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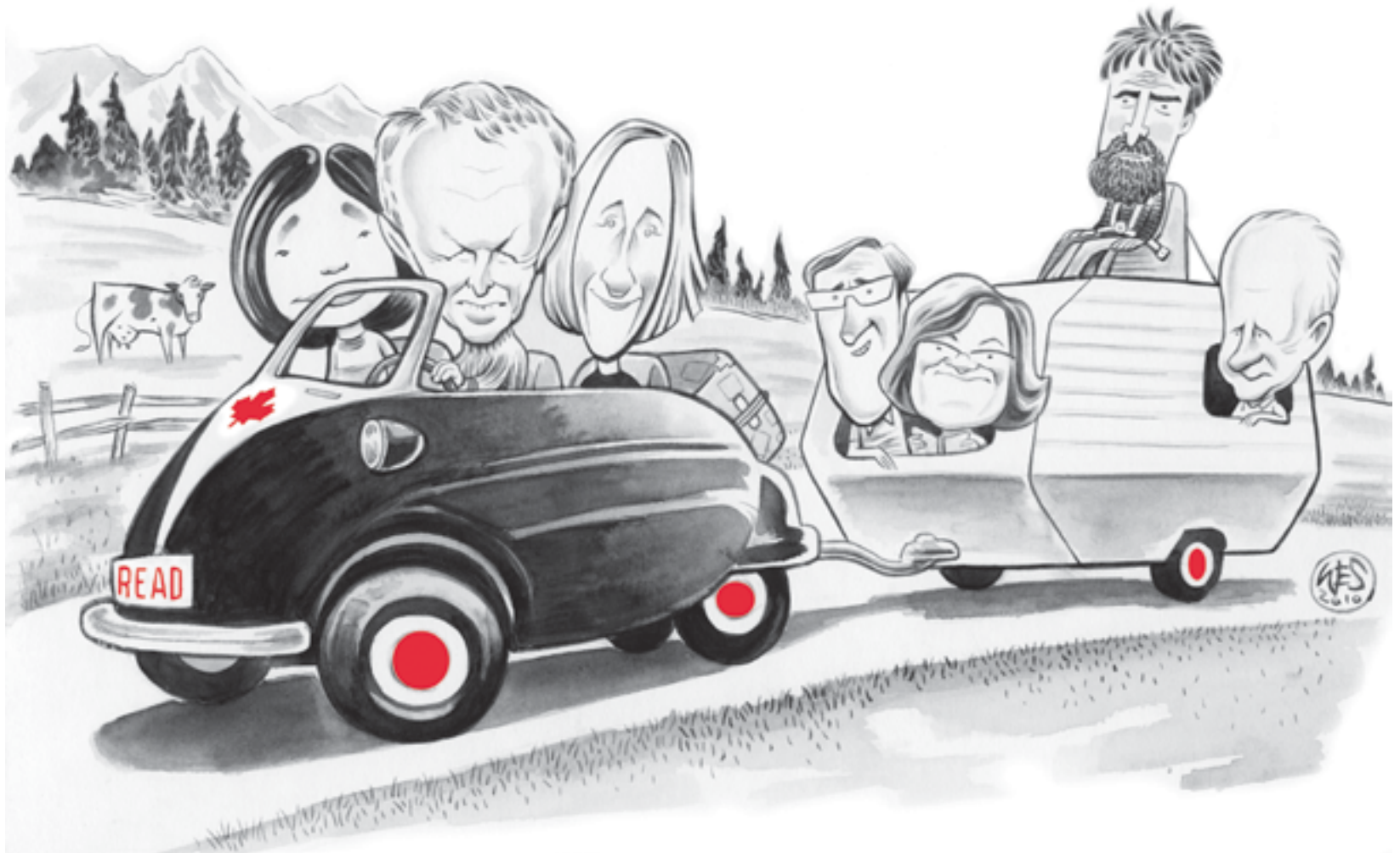
LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA



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## Hit the Road

*Travel cross-country with Linden MacIntyre, Lisa Moore, J.R. Saul, Elizabeth Hay, Denise Chong, Thomas Trofimuk and more.*



