

Aida A. Bamia

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Interviewed by

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Interviewer: Welcome, Professor Aida Bamia. Would you please start by introducing yourself? Give us any personal details that you wish to share with us.

Bamia: Thank you. My full name is Aida Adeep [phonetic] Bamia. I joined the University of Florida in 1985 to teach. This was roughly the beginning of the Arabic Language and Literature [Program]. The idea was to teach Arabic language, only for Level 1 and 2. There was a graduate T.A. from Saudi Arabia who was studying linguistics. My area of specialty is modern Arabic literature in the greater Morocco region in North Africa. My research and study focused on Algerian literature. I taught in Algeria for a long period of time, before coming to the United States. After joining the University of Florida, I started teaching classic and modern Arabic literature. I also introduced a number of Arabic subjects, in addition to Arabic Islamic civilization. The program expanded and continued up to 2005. When I left, the program had already reached a bigger scale. It became possible to obtain a B.A. in Middle Eastern Studies through the Arabic or Hebrew tracks. There were some classes that students in both tracks would jointly take. This might be the case until now.

Interviewer: Thank you. If you don't mind, will you please share with us some of your early personal history before coming to the United States?

Bamia: Let me start with my early childhood. I am originally a Palestinian. I was born in Jerusalem, and my family moved to Egypt in 1948. These were my connections with Egypt [unclear]. I grew up and had my education in Egypt. I remember crossing the Suez Canal. This was a very strange and scary experience for a small child like me at that time, because I never saw a car crossing over any body of water.

Interviewer: What did you study in Egypt?

Bamia: I studied in a private French sisters' school.

Interviewer: Is it in Cairo?

Bamia: I had all my studies in Cairo. Then I joined the American [unclear] in Cairo, where I attained a B.A. in English literature. Then I got my M.A. in Arabic literature, under the supervision and guidance of Dr. [unclear] Huseni [phonetic], and Dr. Anuehi [phonetic] to whom I feel indebted for making me fall in love with old Arabic literature. He was truly a very excellent professor. After that, I went to London and joined SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, where I got my Ph.D. in Algerian literature.

Interviewer: Do you remember specifically what the topic of your dissertation was?

Bamia: Yes, it was about the development of the modern Algerian literature, with a focus on novels and short stories. The novels that were available at that time were very numbered, and they were all in Arabic. My M.A. research topic was about May Ziada [phonetic] and her contributions in the modern Arabic literature. This is a quick view on my academic background. And then came the task of searching for a job. This was truly hard, because [unclear] relations did not

permit giving a nationality certificate to the Palestinians. And I was carrying [unclear] document, which made the task of getting a job, even at the AUC, where I had my B.A., impossible to achieve.

I decided to go to Algeria to look for work, having in mind that I already experienced traveling to Algeria two times before, through my research grant, when I was in Britain for my Ph.D. study. I found those open for me in Algeria for teaching.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Algeria?

Bamia: Eleven years.

Interviewer: [unclear] in the capital city Algeria?

Bamia: No. In the beginning I was in the University of Wahrahn [phonetic]. Then I moved to the University of Constantine. Then to the University of [Annaba?] After that I learned that U.F. [University of Florida] is searching for a professor to teach Arabic. I applied and then came for the interview.

Interviewer: Do you remember, when was that?

Bamia: It was in 1984. But due to the long time to prepare and complete my immigration documents and papers, I wasn't able to join U.F. until the summer of 1985.

Interviewer: That means you were in Florida since 1984?

Bamia: I joined the University of Florida in the summer of 1985, because it took too long to finish the paperwork.

Interviewer: Were you in Algeria while you were waiting for your paperwork to be finalized?

Bamia: No, I was in Egypt. My job in Algeria was terminated. I wanted everything there to be clearly finished and friendly, done. I evacuated the house I was living in, and had all my possessions shipped to the United States of America, where they were actually stored for me in an office in Grinter [phonetic] Hall here at the University of Florida. I remained waiting in Cairo until March 1985, when my paperwork started to arrive. And finally, in May everything was completed and I came to Florida by early summer, when I started teaching the Arabic language that summer of 1985.

