

# *Veiled Sentiments*

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HONOR AND POETRY  
IN A BEDOUIN SOCIETY

*Updated Edition with a New Preface*

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*University of California Press*

*Berkeley & Los Angeles*

*London*

30 years ago.

1. In light of social change she describes, how relevant are the observations of the original book
- ? 2. Can a book like this no longer be written. Not represents an "other"? Said?
- \* 3. Aspects of self-critique on xvi

### PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I said Friday that VS was "about culture" see her critique study xvii.

- a. Culture vs "Arab culture". Distinctly effect of idea of cultural difference.
- b. Culture is too popular - expand this argument + talk about Bedouin.
- c. Can't get away from it, when she talks about veiling.

It is nearly twenty years since I finished the fieldwork on which this book is based. This does not mean that I have not returned, many times, to the community about which I wrote. Nor is this the only book I have written about those Awlad 'Ali Bedouin families in the Western Desert of Egypt I was so fortunate to be able to get to know. Much, however, has changed in their lives and in the larger context of the Egyptian nation-state within which, increasingly, they live those lives. And much has changed in the intellectual fields in which this book must be situated: anthropology, feminist studies, and Middle East studies. I would like to detail some of these changes as a way to contextualize *Veiled Sentiments* for the new century.

a.  
Features to  
consider  
veiling as  
oppression.

### Changing Worlds

First, of course, there have been changes in the personal lives of those I wrote about in this book. The girls who kept me company in those two years between 1978 and 1980 and taught me so much about modesty have, all but one, married and had children. Some moved away, others married cousins and stayed within the community. The boys who ran around playing with homemade cars fashioned out of wire are now young men with deep voices and mustaches. Some have taken over from their fathers, most not yet. Their mothers and fathers are more wrinkled and worn, with worries about children, losses of loved ones, and community matters. But they are proud of their big families and pleased with their

grandchildren. Sadly, one of the Haj's younger brothers and most of those lively old aunts whose stories and jokes were so memorable have passed away. I am always pleased, though, and amazed, when I return to find the Haj's mother still alive. Bedridden and almost blind, on my last visit in 1996 she was frightening to my own young children who were not used to the heavy tattoos of her generation and met her too late to enjoy her storehouse of rhymes. Rashid, whose marriage to a second wife is so important in this book, finally did set up a separate household with Fayga, and they had many children. But he has brought some more scandal to the family by taking yet another wife, someone not from the Bedouin community, and delaying too long his eldest son's marriage.

The world around them has changed too. The cities of Alexandria and Cairo have been brought much closer by four-lane highways, though people in the community remain as involved as ever in their local world. A new town has sprung up in the desert behind them, bringing new residents to the area and offering jobs to some poorer members of the community. Since the early 1980s, the whole coastal region from the area where they live all the way west to Marsa Matruh, the capital of the governorate, has been developed for tourism. Along the coastal road one sees now the walls of successive tourist villages, many built by the army, all for middle- to upper-class Egyptians (people of the Nile Valley, as they used to call them).<sup>1</sup> When I did the research for this book, there were only scattered Bedouin houses along this road that we took west to attend weddings or visit relatives in Alamein. But the ferocious land disputes that brought so many carloads of men to the house in search of the Haj to mediate were the early signs of this development. Some Awlad 'Ali became wealthy through land sales, but this process has crowded everyone else and removed them all from the beautiful Mediterranean coast. Inland, with the extension of the water supply, many turned to agriculture. What was barren save for olive trees has now become, in patches, green with fig and other fruit trees.

The children all go to school, as they did when I was there in the

late 1970s. In this particular rural area where still no one has gone as far as university, many have managed to complete secondary school. Schools are the primary state institutions that families encounter, and they have indeed enmeshed Bedouin children in the Egyptian nation. The mass media, whether the radio broadcasts of soap operas and music produced in Cairo that my young friends had relished, somewhat to the disapproval of their elders, or now television, have made them even more part of a national scene. The young men, like the youngest of their uncles, have served in the army, but they read newspapers and find themselves more regularly connected with all sorts of people, not just their kin and other Awlad 'Ali. These kinds of processes have been under way since the 1960s in the city of Marsa Matruh; but in rural places with few Nile Valley immigrants, social purity and cultural distinctiveness had been easier to maintain.