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Quebec and the rest of us

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for justice



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# Bridging the Divide

*A Canadian business executive finds common cause with the women of Yemen.*

SHEEMA KHAN



## **Unveiling the Breath: One Woman's Journey into Understanding Islam and Gender Equality**

*Donna Kennedy-Glans*

Pari Publishing

160 pages, softcover

ISBN 9788895604060

AS GREG MORTENSON DESCRIBES IT IN *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*, his fervent desire to build a school for the Afghan village of Korphe was about to bear fruit after much self-sacrifice. Mortenson had sold all of his worldly possessions, navigated through the complexities of village politics and secured resources for the arduous task in the rugged Afghan terrain, when he was stopped in his tracks by Korphe's village elder Haji Ali. Before any school could be built, explained Haji Ali, a bridge over the chasm leading to Korphe was essential.

The bridge metaphor was not lost on the author, and it provides a humbling reminder in an era of cultural flashpoints across the globe. Before either side can seek to influence the other, we must engage in the arduous, yet necessary task to understand our common humanity, thereby bridging our cultural divides. Given the enormous popular success of his books, it is clear that Mortenson's humane approach resonates with the wider public. Most people recognize that conflict resolution begins by doing away with caricatures and acknowledging human weaknesses and strengths on all sides.

Within the Mortenson paradigm, enter the vision of Donna Kennedy-Glans, author of *Unveiling the Breath: One Woman's Journey into Understanding*

*Sheema Khan is the author of Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman (TSAR Books, 2009), and is an op-ed columnist for The Globe and Mail.*

*Islam and Gender Equality.* Kennedy-Glans is a Canadian lawyer and businesswoman with 24 years of experience guiding organizations in the management of ethics in more than 30 countries. She was the first female vice-president of international energy giant Nexen Corporation. At the invitation of female leaders and host governments in countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Oman, India and Nepal, in 2005 Kennedy-Glans founded the aptly named Bridges, a volunteer organization that trains and mentors Yemeni community leaders in health care, law, journalism, education and politics.

*Unveiling the Breath* begins at a seaside restaurant in the town of Mulkulla, Yemen, introducing us to the author's good friend, Dr. Ahlam Binbriek. We learn that Ahlam has become more conservative since 9/11, adopting the niqab. Yet that has not prevented her from striving to improve maternal health in her native land, where one in nine mothers dies in childbirth. Theirs is a special friendship, for each woman serves as a mirror to the other, allowing for deep introspection, mutual understanding and evolution of thought. In the words of Kennedy-Glans, Ahlam "has, over the years, helped me put the pieces of my own kaleidoscope into some kind of recognizable order." This book recounts Kennedy-Glans's philosophical ruminations about gender relations gleaned through her travels in Muslim societies and, in particular, through her work with Bridges in Yemen.

Throughout the book, Kennedy-Glans provides examples from her own life about the challenges faced by women in Canada—most notably, in the corporate worlds of law and business. In addition, she reminds us about gender-based violence in North America with mind-numbing statistics, and compares it with a concerted and sincere effort she has encountered in Yemen to begin working toward genuine gender equality there. She also provides examples of female and male pioneers working side by side in the health sectors of Muslim societies. The book is peppered with wisdom from

ancient scriptures and ancestral teachings of the East and West. Yet we are provided with a modern context by the author's extensive use of international development reports and surveys (for example, the United Nations Arab Human Development Report).

Kennedy-Glans's starting point is the "Gender Onion," which symbolizes the progression from the outer secular layers of the workplace and communities, to

the inner sanctum of faith, spirituality and family. Successive chapters examine each layer from a comprehensive perspective.

Hers is not an archly secular approach, but rather a nuanced examination that is inclusive of spirituality. As she astutely observes, "the West's 1960s brand of feminism, including the paving of a secular roadway over the top of spiritual footpaths, isn't going to deliver gender equality in the Muslim world and probably not anywhere." This is in line with polls conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which show that the role and importance of religion are declining in the West (with the exception of the United States), while the opposite is true in much of the rest of the world (with the exception of China). In fact, the women's movement in Yemen—as in other Muslim societies—is not exclusively secular.

