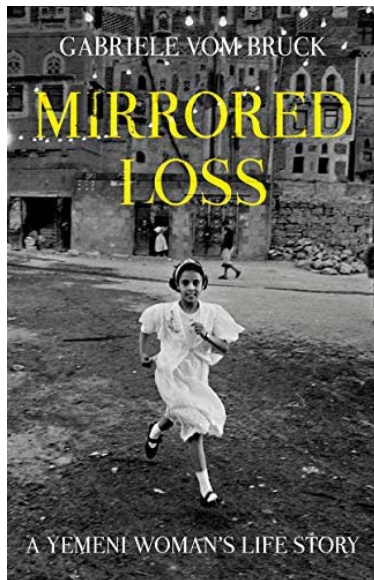


Growing up Female in Yemen

by Aya Golan



Mirrored Loss: A Yemeni Woman's Life Story. By Gabriele Vom Bruck. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$49.95.

In *Mirrored Loss*, social anthropologist Vom Bruck documents the life story of a well-born Yemeni woman, Amat al-Latif al-Wazir, based on interviews with the subject and family members. The author conducted research in the mid-1980s in San'a where she studied the lives of Yemeni ruling families in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Her focus then was on the impact of the 1962 revolution on these ruling families, and it was in this context that she first met Latif. But it was not until two decades later that Latif, the daughter of Abdullah al-Wazir, the leader

of Yemen's constitutional movement, was willing to share her own life story.

Latif's story is of particular interest because her father sought to reform or overthrow the theocratic imamate of Imam Yahya. At the time, Yemen was impoverished and forcibly isolated from foreign influences by Yahya and later his son, Ahmad. Abdullah al-Wazir was a member of one of the strongest Sadah families of southern Yemen and a challenger to Yahya's rule; as such, he was well-positioned to exploit the lack of cohesion among the Yemenites and to harness their momentum for his own purposes. After the revolt of 1948 and the assassination of Yahya, Abdullah al-Wazir briefly assumed power. However, the imam's son overthrew the new government a few weeks later, accused Abdullah al-Wazir of treason, and ultimately had him beheaded. His severed head was displayed in San'a as a warning, as were those of others who had revolted.

The book is also important, in part, because it documents the life of a Yemeni woman intimately affected by significant historical events as well as her efforts to maintain her dignity and self-respect despite the trauma of her father's death and the challenges of two marriages. It examines new questions and perspectives that arise when shifting one's gaze from men's heroic political narratives to the struggles of female family members. Latif, whose father was well-educated and a member of the Yemeni elite, was accustomed to his support and

protection. What did witnessing violence and the death of relationships do to her perspective? How did it impact her life?

Latif's biography throws light on the effect violent conflict has on kinship relations.

Mirrored Loss provides a narrative of Latif's life story that largely follows her own telling and is thus driven by her personal concerns. First, it is a testimonial to her father and an effort to redeem his name and memory. He was clearly much loved by Latif, and the portrait of him that emerges is largely positive, both in terms of his relationship with his daughter and his political aims and aspirations for Yemen. Second, her narrative looks at the events that befell her and close family members in the aftermath of her father's execution, and in her view, how those who regained power often acted in cruel and arbitrary ways.

Third, the book describes Latif's efforts to retain her self-respect and autonomy following her second husband taking a second wife. She explains why she both distanced herself from her husband due to this perceived "betrayal" and yet remained married to him, for the sake of her relationship with their children. This raises fascinating questions about the gendered perception of polygynous marriage in Yemen. Though feeling betrayed by her husband's actions, Latif excuses and defends her father having plural wives. And while her sons defend their father's decision to take a second wife, her daughter shares Latif's view that the decision was an unjustified betrayal.

Mirrored Loss is fascinating as it also provides insight into the lives of the Yemeni elite and their personal and political vicissitudes following the 1948 revolt. For those who have grown up in Yemen, or who

are well versed in its history and culture, Latif's narrative may be somewhat less compelling. For some, her effort to defend her

father's legacy, while touching, may seem too one-sided to serve as history. And while her story provides insights into her own efforts to maintain self-respect and autonomy, she retains a traditional Islamic view of her role as a woman and family member even after she moves out of Yemen to live in the West.

The author makes the case, nonetheless, that Latif's narrative draws attention to experiential dimensions that are often overshadowed in male histories or autobiographical narratives. It throws light on the effect violent conflict has on kinship relations, on the lives of survivors who have been entitled and accustomed to men's provision and protection, and shows how women faced with violent bereavement and psychological injury are able to persevere.

Latif's biography is both her history and the history of Yemen. Among other things, her story illustrates the way many Yemenis have long struggled to find a peaceful life amid the mayhem wrought by war and internal conflicts.

Aya Golan is an artist, graphic designer, and activist. As a Yemeni and the daughter of a Yemeni ambassador, she was raised in Yemen, China, Algeria, Russia, Syria, and Italy. She is an advocate for the basic human rights of Yemeni women.