One of the most striking changes in Egypt in this period has spilled slowly into this region as well: the growing social force of a self-conscious Muslim identity, accompanied by certain practices (especially religious study and regular prayer), modes of dress (modest clothing for women, including a headcovering known as the *hijab*, and beards for men, or in the most rigorous forms, white robes and a skull cap), and comportment (stricter sex segregation). It is common to refer to this phenomenon, noticeable in Cairo and other cities beginning in the 1970s, and also found in many other parts of the Islamic world, as "fundamentalism" or "political Islam." I prefer the term "Islamism," which highlights self-consciousness about Islamic identity and the very deliberate way that people who adopt this identity want society to conform to Muslim values. I also like Saba Mahmood's term, the "piety movement" because it captures what is so central for participants—becoming pious.<sup>2</sup> The news in the West is full of the activities of militant Islamists, but they are only one small part of this much larger trend, which encompasses great variety. The important point is that while Islamism stands in contrast to the secularism of some of the urban middle classes, which many still defend, it is equally different from the every-

day religiosity of the Awlad 'Ali, who simply took it for granted that they were good Muslims.

In the late 1970s, I saw many signs of the movement on the university campuses and streets of Cairo and Alexandria. But the Bedouin area where I worked was little touched by it. By the time I returned in 1986 and 1987 to do the fieldwork on which I based my second book, *Writing Women's Worlds*, I was able to record many reactions to this development.<sup>3</sup> There was excited talk about the strange sight of a woman dentist, veiled from head to foot and wearing gloves, who had set up in the nearby village. She looked like a ghost, but she was offering religious lessons in the mosque. The old women joked irreverently about the beards of certain "brothers." But the adolescents in school were more respectful, the girls getting lectures from their teachers about how they should comport themselves.

By the mid-1990s, local young men had set up small mosques, apart from the one associated with the nearby saint's tomb at which the family's men had regularly gone for Friday prayer. Many of these young men had beards and were strict with their sisters and wives, sometimes even their mothers. The older women complained that weddings were becoming less fun and there was less freedom for women. However, many of the poorer families in the vicinity seem to have embraced the new piety. Some of these women and girls had traded the distinctively tied black headcovering (*tarha*) or the normal colored kerchief for a plain *hijab*, like that worn for prayer in the urban areas. Young educated Bedouin women from the towns followed instead the changing fashions of the urban Egyptian *hijab*; rather than signaling any particular piety, wearing the *hijab* was for them a way of marking their education and difference without jeopardizing their respectability.

Most of these changes—greater enmeshment in state institutions, more regular commerce with non-Bedouin, involvement in national cultural forms and social trends from mass media to the contradictory desires of consumerism and Islamism—were reflected in the book I began working on in the mid-1980s and finished in

the early 1990s: *Writing Women's Worlds*. I wanted to capture there the way the Awlad 'Ali families I knew were experiencing these transformations, as well as to convey, better than I had been able to in *Veiled Sentiments*, the texture of everyday life and storytelling in the community.

