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Review Essay: Arab Women's Writing as Acts of Resistance

Review: *Gendering Civil War: Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon* by Mireille Rebeiz, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 250 pp., ISBN 978 1 4744 9928 6, h/bk £87.00, p/bk £19.99, e-book £19.99.

Review: *Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing and the Politics of Resistance* by Hiyem Cheurfa, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. 282 pp., ISBN 978 1 4744 8971 3, h/bk £90.00, p/bk £19.99, e-book £19.99.

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A review essay on *Gendering Civil War: Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon* by Mireille Rebeiz (2022) and *Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing and the Politics of Resistance* by Hiyem Cheurfa (2023).

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Mireille Rebeiz's *Gendering Civil War: Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon* (2023) and Hiyem Cheurfa's *Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing and the Politics of Resistance* (2024) highlight the role of women's writing in combating oppressive patriarchal regimes and narratives. On the surface, the two books might seem only marginally connected. However, reading Rebeiz's and Cheurfa's works exemplifies how women's writings across the Arab world are connected through their various genres and languages. Whether it is semi-autobiographical novels written in French, memoirs written in English, or diaries in Arabic, women's writings across the Arab world tackle the political and social position of women head on.

Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing is divided into five chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter is not concerned with a particular close reading of a selected corpus. Rather, Cheurfa 'provides a short survey of Arab women's life writing' (2024: 39) in the national context of the twentieth century. By life writing, Cheurfa includes autobiographies, testimonies, diaries, and blogs written by women from Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, to name a few. Following up on her introduction, Cheurfa further contextualises Arab women's life writing in the Arab world in order to strengthen her argument in the following chapters, namely that Arab women's life writing, in its various forms, acts as a tool of resistance in patriarchal Arab societies and highlights the voice and agency of Arab women socially and politically. Chapter Two brings into conversation autobiographical texts by Radwa Ashour and Maissa Bey in regards to their 'autobiographical subjectivity' (2024: 65), with close attention paid to the writers' experimentation within the genre.

Chapter Three is more focused than the previous two chapters, as it investigates resistance in the testimonial life writing of Samar Yazbek and Suad Amiry. This chapter is politically engaged in its corpus and analysis, positioning personal testimony as a tool of resistance in violent contexts. Yazbek writes as she grapples with her position amidst the Syrian revolution (and its implosion into civil war) and her subsequent exile, while Amiry chronicles her life under Israeli occupation. Continuing with Suad Amiry's work, Chapter Four turns towards 'strategic functions of humour' (2024: 145) in resisting oppressive regimes in Palestine (Amiry's *Sharon and My Mother-in-law: Ramallah Diaries* [2006]) and in Egypt (*Revolution is My Name: an Egyptian Woman's Diary from Eighteen Days in Tahrir* [2014]). Chapter Five takes on another genre of life writing: Arab women's digital life writing, mainly focusing on Lina Ben Mhenni's *Tunisian Girl, Bnayyah Tunsiiyyah: Blogueuse pour un printemps arabe* (2011). This final chapter is a welcome addition, as digital life writing has taken an important role as a tool of chronicling protest and life under oppressive regimes and war in the Arab world.

Hiyem Cheurfa's *Contemporary Arab Women's Life Writing and the Politics of Resistance* positions itself within the emerging scholarly interest in Arabic life writing, bringing together literature from across the Arab world and of different linguistic contexts (2024: 2). Cheurfa's work is explicit in its political dimensions, with the corpus focusing on women who engaged in the politics of their countries directly in their writing. Resistance is a core conceptual framework here, and its political contexts are not ignored; Cheurfa aims to explore the importance of resistance and how it is articulated in Arab women's life writing (2024: 5). In doing so, she distances her work from dominant Western approaches to life writing, drawing instead on postcolonial studies as well as feminist autobiographical theory (2024: 13). Her thorough research into Arabic autobiographical tradition and engagement in the political landscapes of writers such as Radwa Ashour, Suad Amiry, and Mona Prince further underscores her convincing arguments and close readings, and Cheurfa skilfully links the political contexts of her corpus with her own theoretical approach.

Cheurfa's book does well in reflecting the skill and depth of Arab women's life writing and their position in the postcolonial literary landscape of the Arab world. Despite the broadness of the literature included, Cheurfa is able to demonstrate why Arab women's life writing deserves more recognition, and presents the genre as a varied and important strategic tool of resistance. She is successful in articulating how the writers 'create narratives that document the conditions, the various forms and drives of popular dissent' (2024: 21). The writers' own entanglement with politics and activism drive in light of authoritarian regimes (Syria), occupation (Palestine), or the Arab Spring (Egypt and North Africa) affirm Cheurfa's claim that the writings 'become bound with activism' (2024: 21). The book also highlights the different strategies employed by these writers: testimonial writing, humour, and digital diaries are all used in service of resisting oppressive regimes. Cheurfa successfully shows the link between life writing and the personal experiences of the women writers, who put themselves at the centre of acts of dissidence, and in Amiry's case perform acts of 'unheroic dissidence' (2024: 160) that further exemplify how women can utilise the gender binaries they are attempting to break through for their own cause. The book enriches both fields of women's writing and postcolonial literature, with its strong literary and political engagement, building on previous works in the field by Golley (2010), Anishchenkova (2014), and Hachad (2019) to cite a few.