Interviewer: Does this long trip and continuous movement from Palestine to Egypt to Algeria, to Britain; then to Egypt, then to the United States, make you think about yourself as a traveler and a person who is continuously moving? What is your opinion about immigration and traveling?

Bamia: These travels and movements from one region to another made me accustomed to new places, and to easily adapt to them. I like the phrase that is written on the Grinter Hall entrance here at the University of Florida, which says, "I am a citizen of the world." If we all carry the sense of this phrase, in spite of my [pride] in being Palestinian with an Arabic background, we would have ended in a world that is more forgiving and closely integrated. No doubt being continuously moving has helped me to believe in being a member of this wide universe. Also, teaching Arabic and Arabic leadership helped me to keep a balance between not giving up on my roots, and at the same time carrying out a mission. I am also appreciative of the facilitations that were given to me here in the United States, specifically in the field of teaching. This reflects the value of human, as a human,

based on his ability to contribute—and not on family background or other inherited merits. This was of a big help to me, to do my job.

Interviewer: After all this period, what relations do you still have with Egypt, Algeria, and Palestine? Are you in touch with family members?

Bamia: I remain in constant touch, and I can't cut off my contacts. I believe I cannot live without keeping contacts with relatives and family there.

Interviewer: Did you go back?

Bamia: Yes, I constantly go back. I go back for family reasons, probably two times a year, even when I was teaching. I also go back for research purposes. I went back to Algeria many times. I also constantly go back to Egypt. Traveling is important also for research and scientific purposes. I am currently in charge of writing an annual article for the Encyclopedia Britannica about the new directions in Arabic literature. It is a short article, because of the limited space. For this reason, I have to keep close to following what is happening. I didn't go back to Palestine until I obtained my American citizenship. In fact, I returned to the West Bank when it was under Jordanian control. After getting the American citizenship, it became easier for me to return back. Also, I visited and conducted research in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon. I also visited all of North Africa—Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia—but I did not go to Libya. I also visited Mauritania. I didn't have the chance or the opportunity of being [i.e., traveling] to the Arab Gulf countries.

Interviewer: After arriving in the United States, equipped with the highest academic degrees, did you have any problem getting settled in the American environment, from the cultural perspective [unclear]?

Bamia: No, because I did have the experience of being in a western civilization setting through living in Britain for three years to do my Ph.D. There might be few and simple differences. The Arabic society had the tradition of being closely integrated, and has the tendency of developing relations in an uncomplicated manner. If, for example, someone wanted to visit you, that person doesn't need to call and inform you a week, or sometimes two weeks in advance. He may just show up, knock on the door, and say, "I just decided to come by and have a cup of coffee with you." This is the kind of relations that I missed here, and I still feel missing it. I respect and appreciate many things in the western civilization, such as respecting time, expecting personal freedom, and appreciation of what people do. However, I always feel I need to communicate with people of Arab descent, and I always try to create this Arabic environment in the house where I currently live, through the food I cook, the readings I read, and the art and entertainment products, such as movies and music, that I watch or listen to.

Interviewer: Whom do you listen to in terms of Arabic music?

Bamia: I love the traditional and classic Arabic and Delusian [phonetic] music. I don't like modern music, but I listen to it from time to time. In Egypt, there are always intensive cultural activities, and whenever I go there, I go to see or to attend some of them, such as those in the opera house. I also like collecting things of an Arab nature from most of the Arab countries that I visit. To link this with my

experience here at U.F., I developed a number of Arabic associations or cultural clubs. We used to organize an annual concert under the auspices of the Arabic Program Students, and we donate the revenue to any group in the humanitarian field of work here in Gainesville. It was a very successful kind of activity, and we used to invite any Arab band to perform. Students used to invite their families from as far as Miami, Pensacola, and Tallahassee, to participate. It was very successful, and I don't know what is happening now with this activity. There were many attempts to bring these activities to a halt. As the supervisor, my advice always to the students was to keep politics and religion out of these activities. I tried to make them aware of the fact that everyone is entitled to his political and religious views, but we are here under the umbrella of culture, civilization, and language, which is by itself a big treasure. Thanks to God, we succeeded in our mission.

