ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN MIDDLE EAST AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

Dissident Writings of Arab Women

Voices Against Violence

Brinda J. Mehta

ROUTLEDGE

Dissident Writings of Arab Women

Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence analyzes the links between creative dissidence and inscriptions of violence in the writings of a selected group of postcolonial Arab women.

The female authors destabilize essentialist framings of Arab identity through a series of reflective interrogations and "contesting" literary genres that include novels, short stories, poems, docudramas, interviews and testimonials. Rejecting a purist "literature for literature's sake" ethic, they embrace a dissident poetics of feminist critique and creative resistance as they engage in multiple and intergenerational border crossings in terms of geography, subject matter, language and transnationality. This book thus examines the ways in which the women's writings provide the blueprint for social justice by "voicing" protest and stimulating critical thought, particularly in instances of social oppression, structural violence and political transition.

Providing an interdisciplinary approach which goes beyond narrow definitions of literature as aesthetic praxis to include literature's added value as a social, historical, political and cultural palimpsest, this book will be a useful resource for students and scholars of North African Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Francophone Studies and Feminist Studies.

Brinda J. Mehta is the Germaine Thompson Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Mills College in Oakland, California, where she teaches postcolonial African and Caribbean literatures, contemporary French literature and transnational feminist theory. She is the author of *Notions of Identity, Diaspora and Gender in Caribbean Women's Writing* (2009); *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing* (2007); and *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Winner of the Frantz Fanon Award, 2007).

"A unique perspective on women's postcolonial literary agency in North Africa. With impressive dexterity and intellectual depth, Brinda Mehta digs out and weaves the subtle but real links between creativity, dissent, and violence in today's North African women's writings, spanning the personal, the cultural, the social, the economic, the political, the intellectual, and the transnational. By highlighting the discursive aspect of power, the book underscores with authority the centrality of an 'engaged' literature based on civic engagement and social responsibility in an overall context that both informs and claims it."

Fatima Sadiqi, *Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco*

"Brinda Mehta's *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence* is a timely engagement with an understudied topic. Focusing in particular on the diaspora and sites of displacement, she brings into the discussion of feminist dissent a powerful insight that is substantiated throughout with blueprint material and documentation. Going beyond the condescending manner that blighted a portion of the feminist critique, she delves into writings and documents that present Arab women's struggle through art, literature, and other public sphere activity to interrogate forms and types of violence that have targeted women populations. But rather than devising ethnic and genderic divides, the effort in this book is focused on manifestations of violence as strategies and methods that cannot be seen outside the colonial and imperial onslaught. The postcolonial scriptoria is expanded and enriched beyond the colonial encounter. Building up its strong argument across languages and borders, this book is a serious and well-documented contribution to the study of feminist dissent."

Muhsin al-Musawi, *Professor of Arabic Literature, Columbia University*

Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies

1 **Iraqi Kurdistan**
Political Development and Emergent Democracy
Gareth R. V. Stansfield

2 **Egypt in the Twenty-First Century**
Challenges for Development
Edited by M. Riad El-Ghonemy

3 **The Christian-Muslim Frontier**
A Zone of Contact, Conflict or Cooperation
Mario Apostolov

4 **The Islamic World-System**
A Study in Polity-Market Interaction
Masudul Alam Choudhury

5 **Regional Security in the Middle East**
A Critical Perspective
Pinar Bilgin

6 **Political Thought in Islam**
A Study in Intellectual Boundaries
Nelly Lahoud

7 **Turkey's Kurds**
A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan
Ali Kemal Özcan

8 **Beyond the Arab Disease**
New Perspectives in Politics and Culture
Riad Nourallah

9 **The Arab Diaspora**
Voices of an Anguished Scream
Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton

10 **Gender and Self in Islam**
Etin Anwar

11 **Nietzsche and Islam**
Roy Jackson

12 **The Baha'is of Iran**
Socio-Historical Studies
Dominic Parvis Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel

13 **Egypt's Culture Wars**
Politics and Practice
Samia Mehrez

14 **Islam and Human Rights in Practice**
Perspectives Across the Ummah
Edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Benjamin MacQueen

15 **Family in the Middle East**
Ideational Change in Egypt, Iran and Tunisia
Edited by Kathryn M. Yount and Hoda Rashad

16 **Syria's Kurds**
History, Politics and Society
Jordi Tejel

17 **Trajectories of Education in the Arab World**
Legacies and Challenges
Edited by Osama Abi-Mershed

18 **The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations**
Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand

19 **Chaos in Yemen**
Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism
Isa Blumi

20 **Rethinking Israeli Space**
Periphery and Identity
Erez Tzfadia and Haim Yacobi

21 **Navigating Contemporary Iran**
Challenging Economic, Social and Political Perspectives
Edited by Eric Hooglund and Leif Stenberg

