

In the presence of Aziza Hussien (1919-2015)

Last week marked one year since Egypt bid farewell to one of her dearest daughters, social activist and women's rights pioneer Aziza Hussein

Amira Noshokaty , Monday 25 Jan 2016



Last week marked one year since Egypt bid farewell to one of her dearest daughters; Aziza Hussein, who was commemorated at the premises of the Higher Institute of Culture at the Cairo Opera House.

Organised by one of Aziza's closest friends, Nada Haidar, the head of the Transcendental Meditation Egypt office, in collaboration with Hussein's family and friends, the memorial gathered people who were touched and inspired by this woman's view on life and her impact on Egypt's civil society.

The hall was packed with her friends, family and grateful students bringing along an air of love and warmth; remembering a woman that was very much present to greet them with her reassuring smile in a big black and white photo at the centre the room.



Literary figures, cultural icons, gurus of social work and a lot of TMers (from the transcendental meditation group) with all their variations united to tell warm stories and life lessons of their inspirational friend that always kept her smile while subtly moving mountains of social taboos regarding women and civil society.

"I remember first seeing her wearing the kaki overall and helping to relieve the pain of people during Suez War in 1956," remembered Abdel-Malak El-Zeini, head of the General Scouts Federation.



Born to a renowned upper-middle class family, Hussein was the first born to a prominent gynaecologist, who was more of a *Hakim* (wise man, a title affiliated

with physicians at the beginning of the 20th century) than a doctor, as she explains in her memoirs *A Pilgrim Soul* (2013).

Due to her mother's illness, her father played the role of both parents in her life, while she on the other hand took good care of her siblings. Her father always believed in women's rights, and was influenced by liberal thinkers Qassem Amin and Sheikh Mohamed Abdou.

He was her main supporter in attaining a college degree, and believed in her right to choose her own husband. When asked "what if she falls in love with a Christian boy from college," he simply answered, "I have educated my daughters to be free and responsible; if nevertheless one of them decides to marry a Christian, I shall go with her to church," (*A Pilgrim Soul*, P38).



She attended the American University in Cairo, where she did her BA dissertation on 'The Prophet Mohamed's Role in Legal Reform,' read her memoirs.

"Dr Shoukry was my greatest gift from God. He and my husband were two great men in my life, therefore I could never join a feminist movement that proposed to consider men as adversaries," (Pilgrim Soul, P.9).

"Ever since I saw her give the graduation speech at my wife's graduation, I was taken by her grace," explained Samir Elish, head of the Central Organisation for Family Planning. "She was the one who first introduced me to the realm of civil society and since then I was never able to leave.

The way she perceived the importance of volunteering and giving back to the community, how she focused on population and women's causes made her the best manifestation of 'people's diplomacy'."



Hussein's first mark on civil society was the establishment of a nursery, or a day care centre, in the village of Sandyouin in 1955. It was the first of its kind in an Egyptian village.

She was a member of the Cairo Women's Club, which allowed members to develop their community service ideas for projects outside the premises of the club. And so the village's first nursery was a big hit, for it proved that the children attending the nursery were healthier and developed more skills than their peers.

"The nursery, as well as the family planning project... granted the Club the first prize from the General Federation of Women's club in Kansas City, Missouri in 1955," read her memoirs. That was the start of a very rich career that highlighted the power of civil society and its impact on social change.



Cyprus President Makarios receiving an IMF Delegation with Dr. Sabek Hoda Issam Nazeer and Aziza Hussein

Aziza Hussein with the TM family at her home 2013

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"Everybody here has a story to tell about Aziza Hussein," remembered Saad El-Din Ibrahim, head of the Ibn Khaldoun NGO. "I remember hearing of her before seeing her. When I was in Washington, all I could hear was 'have you met Aziza Hussein?' And when I did, I told her you must be Queen Aziza, and she smiled at my joke."

Hoda Badran, head of the Egyptian Women Federation, also reminisced on the first time she met Aziza.