### *Shifting Intellectual Contexts*

My second book also took on more directly some of the issues that anthropologists had only begun to consider in the early 1980s when I was writing *Veiled Sentiments*. For example, it was still somewhat radical then to be reflexive about the fieldwork process and attentive to the social location of the anthropologist. I had thought it important to talk about how I was introduced into the community and how people saw me. Only later did I draw out the implications of doing fieldwork as "a dutiful daughter," showing the entailments, both positive and negative, of my being identified as the daughter of a Palestinian Arab and having been myself shaped by childhood experiences with relatives in Jordan.<sup>4</sup> In the years that followed, anthropologists became more sophisticated in analyzing the fieldwork encounter and, even more crucial, I believe, the partiality and positionality of knowledge. In 1988, Donna Haraway published an influential article about feminist knowledge that articulated brilliantly the insight that all knowledge is situated. My own situating of self in *Veiled Sentiments* could now be understood not as a personal confession of partiality but as an honest indication of what is always the case—that we observe and speak from particular positions. Over the next few years I was to develop some thoughts on the special kind of position from which "halfies"—those both inside and outside the communities they write about—produce knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Even more than our recognition of partiality and the inevitability of situated knowledge, we have come, as anthropologists, to be

Lead-in to  
Lave

Maybe this is the last time → The end of a world?

acutely aware of the trouble with representing “others.” *Veiled Sentiments* was published in the same year as James Clifford and George Marcus’ edited collection, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, a book that articulated for the current generation a critique of anthropology based on its failure to have examined ethnographic texts as texts.<sup>6</sup> This critique intersected with an earlier one in another field: Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, a powerful analysis of the ways one region—the one I was working in, in fact—had been represented textually, as part of a project of imperial domination.<sup>7</sup>

When I wrote *Veiled Sentiments* I was not unaware of the effect my representation of the Awlad ‘Ali might have on Western perceptions of the Arab world. One of my hopes was to foster greater understanding and human sympathy. I thought this could be done through drawing a complex portrait of the society I felt I had come to understand. I wanted to explain the logic of the social system, including those aspects such as cousin marriage and women’s veiling that are most abhorrent to outsiders. Also, by bringing to light the beautiful poetry I had discovered to be such an integral part of their lives, as well as the poignant sentiments it expressed, I thought this book might chip away at simplistic images of Middle Eastern social worlds common in the West.<sup>8</sup> Yet I did not try to do much that was radical in my textual practice. *Veiled Sentiments* reads to me now, so many years later, like a fairly standard ethnography—except that I am scrupulous about drawing my analytical points out of rich ethnographic examples and try, especially in chapters 6 and 7, to give a vivid sense of individual experiences.

Even as I was putting the finishing touches on *Veiled Sentiments*, I was already beginning to feel the urge to explore questions of ethnographic voice. In my teaching I had been forced to face more squarely the complex relationship of anthropology to colonialism, and thus the problem of representing cultural difference; in faculty reading groups I had begun to read feminist theory (outside of anthropology) and to wonder about what it might mean to do feminist ethnography; and I was following, in my own discipline, the way anthropologists were thinking about the effects of ethno-

graphic writing itself. Combined with my own frustration at the way I had not been able to convey as richly as I would have liked the quality of “life as lived” in this Awlad ‘Ali community, these intellectual explorations led me to want to do more fieldwork and to try to write another ethnography.<sup>9</sup> That ethnography, *Writing Women’s Worlds*, extends from *Veiled Sentiments*. I think it can stand alone, but some disagree, alleging that readers need the structural analysis of the first book to make sense of the stories of the second. I leave that to others to decide.

*Culture/Gender/Power*

Here I want only to clarify three of the central arguments of *Veiled Sentiments* and to suggest how I developed them in later work. The three arguments are about culture, about veiling and its relation to women’s status, and about power and resistance.

The key contribution of *Veiled Sentiments* is to have dramatically demonstrated the enormous complexity of “culture.” I took seriously the highly valued, yet context-bound, oral lyric poems known as the *ghinnāwas* (little songs) through which women and young men expressed sentiments of love and vulnerability that violated the moral code, sentiments that they themselves denied in their ordinary language interactions in less intimate social situations. The coexistence of two discourses on sentiment, equally valued and representing different ideals to which people were committed, led me to conclude that it was impossible to reduce Bedouin “culture” to the official social and moral ideals encapsulated in the code of honor and modesty. Nor was it possible to reduce individual experience to the dominant cultural forms.

