significantly diverted from my role as researcher. I was also asked to join several rotating saving associations (gameyas) with the provision that I be the last to take the sum of money, so in effect I became a resource by contributing to the capital of these associations. I think this signaled a qualitative change in my relationships in the community. I was pleased to offer this service, largely because it was an opportunity to help people who had been so hospitable and generous to me with their time and energy and from whom I had learned a lot, not just about them, but about myself as well.*

*There were some instances, however, when I failed to keep this balance between resource person and researcher, and when I was faced with the limitations of my role as a researcher. I remain haunted by the various situations in which I was unable to provide badly needed services for women and their families in the communities I studied, and when I stood helpless in the face of dying infant, a badly beaten wife, or the eviction by police of families from their homes. These situations reminded me vividly of the limitations of research and of my role as a researcher. These situations have also made me skeptical of the common claims that feminist methodology is inherently empowering or liberating for those being studied (see for example, Reinharz 1992). The claims of feminist research to empowerment must be seriously questioned, particularly when research is conducted in situations of extreme poverty and social inequalities and in which empowerment requires much stronger and explicit links between research and the commitment and ability to change material conditions and*



challenge power relations<sup>6</sup>.

Nadje felt a rather different role conflict throughout her research. There were only few occasions when she was perceived as an actual resource. Her researcher status allowed her to move among and talk to different women's rights activists (different in terms of group and political affiliations and interpretations of the meaning of women's rights activism, as well as differences with regard to personality, life-style, and support networks, which translated at times into competition, rivalry, or even hostility). Consequently, her knowledge about the activities and opinions about 'the other women' were occasionally sought. Some activists also consulted Nadje regarding her insights into academia and her relationships to particular scholars:

*When I was either directly or indirectly asked to provide information about what the others do or think, I felt a bit uncomfortable. There was this very thin line between sharing and communicating information about the movement and gossiping about this or that activist or group. Occasionally, I saw myself as a mediator between activists who were not talking to each other, especially when I felt that their differences were actually not as great as they perceived them to be. But the role of the mediator was more self-imposed than actually requested. I realized that I was walking on rather shaky grounds: as a researcher I felt too much of an outsider to presume a role of bridging over differences, but having been involved in a women's rights group in Egypt myself, I felt insider enough to engage in mediation.*

*Throughout my research, I tried to find ways to actually be of help, to be a resource and not just to take. It only worked with some of the women I interviewed though mainly those I got to know best and interviewed several times. With many women I found myself in the classic interviewer/respondent situation. The most reciprocal relationship happened with one particular group, for whom I did four seminars presenting different approaches to gender in the social sciences. This was one of the few moments when I felt that feminist theory and activism merged and that I could really contribute something. It is not a coincidence that I got to know*

---

<sup>6</sup> See El-Kholy (1996a).

*many of the activists of this particular group on a personal basis and some became my friends.*

*Becoming friends was both the most pleasurable as well as the most problematic aspect of my research. While the label 'Western' was used on certain occasions to discredit my views, it also opened up a sense of trust and confidence in others situations. I felt this most strongly when talking to some of the women whose life-histories I had recorded and with whom I developed friendships. Several times I felt quite surprised, after having discussed a particular problem or crisis, to find out that my friend had not discussed it with anyone else before. In these situations, the degree of friendship and trust appeared to have been tinted by my inside/outside status. This is probably the one example in which I was not perceived as a wholeie, as either this or that, but as something in between. I shared my own problems and troubles with those friends, often quite intimate ones, which certainly added to the sense of trust. Some of these friendships have certainly added to 'my world' and support network in Cairo and continue to do so from a distance as well.*

*I found it increasingly difficult to slip back into my role of the researcher among the women with whom I had developed the closest friendships. This was either because there were so many more interesting things to talk about or do than my research or because I was afraid that I would be perceived to be just interested in my work and to not really care about the friendship. I think I only totally lost this sense of having to be careful not to appear opportunistic with one person, with whom I got close enough not to worry about these concerns. To some extent, this fear also prevented me from asking Heba too many questions about the movement and her own involvement. Heba also clearly wanted to distance herself from the research. We actually discussed this and decided that we both felt more comfortable in side-tracking my research in our friendship.*

Unlike Nadje, who was mainly dealing with women belonging to the same social class, Heba mentions her awareness of unequal power dynamics as preventing her from developing real friendships with many of the women she interviewed:



*Even though I became intimate with many women, who clearly considered me a friend, I was aware that I was bound to use many of our friendly conversations as data, without them being aware of it, and that our relationship was an inherently unequal one. I have established relationships that I cherish with several women and that I hope to maintain somehow. However, particularly towards the end of my fieldwork, I started consciously trying to distance myself from some of the relationships (with five families in particular). I felt that I had raised their expectations of my friendship in ways that I feared I would not be able to meet, like visiting as often after my fieldwork was completed, inviting them to visit me as often at home, which physically was quite close, and more generally integrating them into my world in the same generous, selfless, and honest way with which they had integrated me into theirs.*

### **Concluding Reflections: Towards a 'Situated Self'**

Hyphenated identities enact an often violent struggle between two or more worlds. Nasser Hussein's description of post-colonial identities certainly rings a bell:

Hyphens are radically ambivalent signifiers, for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both belonging and not belonging. What is even more curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement (1990:10).

