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Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec toi. De la France à l'Égypte: "un extraordinaire amour." Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)*. Preface by Amina Taha Hussein-Okada, with notes and epilogue by Zina Weygand and Bruno Ronfard. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011. 384 pp. 29.00€. (pb). ISBN: 978-2-204-09553-2.

Review by Mona Russell, East Carolina University.

It is indeed a trite cliché to say that there is a great woman standing behind every great man, but there is not necessarily an enormous love that surmounts boundaries of “culture, religion, nationality, and disability” (p. 327). This memoir is a heartfelt rendering of a nearly sixty-year relationship that spans Europe, North Africa, and Asia, centered upon Egypt during a time of enormous change—from British occupation to the façade of liberal parliamentary democracy to the failed revolution of Nasser and beyond. Originally written two years after her husband’s death, it is the widow’s cathartic release in dealing with her bereavement, the couple’s triumphs and struggles, and her extended life in a second homeland.

In order to understand the significance of this work, one must appreciate the importance of Taha Hussein to the cultural and intellectual history of the Middle East. According to the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt* he was a “[w]riter, educational administrator, and minister, often called the Dean of Arabic Letters and *Qahir al-Zalam* (Conqueror of Darkness).”<sup>[1]</sup> Born in a small town in the Minya Governorate and blind from a young age, he excelled in the traditional form of schooling, the *kuttab*, which emphasized rote memorization of the Quran. Hussein mastered this skill by age nine and moved through the traditional path of education; however, he was denied a degree from al-Azhar and instead continued his studies at the newly-created Egyptian University (later Cairo University). In 1914, he received the university’s first Ph.D.<sup>[2]</sup> From there he went to University of Montpellier, where Suzanne Bresseau was his reader and their story together began.

She tells the tale of their first meeting rather romantically, claiming that she was unaware of her fate and a bit perplexed, having never met a blind man. However, another blind Italian professor who gave lessons in Latin proclaimed, “Monsieur cette jeune fille sera votre femme” (p. 33). Despite initial awkwardness on both their parts, it is clear from her writing that Hussein could not have succeeded without her assistance. Suzanne’s efforts went beyond merely reading and, within a short period of time, they were engaged. Her son attributes her beautiful voice as being responsible for “having seduced” his father, but without her intellect and compassion, her voice alone could not tell this remarkable story.<sup>[3]</sup>

The couple was ready to marry; however scholarship recipients were forbidden from marrying before their return home without permission from the university. For this the university would need his parents’ permission, which was not forthcoming. Meanwhile, Taha was studying for a *licence ès lettres* in Classics, aspects for which he was completely unprepared. He had almost no Latin, and geography was enormously difficult for the blind scholar. The two worked together from early in the morning until late in the day. Suzanne explains her husband’s recollections toward the end of his life: “il écrivait avec émotion: ‘On se disait bonjour, j’embrassais ton front et ta bague, et nous parlions d’amour et de science” (p. 37). When examination time arrived, they were given special dispensation to be alone in the room together, where Hussein floundered through the Latin stubbornly refusing to give up, and Suzanne

prayed as she wrote for him. Indeed she sums up her wonder at her husband's accomplishments in France, which is perhaps more telling of her own assistance: "Quand j'y repense, je suis encore stupéfaite qu'en moins de quatre ans quelqu'un d'aussi handicapé et de si peu préparé à la culture occidentale ait pu faire une licence, un diplôme d'études supérieures et une thèse de doctorat" (p. 38). As the editors note, she constantly downplays herself, her family, and her country throughout the work (p. 355). For example, specialists in Middle East Studies are well aware of Hussein's doctoral thesis from the Sorbonne, *Étude analytique et critique de la philosophie sociale d'Ibn Khaldoun*; however, few know the trials and tribulations of how his wife traded favors and worked to get translations of works in languages that neither of them knew.

