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Dissident Writings of Arab Women

Voices Against Violence

Brinda J. Mehta

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Dissident Writings of Arab Women

Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence analyzes the links between creative dissidence and inscriptions of violence in the writings of a selected group of postcolonial Arab women.

The female authors destabilize essentialist framings of Arab identity through a series of reflective interrogations and “contesting” literary genres that include novels, short stories, poems, docudramas, interviews and testimonials. Rejecting a purist “literature for literature’s sake” ethic, they embrace a dissident poetics of feminist critique and creative resistance as they engage in multiple and intergenerational border crossings in terms of geography, subject matter, language and transnationality. This book thus examines the ways in which the women’s writings provide the blueprint for social justice by “voicing” protest and stimulating critical thought, particularly in instances of social oppression, structural violence and political transition.

Providing an interdisciplinary approach which goes beyond narrow definitions of literature as aesthetic praxis to include literature’s added value as a social, historical, political and cultural palimpsest, this book will be a useful resource for students and scholars of North African Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Francophone Studies and Feminist Studies.

Brinda J. Mehta is the Germaine Thompson Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Mills College in Oakland, California, where she teaches postcolonial African and Caribbean literatures, contemporary French literature and transnational feminist theory. She is the author of *Notions of Identity, Diaspora and Gender in Caribbean Women’s Writing* (2009); *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing* (2007); and *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Winner of the Frantz Fanon Award, 2007).

"A unique perspective on women's postcolonial literary agency in North Africa. With impressive dexterity and intellectual depth, Brinda Mehta digs out and weaves the subtle but real links between creativity, dissent, and violence in today's North African women's writings, spanning the personal, the cultural, the social, the economic, the political, the intellectual, and the transnational. By highlighting the discursive aspect of power, the book underscores with authority the centrality of an 'engaged' literature based on civic engagement and social responsibility in an overall context that both informs and claims it."

Fatima Sadiqi, *Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco*

"Brinda Mehta's *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence* is a timely engagement with an understudied topic. Focusing in particular on the diaspora and sites of displacement, she brings into the discussion of feminist dissent a powerful insight that is substantiated throughout with blueprint material and documentation. Going beyond the condescending manner that blighted a portion of the feminist critique, she delves into writings and documents that present Arab women's struggle through art, literature, and other public sphere activity to interrogate forms and types of violence that have targeted women populations. But rather than devising ethnic and genderic divides, the effort in this book is focused on manifestations of violence as strategies and methods that cannot be seen outside the colonial and imperial onslaught. The postcolonial scriptoria is expanded and enriched beyond the colonial encounter. Building up its strong argument across languages and borders, this book is a serious and well-documented contribution to the study of feminist dissent."

Muhsin al-Musawi, *Professor of Arabic Literature, Columbia University*

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Introduction

Inscribing violence: dissident contexts in Arab women's writing from North Africa and the diaspora

In a seminal essay on dissidence and creativity (1995), Egyptian feminist and author Dr. Nawal El Saadawi highlights the intimate synergies between creative thought and dissident action. She describes creativity as a dangerous activity capable of destabilizing the status quo through the search for alternative epistemologies. I argue that dissident creativity represents an act of rebellion against inscriptions of violence in North Africa and the diaspora by manifesting in “revolutionary” forms of action and knowledge production. This anomie is represented by state violence, the violence of coloniality, gender-based violence and social violence against the dispossessed. At the same time, dissident creativity also stimulates important reflections on the role and responsibility of the writer who must give voice to what Assia Djebar calls the “guttural, feral, unsubmitive” (1999, 29) narratives that seek expression in discursive form.¹ El Saadawi states: “I believe there is no dissidence without struggle. We cannot understand dissidence except in a situation of struggle and in its location in place and time. Without this, dissidence becomes a word devoid of responsibility, devoid of meaning” (1995, 2).

Creativity is the quest for meaningful change in a disordered world and it is the logical consequence of political and social consciousness. Believing in the intrinsic dissidence of the creative word, El Saadawi equates writing with the act of fighting for social justice in order to “have the passion and knowledge required to change the powerful oppressive system of family and government.” She asks: “Can we be creative if we submit to the rules forced upon us under different names: father, god, husband, family, nation, security, stability, protection, peace, democracy, family planning, development, human rights, modernism or postmodernism?” (2). Engendering the creative re-hauling of an unbalanced world system, the poetics of dissident creativity provides a necessary tool to fracture “the established philosophical canon ... [that] began with the patriarchal slave or class system and is still prevalent today” (9).

