

It is a distinct privilege and an honor to be selected for this event and I thank the organizers for choosing me. It also gives me personal gratification to come forward to pay tribute to an outstanding fellow countryman, who was a role model and an inspiration for my generation, particularly for those of us who chose science as a vocation in life.

The purpose of this meeting is to launch Dr. Rushdie Said's autobiography

Science and Politics in Egypt: A life's Journey

I have been asked to give impressions about the book.. I read both versions of the book: The Arabic and the author's own translation into English. Be warned: The two versions are slightly different as some expansion (especially for the last few chapters) and some rewriting were planned for the English version which was published some years after the original Arabic version.

Allow me to insert a personal note. I grew up in the 1950's and 1960's Egypt which occupies some primary focus, but not the only focus, of the book. Reading such a book gave me nostalgic feelings, and I would recommend it to anyone of my particular background (ethnicity, education or age group). It discusses rather candidly the positives and negatives of the era. My generation of Egyptians can find in the book good lessons on the reasons for the failures in the system: We should try to negate and not repeat them. We also find lessons in some bright moments: We should try to learn from, capitalize on, emulate and recreate the positive atmosphere that hosted them.

The book gives a general portrait of science and the political atmosphere in which it was practiced in the 1950-1980's, and a portrait of the years that followed while living in the US, where Dr. Said spent most of his retirement. The person behind these events, Dr. Rushdie Said, is a rich character, who made important contributions to modern science, and who participated in the political life of Egypt as a member of the Parliament. Add to all this the dimension of an emigre to the US. All this breadth makes the material in the book a historical testimonial of general interest, very much worth reading.

Because I am in science, I looked closely at the chapters on how science was practiced in Egypt at that time. It is clear from Dr. Said's portrait of the scientific life of Egypt that he had moments of pain, frustration and feeling of lack of appreciation. If one tries to get to the root of it, one cannot help escaping the conclusion that the evaluation of scientific endeavor in Egypt is not a question of pure merit: a lot of personal feelings and other non-objective measures clutter the picture and cloud the judgment of those who make the decisions about selection of qualified personnel and matters regarding promotion and distribution of grants and other resources.

When Dr. Said was senior enough to be considered for higher promotions, he had an impressive resume that surpassed by and large the expectation of the promotion committee. Yet, his promotions took much longer than what they should have, the reviews were not favorable or encouraging, and his credentials did not secure the jobs and positions he deserved. It should be embarrassing to the scientific institution and the

political machinery behind it that the founding father of modern Egyptian geology was not awarded a senior position in the academic system!

Dr. Said openly says in the book that the scientific evaluation of the merits of his case was mixed up with local politics and the position of the Christian minority in Egypt. While all this may be true, I add a point that I mentioned privately to Dr. Said: regardless of religious belief, when a case shines it is natural for others to let their biases and sentiments surface, just because the shining case may make them look bad!

I have been in academia long enough to learn the ropes of excellence in science. In my experience such situations naturally exist everywhere. I heard such horror stories about the Ex-Soviet universities. I am not excluding the USA, but what puts the brakes on it in the West is that under democracy and openness the culture induces a system of checks and balances. So, those who want prejudice to take hold will hesitate and think twice before daring to bring any sort of bias in the open.

The lesson here is that progress in science can only happen through recognition of qualified persons, and awarding them adequately with incentives and work environment (such as laboratories, libraries, and computers) through a fair system commensurate only on merits.

The organizers asked me for “impressions.” By the nature of the requested review, I am at liberty to be selective. I am very interested in science, and far less interested in politics, and therefore I shall be brief on this component of the book. The book portrays an era when Egypt was undergoing its revolution with many underlying social changes. The portrait impresses upon the reader that with all the failures, there were bright moments and, at least at the beginning, there was some honesty, optimism, and a lot of good intentions. However, the net result leaves a lot to be desired as many of these good intentions got lost in two decades of greed, corruption, mismanagement, and unregulated open-door policies.

The last important component of the book is about the life of Dr. Said in the US. The presentation of this part is typical and shows that the author has been living some quiet years in Virginia with his family. There are bits and pieces that tell the reader that Dr. Said has been shuttling back and forth between Egypt and the US, and that lately he has been received with high respect and given good recognition both in Egypt and outside.

A good book is one that makes you think. This one does.