Nonetheless, the book is not without shortcomings. Cheurfa's understanding of testimony in Samar Yazbek's work connects it to collective memory (2024: 125) without a proper exploration of this critical context. Similarly to Rebeiz's attempt to find a national collective memory of the Lebanese civil war (2024: 37), Cheurfa links

the personal memory writing to the national, claiming that ‘Yazbek’s duty to unmute the collective narrative of the civil war [...] becomes urgent and imperative’ (2024: 126). Yet, this collective memory is not elucidated on, with Yazbek herself claiming to write to and for ‘the martyrs of the betrayed Syrian revolution’ (Yazbek, 2015, cited and translated by Cheurfa). The book could benefit from a closer engagement with the representation of memory in Arabic literature (see Qutait 2021; Mehta 2007) and a more solid explanation of collective memory and memory cultures (see Haugbolle 2010), particularly as Cheurfa herself admits that testimonial life writings are ‘subjective personal narratives as opposed to facts’ (2024: 127). Whose collective memory is Yazbek representing? And what is the place of the eyewitness in literary memory? Perhaps similarly to Francophone women’s writing, Arab women’s life writing does not represent a collective memory, but a counter-memory, one that is essential in amplifying the voices of women in the Arab world.

Rebeiz’s *Gendering Civil War* is divided into two parts: Part I is titled ‘The Narrative Voice’ and contains two chapters. Chapter One focuses on the use of the ‘feminine I’ narrative and its expression of trauma in Georgia Makhoul’s *Les Absents* (2014) and Etel Adnan’s *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978). Rebeiz explores how the feminine I – intentionally chosen in lieu of the feminist ‘I’ (2023: 38) – resists patriarchal narratives and aims to ‘record history as it unfolds’ (2023: 78). The distinction between history and memory is not explored, and this would have added a necessary dimension to the book’s exploration of trauma narratives in light of Lebanon’s contested memory of the war. Chapter Two focuses on the omniscient narrator in André Chedid’s *La Maison sans racines* (1985) and *Le Message* (2000), and Evelyne Accad’s *Coquelicot du massacre* (1988), which adopt a ‘moralist superior point of view’ in order to ‘silence the sounds of war’ (2023: 118).

The second part of the book, titled ‘The Narrative Body’, is similarly divided into two chapters. Chapters three and four analyse the grotesque female body as a narrative tool, looking at Vénus Khoury Ghata’s *La Maîtresse du notable* (1992), *Vacarme pour une lune morte* (1983), and *Les Morts n’ont pas d’ombre* (1984), alongside Hyam Yared’s *La Malédiction* (2012) and *L’Armoire des ombres* (2006). In particular, Rebeiz looks at the female body as a metaphor for the various elements of the war, with a theoretical focus on the grotesque and magical realism.

Rebeiz’s chapters are interconnected in that they concern feminine narratives of the war, but they are distinguished by their theoretical engagements. Her work draws on an extensive list of theoretical contexts, from trauma and memory studies to magical realism and Bakhtin’s work on grotesque realism. Rebeiz’s main concern is to investigate how feminist Lebanese Francophone writing reflects and represents the Lebanese Civil War. Employing a classical and post-classical narratological lens, Rebeiz argues that

Lebanese Francophone writers employ a feminist voice that aims to resist patriarchal norms and ‘combat the state-sponsored amnesia and amnesty’ (2023: 37) of the war.

Gendering Civil War adopts a narratological lens to close read Francophone Lebanese novels. This approach is used to ‘read the corpus in light of contextual narratology’ with which Rebeiz attempts to ‘interpret the interaction between the form and content’ (2023: 10). She is careful in her analysis of narrative devices and applies post-classical narratology through a feminist reading of the novels. The book purports to be the first to ‘apply post-classical narratology to non-Western literature of French expression’ (2023: 3). However, her approach contains multiple caveats: Rebeiz ignores the issue of language, relies primarily on Western critics and theories, and distances close reading from the broader discipline of Lebanese women’s writing. These caveats mean that the book exists within its own bubble. The result is a narratological approach to Francophone Lebanese literature that focuses on the novels’ narrative techniques in a detached, literary sense. When close readings are put into conversation with the novels’ contexts, the result is stilted and unconvincing. The book relies on generalised arguments, such as ‘trauma is collective and national’ and ‘feminist discourse has been unkind in its representation of motherhood’ (2023: 125). The result is a confusing reading of the literature that does not delve deep into the themes of exile and trauma, and relies too heavily on singular sources, such as Freud and Caruth, that conflict with the author’s claim of using postcolonial narratology in her analysis. One such example is the analysis of Flora in *La Maîtresse du notable* as ‘the silence of Western countries’ (2023: 125) and a ‘destructive presence in the Middle East’ (2023: 126). Rebeiz is successful in applying a purely post-classical narratological approach in her close reading, but less so in making that approach speak to the broader scope of the novels and their writers.

