

**Madawi Al-Rasheed, Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London: The Construction of Ethnicity, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y. (1998)**  
*Reviewed by Gladys Warda*

We must begin by taking into account that Madawi Al-Rasheed's book is about Assyrians, London Assyrians to be more precise, but as seen from an outsider. Al-Rasheed is an Arab anthropologist residing in London and she took upon herself the task of studying Assyrians, a minority of whose existence she knew nothing prior to this undertaking.

First of all, the frankness of her approach, her humbleness in tackling an ethnic group unknown to her, are admirable. She reveals a warm personality in the way she was able to have Assyrians receive her in their homes and open up to her.

As an outsider, she had to learn everything about Assyrians. It is the opinion of this reviewer that she did this remarkably well. She shows an amazing perception of Assyrians, at the same time being objective about them.

On page 23 she writes:

*"Here I present the community with the voice of an anthropologist trying to understand ethnicity, but not with that of an Arab sympathiser nor with that of an Arab antagonist. I hope that I have achieved this end. My Assyrian and non-Assyrian readers can only be the judges in this case".*

The last sentence can apply personally to this reviewer, who has always lived in a non-Assyrian environment but whose father was a full-fledged Assyrian. Al-Rasheed's explanation of Assyrian history during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, her description of life in the Hakkiari mountains and what this reviewer learned through her Assyrian father are one and the same. On the other hand, wearing another hat, this "non-Assyrian reviewer" completely agrees with the author's views of Assyrians as an outsider.

It is not only the history and descriptions that coincide with this "Assyrian" reviewer's personal view of Assyrians. For example, in regard to "*the adaptation of the London Assyrians*" (page 81), she is quite on the mark in describing the two tendencies as "*a desire to be part of the host country and an equally strong desire to retain [...] heritage*". Another item of coincidence is that of "*employment and self-employment*" (page 95), and also the reference to "*immigration controls*" (page 98): "*kinship connections are mobilised to overcome immigration controls in receiving countries*".

This reviewer's own experience contributes also to reinforce these coincidences. On page 105 "*between confusion and clarification*" Al-Rasheed says "*when Assyrians are asked who they are or where they come from, their reply usually confuses the person who asks the question*". There were times when no one believed this reviewer when she said that her father claimed to be Assyrian.

And last but not least, this reviewer's father was most self-assured of belonging to a "superior race". On page 134 we read: "[...] *differentiates Assyrians and places them in what is believed to be a superior category [...]*".

Al-Rasheed worked with a twenty-person sample in London. All these similarities to the "one-person" sample this reviewer knew shows Al-Rasheed's deep insight as to what Assyrians are.

On another level, this reviewer also compares Al-Rasheed's work with other publications. For example, every mention of the Habbaniya camp brings into mind Pius' book (reviewed in JAAS Vol. XIII No.2, 1999) and makes Al-Rasheed's remarks more understandable. Also, when she speaks of Assyrian history and religion, everything learned in Bugnini's *La Chiesa in Iran* (reviewed in JAAS Vol. XII No.2, 1998) is there too, even the statement that Syriac is incomprehensible to most Assyrians.

But everything is not so serious in the London Assyrian world. A reader can smile when reading about young couples "*resenting their obligations*" (page 68).

As an anthropologist, Al-Rasheed compares Assyrian migration with other migrations. This is interesting of course, and this reviewer compares Assyrian migration to London with similar cases in other parts of the world. For example, European migration to Uruguay (and South America) is not unlike that of Assyrians to London, as it means a "*settlement*" (pages 72 and following), that is, they do not expect to return. This type of migration is juxtaposed to that which includes the "*myth of return*", occurring for instance in the case of exiles fleeing a dictatorship.

Al-Rasheed's discussion of mixed marriages is most interesting. This is also very similar to other cases known to this reviewer, such as that of Armenians in Uruguay,

A most remarkable aspect of Al-Rasheed's work is her questioning, throughout the whole book, of Assyrians being descendants of ancient Assyrians. This begins on pages 41 to 44, and is again analyzed on pages 108 and following.

In regard to Wigram's claim (mentioned on page 42), of physiognomic similarities to sustain the theory of descent from ancient Assyrians, this reviewer offers an amusing anecdote. When visiting the Assyrian sector of the Louvre museum, she found the portrait of an ancient Assyrian who looked exactly like her father!

When Al-Rasheed reports on the contentions that "prove" the theory of descent from ancient Assyrians, one of the arguments advanced is that "[...] *the employment in the levies [...] institutionalized both the martial race discourse [...] and the myth of descent from ancient Assyria*" (page 50). However, there would seem to be something like an incoherence in time with her appreciation and what this reviewer knows through her father. He was absolutely sure he came from a martial race descendant from ancient Assyrians. He came by that certitude when he was very young while he was still in touch with other Assyrians, and before his emigration to South America. He arrived in Buenos Aires in 1923 and

according to Al-Rasheed (page 48 line 11) “by 1928, the levies became entirely Assyrian”. The point we are making here is that this “martial race discourse” was something imbued in Assyrians before the “*employment in the levies*”.

On page 125, when Al-Rasheed discusses “*collective memory*” she makes a profound analysis of “memory” and “collective memory” that would give a more subtle explanation of the theory of “descent from ancient Assyrians” than that at the beginning of the book. “[...] *memory is maintained across generations*”. Here she refers to the collective memory of refugehood, but couldn’t the same idea apply to a collective memory going back many generations into the past?

On the other hand, in regard to this theory, Al-Rasheed shows her objective point of view when she says (page 127) “*the intention is not to establish the truth of these stories [...]*” and again on page 133 “*I have not myself tried to establish the truth about these claims*”. And on page 211: “*We find [...] Assyrians make assertions about their origins to which ‘history’ does not necessarily have the answers*”.

Al-Rasheed stresses the historical events of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But what happened, what was there, before that? Is it only the flight from the Hakkiari mountains and refugehood that made Assyrians what they are now? In this aspect, this reviewer finds that there are several questions that arise from Al-Rasheed’s analyses. But far from this being a drawback, they show how she manages to conduct her readers towards more profound thoughts.

A reader may sometimes feel Al-Rasheed is reiterative, but it all goes to make her ideas clear, and that is something she achieves. At the end of each chapter or subchapter she writes a “résumé” of the principal concepts she explains, all of which makes everything understandable even for those who know nothing about anthropology.

This reviewer highly recommends this book for both Assyrians and non-Assyrians. Assyrians will enjoy discovering their kinship with the London Assyrians, and non-Assyrians will learn more about Assyrians.