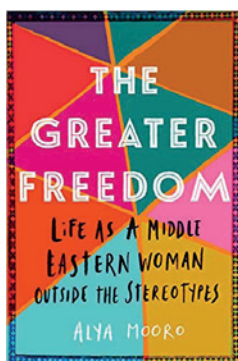
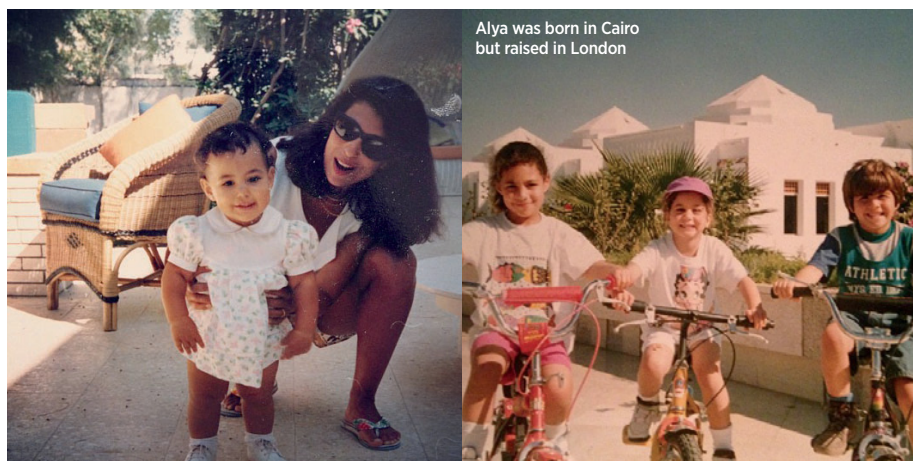


THE MUST-READ TALES FROM THE THIRD CULTURE



The powerful new voice of the female Arab diaspora, Egyptian-British journalist Alya Mooro's debut book is an essential manual for Middle Eastern women who, like her, don't fit the mould



“I really felt like it was my responsibility to open up these conversations that aren't currently in the mainstream,” Cairo-born, London-raised journalist Alya Mooro tells us of the inspiring motivating factors that led her to pen *The Greater Freedom: Life as a Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes*, her debut novel which is released this month.

Part memoir, part social commentary, it is critical reading for any Middle Eastern woman who feels under pressure to conform to society's ideals. A “rallying cry to outsiders everywhere”, the book examines the advantages, burdens and misunderstandings of growing up between two vastly different cultures, while touching on themes including dual identities, contemporary Muslim existence and making peace with not fitting in.

Alya, 30, who lives in London, recalls increasingly feeling the conflicting pull of both cultures, particularly in relation to love and relationships, which later became instrumental in writing the book. She remembers how this intensified during visits to Egypt where friends started to get married and have children, while in London, her friends were in absolutely no rush. “I felt caught in the middle. I started to feel like I related less to my friends, but also felt the pull of what I was ‘supposed’ to do, more and more,” she muses.

It's this that is the running theme throughout *The Greater Freedom*. We see her grapple with dissonant expectations from both cultures throughout her turbulent teenage years to the present day, from navigating relationships, pressures to marry and have children, and the question of where she calls home, all in raw, unflinching detail. Her overarching goal? To debunk the damaging myth that we must ‘belong’ to one or the other identity.

The Greater Freedom is part of a growing surge of female writers from the Arab world redefining their identities on their own terms; from Palestinian-American Etan Rum's novel, *A Woman Is No Man*, to Lebanese-British Zahra Hankir's anthology collection, *Our Women on the Ground*. Alya maintains that she didn't intentionally distance the book from negative western perceptions of Arab women as oppressed, but nonetheless was committed to the importance of presenting an alternative narrative.

“Just by revealing my own life as truthfully as I possibly could is showing that we're not a monolith,” she tells us. And it's not just her own experiences: each chapter is interspersed with interviews with other women of Middle Eastern heritage reflecting on the diversity of their experiences. “The idea that all of us are similar is so boring because it's so far from the case,” Alya adds. “My friends are funny, witty, strong – we're all sorts of things before oppressed. It's other people making these assumptions.”

It's little wonder, then, that she stresses that it's “always” been the right time to hear from young females from the Arab diaspora, not least because they'll be able to see their own experiences reflected. “For women to figure out what they really want, we have to unpick all the messages we've been told and absorbed from family, society and culture. We need to think of who we are and have the courage to act.” She says this is particularly relevant given the lack of representation of Middle Eastern and Muslim women in the mainstream media for decades, particularly exacerbated post 9/11 with what she dubs as the “fear of the other.” Alya continues, “We have so many similarities to each other, and if we can see the human in each other, then it's harder to ‘otherise’ people.”

While she attests to the benefits of straddling two cultures and worlds, giving her an ‘outsider perspective’ – something she says has been beneficial to her journalism – she concedes that she's fortunate she doesn't have to ‘pick’ one side.

“I want to keep telling stories that belong to me, my friends and my surroundings,” she tells us. “It's really important to me.” And not just to her – it's really important for us all. ■