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Abir Hamdar, *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature*, Syracuse University Press, 2014, 184 pp., \$29.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780815633655.

In the opening pages of *The Female Suffering Body*, Abir Hamdar evokes a familiar, traditional female figure, the character of Amina from Naguib Mahfouz's *Al-Thulathiyya* (The Cairo Trilogy, 1956-1957).<sup>1</sup> For Hamdar, in the third book of the trilogy, the depiction of Amina's illness and death is emblematic of representations of female physical illness and impairment in modern Arabic literature more generally; Amina's illness is neither directly depicted nor is her disease specifically named, and the character never voices her own bodily experience of being terminally ill. Amina's story is one of an absence, of a character outside the text, and it is this status of the physically ill or disabled woman being an outsider or a voiceless absentee in narrative worlds of much of twentieth century modern Arabic literature that Hamdar investigates in her book. Offering critical readings of the representation of female disability and illness in several Arabic novels and short stories published from the 1950s through the 2000s, *The Female Suffering Body* provides a fascinating and significant intervention in the field of modern Arabic literary studies.

In her introduction, Hamdar outlines the objectives of her study as an exploration of how the female character in modern Arabic literature "experiences her own disease...how it impacts upon her personal and social sense of identity, and how it is narrativized by the text itself" (9). According to Hamdar, "suffering" is a subject position that has been "imposed upon the women of Arabic literature from without by prevailing discourses," and her analysis aims "to tell the story of how women are able to resist these symbolic discourses and start to narrate their own bodies" (10). Drawing on disability studies in the Arab world by Nawaf Kabbara, Lina Abu-Habibi, and Jahda Abou-Khalil, the author also points out that even when the civil and legal rights of Arab women with disabilities are emphasized through scholarship and activism, this focus on rights often eclipses women's personal and individual experiences with disabilities. For Hamdar, literature is the privileged site for representing such personal experiences, but she questions why and how "the Arabic novel and short story have, for so much of their history, signally failed" to meet the challenge of depicting the experience of the female suffering body (20-21).

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion of the character of Amina, see also Rashid El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83-84, and Hodda ElSadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 79-87.

The first chapter of *The Female Suffering Body* investigates disabled or ill female characters in the prose fiction works of male writers from 1950 to 2000. The author contends that even in those few texts that depict the female suffering body, like Mahfouz's Amina, the female character who is ill or disabled is always "positioned outside the major events of the plot, given minimal narrative voice, and represented in such a highly metaphorical or symbolic fashion as to render the physical dimension of her illness impenetrable" (24). Male authors of this time period have effectively "effaced the corporeal reality" of these female characters, and instead, "the sick/disabled female body is little more than the means to explore larger socio-political and religious questions" (25). By way of example, she analyzes Mahmoud Tamur's short story "Wa Usdila al-Sitar" ("And the Curtain is Lowered," 1969) and Yusuf al-Siba'i's novel, *Nabnu la Nazra'u al-Shawk* (We Do Not Sow Thorns, 1969). Both texts depict a female character suffering from physical illness as a narrative of sin and redemption; the fallen woman redeems herself through her physical suffering. Yet, at the same time, the individual "corporeality" of the protagonists is effaced, and their physical illness becomes merely symptomatic of broader social ills (30).

In parallel, the author analyzes how male authors, such as Ghassan Kanafani in *Rijal fi al-Shams* (Men in the Sun) and Ziyad Qasim in *Abna' al-Qal'a* (Sons of the Castle), have scripted sick or disabled female characters into symbols of the nation; thus, "the ill or disabled female body becomes the privileged sign of the sick, wounded, or fractured nation" (35). Finally, returning to the figure of Amina in Mahfouz's trilogy, Hamdar posits that male writers have also made the female suffering from illness or disability invisible by situating particular female characters entirely in the traditional domestic sphere. Characters like Amina and the mother in Hanna Mina's *Baqaya Suwar* (Fragments of Memory, 1975) are positioned so that the "sick protagonist performs and experiences her illness in line with the patriarchal notion of what womanhood is and how women should live it" (48). Whether depicted as a symbol of social morality, the nation, or the patriarchally defined domestic sphere, the corporeal body of the sick or disabled female characters in these works is rendered "silent and invisible" (60).

