

A Collective Identity in a Divided World

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Queen Noor. 2003. *Leap of Faith. Memoirs of an Unexpected Life*. New York: Miramax Books. 528 pages + xii. Illus.

WRITTEN with the specific political purpose of bridging cultural divides, Queen Noor's *Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life* (2003) offers a notion of the self and identity formation by a woman in the age of globalization. Her transnational self defies all assumptions about the impossibility of belonging to a global world. Her story encompasses both her personal and political selves as she charts her journey from the cultures in which she was brought up into that of her husband.

Queen Noor's memoirs may be seen as one of the myriad political memoirs that flood the shelves of bookstores, as it has become customary for royals, presidents, major politicians, and other celebrities around the world to publish their life stories. Nonetheless, Queen Noor's is very special for it is about an "*Unexpected Life*"; she did not inherit her royal title nor had any reason when growing up to expect to become a queen. Few people become royalty overnight. Her memoir is thus an account of the transition from being an ordinary person to being a player on the international stage.

A Double Text: King's Biography and Queen's Memoir in One Text

Leap of Faith is a five-hundred-page text that narrates not only the personal and political life of the writer but also that of her husband. Queen Noor's story is undoubtedly unique; however, the teller of this story resists portraying a single self. Queen Noor's full identification with her husband, manifested in her combining his life with hers in her book, confirms the claim that the autobiographical self presented by women is multiple and collective. *Leap of Faith* portrays a plurality of selves, presenting a living model of a collective identity. Not only is the book two texts in one—her life story and the king's life story—but the king and queen are presented as one, too. The queen depicts her identification with her husband, country, culture, faith, and dreams as wholehearted and lifelong.

Throughout the autobiography, we live with the king and queen in a rich narrative marked by the fusion of the personal and the political, the alternation of "him" and "I," the interlacing of anecdotes, the succession of events, and the progression of interrelated ideas. The first chapter, "First Impressions," is neither about the writer nor about her birthplace. It is about her future husband and his birthplace, the country she soon adopts. Her fascination and identification as an adult with Jordan, its history, traditions, and beauty is expressed as early as the second page of the book: "I had found myself spellbound by the serene expanse of desert landscape washed golden by the retreating sun at dusk. I was overwhelmed by an extraordinary sensation of belonging, an almost mystical sense of peace" (2). She is to identify with this new image till the last page. Indeed, it is the king whom we first meet, with Queen Alia before her tragic death, through the camera lens of the future queen in the winter of 1976 on page one of *Leap of Faith*. From page three on, we learn about the king as much as we do about Queen Noor, perhaps even more. However, the queen's identification with her husband does not in any way subordinate her role to his. Throughout her life and memoir, she appears to develop a strong and independent personality in her own right.

Independent, Humble, Charitable, and Loyal King

King Hussein is projected through the Queen's gaze as very modest and humble. She writes that he was not rich. Although he depended on help from friends that "could not always be counted on" (259), he would not exploit his people for his own use and that of his family. In spite of his lack of

personal wealth, the king's belief in God's providence, Queen Noor emphasizes, allowed him to be generous to his people and those in need.

Noor depicts the king as loyal to his country at all times. He treated all his subjects as he would his own family, or better. Country came before family for Hussein. The king would not even move his family from their exposed residence in times of war even though "[they] were especially vulnerable [...].....] The palace was very close to the airport, which would be an obvious target if hostilities escalated. Security pressed us to move, but the King and I decided to stay in our home just as other Jordanians were remaining in theirs" (381–82). In return, the people of Jordan rewarded their king with their love, Noor explains.

Romantic Lover and Grateful Husband

Queen Noor fell in love with a man of integrity, courage and compassion. She refers explicitly to her love for her king on numerous occasions in the book in such sentences as "I fell deeply in love with him" (112), "I truly loved him" (133), "I loved him very much" (400). She does not write much or so explicitly about his love for her. However, his letter to her on their tenth anniversary is full of clearly passionate commitment. While very sick and awaiting major cancer surgery, Hussein remembered to present his wife with a birthday gift (a restored antique Mercedes he himself greatly valued) that astounded her (406). And in his last address to his people, the king surprised the queen by publicly revealing his gratitude and admiration to her.

Love, Motherhood, and Family

The persona in *Leap of Faith* asserts a fluid identity, one that all women arguably represent in their self-lifewriting as they define themselves in relation to others. Queen Noor's identification with her husband is the principal force in her life, she insists, and it can be seen in her memoir. However, this identification is not unprecedented. Before meeting the king, Queen Noor (then Lisa Al Halaby) identified with her father and his culture at the expense of her relationship with her mother and her culture, with which she seems not to have formed strong associations. She learned from her father to appreciate "sacrifices made for a larger purpose" (26), something that would characterize her life as queen as she would devote herself for the service of her family and Jordan.