In a similar vein, Franco-Algerian author Albert Camus makes a case for dissident creativity when he stated the following in a lecture given at the University of Uppsala in Sweden: “To create today is to create dangerously. Any publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing” (1957). Creativity is thereby a risky act of public

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disclosure that, in turn, risks condemnation or censorship by “the established philosophical canon” denounced by El Saadawi. Both writers highlight the urgency of inscribing creativity within a certain timeliness and social relevance to debunk the inappropriateness of the bourgeois “art for art’s sake” aesthetic. This modality loses its pertinence in a deeply fractured postcolonial world that nevertheless carries the violent marks of coloniality and its strategically entrenched power structures: “The theory of art for art’s sake ... [is] ... a voicing of irresponsibility,” states Camus (1957). Creative writers engage in dissidence through their discursive ruptures in text by looking for more responsible forms of literariness to “revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world. The time of irresponsible artists is over,” emphasizes Camus.

Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence takes a “responsible” stance by analyzing the links between creative dissidence and inscriptions of violence in the writings of a selected group of postcolonial Arab women. These writers include Assia Djebar, Leila Sebbar and Maïssa Bey (USA/Algeria/France); Aïcha Ech-Channa (Morocco); Laila Lalami (USA/Morocco); Faïza Guène (France); Jalila Baccar (Tunisia); and Laila Soliman (Egypt). My book examines the ways in which these women’s writings provide the blueprint for social justice by “voicing” protest and stimulating critical thought, particularly in instances of social oppression, structural violence and political transition. Its interdisciplinary approach goes beyond narrow definitions of literature as aesthetic praxis to include literature’s added value as a social, historical, political and cultural palimpsest. The writers in this book destabilize essentialist framings of Arab identity through a series of reflective interrogations and “contesting” literary genres that include novels, short stories, poems, docudramas, interviews and testimonials. Rejecting a purist “literature for literature’s sake” ethic, these women embrace a dissident poetics of feminist critique and creative resistance, as they engage in multiple and intergenerational border crossings in terms of geography, subject matter, language and transnationality. Their writings demonstrate their timeliness in circumstances of war, the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Algerian War of Independence in 2012 and the ongoing trajectories of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. I argue that Arab women writers already announced the Arab Spring revolutions in their work by revealing the inherent tensions afflicting their respective societies in the pre-and post-independence years. Their writings in this study span a fifty-year timeline beginning with the Algerian “war story” of the 1950s and ending with the early phases of the uprisings of 2012.

As mentioned earlier, dissident creativity is intimately linked to a common preoccupation with violence and social injustice in all these women’s writings. In fact, the multiple configurations of violence in its most abject forms structure all the chapters of this book. The writers search for strategies to “dismember” the language of violence in their texts while making a commitment to socially informed models of creative activism found in the acts of writing

and contesting. Literature provides them with the necessary instrument to express dissent by positing writing as an act of rebellion against the dangers of violence that circumscribe the lives of men, women and children. These woman-centered narratives favor the cause of the socially abject, the economically wretched, the politically dispossessed and the intellectually marginalized while “singing” revolutionary songs of hope. As stated by Chantal Kalisa: “For women writers, literature offers a privileged medium through which they attempt to resolve the tension between historical or state forms of violence associated with colonialism and postcolonial conditions and internal forms of violence that result from unfair cultural, social, and political rules based on gender” (2009, 3). By giving violence “center-stage” positionality in their works, these writers dislodge violence from the invisible realm of private space and bring it into the main forum of visibility and public critique, particularly with reference to the physical, emotional and social violence against women.

Why is violence an overarching trope in Arab women’s writing and why do the women seek to engender violence in text? Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi offer a possible explanation in the introduction to their co-edited volume, *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*. They argue:

While gender-based violence is a universal phenomenon, it takes interesting nuances and wears multiple faces in the region where tradition, social norm, religion, war, and politics intermingle in a powerful and tantalizing space-based patriarchy. The theme of “gender and violence” is relatively new in the field of research; hence, scholarly literature ... is both scarce and dispersed.

(2011, 1)

Ennaji and Sadiqi reference the many social and cultural taboos that inhibit the public disclosure of visible and invisible forms of violence. The exposure of national and domestic violence is impeded by the multiple layers of conservatism, censorship, state intimidation, gender normativity and morality codes that shroud the home and nation in an attempt to guard the sacrosanct nature of these inviolable acts. Inscribed within dysfunctional power systems of regulation, control and law enforcement, violence represents the language of patriarchal authority, an exceptional form of “biopower” (Mbembe 2003, 16) destined to confiscate individual rights and subjectivity.

