

The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies "Gender, Nation and Belonging, Arab and Arab-American Perspectives"

Rabab Abdul Hadi, Nadine Naber and Evelyn Alsultany (editors). Volume, 5, Spring 2005. 279 pages. (All issues available at <http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/>).

Where do you Really Come From?: Arab and Arab-American Women Break Silences

For scholars and students located, as is this reviewer, in places with erratic (or no) postal service, inadequate library budgets, and other problems of access and isolation, MIT's *Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* (EJMES), a multi-disciplinary journal launched in 2001, is welcome in its highly accessible form — but also in its innovative, and critical content. Its encouragement of work by young scholars, including graduate students, is particularly appealing. "Gender, Nation and Belonging: Arab and American Feminist Perspectives", edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber and Evelyn Alsultany (Summer 2006, Volume 5), is the most ambitious (as well as the longest) offering to date and has the signal virtue of being both analytically rich and a pleasure to read, including poetry, memoirs and interviews, as well as more academic interventions.

The editors aim high, with a goal of bringing "Arab-American Studies into conversation with American Studies, Middle East Studies, and Ethnic Studies", while deploying "conceptual frameworks from feminist, post-colonial and critical studies" (p. 7). The reader may find this conceptual roll call a bit daunting — and certainly, no one volume could be entirely successful in this undertaking — but the twenty-five contributions' to this volume break much new and interesting ground, as well as the near silence surrounding Arab-American studies in the American academy. The editors give a fascinating account of their journey through several academic associations and electronic networks in search of an adequate forum to engage with the issues that meant the most to them as academics and activists.

The reader is thus grateful that authors did not take the advice of Nadine Naber's academic advisor, who told her that Arab-American studies was "academic suicide" (p. 8). The defiance of the contributors, and the challenges they face in speaking out and writing goes beyond the choice of a neglected and academically unfashionable discipline. Not only the academy, but fellow feminists as well, circumscribe the subjects which are deemed appropriate for and about

Book Reviews

Arab women: As the editors note, "The 'veil', 'female circumcision' and 'honor' crimes are but three examples that have become the standard litmus test by which our feminism is measured and evaluated, and the basis for which we get hired or fired, granted monetary rewards for our projects, or granted native informant passes to national feminist gatherings" (p. 21). This is a heavy indictment of liberal feminism in particular (as well as the current intellectual climate in America) when some leading liberal feminists embed the "liberation of Arab women" into America's imperial project, and one hopes for further debates and engagement with the multiple feminist publics in the United States. It is not surprising that one site of contention is Palestine and what Nadine Naber accurately terms the "forgotten ism" of Zionism. Nadia Elia's essay in this volume, "The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out," discusses three incidents she "personally experienced which illustrate the silencing of pro-Palestinian activism" (p. 60). Of particular salience is that all three occurred in "progressive spaces" where other forms of anti-colonial and rights discourse might be encouraged. In breaking a series of silences with both analysis and passion, this volume enriches both academic and activist thinking and is well-described by the editors as an "intellectual labor of love" (p. 8).

Disrupting Dichotomies

This volume launches the readers (and writers) on a journey of critical investigations, but, if one was to take issue with any part of the editorial call for this admirable undertaking, it is that the editors sometimes move too quickly to foreclose some of the questions. For example, the editors give as another aim "disrupting the dichotomies (private/public, fact/fiction, oppressed/liberated, us/them)" (p. 8). This seems literally too breathless: if a reader could speak, she might well say "slow down." As a project, it might be more productive to call for a (slower) examination and reflection on how these dichotomies are deployed (and by who) in various contexts and whether collapsing these binaries, or understanding their dynamic interplay is more useful. To use a simple example, the editors do not separate work that is defined as fiction from that "which is considered 'factual' by social scientists, affirming that "we do not subscribe to the fact/fiction dichotomy; we insist that no such "thing" as universal "Truth" exists" (p. 12). The volume is indeed very successful in integrating "individual narratives and theoretical contributions" (p. 13) but this is a different matter. First, a small objection: most of the non-fiction work is in fact poetry which operates differently from fiction, in this reviewer's opinion. Then, without adhering to universal truth, one might well wish to distinguish fact from fiction (or lies from truth, as in Amireh's examination of the work of Victor below). Fictional devices may be employed by scholars — many of us have the experience of shaping character and narrative while, for example, writing

a life story — but surely we wish to reveal what we are doing. In the current climate, the deployment (and blurring) of fact-fiction binaries certainly affects the life of Arabs and Arab-Americans in the United States. Indeed, how Arab and American function as a dichotomy is itself at the heart of the matters under investigation.

Death by Culture

In an incisive contribution, Amal Amireh discusses the "erasure of the political" (p. 236) in "Palestinian Women's Disappearing Act: The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes," examining the writings of Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan and the particularly egregious Barbara Victor (a shoddy journalist who is a paramount example of why distinguishing fact from fiction remains important). Although these writers differ intellectually and ideologically, all invoke what Uma Narayan has called the "death by culture" paradigm (p. 231). Thus, Amireh finds that Palestinian women suicide bombers are abstracted from "any historical and political context" and placed exclusively in a cultural one, as "another example of the ways Arab culture inevitably kills its women" (p. 231). Amireh rightly restores political agency by understanding these acts as "political violence" whose cultural aspect is better understood as a "culture of militarization whose effects are by no means limited to Palestinian society" (p. 240).