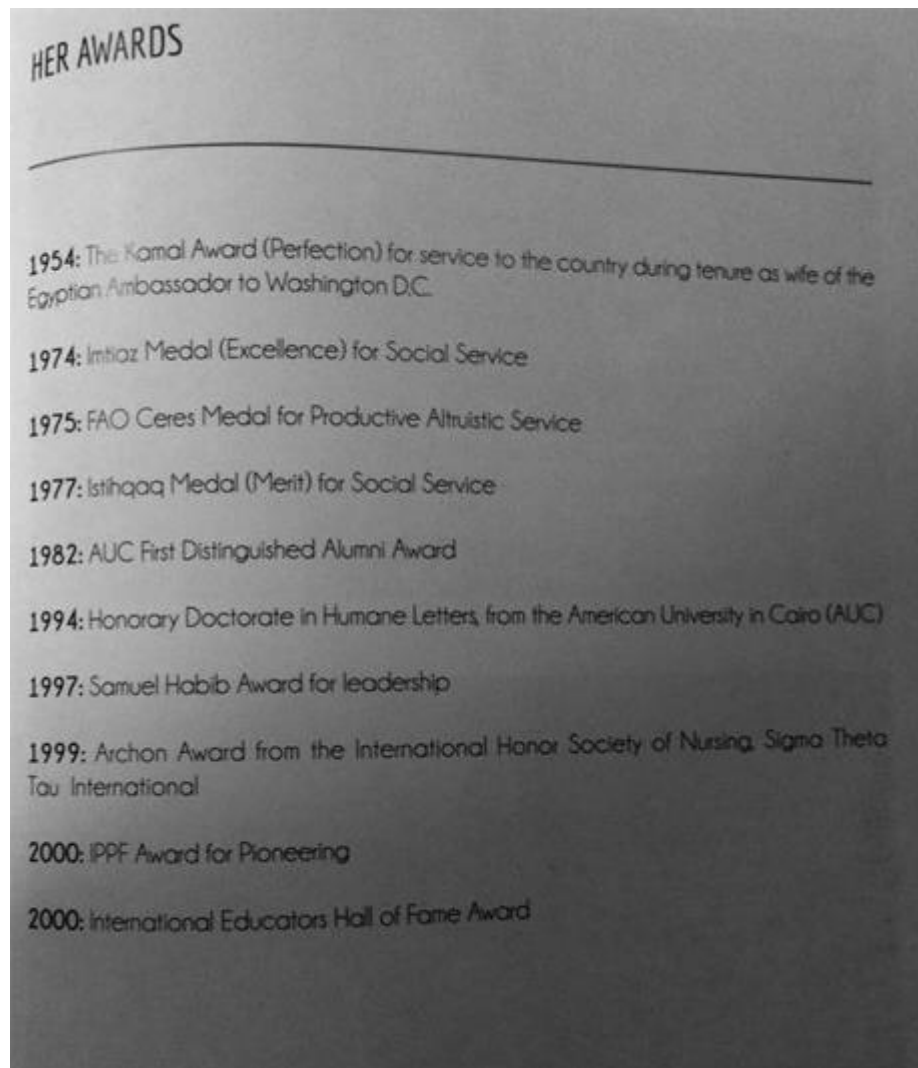
"I remember when I first came to Washington for my scholarship I was introduced to Aziza Hussein as part of the diplomatic procedures, for she was the wife of the Egyptian Ambassador to the United States at the time.

She became my role model since then. Her booklet on women's status in Egypt at the time was the only reference I could find on the topic. On the First International Woman Conference in 1975 she gave me her post, a fresh grad working at the UNICEF, out of her solidarity to younger generation."

She chaired numerous NGOs and her name always brought to mind serious, sustainable community work that subtly changes community taboos through reason and communication. Needless to say, success and admiration followed her path.

Journalist Aziza Sami, Hussein's niece and namesake, said at the commemoration, "My aunt was an exceptional woman, and in the near future we aim to publish the Arabic version of her memoirs, one that she wrote herself in

Arabic, as well as re-launch the association bearing her name and maintaining her social work."



Hussein's friend and meditation guru Nada Haidar described Aziza as "a woman who was always present, providing and helping, and the founder of the Egyptian Society for the Development of Consciousness and Human Potential, which introduced transcendental meditation to Egypt.

Till the last minute of her life, she was keen on hosting the group meditations at her house. I remembering coming for a short visit from Lebanon and ending up living for 17 years at Aziza Hussein's house."

"My Advice for Egyptian women is to have more confidence, for they have great powers that they are unaware of, powers of compassion and humanity," Hussein in a TV interview, a clip from which was played the night of the commemoration. "They should learn to trust more in other people because through collaborative work they can achieve a lot."

Photos Courtesy of Publication handed out in her honour titled: Celebrating the life of an Outstanding Lady: Aziza Shoukry Hussein

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