In later work, I became even more wary of the notion of people in a community having “a culture.” Not only was there complexity at the level of discourses—ordinary language versus poetry, for example—but even at the individual level. *Writing Women’s Worlds*

highlighted the complexity of culture by bringing out individual differences within the community and the play of arguments, contests, and strategic manipulation of terms. In the notion I developed there of "writing against culture," I challenged the very utility of the concept of culture, as the shared meanings of a bounded community commonly referred to as a culture.<sup>10</sup>

My arguments about writing against culture have met with some resistance. I would continue to defend this project even more now, expanding the ways one could write against culture to include more than textual strategies of writing about the particulars of people's lives. I had developed the argument originally in the context of trying to think how I might write an ethnography of a Bedouin community that did justice to the complexity and uncertainty of everyday life and to the individuality of its members. I was also working with a strong sense, following Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, of the ways that representations of people in other parts of the world, particularly parts of the world that are viewed with antipathy in the West, might reinforce—or be made to undermine—such antipathies. The idea of "a culture," with its inevitable generalizations and typifications, it seemed to me, had become a central component of the distancing and othering against which I wanted to work, even while I recognized that humans are, in the broadest sense, as Clifford Geertz has so persuasively shown us, "cultural" beings.<sup>11</sup>

The problem, as I see it, is that the concept of culture and the related concept of cultures (groups of people who share a culture) are contaminated by the politicized world in which they have developed. As I have recently argued, in response to an article provocatively titled "Writing for Culture," the fact that culture is now such a popular concept, reaching well beyond anthropology, should be cause for suspicion, not self-congratulation for anthropologists. That the concept lends itself to usages so apparently corrupting of the anthropological ones as the pernicious theses of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations is, for me, serious. Huntington's reification of cultures and cultural difference resonates with popular

sentiment and racist politics.<sup>12</sup> It seems to me that the role of the anthropologist is not to use his or her expertise in the deployment of the culture concept to correct such people (by showing that their cultural units are too big or too incommensurate, too homogenized or too crude) but to criticize the very enterprise in which they are engaged: setting up as hostile and opposed groups of people defined by shared cultures in a fragile global context. If civilizations are extensions of cultures, and cultures depends on culture, and we do not question the notion of culture, then we are not in a position to mount this critique.

If the complexity of culture that I discovered twenty years ago living with the Awlad 'Ali led me eventually to this critique of the concept of culture and the ways we represent other "cultures," the ambiguities of another crucial facet of Awlad 'Ali Bedouin life—gender relations—led me to question the usefulness of a favorite feminist concept, patriarchy. Although *Veiled Sentiments* does not explicitly address many of the arguments of feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, its analysis of gender and women's positions in this Awlad 'Ali community is relevant to them. Much of the book is about what it actually means for women to live within a patrilineal system, although there is a great deal too about the values of autonomy that undergird this tribal or segmentary form of social organization and how these shape manhood as well.

The part of my analysis that causes the most confusion, and sometimes consternation, is that about veiling. By veiling I mean, in the Awlad 'Ali case, the act of placing over one's face a part of the black semi-opaque cloth (*tarha*) that every married woman wraps around her head to cover her hair. It is customary that everyone except children cover their hair. Unmarried girls wear kerchiefs; men wear headcloths, sometimes left hanging, sometimes wrapped as a turban. Only those men who wear city clothes or the clothes of the educated (trousers and shirts) would not cover their heads.

