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Breaking Taboos

A leading historian's memoirs, targeting the nation's youth, spark debate about how national identity is constructed and about academic politics

By Manal El Jesri

DR. RAOUF ABBAS'S MEMOIRS, published under the title of Mashaynaha Khota (We Have Tread Its Ways), have stirred loud debate in the nation's sometimes stagnant intellectual circles since their publication last December. Stripped of detail: The historian / history professor / renowned public intellectual / chairman of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies has said what only few dare to say.

The list of taboos he managed to break is exceptionally long, starting with allegations of corruption in academic circles, moving on to prejudice against the nation's Coptic Christian minority and even alleged corruption leading to a former first lady becoming a university professor.

Abbas brushes off his critics by insisting he merely said what had to be said. "The average life expectancy of an Egyptian male is 60--something. I have passed that age, so I have little to be afraid of. What I wrote is just a sample of what people know, but cannot say to get it off their chests," he says.

Born in pre-revolution Cairo, Abbas and his entire generation were deeply moved by the turbulent politics of his youth.

"I lived through the end of the royal era," he says. "As children, my colleagues and I used to go out to demonstrations, demanding independence and an end to imperialist oppression. We got hurt, but still insisted on marching with the others." The point, he adds, in case the interviewer missed it, is that ever since his childhood, his generation has had something to fight for, while "youth today have nothing. Everything has been watered down,"

Much of that has to do with a sense of national identity. “During the royal era, we were raised to think of ourselves as being Egyptians. History lessons, literature and just about everything else concentrated on an Egyptian identity. Then came the revolution. It emphasized an Egyptian identity for a while, something that, for example, saw the statue of Ramses I moved to what was once called Queen Nazli Square (Bab ElHadid), but which was renamed Ramses St. But after 1956, [former President Gamal Abdel] Nasser realized that what was actually happening in Egypt has actually resulted in the opening of new horizons for all Arabs. Thus we saw the spark for the idea of pan-Arabism and action to free the Arab world. Then came Anwar Sadat, who announced that ‘Egypt is for the Egyptians.’ The only problem is that Egypt turned out to be a haven for thieves. Young people are not to blame [for the loss of identity],” he says.

Although what was going on in Egypt during Abbas’ childhood and youth affected his entire generation, Abbas frankly discusses in his book the personal influences that shaped him into what he is today, including a very difficult childhood, in which poverty coupled with constant toil were the main characteristics.

“A lot of people were shocked because I spoke about my childhood in such detail,” the historian explains. “The norm is to either say a few words and move on, or pretend to have come from a rich family. But I wanted to reach out to young people and show them that no matter how difficult life may be, if one has hope, one can accomplish anything.”

Hoping to make his memoirs accessible to younger readers, Abbas made a clear decision to steer way from academic jargon when he wrote them. The stakes, he suggests, are so high that he couldn’t risk his message being ignored or misunderstood.

“The nation is torn like it has never been torn before,” he begins. “This is very dangerous. When national issues are absent, we tend to think in terms of Muslim, Christian and Jew. I tried to illustrate, in my book, that Egyptians dealt with each other as Egyptians, not as Christians or Muslims. It was as if there was an unwritten pact between all Egyptians that no one is to go near other people’s beliefs. This turned Egypt into a melting pot for all races,” Abbas says.

He still remembers what an old Englishman once told him: “I was looking at the Egyptian royal-era documents in London, and this man who worked there asked me why no two Egyptians looked alike. He noted that some are brown, some white, some have red hair, etc. I told him, ‘Because we never ask people about their origins. We just take them as they are’.”

Back to the memoirs: When Abbas finished his high school education, he wanted to go on to university. His father refused, saying he thought it was time for Abbas, as the eldest son, to work and share the family burden with him. “It was normal for people my age to insist on getting a good education. Education was the door to social advancement. Nowadays, education means nothing. Having money has replaced education as a value,” he says.

Abbas believes he was lucky to have had the chance to enroll at Ain Shams University. “The university was in its beginnings. My class was only the tenth to graduate. Professors at Ain Shams were trying to prove their competence,” he remembers. Some people, whom he says “just read one line of the book,” attacked him for speaking so favorably of Ain Shams, at the same time making grave allegations about corruption at Cairo University.

“They fail to understand that I speak about the past. Today, Ain Shams may be even worse. [Mediocrity and corruption] are part of the system. Look at university text books. They [the professors] write trashy books that they then force students to buy. They even tamper with students’ grades for the benefit of privileged students,” he points out.

