

Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing

Brinda Mehta

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Gender, an issue that has been in the headlines for decades now, has naturally also attracted the scholarly attention of both men and women. In the book under review, Brinda Mehta, professor of French and Francophone Studies at Mills College, inquires into the subject of gender from the perspective of a select group of leading contemporary women writers in the Arab world whose compositions express the complexities of life for Arab women in the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq), North Africa (Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco), and the United States (Los Angeles). The authors are all Arabs on both sides, except for Diana Abu-Jaber, daughter of a Jordanian-born Arab Muslim father and an American Christian mother. The novels chosen for analysis have widely varying plots, but all reflect the place of women in Arab society and how they cope with difficult circumstances.

The book is divided into six chapters, each devoted to one or more compositions (novels) by a writer or two, whose stimulation to write was derived at least in part from their own personal experiences.

In chapter 1 we are introduced to Liana Badr, a Palestinian woman who has chronicled the devastation faced by the Palestinian inhabitants of Lebanon's Ezza'tar refugee camp in 1975-76 during the Lebanese civil war. As a journalist, she also covered the events at Sabra and Shatila in 1982 and later documented the camp's history through eyewitness accounts. Chapter 2 is devoted to Malika Mukeddem, a descendant of Saharan nomads who was born at an oasis on the Moroccan-Algerian border. Her writings deal with the problems of race, geography, and cultural vacuum; her characters are mostly nomadic people of the desert. The subject of chapter 3 is Assia Djebar, who was born in a small coastal town near Algiers and took part in the Algerian independence struggle. We also encounter Fatima Mernissi, a

native of Fez, who took an interest in the status of women in Islam and in the evolution of Islamic thought in modern times. As a sociologist, she carried out extensive field work in Morocco and published her results.

Chapter 4 features Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer who is one of the most controversial women in the Arab world today, a physician and an author who has attracted a great deal of criticism and admiration. Conservatives have accused her of heresy, and she was imprisoned for a time for her views and struggle for justice and equality. In chapter 5 we encounter Hanan Al-Shaykh, a Lebanese woman born into a Shi`ite family who has written novels, short stories, and plays. Before turning to fiction, she worked as a journalist in Beirut. Another writer dealt with in the same chapter is Nuha Al-Radi, who was born in Baghdad, studied in Lebanon, and was forced to return to her homeland after civil war broke out in Lebanon. In Baghdad she also had experiences of war, which she documented in her *Baghdad Diaries*, in which she wrote about the senselessness of war and the suffering of helpless citizen caught in its cycle of terror and destruction. Chapter 6, the final chapter, deals with Diana Abu Jaber, an American who absorbed Arab culture from her father's stories about himself, his homeland, and his family.

Throughout her book, Mehta shows how the feminine perception concerning a woman's place in society is reflected in the works she discusses. In antiquity (i.e., Pharaonic, pre-Christian, and pre-Islamic times), according to this view women were goddesses and queens and men played only a marginal roles in their lives (the Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ without a human husband; goddesses ruled without spouses; women in early Muslim times participated in the creation of hadith; Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, believed in him and encouraged him in times of crisis; and Aisha, his favorite wife, transmitted hadith after his death).

But women's status deteriorated after Islam became an established religion, due to the male-oriented interpretation of the Qur'an. Women became prisoners, domestic maids, and sexual objects for the pleasure of men. Their standing did not change despite their contributions in the home and outside, in everyday life, and in times of political crisis. Every woman was under the authority of a man (viz., father, husband, brother, or another male relative). For centuries women suffered from restrictions: they were kept at home, marginalized, exploited, sexually abused, oppressed, and kept in a state of alienation and segregation. In reaction, they created acts and rituals to preserve memory, prevent the loss of personal identity, help them recover from traumatic experiences (in refugee camps, during wars, and under foreign occupation), revive them from the marginalized existence into which they had been forced for generations, and break through the long-standing physical and spir-

itual walls inside of which they had been fenced. Memory (through words) thus becomes a purifying force that helps women overcome their insecurity. Such rituals and ceremonies as the *Ua'era*, a trance dance accompanied by prayer (p. 105), and exorcism rites that also involve dancing are ways of communicating with God and obtaining release from accumulated tension (p. 106). The same is true of singing, coffee drinking, and more.

The study elicits evidence for women's inferior status from the novels and highlights their ability to survive even in very difficult circumstances, such as the loss of a dear one (e.g., a son killed in war). Women's double struggle against colonialism in public and patriarchal authority at home drives them to search for places where they can be free, where men cannot enter, such as the public bath (*úammŕm*) and the kitchen.

The analysis of the female characters in these novels is accompanied by an explanation of the various concepts, symbols, commandments, and customs (i.e., the importance of water, purification, the rivers of Paradise, prayer, and ritual law) in Muslim society, without which the discussion would be meaningless or incomprehensible. The authors use their novels to argue that women should not remain deprived of their rights, that they are just as important as men to society, and that they are intelligent and skilled enough to do whatever men can do: they can be archeologists, hotel and restaurant managers, and even combat soldiers.

Mehta explains her ideas in different ways; one explanation is often followed by a sentence beginning with "In other words," which gives the reader a different perspective on the matter in question. The study is full of quotes from the novels being analyzed, which provides the reader with a more vivid acquaintance with the characters. No summaries are provided; rather, in the course of her discussion the author gradually adds relevant details to support her thesis and give a clearer picture of the character under discussion.

At the end of the book, Mehta provides a list of "Words Cited" and an index of names and terms, including Arabic concepts and their translation. References are given in the text itself. Footnotes are rare, and mostly provide references to further reading on the topic in the text. The text is well-written and the analysis is occasionally quite philosophical. The book will prove useful to any educated person with an interest in women's literature, feminism, and religion and gender in the Arab world.