The second chapter examines the characterizations of women with illnesses and disabilities in the works of female writers in the same time period. Observing a similar pattern of absence of the female suffering body in women's writing, Hamdar insightfully demonstrates how later texts have managed to "give voice to the female body in pain" and break away from "the dominant norms for representing female illness and disability" (66, 95). She analyzes Huyam Nuwayati's understudied novel *Fi al-Layl* (In the Night, 1959) in which the female protagonist suddenly goes blind due to emotional fallout from a relationship with her teacher as well as Collette Khoury's *Layla Wahida* (One Night, 1961) in which the female heroine mistakenly believes she suffers from infertility, only to learn that her husband is infertile and her doctors have been lying to her. Accordingly, in the former novel, blindness is not treated as a physical loss or condition and is sentimentally romanticized. In the latter novel, the protagonist's assumed physical ailment is a "metaphor for a peculiarly male or patriarchal set of anxieties about the sickness of the social or political body" (71). For Hamdar, Khoury's novel might be read as pointing to "a new kind of body politics," but it "remains mired in the old, patriarchal one" (73). Both novels "ultimately...fail to address the question of the sick female body in depth," and their "representation of sick women remain[s] too close to the patriarchal ideology they seek to resist" (91).

This chapter also examines novels written in the 1980s and 1990s: Hanan al-Shaykh's *Faras al-Shaytan* (The Devil's Horse, 1975), Alia Mamdouh's *Habbat al-Naftaleen* (Mothballs,

1986), Salwa Bakr's *al-Araba al-Dhababiya la Tas'ud ila al-Sama'* (The Golden Chariot, 1991), and Miral al-Tahawi's *al-Khiba* (The Tent, 1996). Hamdar points out that all three novels return to the figure of the sick mother seen in writings by male authors, but her readings demonstrate that these texts offer greater complexity in their depictions of the female suffering body, particularly in its manifestation as part of a mother-daughter relationship. She validly argues that while these novels can "appear to conform to the dominant patriarchal ideology that excludes the female body in pain," they can also "succeed in constructing embedded narratives that resist such acts of textual erasure" (91).

For Hamdar, al-Shaykh's novel offers a full condemnation of patriarchy, but does not "uncover the impact of pain upon female bodies and selves" (74). Instead, the sick mother figure never speaks in her own voice, and her body is "merely the site on which patriarchal discourses are inscribed" (74). Mamdouh's *Habbat al-Naftaleen* presents a more tangible shift in the representation of the physically ill mother, Iqbal. Unlike earlier depictions in men's writing in which the "silent presence of the sick mother" is sanctified as "the embodiment of female submissiveness and stoicism," Iqbal's suffering is made known to the reader through her daughter, Huda, through the "act of ventriloquizing her mother" (79). Hamdar also shows that Bakr's *al-Araba al-Dhababiya* both perpetuates and dismantles "the traditional patriarchal representation of female illness and disability" through the character of Aziza, who is imprisoned for killing her stepfather and through Aziza's blind mother. Through Aziza's imagined conversations with her mother, the maternal voice is recreated, and the mother's body is rescued from "its physical and social marginalization" and situated "firmly in the center of the narrative" (83). Finally, Miral al-Tahawi's *al-Khiba* marks a more direct interrogation of illness and disability because the narrative endeavors to "render the subjective experience of what it means and feels like to be a woman who suffers from physical illness/disability" (86). In Mamdouh's, Bakr's, and al-Tahawi's novels, the mother-daughter narrative is "genuinely dialogical," and begins to reflect "the sick mother as a textual, affective, and social presence in the daughter's life" (92). All three texts rescript the "patriarchal trope of the sick mother," evoke and highlight her "textual silence," allow her to speak, and thus, as Hamdar effectively demonstrates, challenge "the marginalization of female physical illness/disability" (92).