Confusion arises for readers today because this kind of women's veiling is so different from the new veiling of the 1970s to which I referred earlier, associated with the piety movement in the cities

and towns of Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world. This new kind of veiling, which usually does not involve covering the face but only the hair, is what one now sees in the cities and provincial towns all over Egypt. Western news broadcasts tend to focus on the stricter forms that a minority of women, like the dentist who had caused such comment among my Awlad 'Ali friends, have chosen. In addition to the full-length loose clothing and the headcovering, they wear the *niqab*, a piece of cloth that veils the face by covering their nose and mouth, as a mark of their piety. These forms, somewhat like the state-imposed *chador* in Iran, are linked to Islamism, having their foundation in ideals of modesty but as these are explicitly linked to commitment to religious ideals and Muslim identity.<sup>13</sup>

Awlad 'Ali veiling is quite different. Those in the cities who adopt the *hijab* are mostly educated women who would, twenty-five years ago, have worn Western clothes and left their hair uncovered, or, as the practice has spread to the lower classes, those from the countryside who would have worn a kerchief or some sort of *tarha* like the Awlad 'Ali. The Awlad 'Ali women see their headcovering as a traditional piece of clothing that is similarly associated with modesty but both more taken-for-granted and more closely tied to the local social hierarchy. Believing themselves to be good Muslims, they naturally associate all their positive practices with Islam. But their distinctive practice of covering their faces for certain men and in certain mixed-sex situations must be seen not so much as part of religious piety but of social respectability within the culturally, or some might say ethnically, distinct context. Only Awlad 'Ali women do this kind of veiling, and they only do it for other Bedouin.

If the confusion for readers in understanding what I mean by veiling arises from the multiple meanings of veiling across the Muslim world today and the failure to appreciate that the context of Awlad 'Ali veiling is very particular, the consternation arises from my failure to condemn it as a sign of women's oppression. Am I an apologist for a patently patriarchal society in which women are subordinated, veiling being an index of that subordination?

*Veiled Sentiments* suggests that such simplistic formulations do not do justice to the complex realities of the Awlad 'Ali gender system. The women who do the veiling I describe see it as a voluntary act. It is one of the key ways they assert their honor. Through this act, along with others that demonstrate their comprehension of and adherence to the moral system whose ideals guide people, they gain social respect. Modesty (*hasham*) is for women and the young the mark of respect for the social hierarchy based, in people's eyes, on the superiority of those most able to achieve the moral ideals of honor. The achievement of honor or modesty is not considered easy for anyone, hence the rewards of maintaining these ideals.

I do not deny that the social system is hierarchical, with status linked to age and gender. But I do try to uncover the terms in which women and men in this social system see themselves and the social system, instead of imposing on them ideals of equality and critiques of morality that derive from foreign contexts. I also try to explain the logic of the system and the way moral values and the social imperatives of patrilineality work together. This is a necessary first step, even if one might later want to ask whether their gender system provides fuel for arguments about the universal subordination or Third World oppression of women or to mount a critique of the way moral systems are used to establish hierarchies that not only disfavor women but make it difficult for them to defy social systems.

My analysis of gender makes simple assessments of women's status even more difficult when it turns from veiling to other aspects of women's practice. At the center of the book is poetry. And it is a genre of poetry that women use. Through it, I argue, they express sentiments that violate the very moral code they uphold so passionately with their practices of modesty. How does the revelation of this domain of alternative, even subversive, expression, however constrained by social context and form, affect our understanding of women's positions? In *Listen to the Heron's Words*, a wonderful book about North Indian women's expressive forms, Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold go further than I do in labeling songs that seem to express a women's counterculture as subversive.<sup>14</sup> They are not afraid

to see such songs as an imaginative form of defiance of or resistance to the patriarchal social and cultural (religious) systems in which Hindu women find themselves in this region.

I am more cautious about resistance. I do show, in *Veiled Sentiments*, the ways that the *ghinnāwa* defies the moral codes; I give equal weight, though, to women's commitment to those codes. I also give careful consideration to the fact that the poems are not just women's poems and that the poems have enormous cultural value. I ask instead how the two discourses—of honor and modesty and of poetry—existing side by side, inflect each other.