Moreover, Kennedy-Glans sees the challenges that women face here and in Muslim countries as being more alike than most people realize. She argues that "patriarchy exists in subtle ways in the West that we might not want to acknowledge; conversely, patriarchy in the Muslim world isn't as extreme as our Western view of it either." Nevertheless, the author—along with many Muslim women (and men)—calls for patriarchy to be rooted out from the faith. In approaching the subject of gender with a dose of introspection and complexity, she finds more similarities than differences. She also warns against western arrogance toward the plight of Muslims, arguing instead for dialogue.

To that end, Kennedy-Glans dismantles a number of western assumptions regarding women's progress in the Muslim world. Contrary to western perception, "vital questions about gender are being reframed, entrenched misconceptions are being exposed in the Islamic world, and meaningful dialogue is happening." Witness the groundbreaking conference on sexual harassment in the Middle East that took place in Cairo in December 2009 under the auspices of the Egyptian Center

for Women's Rights (ECWR), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The once-taboo subject underwent public scrutiny for the first time, with demands from women across the region to address an endemic problem. According to conference organizers, about 90 percent of women in Yemen reported being sexually harassed (either verbally or physically)—in spite of covering up from head to toe. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Yemen has no clear legislation that provides punishment for sexual harassment.

Change must come from within, and, as Kennedy-Glans argues, we must allow for “breathing spaces” in which women (and men) can discuss critical issues without being subject to western scorn. Wholesale condemnations of Islam and ridiculing of the Prophet Muhammad only discourage debate and discussion. When change is imposed from without, the backlash often entrenches the very behaviour the changes seek to uproot. As an example, the author points to the prohibition against female genital mutilation by Kenyan tribes by British colonialists in the 1950s, which only strengthened opposition to colonial rule and support for the opposing guerrilla movement.

She points to the Totsan Senegalese project as an example where indigenous education, rather than cultural imperialism, has been successful at rooting out female circumcision one village at a time. The role of faith has played a vital role in the improvement of the lives of women, as imams working with the project have been instrumental in teaching people that female genital mutilation is actually forbidden by the authentic teachings of Islam. There can also be a dark side to clerical engagement, however: in March, Yemen's most influential cleric, Sheikh Abdul-Majid Al-Zindani, vociferously opposed a ban on the tribal custom of child brides, organizing widespread support against raising the minimum age of marriage to 17.

In the face of such attitudes, Kennedy-Glans believes (like Greg Mortenson) that women's education is the key to change. She points to the genuine love of learning amongst the Yemeni population, along with the fact that faith leaders are onside—at least when it comes to education. The faith itself emphasizes that “knowledge is incumbent upon every male and female,” and one of its most illustrious historical figures, Aisha (the youngest wife of Prophet Muhammad), was a scholar in her own right, setting an example for many to follow. There are many female scholars and jurists throughout Islamic history, whose examples need to be unearthed and broadcast to Muslim societies. The seeds of change lie within their own history.

In fact, Islamic history is replete with examples of strong-willed women who engendered change and reform, such as Khadija and Aisha (wives of Prophet Muhammad), Umm Sulaim (who participated in military battle alongside Prophet Muhammad while pregnant), Rabia al-Adawiyya (a Sufi mystic) and Razia Sultana (a 13th-century sultan of Delhi). Yet those wishing to bring the promised land of gender equality to Muslim societies may be surprised to learn that this term is sometimes viewed pejoratively. According to Kennedy-Glans, “the term is offensive to many in Yemen—it is seen as a Western value associated with promiscuity and social problems.” That does not mean that Muslim

societies are happy with the status quo. According to the Arab Human Development Report, the progress of many Arab countries is hindered by resistance to women's emancipation (by both women and men). Some (within Muslim societies) compare the condition of Muslim women to that of a collapsed lung, which incapacitates the entire body. A community, a nation, can never reach its full potential if half its members are denied certain rights. And yet, Kennedy-Glans remains optimistic, pointing to a vast network of activists striving for change in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Yemen, the Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Algeria, Nigeria, Tanzania and more. She has been inspired by changes on the ground in Yemen, “one tiny, remote and dusty town or village ... at a time.”