These limitations notwithstanding, the book offers a new perspective on francophone women’s writing in Lebanon. Narratology has not taken a foothold in Lebanese war literature and Rebeiz may be the first to employ narratology in her analysis of the field. Her analysis of the feminine ‘I’ exemplifies the fragility and pressures that feminist narratives have to contend with. The silencing of the feminine ‘I’ is not merely the silencing of one voice, but of a broader ‘agency and voice in traditionally male-dominated spaces’ (2023: 78). Readers interested in narratology can benefit from the work’s engagement with various theories, particularly Emily Heavy’s (2015) narrative theory of embodiedness and Rebeiz’s analysis of the feminine body as a narrative tool. The book adds to the existing literary work on Lebanon and Beirut as a feminine body, through a narratological approach that has not been used before. Those interested in Lebanese civil war literature can also be pleased that the field is expanding, even if Rebeiz herself seems at distance from the rest of the works in the field.

Rebeiz is not the first scholar to look at Lebanese war literature as a means of creating a counter-memory. This view has been applied to Lebanese Arabic literature (Lang: 2016) and Lebanese anglophone literature (Hout: 2012). The book contributes to this growing field, but Rebeiz positions herself outside the existing research. Her emphasis on the impossibility of combining a study on a francophone corpus, while at the same time engaging in 'a comparative approach to include texts of other languages' (2023: 19), is justified and pragmatic, yet it ignores pre-existing scholarly work on Lebanese women's war writing.

Rebeiz's final line of the book is a question: 'can trauma be translated?' (2023: 213). This would have been an apt question if it were not for the fact that Chedid, Khatta-Ghoury, and Adnan were all native French speakers. She does not 'engage in the discussion surrounding the language of production' (19). This decision is at odds with the claim that her approach is contextual. French as a language of expression in Lebanese literature is loaded with political and cultural implications. Rebeiz does her best to skirt around the colonial ramifications of French expressions, explaining how 'Lebanon continued to have an easy affiliation with the language' (2023: 21). It is not lost on the knowledgeable reader that one of the authors included in the book, Etel Adnan, has repeatedly spoken about the erasure of Arabic by French colonial schools and her eventual decision to stop writing in French (Adnan: 1984). Rebeiz's attempt to position French language as an 'active choice' (2023: 22) ignores France's cultural colonisation of Lebanon. Whether a Lebanese writer has chosen to write in French or was forced to do so is an interesting question to pose, and a deeper engagement with it would have added an extra dimension to the book's place as counter-memory and expression of resistance.

The choice of language is linked to the war itself. French was the language of the middle class and the elite, and the class dimensions of the Lebanese civil war are well recorded (Hanf: 1993). Rebeiz, however, attributes the war merely to political causes, namely the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. It is reasonable to exclude a lengthy historical summary of the war and its causes, and she is correct in avoiding such an approach. However, by largely relying on one source, Rustum Shehadeh's *Women and War in Lebanon* (1999), Rebeiz presents a skewed perspective and characterises the situation of women during the war as exclusively one of victimhood with little agency (see Eggert 2021). Through the book, her role as a producer of a memory of the war can be seen in her own claims regarding 'sectional memories' (2023: 36) and her focus on blaming the Palestinian presence in Lebanon (2023: 30) for the start of the war. Her assertion that Martyrs' Day has been replaced by Liberation Day (2023: 36) is unsubstantiated, as both events are officially commemorated in Lebanon. Rebeiz

presents francophone women's writing as a process of counter-memory without naming it as such, but her own book ascribes to Lang's (2025) notion of literary scholars as co-producers of counter-memory.

Gendering Civil War is concerned with how Francophone women's writing 'help[s] Lebanese society remember its own past' (2023: 28), but the memory work she conducts remains far from convincing. Her analysis heavily leans on Caruth's (1996) work on trauma, but excludes recent work on trauma within the context of Lebanese literature, such as Hout (2012) and Gana (2013). Moreover, the perspective of a 'state-sponsored amnesia' of the war has been disputed in works by Hermez (2017) and Larkin (2012). While it is true that the Lebanese educational curriculum does not teach the war, the plethora of theses on Lebanese war literature written and produced at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University show that the Lebanese civil war is not ignored within the academic setting, as she claims (2023: 37). This all underscores Rebeiz's lack of engagement with the broader field of Lebanese civil war literature and cultural memory studies, which weakens the book's argument when dealing with the concepts of memory and trauma in Lebanese civil war literature.

Despite their different approaches, *Gendering Civil War* and *Arab Women's Life Writing* present a fuller picture of the power of women's writing in Lebanon and the Arab world. Rebeiz might draw a distinction between Lebanese literature and Arab literature, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Reading both books, it becomes clear that they shed light on how women navigate a patriarchal world and how they use their writing to magnify their voices and positions in oppressive environments.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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