Queen Noor does not go into much detail about her parents but candidly refers to their troubled marriage. The “dysfunctional” family atmosphere was so tense that young Al Halaby begged her parents to divorce and, perhaps not surprisingly, asked to attend a boarding school (34). However, family tensions were also positive driving forces in Al Halaby’s life. Her emotional distance from her parents (27) would turn Al Halaby into an independent person who appreciated collaborative relationships, which characterized her unique marriage situation. Queen Noor emerges in her memoirs an ideal wife, mother, and stepmother. An independent young woman commits herself, out of sheer love and conviction, to a man with a history of three marriages, eight children, and a whole country to rule under very difficult political circumstances. Her self-reliance, wisdom, and determination to create a strong family, unlike the one she was raised within, are evident throughout her memoir.

In the book, the queen’s identification with her husband does not overshadow her attempts to identify with other members of the family. She tries hard to keep a complex family together, becoming a godmother figure in the royal household. “Over the years,” she writes, she would try “as much as possible to include all the children and, when appropriate, their mothers in family gatherings, hoping that regular contact would bring us closer and reduce whatever tensions might exist” (129–30). Queen Noor might overshadow her mother in her book; however, as a mother herself, she follows in her own mother’s footsteps for, among the few references to her mother, Queen Noor praises her “courageous if painful struggle for family peace” (34). In this sense, Queen Noor’s memoir asserts the cultural power of the maternal stance.

Public versus Private: A Public Marriage

Leap of Faith is a story of transition from ordinary to royal life, where the negotiation of the private and the public become obvious. The adjustment to royal lifestyle was not particularly easy for a private and independent person like Al Halaby. A simple person by nature, Queen Noor never really liked the lavish lifestyle of royalty. A strong believer in privacy, she had to become resigned to the fact that the “King and his family” were “public property” (157), and that the most private of issues, like her first miscarriage for example, was used “as fodder for public consumption” (185). In spite of, as she writes, “learn[ing] to strike an effective balance between my natural inclination to privacy and the practical value of sharing

enough of our lives with others so [the others] could understand what we were trying to accomplish” (158), she continued to find the intrusion of the world into her private life to be very challenging. In fact, it caused her a lot of grief and sometimes depression (314–15).

In order to strike a “balance between an understated style and the need to look regal” (170), Queen Noor—who thought that a “queen may be expected to present a glittering image, but it was neither my nature nor what I considered useful as a representative of Jordan” (170)—looked for a role model of regal simplicity, which she found in Queen Sofia of Spain (174–75). Noor would also soon become very active in her work (running an independent office from the Royal Palace that developed programs to promote cultural understanding) and learn to project the kind of public image she wanted the media to disseminate. She writes that she started to “pick and choose what to emphasize, planning my schedule to achieve a balance between my more traditional ceremonial roles and my desire to focus on significant development initiatives—cultural, social, and environmental” (159). The result would be a queen who would soon “set out my own priorities, establish projects, and speak publicly on my own initiative,” Noor writes (159–60).

A Multicultural/Transnational Identity

The persona in *Leap of Faith* is an excellent model of a multicultural self with a transnational identity. Having Arab and Swedish ancestors, Queen Noor’s multiculturalism starts at home, but as King Hussein of Jordan becomes the role model for Al Halaby, she identifies with everything he stands for politically and culturally. She learns his language and culture, adopts his religion, and becomes his political partner and wife. Even before meeting the king, Al Halaby traveled to the Middle East, “the land of [her] ancestors,” in order to “reconnect with the Arab roots” of her father (2). Her sense of culture was broad enough to transcend national borders. But she did not travel to Syria, the place of origin of her father’s family, in order to discover her roots. Instead, Iran and Jordan were her destinations. Had the Jordanian king not stolen her heart, who knows, she might have made it to Aleppo, too.

Leap of Faith is a journey of self-discovery and identity formation. The writer first learned about her multicultural roots—Swedish on her mother’s side and Arabic on her father’s—at the age of six. She writes that this multiple heritage gave her a new sense of identity: “I felt connected for the

first time to a larger family and a wider world.” Much to her mother’s “long-standing frustration,” Al Halaby would be “most intrigued by her Arab roots” (10).

Al Halaby’s multicultural heritage and her early but advanced political awareness helped her adapt and assimilate quickly to other cultures, so that her “attachments to Jordan and Jordanians came very naturally” (148). After marrying King Hussein, Queen Noor materialized her sense of belonging to Arab culture by intensifying her efforts to learn Arabic, for a true Muslim has to know the language of the Holy Quran, and by adopting Islam as her religion. Having been brought up to “choose my own spiritual path” (111), she understood that the “decision [to adopt Islam] would be mine and mine alone” (112).