In a later work, I reflected more systematically on the question of resistance.<sup>15</sup> This was a concept that swept anthropology and feminist studies in the 1980s, with James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* being perhaps the touchstone.<sup>16</sup> I argued that we should be wary of romanticizing resistance and celebrating in such an uncritical way the nonrevolutionary forms of resistance that we work so hard to find among subaltern groups, including women. What function does it serve us, as academics, to so quickly celebrate these little resistances? I outlined many of the forms of "resistance" one could find among Awlad 'Ali women—colluding to keep women's secrets away from men, irreverence toward men and masculinity, and reciting poetry—and argued that one had to acknowledge them. But I also showed their limits. For example, I showed how certain forms of resistance, like that of the younger generation of girls against their elders (with their kin-based power), actually enmeshed these girls in wider systems of power, including those of capitalist consumerism and the state. The same would be true, I would argue today, for the resistance represented by Islamism. In resisting one set of forces and actively seeking to shape their lives in ways different from either their parents' or the dominant norms, pious women all over Egypt place themselves under new authorities and disciplines.

The most important argument I put forth in that article, however, was that forms of resistance might better be used as "diagnostics" of the different forms that power can take than as inspirational signs of the resilience of the human spirit. Thus I granted, more

than I had perhaps been willing to in *Veiled Sentiments*, the ways in which the social hierarchy that favored older men, and the moral system of honor and modesty that supported it, were indeed part of a system of power. At the same time I maintained that the poetry that women and young men recited could not be considered truly subversive. In the conclusion to *Veiled Sentiments* I offer some arguments about what the poetry, as art, does for the people who recite it and for their experience of the social system of which they are a part. I hope that these observations lead readers to understandings of gender in the Arab world that are as nonreductive as the understandings of culture I sought to promote.

#### *Ambivalent Reception*

This book has had a life of its own. Whatever I wanted it to do when I wrote it in the early 1980s, it has, like any book, escaped the intentions of its author and inserted itself in unanticipated places. With the changing intellectual contexts and the passage of time, it has taken on new significances. Yet it has a certain integrity that has made me unwilling to tinker with it. Instead, I have tried in this preface to acknowledge the ways my own thinking has changed and to point to the arguments that still might be useful. In closing, I want only to satisfy some curiosity about how the book has been received.

I will never know in any full sense what the book has meant to readers. I am gratified when I get letters from students doing reports, from faculty teaching it, from a former classmate reading it to try to understand something about a friend from the Middle East, from ethnomusicologists seeking tape recordings of the songs, and from collectors of Arab tribal poetry in other parts of Egypt and as far afield as Saudi Arabia. I am always amazed at how varied the audience seems to be and how many different aspects of the book have been found useful.



I was pleased when my father read it and, though he grew up in Jaffa, Palestine, an urban setting far from the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin world of the 1970s and 1980s, felt he recognized something important about his own childhood experiences and his mother's world. I thought the Awlad 'Ali were culturally distinctive, and they are. Even the particular families I lived with had, in a sense, their own local culture, a bit different from that of other family groups. But the book has resonated with so many other scholars and readers familiar with other regions of Egypt and other parts of the Arab world that I have to acknowledge the existence of broad similarities across the Middle East. The Awlad 'Ali families I wrote about should not to be taken as representative of or typical of Arab society. But they are also not to be thought of as unique.

Perhaps the sharpest differences in the Arab world are between rural and urban groups or educated elites and the noneducated. The gap between these, especially in terms of women's lives, is best captured by examining who was responsible for making *Veiled Sentiments* available in Arabic. Nearly ten years after it was published in English, *Masha'ir Muḥajjaba*, as it is called in Arabic, was published in Cairo by Nour, a publishing house established by a small group of distinguished Arab women writers, academics, and publishing professionals who felt it was important to disseminate works on or by Arab women. Nour commissioned books and launched a book review magazine. It convened conferences and an international women's book fair. It also considered selected works for translation, and I was honored that the group accepted *Veiled Sentiments*. It took the expertise of a number of anthropologists working in Jordan and Egypt to make the translation possible; I am grateful to Hasna Mekdashi, Soraya Altorki, Seteny Shami, Reem Saad, and the meticulous translator, Ahmad Jradat, for all their work.