Their marriage, the conclusion of Taha's thesis, the birth of their first child, and the termination of World War One all came within a relatively short period beginning in August 1917. One cannot help but be struck by her description of her wedding day and popular reaction to it, colored as the reader is by the demographics and prejudices of the twenty-first century. But in war-torn France, where a generation of young men had been lost and the percentage of Arabs as temporary or permanent residents was small, she was greeted by soldiers, who shouted, "Long live the bride!" (p. 40). Once married and Taha's studies completed, and with the war safely over, the couple could return to Egypt in 1919.

How was their marriage received in Egypt? While Suzanne speaks of being warmly welcomed by the governor of Alexandria upon their arrival, in one of her candid admissions, she also notes that she "has not always been successful in Egypt" and that she has "suffered severely." However, she is also quick to follow that Egypt became her "second home (*patrie*)" because of the great love that bound her to her husband (p. 43). One cannot help but wonder if this suffering had something to do with the then-current debates in the Egyptian women's press surrounding cross-cultural marriage, particularly those of Egyptian men marrying European women, in the two decades before the couple returned from France. According to Hanan Kholoussy: "These anxieties coalesced particularly in critiques that often portrayed mixed marriage as endangering the marital futures of Egyptian women, and the political and cultural identities of mixed marriage offspring, the family, and the Egyptian nation by extension...these debates...reveal that mixed marriage was often portrayed as an impediment--and sometimes as a facilitator--to Egypt's path of modernity." [4]

Unfortunately for the Husseins, four years after their return from France, a highly publicized case of a French woman killing her Egyptian husband, a beloved nationalist icon, must have created even more tension. The incident took place in London where the wife claimed self-defense and was acquitted by the British system of justice. The consequence of this case was that men began to discuss cross-cultural marriages as well, whereas before 1923, the discussion had largely been limited to the women's press. [5] What clues do we have as to whether or not the Husseins were affected by these debates since the author spends so little time discussing herself? Again, according to Kholoussy, the touchstones of transgression as revealed in the press dealt with "boundaries of colonizer versus colonized, Egyptian versus European, Muslim versus non-Muslim, but also those of class." [6] While Taha Hussein came from humble roots, his accomplishments in education and connections to powerful men allowed him to rise above his origins. If either spouse began life in a higher station, it was Suzanne Bresseau, the French, Catholic girl. Nevertheless, one might imagine the elite class of Egyptians looking at her, originally Taha's reader, as in the same category as women who came to Egypt seeking their fortune as teachers, governesses, nannies, and entertainers.

The evidence in the memoir suggests that Suzanne's closest friends were foreign, e.g., Jane Francis, Mme. Mahmoud Khalil (Émilienne Hector), and Mme. Wassef Ghali (Louise Majorelle) or Syrian Christian, e.g., Mary Kahil. Thus, some of her closest friends were in marriages similar to her own, were European, or were Christians in Egypt. There appears to have been greater openness among her

husband's Egyptian friends and colleagues, some of whom she speaks with great warmth, though it does not necessarily extend to their families. While one might assume a linguistic barrier, the class of elite and upper-middle-class Cairene women were schooled in French, often to the detriment of their native tongue—a subject that appeared frequently in the press. Indeed, the nature of “francophone” Egypt is treated in the epilogue (pp. 361-364).

Suzanne is far more interested in telling her husband's story than telling her own, however it is with the details of their everyday life that the familiar becomes better known to the reader. Perhaps one of the most infamous anecdotes that resonates with stories of censorship today is the story of Taha Hussein's rise and fall at Cairo University with the publication of *Fi shîr al-jahili* (1926), revised as *Fil adab al-jahili* (1927). Told through the voice of his wife, it receives new rhythm and new dimensions; and it is typical of the style of the memoir. She describes the university as a seedbed of intrigue and that Taha was treated as “second” or even “third” class citizen even before the allegations (pp. 96-97). She conveys his concern about his ability to reach his students, but not in his ability as a scholar. In between the familiar narrative we also find heart-wrenching details of their everyday life, e.g., the death of his friend and mentor Paul Casanova and the couple's unhappiness in not conceiving a third child, creating a deep depression in her and panic attacks in her husband (p. 98). As Suzanne discusses Taha's appendectomy and his doctors, she notes almost as an afterthought: “Car nous étions mal remis des secousses causées par ‘la poésie pré-islamique’” (p. 99). She displays remarkable confidence in her husband's genius in composing *Fi shîr al-jahili* in a matter of about three months by literally working day and night. Suzanne refers to what follows as a “backlash of ignorance and fanaticism” that interrupted their lives with death threats and guards posted outside their villa (pp. 99-100). We see her husband's dignity and “unshakable” nature after his dismissal as dean in the years following the incident, which took quite some time to iron out (p. 100). The role of good friends such as Abdel Aziz Fahmi helped the couple through these trying times, particularly as Taha complied with outrageous demands, travels, and continued his work at a remarkable pace, finishing the first volume of *al-Ayyam* (*Le Livre de jours*) in just nine days—a fitting tribute to the asymmetrical response—political, religious, and social—to his work.

