Together, the society of women gave me the words to write with and their stories constitute the basis for what follows. The picture that will emerge from their stories is not one of homogeneity. Through descriptions and analyses of the everyday and the ordinary we are able to see that although ordinary people carry out similar activities they live their lives in different ways. Musharafah women are individuals with distinctive personal histories which they link to fetching water from the spring, and these stories convey a lively sense of variety, and often inconsistency, in their views on the benefits of spring water and the disadvantages of piped water. Poorer women often live alone, and they feel the pressures and anxieties of being left alone. The meeting point represented by the traditional water point is no longer there, and the shared chores are no longer part of the daily efforts of women.

Poor women in Musharafah are more exposed to the culturally defined limitations on their movements in public spaces, and they are, as a consequence, feeling marginalised and isolated. While women surrounded by their families may not experience a feeling of isolation in the same way, they certainly express feelings of loss of the joy and comfort which they felt in the company of other women around the water point. The wife of the richest peasant, Um Ibahim, talks about another sense of loss. She refers back to the days when other women were fetching water for her and laments the day when the development of a new political consciousness made this impossible. The paradox here is that her sons, educated in the Soviet Union, were involved in leading and following the communist movement in the village. Her oldest son, according to her, was energetic and forceful in his campaigning for peasants to join in the movement and to turn Musharafah into a ‘red’ village. She regrets that he rallied “to unshackle the poor from the feudal rich who according to him were like his own father.”

Samiha, the youngest woman in the group and the one with primary education, takes the opposite view and claims to be happy that younger women do not have to forsake their education for heavy household chores. Still she and Um Ibrahim also share the other women’s sense of
loss and agree that taste, colour and froth of spring water are superior to piped water. Samiha was also concerned with particular emotional and social attachments to the traditional sources of water, and she talked about the exclusivity and tang of ‘winter water.’

In the village of Musharafah, like many other villages in the Middle East, it seemed that the toughest rules and most burdensome roles were for women, and the women certainly talked much about suffering. But they also spoke of tenacity. Many times in the village they responded by simply saying “This is the way we do things here,” “This is our custom,” and “This is how we live.” Although they do not find the need for a justification for the burdens and constraints, this does not mean that women are completely paralysed by the sorrows they experience everyday and, therefore, do not manage to act or react. On the contrary, the narratives show us that their reality is complicated and that they are opinionated.

We will hear stories like the one where the women talked about their own strength and beauty, or about the woman who married a man whose ugly face made her sick. While one woman married the man “she cared for,” another one was relieved that her husband died when she was too old to be forced to remarry. They are women who still complained about their hopeless daughters-in-law, and who insisted on taking grandchildren away from ex-daughters-in-law; others disapproved of the immoral Egyptian soap operas watched by the young—still, they all watch them. One woman has a son working in the United States, a daughter in Australia, and another daughter finishing her PhD in England—the old women are aware of a world outside Musharafah.

*Women, Water and Memory* speaks of many different lives: of an old midwife who dislikes the interference from official health workers “with slick hair and nose up in the air”; of two grandmothers who insisted that a young Ramallah bride perform the ritual of going to the water spring to honour the spirit of the spring and village heritage; of the joy they all show each time they dance at a wedding or the delight when they hear of a birth; of the sheer pleasure one woman shows every time she lights a cigarette to accompany her strong cup of coffee; of the loyalty and shared despair towards families with members in prison, and of the tears of sorrow with each death. And their stories tell of a group of women who discuss political happenings: they speak of the Turks, British, the Jews, the hero Nasser and the ‘traitor’ Sadat; they honour the martyrs of the intifadah, although some tie it to the added