Based on her fieldwork, Kennedy-Glans reports that Yemenis are aspiring to “create an egalitarian society built on laws, human rights and economics—but also a society that enables feminine and masculine contribution in harmony with local cul-

## Imams have been instrumental in teaching Senegalese that female genital mutilation is actually forbidden by the authentic teachings of Islam.

ture and personal faith.” This noble endeavour has been aptly termed “gender jihad” by the Yemenis themselves, and signifies the struggle of women and men for equality in the home, workplace and state. While some may recoil against the use of jihad, the term itself has many meanings within Muslim culture, including “noble struggle” to improve from within. Gender jihad is both spiritually and culturally accurate, and as such, could equally apply in other Muslim societies such as Afghanistan. In Arabic, *jihad al mawadah* encapsulates “the internal struggle for respectful, nurturing, loving and harmonious relationships between men and women.” The key is that Muslims themselves take ownership of the issues and the language used to frame solutions, based on indigenous paradigms—rather than cultural exports from the West. The question is whether such paradigms exist.

Kennedy-Glans points to Yemen's ambitious goals as evidence of the country's intent to improve women's lives: the guarantee of access to all levels of education for both girls and boys, the requirement that each ministry have a woman at the director-general level, the appointment of female ministers and ambassadors, a 15 percent quota for women in politics, public education about violence against women and the fight against the practice of marrying off child brides by constructively focusing on the health risks. These are indigenous aspirations.

While Yemen's national goals are laudable, there is a “performance gap,” defined by the author as the “yawning chasm between government commitments to equality and individual citizens' ability and motivation to take ownership of these promises.” She points to Lamya Al-Sakkaf, a political science student who is seeking to close this gap within her faith: “Islam was the first actor that brought feminism into the Arab world ... The Qur'an states that people should be treated equally regardless of anything. Nevertheless, politicized religious movements have been drifting away from the essence of ... the Qur'an ... to put women down for certain political agendas.”

The extensive research provided by the author should be an eye-opener to those unfamiliar with the rich history of the Middle East (and Yemen, in particular). If there is one quibble, it is her inaccurate information regarding the Islamic version of Adam and Eve (Hawa in Arabic). According to primary Islamic sources (the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad), it is not clear whether Hawa was created from Adam's rib, but, more importantly, she is not regarded as a temptress who caused the downfall of Adam. There is no theological basis in Islam for blaming women for the actions of men. A number of present-day imams could benefit from this reminder.

Those who believe in a “West is best, East is beast” approach will dismiss Kennedy-Glans's perspectives as moral relativism. So will those who advocate purely secular paradigms, in which religious belief is viewed with great antipathy (such as the Somali-Dutch activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali). However, pragmatism usually trumps ideology.

Witness the courageous example of Mukhtar Mai, whose memoir, *In the Name of Honour*, details the importance of her faith in sustaining her quest for personal justice (following a brutal gang rape in Pakistan) as well as improving the lives of others through education and literacy.

The combination of feminism and faith is often viewed with skepticism here in the West. Not so for female activists in Muslim societies, who also welcome the paradigm of human rights espoused by the West. Halfway across the world, courageous Afghan women (and men) are fighting against the Taliban's draconian edicts regarding women. They champion human rights, yet are appalled by the recent call for banning the burka/niqab in Europe (and Quebec). Afghan lawmaker Shinkai Karokhail sees a double standard: western democracies espouse human rights in Afghanistan, yet (some) restrict a Muslim woman's choice on their own “progressive” turf back home in the West, denying her all kinds of opportunities. Outspoken Afghan critic Malalai Joya dislikes the burka, but fights for the rights of women to make personal choices; in her view, “It is against the very basic element of democracy to restrict a human being from wearing the clothes of his/her choice.”

In an age of globalization and the internet, there will invariably be more transcontinental exchanges regarding cultural values. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as it provides the opportunity to reflect upon principles. If we are secure in our values, we should not feel threatened by such exchanges. Instead, we can use these opportunities to learn, since education is an agent of change. And this seems to be the defining message Kennedy-Glans is proclaiming:

Though the West finds much mystical and frightening about the Muslim world, there are Westerners, including myself, who see hope in a cross-boundary engagement on these questions about worldview and masculine-feminine harmonization. The West has legitimate experience with secularism to share with the East. And I am intrigued by the Eastern notion that two parallel pathways to gender equilibrium—secular and sacred—can meet in infinity. Admittedly, there are real differences in culture that cannot be denied. Yet there is much we can learn from one another.

LR