As our experiences from the field have shown, we both relate to the movement captured by Hussein. However, shuttling between two worlds can take different forms, meanings, and degrees. For Nadje, the attempt to negotiate the terms between shifting alliances resulted in the feeling of being "born over and over again as a hyphen rather than a fixed entity" (Trinh 1991:159):

*The 'rite of passage' at the Cairo airport is emblematic of the ambiguities, dislocations, and states of liminality inherent in identity constructions and representations of self. On rare occasions, I actually felt strongly about a particular part of my*



in Egypt (which in fact I was, because of my previous work experience) and would have a network of family and friends "as *wastas*" (connections), which I could activate to mediate on behalf of the women I was studying. I was continuously asked questions like: "Can your husband find my son a job in the textile industry?" (after I had mentioned that my husband works in textiles); "Does he know anybody well connected at the Saudi embassy, to get my brother a visa to Saudi Arabia?" How the perception of my being a resource affected my initial fieldwork is critical. One of my research interests was extra-household female networks. However, I met with frustration during my discussions with women about these topics early on in my fieldwork. Women often put an abrupt end to my questions, responding that relationships of cooperation simply did not exist, that the community was fragmented, that people were greedy and selfish, etc. As I spent more time in the community, observing the range of networks of mutual help that did actually exist, I realized that I may have been purposefully misled. It was only upon reflection about the community's perception of me as a resource that I began to understand why: as a perceived resource I was the object of intense competition. Individual women purposefully projected themselves to me as struggling on their own so as to maximize the attention and services they could command from me. I think I probably unconsciously blocked this possibility because of my desire to negate or lessen the social and economic differences between us and to establish a more equitable relationship with my interviewees. This experience made me reflect more critically on the findings of Wikan's study of poverty in Cairo from this particular angle, of the perception of the researcher as a resource. In her ethnography of 17 poor families in a Cairo suburb in the early 1970s, one of the earliest ethnographies of poverty in the city, Wikan (1980) argues that most social relations in that community were characterized by divisiveness, jealousy, suspicion, and infighting, with little sustained cooperation.

Wikan concludes that:

The poor urban neighborhood reproduces its characteristic social organization: small divisive coalitions, and enmities in a sea of strangers; unstable scattered circles of acquaintances in spite of limited geographical mobility; a low level of integration...(Wikan 1980:147).

*It would be interesting to reflect on Wikan's conclusions in light of*



*believe firmly that those of us interested in gender equality will need to engage in the challenging task of developing a national feminist agenda, one that is **broad** enough to seriously accommodate such class differences and priorities, without losing its basic principles of gender equality. Only then will we be able to move from being gender activists to being part of a sustainable and effective women's movement.*

What we have tried to show throughout this paper is that, whether native, foreigner, or halfie, notions of insider and outsider always entail ambiguity and motion. By drawing attention to the situated self, we not only raise the issue of identities but also the issue of power dynamics and relations within the discipline of anthropology in particular and social science research in general. Our respective reflections unsettle some of the underlying assumptions and premises upon which anthropological research has been based and continues to be practiced. We hope that this type of unsettling exercise will not only lead to a more nuanced understanding of the categories native, foreigner, and halfie, but will also begin to shatter the long-standing hierarchies among anthropologists.

## Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, L. 1991. "Writing Against Culture." In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by R.G. Fox. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Al-Ali, N.S. 1994. *Gender Writing Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Clifford, J. and George, M., eds. 1986. *Writing Culture*: University of California Press.
- El-Kholy, H. 1996. "Confidante, Resource, Arbitrator and Counselor: The Less Talked About, and Often Conflicting Role of the Ethnographer." Unpublished paper. London: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies.
- , 1996a. "Empowering for Whom? Reflections on Feminist Methodologies in Fieldwork." Unpublished paper. London: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Geertz, C. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hussein, N. 1990. "Hyphenated Identity: Nationality Discourse, History, and the Anxiety of Criticism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*." *Qui Parle?*, 8.
- Reinharz, S. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sayigh, R. 1996. "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical and Methodological Problems." In *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, edited by D. Kandiyoti. London: I.B. Taurus Publishers.
- Strathern, M. 1987. "Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 28(3): 1-77.
- Trinh T. M. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red*. New York: Routledge.



Visweswaran, K. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Wikan, U. 1980. *Living Among the Poor in Cairo*, translated by A. Henning. London: Tavistock Publications.