The third chapter of *The Female Suffering Body* examines more recent works of literature published in the 2000s including Hassan Daoud's *Makyaj Khafif li-Hadhib al-Layla* (Light Make Up for Tonight, 2003), Betoool Khedairi's *Ghayib* (Absent, 2004), and Haifa Bitar's *Imra'a min Hadba al-'Asr* (A Woman of this Modern Age, 2004). In Hamdar's interpretations, these three contemporary works represent the physically ill or disabled female character as fully "articulated" and "embodied" (97). All three novels have contributed to the "corporeal turn" through the formation of a new type of narrative discourse in which the disabled or physically ill female's body "is located at the very center of contemporary Arabic fiction" (121, 120). Daoud's *Makyaj Khafif* presents the story of Fadia Nasser, a Lebanese woman who is severely injured and scarred in a bomb explosion that causes the deaths of her husband, sister, and brother. Through the filmmaker Jihan's and the painter Youssef's visions of the protagonist's scarred and disabled body, the narrative offers "a complex series of meditations upon the power of the male gaze" that Fadia begins to resist in order to "constitute her own subjectivity" and construct a brand new identity (105). In Khedairi's novel *Ghayib*, the narrator of the novel, Dalal, recounts the daily lives of the residents of a building in Baghdad while the reader also learns more and more about Dalal's facial disfigurement caused by stroke in childhood and the character Ilham's diagnosis of breast cancer. Hamdar convincingly argues that the novel "moves beyond the discursive regime

that transforms physical disability into a crude metaphor for the plight of the nation state because the “particularity” of their illnesses and physical suffering is preserved (107). Bitar’s *Imra’a min Hadba al-‘Asr* represents a truly “self-reflective narrative of illness” (113). The main character, Maryam, narrates her experiences with breast cancer as well as a series of failed relationships with men. Bitar’s narrative is explicitly concerned with “the corporeality of her protagonist’s illness” and presents “an intimate map of the physical landscape of her body by giving detailed descriptions of the phenomenological disorientation her illness produces” (114). Hamdar asserts that prior to her illness, the protagonist’s “right to identity has consistently been foreclosed by the social norms she has been forced to live by,” but through her experience of cancer, Maryam “paradoxically...begins to experience subjective consciousness without the prohibition of external forces and individuals” (118).

Drawing on sociological and feminist theories of the body, Abir Hamdar’s *The Female Suffering Body* effectively traces the trajectory of representations of the disabled or physically ill female in works of modern Arabic literature published from the second half of the twentieth century through 2004. In presenting such an innovative study, the author has filled a major gap in both English and Arabic language criticism of modern Arabic prose fiction. At the same time, Hamdar’s analyses and observations also raise further questions for consideration and scholarly investigation. Such questions range from how scholars of Arabic literature can offer fruitful comparative observations without slipping into the “perils of Occidentalism” to whether particular interpretations of literary texts can lead to positing normative expectations of how female corporeality and embodiment is best expressed in narrative terms.<sup>2</sup>

It is noticeable that in the introduction, the author analyzes her subject matter via a series of comparisons with Western literature, theories, and discourses on health, illness, and disability. In articulating these comparisons, the Arab world and Arabic literature generally appear as the negative mirror image vis-à-vis the West, and that image reflects a series of seemingly developmental gaps, lapses, and voids. For example, Hamdar remarks:

To appreciate the extent to which the sick female body still remains largely outside the Arab literary imaginary, it is only necessary to recall the rich, complex, and variegated representations of female illness in Western literature over the last two centuries: Where, for example, are the Arab equivalents to Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818), to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm* (1981), and Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992)? If representation of gender and illness in European and North American literature has spawned an entire critical industry—including the new burgeoning field of the Medical Humanities—it is also striking that to date, few, if any, studies have appeared that address the field of Arabic literature. In the early years of the twenty-first century, it seems that Arabic literary criticism still awaits its own Michel Foucault, Susan Sontag, Elaine Scarry, Byron J. Good, or Arthur Kleinman. (2)