A Spiritual Journey

Queen Noor’s memoir can be seen as a personal expedition, a crossing from a state of liberalism into a life of spiritualism. As a converted Muslim, for “the first time in my life,” Queen Noor writes, she “felt a sense of belonging to a larger community.” She “felt humbled and grateful” (112). She did not adopt Islam for convenience’s sake, but out of sheer conviction and willful acceptance. In fact, her sense of belonging to the Muslim community would persist with her throughout her life with the king and after his death when, a year later, she performed *Umrah*, a shorter version of Al Hajj.

The Queen-to-be not only willingly embraced Islam as her religion and learned Arabic as her second language, but even welcomed a change in her given name. She writes that she did not question or resist changing her full name from Al Halaby to Noor Al-Hussein. Although it is not customary in Arab cultures to change a woman’s family name after marriage, Queen Noor considered her new name the “most precious gift the King ever gave me [...] ‘Noor.’ It means ‘light’ in Arabic. My name would be Noor Al Hussein, the ‘Light of Hussein’” (110). It seems that accepting a totally new name is evidence of her accepting a new identity.

Redefining Americanness

The quest for identity necessitates a look into one’s past. To be sure, Al Halaby was never anti-American. In fact, she writes. “I loved my country” but “found my trust in its institutions badly shaken” (38). Al Halaby knew

about what she calls the “legendary” influence that the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) had over the American government (228). After her marriage, she saw Jordanian politics up close and was shocked to experience American double standards and hypocrisy first hand. She reveals that, although the American government used Jordan—the country it was punishing by, as she says, “withholding arms” (233) over the Camp David agreement—to support Iraq in its war against Iran by covertly shipping arms through Jordan (387–88), years later the USA would accuse and punish Jordan for supporting Iraq in the second Gulf War. It would also hijack the King’s mission in 1994 to achieve peace with Israel and strong arm Jordan to accept the American terms of such peace. When the King expressed his reluctance to accept those terms, the “United States responded by dangling all sorts of financial incentives, including the forgiveness of Jordan’s crippling \$700 million debt” (424). It would take the Queen twelve years after her marriage, on her first private visit to the States, to talk about her American “roots” (316) and even then, what she said seems based more on her family, friends, and the American people than in crude nationalistic feeling. Disenchanted with American politics, Queen Noor presents herself as more than happy with her new Arab/Muslim identity.

Modesty and Sense of Propriety

Queen Noor is aware that memoirs are expected to reveal what is hidden: “Memoirs are by definition a deeply personal undertaking requiring reflection and a measure of introspection” (x). However, her purpose in writing her memoir is quite different; it is spelled out clearly on the first page. As a believer in building cultural bridges as means of promoting “constructive dialogue,” she hopes that her book “will inspire some of its readers to put those ideals into practice” (ix). She has written her book “in the spirit of reconciliation” that she hopes “will contribute to a greater awareness, especially in the West, of events that have shaped the modern Middle East,” and “encourage a deeper understanding of contemporary challenges facing the Arab world as well as an appreciation for the true values of Islam” (ix). To achieve this goal, she asserts that she “tried to write accurately and from first-hand experience whenever possible” (ix). There is no reason to doubt the Queen’s motives and honesty. Indeed, Queen Noor’s memoir can be seen as the result of a collaborative effort that resulted in projecting the collective identity of the queen.

Leap of Faith does not reveal much about the very personal life of the Queen, her husband, or her children precisely because she has not intended that her memoir do so. She explains that if she sounds “guarded and aloof, particularly when it comes to her private life and to her children”,¹ it is because she never promised that her memoir would reveal those aspects of her life. The Queen’s cultural and political purpose in writing the memoir partly explains the modest and gentle style of the book. However, Queen Noor’s total admiration of her king is behind much of the book’s sense of propriety and mild style.

Queen Noor’s modesty does not stop her from making candid remarks, though. Two issues means a great deal to the queen: honor killing and freedom of speech and expression. In her memoir, the queen pays tribute to Rana Hussein, a journalist who “single-handedly brought this problem to the attention of the public in a series of newspaper articles over a nine-year period” (448). She also criticizes the government for its “simple lack of political will, despite the Constitution and the religious law known as *shari’a*, both of which are patently opposed to the so-called honor killings and forbid the taking of the law into one’s own hands” (448). Over the years, the queen writes that she argued for more freedom of the press in Jordan and lobbied her “husband and his key officials [...] to reconsider their sometimes restrictive attitude toward personal and institutional freedoms” (299), while she herself was under media attack around the world. Even though the queen correctly “decried the irresponsibility of certain Western journalists,” she was also right to feel “just as strongly that there should be an outlet in Jordan for differences of opinions [...]. The press in Jordan, though privately owned, was effectively government-controlled. Truly independent reporting did not exist” (299).