A second example of the way in which the author embeds the daily routine within the extraordinary career of her husband is her description of Hussein's attending the second marriage of the King (Faruq) at Koubbeh palace, while she nursed a sick tooth. At the time her husband was Minister of Education and known for being a champion of free and compulsory education, as well as eliminating the two-track system. It is difficult to surpass the beauty and simplicity of her description of people screaming in the streets upon his return from the wedding: “Vive notre ministre, vive notre ami, vive le père des pauvres, celui qui nous éclaire!” (p. 193). The next day, apparently the same day she had her tooth removed, all the ministers' wives were to meet the royal couple. Beforehand, the prime minister's wife anxiously practiced bowing backwards and encouraged the other women to do the same, but she and another (unnamed) companion refused, without causing incident. It is this unassuming charm that underlies the memoir.

The author's separation from her country of origin and her near lack of discussion are quite noticeable on topics, such as World War Two, the Suez Crisis, and her family in general. Even when she does open up, e.g. her feelings over her mother's death, the tone is simple: “Elle ne me comprenait pas toujours. J'en ai parfois souffert. Il arrivait que Taha, rentrant à maison me voyait toute à l'envers; me disait: ‘Tu as reçu une lettre de ta mère.’ Cependent, elle m'aimait. Et je l'aimais” (pp. 231-232).

There are a number of potential audiences and classroom uses for *Avec Toi*. The elegant, but unpretentious nature of the writing means that it could potentially be used for advanced undergraduates, as well as graduate students. For graduate students and scholars of Middle East history, the text breathes new life into the world of Taha Hussein and his contemporaries. The editors have painstakingly cross-referenced all incidents with major works by and about Taha Hussein, in

addition to identifying all individuals mentioned in the text. In this annotation, the editors do not shy away from asserting their opinions.[7] A shortcoming is that the memoir contains no index and no chapter headings. Thus, finding a particular incident is difficult. However, it is not meant to be a topically-organized history, it is the selective and subjective reminiscences of a grieving widow. It is, instead, a poignant life history, suitable for any number of transnational, multicultural, or francophone literature courses.

## NOTES

[1] Arthur Goldschmidt, ed., "Taha Husayn," *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 2000), p. 81.

[2] Goldschmidt, *Biographical Dictionary*, p.81.

[3] Moënis Claude Taha Hussein, *Mes souvenirs*, Première Partie, p. 157, as cited in *Avec Toi*, p. 370.

[4] Hanan Kholoussy, "Stolen Husbands, Foreign Wives: Foreign Marriage, Identity Formation, and Gender in Colonial Egypt, 1909-1923," *Harwa* 1/2(2003): 209. Note that Kholoussy only presents one case where cross-cultural marriage was presented in a positive light.

[5] Kholoussy, "Stolen Husbands, Foreign Wives," pp. 206-207.

[6] Kholoussy, "Stolen Husbands, Foreign Wives," p. 235.

[7] For example, the second time the Egyptian Feminist Union and Mary Kahil are mentioned, they note her participation in the women's movement and mention with a condescending note that Muslim works rarely mention her (p. 132). They go on to discuss the 1919 Revolution as a moment where the national movement and the women's movement became unified, whereas Beth Baron's research demonstrates that a feminist agenda has now been overlaid on nationalist demonstrations due to the content of later ones and the memories of the two have become conflated. See her *Egypt as a Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

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