

Women, Activism, and the Arts

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This special issue of *al-Raida* is devoted to women, activism, and the arts in the Arab world – a subject that was not chosen at random. Women and creativity has always been a topic of interest in the discipline of Women’s Studies, and this issue in particular has as its focus the ways in which women of the Arab diaspora channel their creativity in a positive way in order to develop tools of consciousness-raising and a means of actively participating in the history – past, present, and future – of their own communities and countries as well as of the world in general. The goal of such activism is to improve the lives of contemporary women and their families with the outcome having a direct impact on the quality of life in Arab societies and beyond. The arts are one of the few unifying forces for such activism since they enable all women to potentially find a common medium of communication regardless of social class, ethnic or religious background, or level of formal education. One pertinent example of note is found in the work of Lebanese photographer, Rania Matar (for more details see the box on page 6). Her latest series of photos, “The Forgotten People”, published in the Spring 2009 edition of *Nueva Luz Photographic Journal* portrays the lives of individuals in the Shatila Palestinian camp in Lebanon. However, Matar’s powerful images undoubtedly tell a story common to all refugees. Matar herself was deeply inspired by the people whose spirit and resilience she captured on film. The purpose of Matar’s activism is to make others aware of such situations and to remind the world’s citizens of their obligation to right injustice. This is clear in Matar’s forcefully stated words in the introduction to her series, “This is not a political project and does not try to promote any solution to a complicated and sensitive issue, but a photographic portrait of a ‘forgotten people’” (“Rania Matar”, 2009, ¶ 2).

Various art forms analyzed in this issue range from highly intellectualized artistic projects to grassroots movements, the relevance of both being obvious to anyone willing to experience art with an open mind. “Art” is therefore defined in the broadest sense of the term, and includes all visual, literary, and performing arts and combinations thereof. It is logical for art to serve as a catalyst for change and reform. In her renowned essay, entitled “Dissidence and Creativity”, Egyptian feminist scholar Nawal el-Saadawi (1997) defines ‘dissidence’ as the “antithesis of power” (p. 165), and explains how dissidence and creativity are inextricably linked. El-Saadawi asserts: “We are all born dissident and creative. But we lose our creativity and dissidence partially or wholly through education and the fear that we shall be punished [...]” (p. 172). This special issue of *al-Raida* pays tribute to these creative women activists of the Arab world who have lost neither their creativity nor their dissidence in the face of hardship, injustice, conflict, and even war. Some of the activist artists whose works are discussed here include Maghrebi filmmakers Yamina Benguigui, Nejia Ben Mabrouk, Moufida Tlatli, and Nadia Farès, Algerian novelists such as Assia Djebar and Salima Ghezali, Palestinian-American spoken-word poet, Suheir Hammad, and Palestinian photographers such as Karima Abboud and Ahlam Shibli. Also included in this issue is an essay by Lebanese painter Helen Zughaib whose work, “Midnight Prayers”

was recently offered as a gift to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki by President Barack Obama. In “Painting in America as an Arab-American after 9/11: One Artist’s View”, Zughuib explains her activism and art in her own words, an essential component in such an issue as this one since it complements the majority of the articles which include analyzes by those other than the artists themselves.

The issue opens with Theri Picken’s “‘Mic Check: Can You Hear Me?’: Suheir Hammad and the Politics of Spoken Word Poetry”. Hammad, a Palestinian-American artist, is the author of *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) and *ZaatarDiva* (2005). In both of these works, she asks profound questions about her identity as an Arab-American woman and her place as a woman of color in a global community. Hammad’s body of work as poetry is one that builds a cross-cultural bridge through language and performance and is therefore innovative in its approach since Arab-American women were previously invisible in the art of hip-hop/spoken word.

Abdelkader Cheref’s essay, “Salima Ghezali: The Quintessence of Subversive Creativity” is an excellent example of what Nawal el-Saadawi analyzes in her essay, “Dissidence and Creativity”. The Algerian regime considers Ghezali, a prominent woman journalist, novelist, activist, and educator to be “subversive”. Undoubtedly, el-Saadawi (1997) would describe Ghezali’s work as “dissident”, for Ghezali’s creative endeavors “challenge the global neocolonialist powers and their collaborators in local government” (p. 159). Using Ghezali’s work as a prime example, Cheref demonstrates how literature is indeed an art form which can develop out of activism.

In “No Place Like Home: Domestic Space and Women’s Sense of Self in North African Cinema”, Sonia Assa takes a look at some of the most important Tunisian women filmmakers of our time, Nejia Ben Mabrouk, Moufida Tlatli, and Nadia Farès. Although domestic space is usually thought of as “women’s space” which may even symbolize for women confinement and servitude, Assa shows how these three artists appropriate this notion and transform this space into a foundational component in the formation of identity. The work of the female directors Assa cites adds to a long tradition of feminist activism and art in Tunisia. The films analyzed in this essay touch upon both the historical and the contemporary and bring us to a better understanding of how Tunisian women define ‘feminism’ today in their own words. This provides an interesting contrast to how the place of women was originally defined by the “founders” of an early Tunisian feminism for which scholar and reformer Tahar Haddad and former president Habib Bourguiba are celebrated. While Haddad’s book, *Our Women in the Shari’a and Society* (1930), and Bourguiba’s 1956 Personal Status Code both demanded more rights for Tunisian women and should not be discredited, the definition of Tunisian feminism today now lies in the hands of female activists such as Ben Mabrouk, Tlatli, and Farès.

Marzia Caporale takes us across the Arab diaspora and relates the immigrant experience in France through one Franco-Algerian filmmaker in the essay, “The Cinematic Gaze as Social Activism: Yamina Benguigui from Documentary to Fiction”. While immigration in France is a highly debated subject in recent years, such an experience is related mostly through the eyes of male immigrants. Caporale’s essay therefore gives a rare look at how discrimination and integration in France affect women differently, especially keeping in mind the fact that women are universally regarded as ‘keepers of culture’. Benguigui’s films poignantly show

how women immigrants of the Arab world who are now in France struggle to find a place for themselves in their new home while attempting to preserve the most positive aspects of their culture nonetheless.

Christa Jones' essay, "The Teacher as Performer and Activist in Assia Djébar's '*La femme en morceaux*'" profiles works by the only Arab Francophone woman writer yet to find a most deserved place in the Académie Française, Assia Djébar. Jones' essay further supports what Cheref posits earlier in that literature is also a form of resistance and rebellion. Jones analyzes the political, societal, and educational stances played out in "*La femme en morceaux*", a piece in Assia Djébar's collection of short stories *Oran Langue Morte* set in 1994 Algeria.

Finally, Janan Abdu's piece entitled, "National Self in the Work of Palestinian Female Artists" highlights the creativity of women of the Palestinian community within the Occupied Territories, artists who are often cut off from their peers in the Arab diaspora and beyond due to government restrictions in many states that limit, monitor, or prohibit travel between the Territories and other countries. Abdu analyzes several examples of resistance art in the form of literature, painting, photography, sculpture, and installation art.

While this issue of *al-Raida* is of course the result of a direct collaboration of the authors whose articles appear in it, it is also a reflection of a more developed project involving the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and myself. In 2005, nearly twenty scholars and students at LAU and Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio met by means of international videoconference to discuss women, war, music, and activism. In many ways, that discussion was a precursor to this very issue of *al-Raida*. The subject became even more relevant to my colleagues in Lebanon when they were faced with yet another encounter with war in 2006. Art and activism in the aftermath of that conflict revealed another new generation of young female artists in Lebanon and in the Arab world in particular who have powerful messages to convey.

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