Hamdar persuasively traces the limited scholarship on female disability and illness in the Arab world and effectively examines how patriarchal norms have affected representations of the female suffering body in Arabic literature. However, such a lamentation over what is

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Jenine Abboushi Dallal, “The Perils of Occidentalism: How Arab Novelists are Driven to Write for Western Readers,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 24, 1998, 8-9.

*lacking* in Arabic literature, Arabic literary criticism, and Arabic critical theory privileges Western literature, theory, and scholarship and fails to account for the specific historical trajectories and contexts that produce particular literary works as well as particular lines of scholarly inquiry. Additionally, this type of observation is reminiscent of English language criticism of Arabic literature that views Arabic literary texts, particularly the novel, as failing to live up to Western expectations and standards of a given genre.<sup>3</sup>

In the introduction, the author also investigates definitions of the terms “health,” “illness,” “sickness,” and “disability.” Notably, she does not contend with more radical definitions and critiques of the term “disability,” a relatively recent category in the English language, and a term that has also been interrogated by scholars and activists. The author also does not examine the historical development of Arabic terms for physical disabilities, impairments, and disfigurements. Historical studies by Kristina Richardson and Sara Scalenghe have examined disability in the medieval Islamic and Ottoman Arab worlds respectively.<sup>4</sup> While these studies are recently published and perhaps were not yet available to the author by the time she had completed her own manuscript, the observations made by both Richardson and Scalenghe could productively complicate Hamdar’s discussion of the lack of Arabic scholarship on disability by providing a greater historical understanding of how illness and physical impairments were articulated in the Arab world in previous centuries.

In her conclusion, Hamdar states that her objective is to show how the tale of the female suffering body in Arabic literature is “a story of a slow passage from invisibility to visibility, from metaphoric and symbolic construction to corporeal and affective materiality, and from textual silence to speech, self-expression, and narrative,” and her book wholly fulfills that goal (125-126). She also notes that she does not “seek to imply that there is a ‘right’ way to represent female illness and disability with all the normative assumptions such terms carry” (126). However, as one reads through the analyses offered in *The Female Suffering Body*, Hamdar appears to suggest that only the more contemporary texts by Daoud, Khedairi, and Bitar meet her expectations of the representation of the fully embodied corporeality of the disabled or physically ill female character. But if, as Lynda Nead suggests, there is “no monolithic category of the body,” then there is also no single mode for expressing “corporeal and affective materiality” (125).<sup>5</sup> While Hamdar is aware of the multiplicity of ways in which such bodily materiality can be represented, at times, her analyses appear to posit a normative mode of articulating lived corporeality in narrative form. Yet, it is important to note that experience of living in one’s body, particularly a body in pain, as Elaine Scarry has suggested, can render a subject silent or such an experience can be articulated without direct reference to or self-reflexive reflection on the body itself. The subjectivity of a physically ill or disabled person does not necessarily have to be articulated by concrete corporeal references in order for the representation of lived, embodied experience to occur.

These observations are not meant to detract from the very important and welcome interventions that Abir Hamdar’s *The Female Suffering Body* have made to the field of Arabic

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. See, for example, Dallal’s discussion of the American reception of Abdelrahman Mounif’s *Cities of Salt* in English translation.

<sup>4</sup> See Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), and Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World: 1550-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> As cited in Hamdar, Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2007), 64.

literary studies. Rather, they are raised for the purpose of further inquiry and debate. This book will be incredibly useful for those in the fields of Arabic literature and cultural studies, comparative literature, the medical humanities, and disability studies. The author is to be congratulated for such an original, rich, and fruitful contribution to these fields.

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