After receiving a degree in modern history from Ain Shams, Abbas went on to do his master’s. At the time, he had started working at the Egyptian Financial and Industrial Company in Kafr ElZayat. Although his job had nothing to do with history, he was lucky in that he was introduced to the idea of workers’ syndicates and workers’ rights.

“I decided to do my master’s on the Egyptian workers’ movement. God was kind to me in leading me to my professor, Dr. Ahmed Ezzat Abdel Karim, who was broad-minded enough to accept my data-gathering methods,” Abbas remembers. For the first time in Egyptian history, a master’s thesis was completed based on oral reports of witnesses of a historical movement.

A few years after he received his master’s degree (he had started to teach at Cairo University in the meantime), Abbas was invited to join a research group to study social and economic development in Egypt and Japan during the 19th century. After what he says was a rich and moving experience, Abbas came back from Japan with many memories and a book he had translated and printed, but that no publisher wanted to distribute.

The book, *Hiroshima Diaries*, was the diary of the director of the Transportation Hospital in Hiroshima. Beginning on the day Hiroshima was bombed at the end of the Second

World War and ending the day the hospital was turned over to the Americans, the book reveals some frightening facts.

“It shows that Japan was used to test the effect of the nuclear bomb. The United States hit Japan at a time when the Japanese were secretly negotiating a surrender. After they hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they sent in a team of American doctors who happened to speak and read Japanese fluently. This means that they had been preparing for this since the beginning of the war,” Abbas alleges. “In the man’s [the Japanese diarist’s] town, they had turned his home into a museum, and I saw 17 translations of the book. The Arabic translation was number 18,” Abbas says.

When Abbas took the book to Al-Ahram to have it distributed, the man in charge told him, “This is not the right time. The world is not ready for such a book opposing the United States.”

“I insisted, so he said, ‘Suit yourself.’ Weeks later, Al-Ahram received verbal orders to stop the book from circulating, so a truck delivered all copies to my home. When I took the book to bookshops, I was told: ‘Is this the Hiroshima book? It is banned.’” Abbas never saw any written orders banning his book.

“Even Libya, Algeria and Syria [who then formed a front against imperialism] refused to let the book in. They screamed about elimperialiyya wel mahalabiyya, but it was all a show,” he says.

Abbas believes regimes in developing nations often interfere with ‘what can be said.’

“Can you write today about the big lie of the constitutional amendments? Can you say it is nothing except an answer to external pressure? You probably can, but no one will dare publish it,” he says. “Of course, each regime has those who promote it. On the other hand, he who always says what his conscience dictates never attains great positions.” He cites the example of a historian from Andalusia, who spoke his mind and was hated by rulers. “Despite that, they were all afraid of him,” Abbas says.

If not everything can be told, should we trust what we find in the history books, especially when it comes to what students are taught in schools? According to Abbas, the answer is “Not all the time.”

“Take Islamic history, for example. It is presented in a way that relies on legends more than an analysis of culture. They talk about the Ptolemaic era in two lines, and then they jump to the Arab invasion of Egypt, leaving behind a very important period the Coptic era. Their excuse is that there was never a Coptic state, but rather a Byzantine one. History should be taken as a whole. They do not teach students, for example, that the Ancient Egyptians invented religion and that all divine religions came and said the same thing,” he says. “Gamal Hemdan said that if you find an Islamic Egyptian script, scratch its surface and you’ll find a Coptic script. Scratch some more and you’ll find a Pharaonic script.”

Despite the faults he finds with history school textbooks, Abbas believes it is imperative for students at all levels to study history. In fact, the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies had held a seminar last month on history curricula, and recommended that the study of history be mandatory.

The move came after the Ministry of Education proposed making history an optional subject in secondary schools, prompting vicious criticism from the Shura Council and a minor media firestorm.

“The United States would rather all Third World countries stopped teaching national history,” Abbas grumbles. “This is their way of achieving dominance in the age of globalization. They do not want us to form a national identity. At the same time, they foster national education in their own schools,” he says.

Unfortunately, the historian points out, the nation’s textbooks do nothing to help youth develop an awareness of history or national identity. “Take the battle of Hittin, for example. They give the students innumerable details, overlooking the essence. Muslims and Christians fought side-by-side for two and a half centuries against the Crusaders. Every regime comes with its own priorities and consequently the textbooks are changed accordingly. The result is textbooks devoid of meaning,” he says.

Abbas’ explosive memoirs have probably irked a lot of people. He remembers an old Egyptian motto, explaining why he decided to publish his memoirs today: “The Egyptian proverb tells you, ‘If you are afraid, don’t say, and if you say, don’t be afraid’.”

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