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Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nicola Pratt, eds., *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World*, Zed Books, 2015, 272 pp., \$28.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781783602827.

The complex issues confronting women in the Arab world have understandably captured public attention in recent years. Since the uprisings that spread across the region, women's roles in political transformations have come clearly into focus. This attention is perhaps unsurprising given the significant role women have played in previous revolutions around the world. Against this background, the editors of this volume have brought together crucial reflections on the gendered dimensions of recent Arab conflicts. One of the real virtues of the collection is the subtle linkage that it draws between revolutionary activity, on the one hand, and, on the other, women's contestation of both traditional and modern gender norms.

To put it slightly differently, the unity of the papers collected in this volume lies in their subtle framings of gender agency, which have shaped power-relations in ways that sometimes support dominant political goals, but which also operate more complexly. The authors address the experiences of women in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, with contributions divided into three sections: "The Malleability of Gender and Sexuality," "The Body and Resistance," and "Gender and the Construction of the Secular/Islamic Binary." In an astute introduction, the editors outline a core question running throughout the chapters: what gendered assumptions, if any, are at work in these recent political shifts? The second two sections focus on changes to gendered norms during political crisis, particularly through women's use of their bodies to contest religious norms. Advanced students and scholars working in the expanding research field of "Middle Eastern gender studies" would benefit especially from these carefully written contributions.

Positively, the essays concentrate on raising questions rather than offering answers or strong views. Shereen Abouelnaga, in "Reconstructing Gender in Post-Revolution Egypt," sets the tone by explaining that it would oversimplify the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt to call them "emancipatory." For instance, in Egypt, while progress was made towards gender justice, the region also witnessed widespread violations of women's rights both during and after the uprisings. Given the ambiguities over the feminist dimensions of these struggles, the issues covered by the contributors clearly deserve the sustained attention brought by this volume.

The second section will be particularly helpful for scholars interested in issues of female bodily identity from different cultural perspectives. The chapters highlight under-examined

questions of women's (actual and symbolic) use of their bodies during revolutionary times. Overall, the essays bring important insight to bear on the complex ways that gender resistance may unsettle cultural meanings. In particular, Maha El Said's essay, "She Resists: Body Politics between Radical and Subaltern," engages radical and postcolonial perspectives to contrast the reception of two women who defied female cultural regulation. One did so by rejecting traditional Egyptian cultural norms completely, and the other through more subtle resistance embedded in cultural norms. During the Egyptian Revolution, El Said argues, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy was "not only demonstrating the probability and threat of a reversed gaze; she was a militant body resisting dominant power structures" (117). Yet El Said suggests the social and political limitations of such "radical" resistance. Because Elmahdy seemed to reject traditional norms outright, she was perceived as alien to an Egyptian feminist agenda. Perhaps predictably, for this reason she was viewed as "Westernised," individualistic, and even self-absorbed. El Said carefully contrasts Elmahdy with Sama El-Masry, who used the Egyptian tradition of belly-dancing as a form of culturally-grounded resistance. According to El Said, El-Masry was able to "decode and deconstruct" cultural meanings more effectively than her counterpart (125), precisely because she did so from within established cultural norms. Yet, this duality seems to invite further thought. One possibility is that the real potential of gender agency in these situations lies in the ambiguous space that they occupy "inside" or "outside" prevalent norms. In reality, it is perhaps not genuinely possible for human beings to oppose cultural norms completely. If, as has often been suggested, human agency is only comprehensible from within a particular framework of cultural meanings, then understandings of what is cultural, or not, are themselves culturally grounded issues.

This point raises an even deeper one confronting the authors collectively, namely about the intention and effects of human action. The issue may be that, whether particular women think of themselves as "inside" or "outside," like all human beings they act purposively with particular goals in mind. The problem, however, is that there is sometimes a large gap between the intention and the effect or interpretation of particular acts. Women's efforts either to serve mainstream political goals or to go beyond them can be understood in different ways, perhaps precisely because political revolutions have seldom, if ever, focused on gender justice as a main purpose.

The question of how women's agency is socially and politically constructed is developed by Abeer Al-Najjar and Anoud Abusalim, in their essay "Framing the Female Body." The authors further analyze Elmahdy's action, amongst others', by locating their activities between emancipatory humanist liberalism on the one hand, and on the other the discourses of traditionalist culture. They suggest that distinguishing these positions strongly fails to portray women's agency (151). Sometimes, women are motivated completely by the aims of the revolution, as in many cases of Palestinian female suicide bombers. Yet, very often, this is not clearly understood: suicide bombers are often caught in a binary of "woman as victim"/"man as defender," which could be seen as a product of masculine thought itself. With this idea in mind, the authors thoughtfully advance longstanding feminist debate about how to conceptualize women's agency outside gender binaries (131). Rather than understanding them politically, for instance, the women were often portrayed by the (Western) media as purely responding to personal circumstances or failings (138).