Intended Audience

Even if the queen had not declared her purpose in writing her memoir, the narrative shows that the intended audience is Western/non-Arab. Trusting her position as an insider within Middle Eastern culture, Queen Noor speaks as a non-Western/Arab in the book, which to her is a project of cultural understanding and appreciation. Several long historical and political accounts in *Leap of Faith* include details that a non-Arab reader probably needs to know. On occasions, the queen goes in some specific details that only non-Arab audience might need.

Textual Strategies

Leap of Faith is thematically rich. The book has enough reflective and candid material for a fully fledged autobiography. Understandably, Noor's memoir has stylistic failings that could have been prevented by careful editing, as one reviewer, Elizabeth Bennett, observed.² The book suffers from some serious digressions from the main flow of its narrative and some lengthy and irrelevant passages, such as descriptions of some royals and dignitaries.

Another problem with the memoir is that the narrative voice is not always Queen Noor's. She says that the memoirs are based on a journal or diary that she has kept. She takes sole responsibility for "the views expressed" (ix) in her book, but admits that they were "refined in the course of many spirited conversations with friends and advisers" (ix), whom she acknowledges by name. While Queen Noor writes with a seemingly unified voice, it is not difficult to hear the voices of those friends and advisers. In this way, the book suffers from a multiplicity of voices, even though the queen insists that all views in the book reflect her own. Clearly the memoir recounts only the personal and the political events in the queen's life that she wishes to disclose to the readers. All personal information and reflections are obviously presented in her own voice. Her voice is also evident in other parts of the book where the data is clearly historical and political, but there the shadow voices are also more obvious. What distinguishes the queen's political voice from those of these shadows is the way that the politics and political data are personalized. For example, in "Chapter Three: Tehran Journal," the queen offers her personal reflections on a society and country she lived and worked in for two years. In this section, she describes the social and political situation in Iran when she was there (1975–77). Though the section is focused on the politics of Iran, the voice is personalized to a great extent. The voice sounds authentic because she witnessed the events she recounts.

Shadow voices are especially clear in the pages buried in "Chapter Four: An Audience with the King" that offer a detailed history of Jordan (60–74). They also abruptly interrupt the narrative in "Chapter Six: Honeymoon at Gleneagles." Other than for twelve pages, the chapter would sound very personal. In the middle of it, however, we suddenly read about Jordan's political challenges, the creation of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its relationship with Jordan, the conflict between the king and

Arafat the PLO leader, and the Syrian “invasion” of Jordan in 1970 before hearing the queen’s voice again narrating the honeymoon in Gleneagles.

Since *Leap of Faith* is the memoir of a queen and her husband, the personal and the political are expectedly present. They cannot be dichotomized in the monarchs’ lives and thus are not in the memoir. This interweaving of the personal and political emphasizes that the queen’s life is not her own and that the political will rule the queen’s life forever. The intrusion of politics on her honeymoon and the inclusion of political data in that chapter help to illustrate the queen’s realization that “politics had become our constant companion” (133) and that she will have to live it with until the end.

Conclusion: A Role Model

Queen Noor can be seen as a role model for multicultural women around the world in a globalized society. Her personal and political devotion to a new community beyond the borders of the country she was raised in shows women’s ability to transgress borders, resolve differences, forgive mistakes, and embrace the Other without totally losing all sense of individuality. Her contribution to women’s lives in Jordan cannot be denied. In the memoir, she refers modestly to some of the areas where her support was instrumental in changing Jordanian women’s lives. Believing that “whenever women engage as equal partners with men, development and progress accelerate and endure” (446), she supported women in Jordan and the world in many ways. The establishment of the Noor Al Hussein Foundation of Jordanian Women endeavored to improve the political, economic, and social status of women, and the professional Women’s Club supported the improvement of working conditions for women. Under the aegis of the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, community-development handicrafts-production projects such as Bani Hamida (the National Handicrafts Development Project), Quality of Life, micro-credit programs, and the Institute for Child Health and Development functioned effectively in Jordan.

I was touched by Queen Noor’s honesty and made associations with her journey from the first page on. I have emphasized the nobility of Queen Noor’s quest for identity in our highly divided world. The wholehearted adoption of an Arab Muslim culture by an American is especially inspiring and reassuring to Arabs in a world characterized by utmost despair due to

the highly controversial role the United States is playing in the world, the Middle East in particular.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Bennett. (May 9, 2003). "A Slice of Royal Life. Queen Noor Recalls a Tough Transition," *Houston Chronicle*, May 11, 2003, <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/ae/books/reviews/1901968> (accessed October 29, 2004).

2. Ibid.