As a “pattern for social structuring in the nation state” (Ennaji and Sadiqi 2011, i), violence is a disabling praxis of subjugation, conformity and submission. I associate violence with the physical and symbolic act of dismemberment. The term has a special resonance in this book, as it refers to a dual process of de-territorialization and de-corporealization. The women reveal how violence is configured physically and figuratively in its relation to the body, the female body in particular, through images of mutilated war-torn bodies, invisible bodies, ruptured hymens, bruised limbs, torture, and the ultimate annihilation of the body in “madness.” At the same time,

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dismemberment also has a symbolic value when clandestine migrants are wrenched from their home countries by economic dispossession, only to be objectified on European shores through border violence and sexual enslavement. In these circumstances, dissident creativity is a means to re-member the abject body while denouncing the agents of violence in acts of scripting violence, witnessing, testifying and denouncing. For this reason, Arab women's writings occupy an interstitial space between dismemberment and embodiment to demonstrate how the act of writing against violence revives the historical and social traumas of marginality and invisibility in an inescapable landscape of pain. These "wounded" narratives are inscribed in socially vibrant texts that reveal the intersectional positioning of violence in prismatic contexts of war, sexual subalternity, clandestine migration, social exclusion (in France) and state dystopia.

The following questions structure the "organization" of violence in the following chapters to offer a more comprehensive reading of the different forms of local and national violence that structure and deconstruct lives. How do "trans-locational" Arab women write "against violence"? Why is the dismemberment of violence a major feminist concern for all of them? How is the body dismembered by violence? What are the different narrative modes the women choose to expose and contest the suppressed "truths" about violence? What are the multiple ways in which each writer imagines her own "revolutionary" landscapes and framings of social justice from a gendered perspective? How do they express the inexpressible in the face of social taboos, censorship, exile, war, trauma and minority representation? What is the relationship between dissidence, creativity and human integrity in an increasingly volatile world?

It must be mentioned that dissident creativity in these writings is not a reactive or reactionary praxis of negation and denial. On the contrary, it embraces a more proactive stance in its dual positioning as " ... not only a struggle against but also a struggle for ... a future where resistance and struggle might give way to peaceful, productive and equal coexistence," as stated by Jennifer Browdy de Hernández, Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho and Anne Sérafin, editors of *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* (2010, 7). In addition, the women do not seek to "uncover" violence for its sensational value or for marketing purposes. To this end, they do not privilege one particular form of dissident expression or one specific narrative form over another. The women's use of textual hybridity, as a medium to express their complex postcolonial subjectivities and transnational sensibilities, ruptures the conventional boundaries of literary genre by opening other discursive spaces, such as testimonials and docudramas. This plurality highlights the complex "in-between-ness" of their writings that decodes the violent wounds of coloniality that compromise survival and engender resistance in troubling times today. As argued by miriam cooke in *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, "dissidence is not agenda driven but improvisational. It confronts and engages with dominant discourses. Always

new and arresting, to survive, dissidence must deflect official attempts to repress it, reduce it to empty rhetoric, or co-opt it" (2007, 85). Dissidence stages discursive "arrests" through its unpredictability, spontaneity and refusal to be usurped by the state as a mouthpiece for partisan ideology. For this reason, it channels wide and varied means of expression that resist homogeneity and literalness.

Dissident creativity is more than an invitation to transform reality through the power of discursivity. I argue that it is an act of civic engagement and social responsibility that engages the writer-artist in "unruly critique" (Chakravorty 2010, 116) and in meaningful "disobedience to a directive" (Danticat 2010, 11). Creative disobedience in literature is thereby a call to produce socially committed texts by combining literary activism with ethical consciousness, a creative praxis that nevertheless has its roots in context and social relevance. These creatively committed texts express their "modernity" by contesting the privilege of an ivory tower isolationism that de-links literature from its ethical responsibilities. As stated by Salman Rushdie: "Works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; ... the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, a context" (1984, 2). In other words, a postcolonial text must reveal its contemporary instance by negotiating the tensions between aesthetics and context in an active decolonizing of literature from colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal paradigms. "The writer need not always be the servant of some beetle-browed ideology. He can also be its critic, its antagonist, its scourge ... writers have discharged this role with honor" (1984, 4), asserts Rushdie.

Dissident Writings of Arab Women makes a case for the creative dissidence of contemporary Arab women writers by demonstrating how the women further problematize this trope through their particular gender preoccupations. These concerns demand feminist re-negotiations of questions related to identity, citizenship and personal liberties according to more inclusionary paradigms. The women nevertheless inherit a long tradition of social consciousness, wherein "gender consciousness is hardly new to Middle Eastern society." According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995, 16), "social, cultural, historical and legal questions relating to male-female roles, equality of women, and so forth, have been part and parcel of Arabo-Islamic discourse for centuries." However, these twenty-first-century writers reveal the contemporary relevance of their struggles by demonstrating how dissidence against injustice is still a work-in-progress due to the ongoing violence of history, coloniality, refracted gender ideologies, and politics.