The secular-Islamic binary provides the focus for the final section, which could be seen as the most normatively or theoretically engaged in the volume. It also suggests the cultural distinctiveness of the movements in the Arab Spring from other revolutionary moments. The essays in this section move from state feminism in Egypt to Aitemad Muhanna's

distinctive exploration of Islamic and secular women's activism in post-uprising Tunisia. Muhanna emphasizes how women of different ideological perspectives in Tunisia have learned from one another in the collective struggle over women's equality. The emphasis is on the potential for common goals in spite of differences in their values and political persuasions (207). Unsurprisingly, radical democratic feminists in Tunisia have largely pursued "secular" campaigns for sexual freedom, in the manner of French feminists of the 1970s, who contested religious orthodoxy and fought for women's control over their bodies. These feminists seem to be at odds with Islamic women's activism, which opposes "universal" defenses of women's rights and emphasizes instead "an understanding of women's rights within an Islamic framework" (218). Muhanna's hope is for the possibility of a genuine coalition between these perspectives, or a mature universalism about women's interests and rights, formed through the overlap and interaction between different normative perspectives.

This optimism about coalition-forming seems well supported by practical experience. Yet, some feminists would probably be more reticent than Muhanna about the hope of feminist agreement on controversial issues such as the framing of human rights norms. The challenge that confronts all Middle Eastern feminisms generally may be of somehow finding a means of transcending the dualisms of human rights universalism and particularism. Recent feminist theorizing has offered creative "postcolonial" and "decolonial" perspectives which might further support the coalition strategy that Muhanna recommends.<sup>1</sup> These perspectives might help to support practice, when issues such as modernization, cultural alienation, and a possible "backlash" against women who resist gendered cultural codes arise.

The volume, finally, contains a highly useful and carefully developed conclusion. The editors bring home the core themes, and further suggest the challenges of understanding the emancipatory potential of women's agency. Again, they raise questions rather than offer solutions or recommendations. The editors use this final space to ask, for instance, how dance or less conventional aesthetic expression, including graffiti, posters, and related artworks (238), may help to break down gender stereotypes and promote interest in equality and freedom in these regions. They accept that this theorizing may be done in the Arab Spring through neutral "human rights" discourse of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] (236), but that other, perhaps more challenging frameworks might be developed too. One possibility is Judith Butler's well known idea of gender performativity, which she explains in the following way: "the question of *agency* (at once 'ontological' and 'epistemological') is reformulated as a question of how signification and re-signification work" (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [London and New York: Routledge, 1999], 184 as cited on p. 236). Gender is not something that "is," but rather something that people "do." It therefore seems right to say that "women's resistance cannot be reduced to a universal modality of subversion of/subordination to patriarchy. *The meanings and means of resistance are historically*

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<sup>1</sup> For recent postcolonial feminist perspectives, see: Sondra Hale, "The New Middle East: Insurrections and Other Subversions of the Modernist Frame," *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2014): 40-61. See also: Lucia Sobera, "Challenges of Thinking Feminism and Revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014," *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2014): 63-75. For recent examinations of "decolonial" feminism (which is historically grounded and associated with Latin America and the Caribbean rather than the Middle East, however), see: Isis Giraldo, "Coloniality at Work: Decolonial Critique and the Postfeminist Regime," *Feminist Theory* 28 (2016) and G. Dietz, "Decolonizing Gender – Gendering Decolonial Theory: Cross-Currents and Archaeologies," in Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, eds., *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality: Black Critique: Joints and Fissures* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014).

*constituted*’ (237, emphasis added). The editors of the volume are thereby able to operate with what seems to be a more “complex ontology” for studying the role of women’s agency in everyday life, for instance outside formal institutions such as parliaments, judiciaries, or within elections.

Of course, one problem that feminists might then confront is normative: when and how an act should be called “revolutionary” (if this is, if abstractly, one of the questions raised). I am not suggesting that the editors could have fully answered this question, as the aim of the volume is to open the debate rather than to give the “last word” on the particular issue. Feminists, in particular, might be led to ask whether theoretical concepts like gender performativity can help to answer the normative questions of what should be deemed “emancipatory” or “progressive.” If this is a fair question, the problem is that answering it is fraught with difficulties—not least, because what is “emancipatory” may only be discernible or understood from a particular framework of meaning, or, perhaps, from a particular “ideological” point of view.

Finally, this is an accomplished and insightful volume, which will be of great interest to scholars working in this burgeoning research field. In the short space of this review, it would of course be a challenge to suggest answers to the complex questions that the authors collectively raise concerning female emancipation and resistance, and concerning the gendered implications of the distinction between the “traditional” and the “modern.” Yet the relationship of these concepts to broader agendas for social justice in the Middle East today clearly deserves the attention that the authors collectively devote. It seems likely that any answers to these questions will be at once historically and geographically specific and connected with universal ideals of justice.

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