Once translated into Arabic, the book gained new audiences. The letter I received from the amateur tribal poetry collector in Egypt came after this publication. The most important new audience, critical for me, was the Awlad 'Ali community itself. These would-be readers were different from the cosmopolitan, politically

dedicated feminists (though some would not call themselves that) who had arranged to publish the book.

As anyone who reads this book and learns something of these families' relationship to the nation-state in which they live and gender relations within the community might expect, the response has been ambivalent. Even when the book was only available in English, a review in an Arabic journal circulated in the region and caused a stir. There was controversy within the larger Awlad 'Ali community about how my revelations of their resistance to taxation and gun laws, and attitudes toward Egyptians, might reflect on them. Those more involved in state institutions or more closely linked in their everyday lives to Egyptians than the families with whom I lived objected. The Haj defended me. This was not surprising since I had learned so much from him. Another awkward reaction was that of a woman who discovered that I had recorded in the book some of her poems. She was dismayed, half-jokingly accusing me of scandalizing the family.

The Arabic translation would now make available to them the whole text I had written. It was with excitement and some trepidation that I took them a copy in 1996. It was eagerly passed around. The Haj began reading it aloud. But it is a long book and it was soon put away for later. How many people actually started reading in the months that followed it I don't know. I doubt that anyone has read it all the way through. All the young men are literate. Most of the girls too have been to school now. Yet no one in the community is highly educated, and it is unlikely that anyone has come across an academic book. They have relatives or in-laws who have attended university, though none of these, as far as I know, have studied anthropology and would be familiar with the ethnographic genre. As I reread the book with an eye to how they might respond, I am uncomfortable, conscious of the strange distance of the social scientific or ethnographic mode. The words and actions of the people who would now read the book had been treated as raw material for my analysis of culture and gender systems, evidence for my arguments, illustrations of theories. This must be jarring. At the same

time, as I explained in *Writing Women's Worlds*, they might be shocked to find in a fixed and public form conversations meant to be fleeting and events meant to be private. They always told me to keep for myself the candid photographs I took of them; they wanted only the posed photographs in which they stood, unsmiling, in their best clothing.

I have not yet had a chance to go back and talk with them about the book because my last visit was so brief and busy—I had gone to attend a wedding. I did get a glimpse of some unexpected trouble, though. In a short chat with some of the Haj's grown sons before we headed off to the festivities, I found out that they had hidden the book. They told me they didn't want "the girls" (their sisters) reading it because it had stuff on women that they thought was inappropriate for them. It was clear to me without their having said it that the "stuff" had to do with sexuality. A book that revealed such things in men's company was awkward. But the discussions of virginity, marriage, and divorce, were, perhaps, in these young men's eyes, too advanced for young girls. I knew, from having lived in the women's world, that they were deluding themselves if they thought their sisters had not been privy to all these sorts of discussions. Their response indicated to me, however, that the old protectiveness toward sisters had metamorphosed into new prerogatives of discipline related to the stricter morality about relations between the sexes associated with Islamism. These young men did not have beards. But their cousins were among those who refused to greet women in the traditional way, by shaking hands, because touching women was wrong. It is likely that the general climate gave them new powers.

I hope that this book will be more than a scandal for those about whom it was written. It captures a complex way of life. It records a beautiful expressive form. And someday there will be more people in the Awlad 'Ali community who are familiar with the strange genre of social analysis and can judge it for what it is, even if they can't put themselves in the shoes of the Western readers for whom it was written. In the meantime, since the Haj has so often ex-

pressed his desire that I use my newfound authority to set straight Egyptians' ideas about the Awlad 'Ali, I hope at least the book can be useful to them in uncovering, for those who are ignorant of it, something about their vibrant community with its strong bonds of kinship and intensity of feeling, its extraordinary moral system, and the remarkable way ordinary people express themselves through a poetry with the power to move anyone.

New York City  
June 1999