Amireh notes that her questioning of the connection between suicide bombing and Arab culture is part of a critique of paradigms in "Western feminist writings about gender and Palestinian nationalism" (p. 228). While she does not elaborate this point, beyond noting a dominant view that Third World women are "victims of nationalism" (p. 231), this wider critique is urgently needed and hopefully Amireh and other scholars will be writing more in the future.

Secularist Silencing

Like Amireh, Lara Deeb explores how uncomfortable political issues may be cast as cultural — but this time within Arab-American feminist communities. In a brief, but thought-provoking, article on "Silencing Religiosity: Secularity and Arab American Feminisms," Deeb explores the conflation of political positions with religiosity (p. 206) and its deleterious effect on common action by women. An important background to Deeb's critique is her experience in fieldwork and extended conversations with Shiite women working in an Islamic women's social welfare organization in the southern suburbs of Beirut. While these women rejected the term "feminism" both for its colonial linkages and because "it was not broad enough to embrace their entire vision," (p. 203), their activism, commitment to social justice, and eloquence spurred Deeb to ask how "the terms we choose" affect communication" (p.203).

Her conversations traveled with her to America and to Arab-American feminist circles where she found that “a disdain for religiosity seems to infect our discussion” (p. 204). Assumptions about religious women (whether backward, homophobic, or always pro-Palestine!) branded them with a single identity and stood in the way of communication and action. Noting that debate and discussion on all these issues occur in both Arab-American secularist and faith-based communities, she makes the interesting observation that “the category ‘Arab-American’ is also implicated in the erasure of other differences, including those of generation and national origin” (p. 205). Deeb’s evocation of the “complementarity” (not the identity) of the various social, economic, political, and social justice struggles in which we are all engaged on a daily basis” (p. 206) offers a way, even if loosely defined, to move beyond the silence. In the same volume, an interview with long-time activist Anan Ameri and Mervat Hatem’s contribution on “Arab and Arab American Feminism after September 11, 2001” serves to ground Deeb’s call for new coalitions and agendas.

Feminist Solidarities

When Therese Saliba and her colleague Anne at Evergreen State College were mourning the death of Evergreen student Rachel Corrie (an ISM activist crushed to death by an Israeli bulldozer on 21 March 2003 while trying to prevent a home demolition in Rafah), Anne, who is Jewish and was very close to Rachel, asked Therese how she could explain the vicious on-going campaign to silence any protest over Rachel’s death. Saliba replied simply: “She has become Palestinian” (p. 217). Saliba goes on to explore new meanings (and of course difficulties) for feminist solidarity that goes “beyond tribes” in a contribution that is both moving and intellectually rewarding — an excellent example of the intellectual labor of love that characterizes this volume.

The Other Side of the Hyphen

Many authors contribute to an understanding of being Arab — and being an Arab woman — in America. Of particular interest is Zeina Zaatari’s reflective essay, “The Belly of the Beast: Struggling for Non-violent Belonging,” which recounts her odyssey as a young woman who grew up in South Lebanon “as a product of war and occupation grappling with its post-colonial identity” and entering the racialized and discriminatory spaces of imperial America in the 1990s. She is perceptive on her initial experiences as a student in an Iowa university where, as an Arab Muslim woman, she was “eager to ‘represent’ the ‘good side,’ the ‘non-stereotype,’ the ‘we are just like you side,’” something she now calls the “showcase syndrome” (p. 80). Describing herself as “carrying history in her back pocket,” she compares the violence of growing up in a war-torn country to the “violence on display” and the danger of night streets of urban America. She reflects on her experiences of student activism and campus discrimination, end-

ing with her standing with 80,000 people in a San Francisco demonstration against the war in Iraq. She concludes: “the only location in the U.S. where I could feel safe, where my belonging could start to take shape, where the history that I carry in my pocket can have room to breathe and dialogue” (p. 85) is in these oppositional spaces of anti-war, feminist, and progressive politics.

However, despite the richness of the offerings in this volume, the other side of the hyphen (American) remains to some extent unexplored, almost as if it is already known and does not require further analysis. For many contributors, America is an encounter with the Other, more than a component of identity and belonging, however troubled. As the editors affirm, “today the label American implies a certain identification with a hegemonic definition of Americanness, the content of which is inseparable from the destruction of our homelands” (p. 14). But just as Zaatari finds safety in oppositional American spaces, surely other forms of identity are lodged in the multiple spaces of a reclaimed and non-hegemonic America — whether embedded in memory, in family, in alternative cultures or politics, or in resistance. There is much to explore here — perhaps a subject for another volume by these and other Arab and Arab-American writers in the United States.

Sherene Seikaly’s contribution explores “memory as a burden and a gift” (p. 189) as she “returns” to Haifa, her parent’s city but one she has never seen. Seikaly was born in Beirut from Palestinian parents from Haifa who subsequently moved to California. When an official at Los Angeles Airport examined Sherene Seikaly’s U.S. passport and asked her, “Where do you come from?” she hesitated, and said “California.” He looked again at her passport and asked a question familiar to many Arab and other immigrants: “But where are you really from?” (p. 195). For this American official, origin was determining — and there is only one answer to the question. The writers in this volume, whether in their scholarly, artistic, activist, or personal life, not only refuse a single answer - they have begun an important search to re-formulate the questions.

Reviewed by Penny Johnson

Endnotes

* Penny Johnson is an associate researcher at the Institute of Women’s Studies, Birzeit University and co-editor of the Institute’s Review of Women’s Studies.

1. In addition, there are eight book reviews. I have grouped the three poems by Youmna Chala as one contribution.