Interviewer: How do you look at your Arabic language teaching experience at the University of Florida? Do you think that the students are genuinely interested, or is it just a matter of credit hours requirement for them that they want to fulfill?

Bamia: My experience at the University of Florida, which is longer, is different from the one that I had at Wayne University. In Wayne State University, there is a big Arab community, and many of them joined my classes. While most of those who joined my classes here at U.F. are of American origin, who come to class with the very serious desire to learn the language. They might have different motivations. Some of these might relate to annoying a classmate or neighbors of an Arab descent. It could also be a personal ambition, or the desire to learn a non-Western

language. The number of students from Arabic descent was very small. The rules were very strict in admitting students who already have a previous knowledge or any kind of relation with Arabic to join the class, because they joined not to learn, but to obtain a good grade through less effort. It is also relating to the fact that Arabic teaching methodology to those who have any level of knowledge of the language should be different from that who are totally new to the language. It is true that the events of September 11 contributed to pushing more numbers of students to become interested in learning Arabic. This is the reason behind offering four levels of the language, rather than just one. It is also true that teaching Arabic helped the students to develop their knowledge of many other topics, including English grammar. That is by making the students to compare some of the Arab grammar rules to the English ones. Those who are not good at English grammar have to go back and brush [up] a little bit on their language rules.

Interviewer: I want to go back to the point about your M.A. research. You mentioned that your student focused on the literature works of May Ziada. Then later you moved to North Africa [unclear] to do your Ph.D. My questions about this move from the eastern part to the western part of the Arab world, is there a specific reason behind this move?

Bamia: I was always curious about the greater Morocco region. The Algerian Revolution was at its zenith when I was in school. Everybody had the feeling of sympathy with the events there, especially in Egypt, as well as in many other Arab countries. I took part in the donation campaigns that were carried out in

support of that revolution. I also had in mind this connection between the Algerian Revolution and the Palestinian quest. This came from the suffering and the inappropriate conditions the people were living under at that time. I remember in 1967, during the [Triple?] attack on Egypt, there was a curfew status that forced us to stay home all the time, which gave me ample time to read. My family, who used to encourage us to read, had a home library. One of the books from this collection that I read is translated from German into English, and the topic is about Algerian Revolution. One short chapter in this book is about the literature in Algeria. It focused on the literature written in French, with a very slight touch on the Arabic literature. This remained in my mind when I went to Britain to study. Although my first attempt was to study Ah-whan Asafa [phonetic], one of my professors discussed my research plan and tried to convince me to change my plans. I rejected his idea of studying women's literature, because I already had the experience of doing that in my M.A. study, when I focused on May Ziada. The Ph.D. study system in Britain doesn't offer courses. The student has to start didactically writing his research. It is therefore important to find a topic that interests you, and you have the enthusiasm to do it. I witnessed many students who failed in finishing their research projects because they did not have the full conviction of what they were doing. I told him that the topic that has not been studied, even until now, is the Algerian literature.

Because I mastered the French language, I wanted to compare between the works of Algerian writers who write in French, with that of the French writers of Algerian descent, and that is what I did.

Interviewer: We only have a few minutes left. I want to ask you as a Palestinian citizen who lived in Egypt and then in Algeria, and now you carry American citizenship, do you see yourself as a global citizen?

Bamia: I see myself as an Arab American. But my Palestinian obligation comes on top of everything. I appreciate having the chance to grow and get educated in Egypt, in spite of the too many difficulties that I faced, which I don't want to go through now. I also appreciate the too many good opportunities that I had after coming to America. I think describing myself as an Arab American is fair.

Interviewer: Finally, we are all following what is going on in Egypt these days. How do you think the situation will unfold like?

Bamia: This is a very complicated issue. I think the demands raised by the protestors are fair, and the government should deal with them in a rational way. There are many serious problems that have to be dealt with courageously and meticulously. It is really a very hard situation and my hope is that the situation doesn't get any worse in Egypt and in the entire Arab world.

Interviewer: Thank you, Professor [Bamia].

[END OF INTERVIEW]