

BRINDA J. MEHTA, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women*
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This volume represents a creative approach to writings on gender and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It attempts, largely successfully, to build an analytical bridge between the study of the political (dis)organization of the region, women's experiences, and the (semi)fictional writings of a selection of Middle Eastern authors. Such an approach encourages the consideration of women's experience that cut across spatial and territorial delimitations. The book's introduction outlines the rich tradition of what Brinda Mehta has termed dissident voices in the region; including from non-women such as Franco-Algerian Albert Camus (2). Mehta understands dissidence as a spontaneous and creative act fundamentally rooted in refusing to comply with societal or state-led power. The authors she examines exercise some degree of dissidence and there are a variety of common themes such as violence against women (3-4). The scope of authors consulted and concepts conjured are the result of what Mehta describes as "femi-humanism," which she sees as an attempt to avoid the fragmentation that has accompanied gendered analyses.

Chapter One provides a particularly interesting account of how women's writings in Algeria have gendered its relationship with former colonial power France. Mehta makes interesting insights into women writers by going outside of the MENA context. For instance, she makes use of the ideas of Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana American activist, to conceptualize the kind of knowledge channeled by women writers in their incisive analysis. There are some possible difficulties in the great scope of authors considered which leads the analysis to overly depend on writers' perceptions. This not so much a fault as a call for other studies to pick up the analysis here and to apply similar concepts in sociological and

historical research. The discussion of *Madame Lafrance* in this first chapter is a case in point. Mehta introduces this concept as a personification of France's civilizing mission (40–41) and a medium for the symbolic violence against women as part of the conquest by the "civilizing" power.

While this provides an interesting supplement to historical accounts of the violence by historians such as Benjamin Stora, who is cited by Mehta, William Gallois, and Benjamin Brower, it perhaps encourages an overly static reading of the ways in which dominant discourses can be fixed as binaries of dominant masculine colonial power and feminized oriental subjects. To give a personal anecdote it is interesting to note that in one social situation in the post-colonial period that this reviewer has encountered, the words *Madame Lafrance* has become a derisive phrase used to question French educated Algerian women's loyalty to the nation. This demonstrates the fluidity of patriarchal, dominating, discourses that can indeed mutate a colonial phrase while maintaining the essential imbalance between masculinist, patriotic, power and feminine subjugation.

Chasing up such particular aspects of women's subjugation and defiance would allow the application of the ideas put across in Brinda Mehta's reading of a swathe of Middle Eastern and North African women writers. The scope of the reading is evident in each chapter, as the sections tackle a variety of different authors. Chapter Four, for instance, reads a novel by Faiza Guene showing how the dominant patriarchal discourses of colonial times have traveled with migrant families, or "beurs" in French slang, to the French metropolis. One of the case studies examined in this chapter concerns young Parisian "beurettes," slang for the teenage girls of North African origins, who find themselves in a double bind: between the patriarchy of Islam and the sexual pressures of late capitalist urban culture. As with every other chapter, the conceptual literature is richly interwoven; in this case the works of Franz Fanon are used to explore the liminality of women's experiences as members of a migrant social group rooted in a colonial experience.

Brinda Mehta has written a compelling and complex account of Middle Eastern and North African women's experiences that stretches from colonial cases studies to the last chapter's discussion of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. The case study of North African girls and women living in Parisian suburbs would be of particular interest to the readership of this journal. The book's discussion of

the “bequettes” and their experience, which should encourage further examination of the European *mah jar* (or *Ghourba* in Maghrebi) in and of itself, could form some basis for comparison of how Middle Eastern migrants and their daughters have integrated themselves in the suburbs of other metropoli around the world. This book’s definitive originality lies in being able to undertake this analysis by framing the themes through an examination of (semi)fictional works. This makes for a book not fixed to any particular discipline but rather emphasizing a humane feminist approach that provides a series of interesting insights.