At the same time, these writers further strengthen Arabic literature's critical and creative engagements with "the word" by using creativity to reflect on a particular society's cultural and collective ethos: "Literature is the archive of a culture," states feminist Toril Moi, who makes a case for literature's importance as a narrative of shared vision, hope, generosity and human understanding. She adds:

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A novel or a poem or a play, or a theoretical essay for that matter, is an attempt to make others see something that really matters to the writer ... In this gesture, there is hope – not certainty – that perhaps others may come to share her vision, if only for a moment. This hope makes a writer vulnerable. She has to be willing to say what she sees, to stake everything on her vision, without any guarantee that she will be understood. To write is to risk rejection and misunderstanding. To create a work of art, Sartre writes, is to give the world a gift nobody has asked for. But if we don't dare to share with others what we see, the world will be poorer for it.

(2008, 268)

Moi does not advocate literary authoritarianism, wherein literature morphs into an ideological and homogenous point of view dominated by the writer's uni-centered vision, a dangerous positionality that has been manipulated and exploited by writers and critics worldwide. Instead, this "literature of conscience" encourages its readers to see the world differently through the lens of what Tariq Sabry calls "an ethics of otherness" described as "an ethics of radical exteriority ... otherness-as-care, an otherness 'for-the-other,' and a way of being 'otherwise'" (2012, 17). This revised ontology represents the very crux of creative possibility for Sabry, who focuses on "otherness as a heuristic and necessary ethical modality, a kind of precursor to a more universally inclusive and non-immanent way of thinking the other" (16). Sabry advocates a transformative consciousness that goes beyond the limited and opposing binaries of alterity that remain immobilized in a "self-versus-Other" dialectic. Instead, he proposes more synchronic engagements with otherness through an affirming ethics of accountability that is of particular relevance to the woman writer who has been systematically and dually displaced by the constructed marginality of her gendered Arabness in colonial and neocolonial discourses. As miriam cooke confirms in *Women Claim Islam*, Arab women

... have been left out of history, out of the War Story, out of narratives of emigration and exile, out of the psychical and hermeneutical spaces of religion ... Only by concentrating on their collective cultural production can we see that Arab women intellectuals are everywhere challenging meta-narratives that write them out of active political presence.

(2001, viii, xxv)

By reclaiming literary spaces on which to inscribe their engagement with an "otherness-as-care" ethic (Sabry 2012, 17), the women's writing "seek justice wherever it can find it" (cooke 2001, x). On the one hand, their search exposes the historical and cultural violations that have marginalized their creative output. On the other hand, according to Anne Donadey (2001, xx), this quest creates sites of intellectual recovery "in which they reconstruct their history through the blanks of the other's discourse (be it the colonizer's or

that of the patriarchal tradition).” This social justice perspective both “humanizes” literature and expressively articulates dissent in deeply embodied form, a discursive strategy that, according to Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber:

belongs to the tradition of Arab and Arab American knowledge production and further engages in a “theory in the flesh” or knowledge derived from narrating lived experiences and producing critical lenses through which we see and analyze the social and political world.

(2011, xxx)

Embracing the personal and the human within a politicized economy of awareness, Arab women thereby articulate what Lebanese author Evelyn Accad calls their “femi-humanism” (Zahnd 2010, 7).

This “humanistic ethos of being” situates gender at the intersection of human concerns with oppression, exploitation, survival and historical violence framed within local, national, personal and transnational geo-positionings of self and culture. In so doing, these writers become informed advocates for social change through their revolutionary voices that complicate and nuance the intentionality and scope of dissident literature from the region: “I write against my hand,” emphasizes Lebanese author Hoda Barakat in her autobiographical essay from Fadia Faqir’s edited volume, *In The House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (1998). Barakat’s statement reveals how writing is not only an act of coming-to-consciousness, but also a strategy of “bringing-to-consciousness” all that remains repressed, disavowed and concealed from public disclosure. Dissident creativity expresses the inexplicable *non-dit* (“the unsaid”) through narrative rupture, silence, memory, trauma, pain and the “resistant” subjectivities of the women themselves. These women refuse to accept the unacceptable dictates of intellectual chauvinism and social submission by engendering discursive *fitna* (“chaos”) in text. As stated by El Saadawi:

Creativity channeled in such a way paves the way for change, demolishes outmoded, reactionary antidemocratic structures, and strengthens political and social movements grounded in the struggle for peace, democracy, justice and gender equality ... Creative women know how to live with chaos because they understand that every creation is an inspiration that surges up out of chaos.

(2010, 73)

The act of creating chaos in text is a public intervention that brings the private art of writing to the open forum of readership and analysis. In so doing, the writer has the potential to “influence public life and public debate” (Bamyeh 2011, 1) through the social relevance of his/her work that refuses indifference, disengagement, jingoism and isolation when confronted with