22 **Music, Culture and Identity in the Muslim World**
Performance, Politics and Piety
Edited by Kamal Salhi

23 **Dissident Writings of Arab Women**
Voices Against Violence
Brinda J. Mehta

Dissident Writings of Arab Women

Voices Against Violence

Brinda J. Mehta

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Dissident writings of Arab women : voices against violence / [edited by] Brinda J. Mehta.
pages cm.——(Routledge advances in Middle East and Islamic studies)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Women, Arab. 2. Dissenters——Arab countries. 3. Muslim women authors——Arab countries. 4. Social justice. I. Mehta, Brinda J.
II. Stansfield, Gareth R. V. Iraqi Kurdistan.
HQ1729.5.D57 2014
303.3'7209174927——dc23
2013026997

ISBN: 978-0-415-73044-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-84983-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Taylor and Francis Books

Contents

Acknowledgements

This book is the result of a collective effort. I am very grateful to Joe Whiting for his enthusiastic acceptance of my project. My sincere thanks go out to the *Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies* team. Kathryn Rylance is a superb editorial assistant. Michael Helfield's copyediting skills have brought elegance and fluidity to the manuscript. I am indebted to miriam cooke, Evelyne Accad, Maria Lugones, Sonia Dayan Herzbrun, Tareq Ismael, Fatima Sadiqi, Nawal El Saadawi and Muhsin Al-Musawi for their support of my work.

I am grateful to the external reviewers for their thoughtful and insightful reading of the manuscript.

I thank my friends Renée Larrier, H. Adlai Murdoch, Simone James Alexander, Medha Karmarkar, Grant Farred, Paget Henry, Myriam Chancy, Christian Marouby, Rafika Zahrouni, Hakim Abderrezak, Jacquelyn Cooper and Laura Chakravorty Box for their faith in me. My heartfelt thanks go to Laila Soliman for sharing her unpublished plays. Spark Carranza has provided invaluable technical support once again. I thank her for her patience and good humor.

I am grateful to Mills College for supporting my research in France and North Africa through Faculty Development grants and Meg Quigley summer grants offered by the Department of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies. This book would not have been possible without the excellent interlibrary services provided by Moya Stone and Michael Beller.

My husband, Arturo Dávila Sánchez, is my *partenaire de vie* and best friend. I am grateful for his love, wisdom and gentle heart.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my beloved parents, Jagadish and Kunda Mehta, and my uncle, Admiral Oscar Stanley Dawson. Their peaceful spirits grace the pages of this book.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Inscribing violence: dissident contexts in Arab women's writing from North Africa and the diaspora

In a seminal essay on dissidence and creativity (1995), Egyptian feminist and author Dr. Nawal El Saadawi highlights the intimate synergies between creative thought and dissident action. She describes creativity as a dangerous activity capable of destabilizing the status quo through the search for alternative epistemologies. I argue that dissident creativity represents an act of rebellion against inscriptions of violence in North Africa and the diaspora by manifesting in "revolutionary" forms of action and knowledge production. This anomie is represented by state violence, the violence of coloniality, gender-based violence and social violence against the dispossessed. At the same time, dissident creativity also stimulates important reflections on the role and responsibility of the writer who must give voice to what Assia Djebar calls the "guttural, feral, unsubmissive" (1999, 29) narratives that seek expression in discursive form.[1] El Saadawi states: "I believe there is no dissidence without struggle. We cannot understand dissidence except in a situation of struggle and in its location in place and time. Without this, dissidence becomes a word devoid of responsibility, devoid of meaning" (1995, 2).

Creativity is the quest for meaningful change in a disordered world and it is the logical consequence of political and social consciousness. Believing in the intrinsic dissidence of the creative word, El Saadawi equates writing with the act of fighting for social justice in order to "have the passion and knowledge required to change the powerful oppressive system of family and government." She asks: "Can we be creative if we submit to the rules forced upon us under different names: father, god, husband, family, nation, security, stability, protection, peace, democracy, family planning, development, human rights, modernism or postmodernism?" (2). Engendering the creative re-hauling of an unbalanced world system, the poetics of dissident creativity provides a necessary tool to fracture "the established philosophical canon … [that] began with the patriarchal slave or class system and is still prevalent today" (9).

In a similar vein, Franco-Algerian author Albert Camus makes a case for dissident creativity when he stated the following in a lecture given at the University of Uppsala in Sweden: "To create today is to create dangerously. Any publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing" (1957). Creativity is thereby a risky act of public

disclosure that, in turn, risks condemnation or censorship by "the established philosophical canon" denounced by El Saadawi. Both writers highlight the urgency of inscribing creativity within a certain timeliness and social relevance to debunk the inappropriateness of the bourgeois "art for art's sake" aesthetic. This modality loses it pertinence in a deeply fractured postcolonial world that nevertheless carries the violent marks of coloniality and its strategically entrenched power structures: "The theory of art for art's sake … [is] … a voicing of irresponsibility," states Camus (1957). Creative writers engage in dissidence through their discursive ruptures in text by looking for more responsible forms of literariness to "revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world. The time of irresponsible artists is over," emphasizes Camus.

Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence takes a "responsible" stance by analyzing the links between creative dissidence and inscriptions of violence in the writings of a selected group of postcolonial Arab women. These writers include Assia Djebar, Leila Sebbar and Maïssa Bey (USA/Algeria/France); Aïcha Ech-Channa (Morocco); Laila Lalami (USA/Morocco); Faïza Guène (France); Jalila Baccar (Tunisia); and Laila Soliman (Egypt). My book examines the ways in which these women's writings provide the blueprint for social justice by "voicing" protest and stimulating critical thought, particularly in instances of social oppression, structural violence and political transition. Its interdisciplinary approach goes beyond narrow definitions of literature as aesthetic praxis to include literature's added value as a social, historical, political and cultural palimpsest. The writers in this book destabilize essentialist framings of Arab identity through a series of reflective interrogations and "contesting" literary genres that include novels, short stories, poems, docudramas, interviews and testimonials. Rejecting a purist "literature for literature's sake" ethic, these women embrace a dissident poetics of feminist critique and creative resistance, as they engage in multiple and intergenerational border crossings in terms of geography, subject matter, language and transnationality. Their writings demonstrate their timeliness in circumstances of war, the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Algerian War of Independence in 2012 and the ongoing trajectories of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. I argue that Arab women writers already announced the Arab Spring revolutions in their work by revealing the inherent tensions afflicting their respective societies in the pre-and post-independence years. Their writings in this study span a fifty-year timeline beginning with the Algerian "war story" of the 1950s and ending with the early phases of the uprisings of 2012.

As mentioned earlier, dissident creativity is intimately linked to a common preoccupation with violence and social injustice in all these women's writings. In fact, the multiple configurations of violence in its most abject forms structure all the chapters of this book. The writers search for strategies to "dismember" the language of violence in their texts while making a commitment to socially informed models of creative activism found in the acts of writing

and contesting. Literature provides them with the necessary instrument to express dissent by positing writing as an act of rebellion against the dangers of violence that circumscribe the lives of men, women and children. These woman-centered narratives favor the cause of the socially abject, the economically wretched, the politically dispossessed and the intellectually marginalized while "singing" revolutionary songs of hope. As stated by Chantal Kalisa: "For women writers, literature offers a privileged medium through which they attempt to resolve the tension between historical or state forms of violence associated with colonialism and postcolonial conditions and internal forms of violence that result from unfair cultural, social, and political rules based on gender" (2009, 3). By giving violence "center-stage" positionality in their works, these writers dislodge violence from the invisible realm of private space and bring it into the main forum of visibility and public critique, particularly with reference to the physical, emotional and social violence against women.

Why is violence an overarching trope in Arab women's writing and why do the women seek to engender violence in text? Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi offer a possible explanation in the introduction to their co-edited volume, *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*. They argue:

> While gender-based violence is a universal phenomenon, it takes interesting nuances and wears multiple faces in the region where tradition, social norm, religion, war, and politics intermingle in a powerful and tantalizing space-based patriarchy. The theme of "gender and violence" is relatively new in the field of research; hence, scholarly literature … is both scarce and dispersed.
>
> (2011, 1)

Ennaji and Sadiqi reference the many social and cultural taboos that inhibit the public disclosure of visible and invisible forms of violence. The exposure of national and domestic violence is impeded by the multiple layers of conservatism, censorship, state intimidation, gender normativity and morality codes that shroud the home and nation in an attempt to guard the sacrosanct nature of these inviolable acts. Inscribed within dysfunctional power systems of regulation, control and law enforcement, violence represents the language of patriarchal authority, an exceptional form of "biopower" (Mbembe 2003, 16) destined to confiscate individual rights and subjectivity.

As a "pattern for social structuring in the nation state" (Ennaji and Sadiqi 2011, i), violence is a disabling praxis of subjugation, conformity and submission. I associate violence with the physical and symbolic act of dismemberment. The term has a special resonance in this book, as it refers to a dual process of de-territorialization and de-corporealization. The women reveal how violence is configured physically and figuratively in its relation to the body, the female body in particular, through images of mutilated war-torn bodies, invisible bodies, ruptured hymens, bruised limbs, torture, and the ultimate annihilation of the body in "madness." At the same time,

dismemberment also has a symbolic value when clandestine migrants are wrenched from their home countries by economic dispossession, only to be objectified on European shores through border violence and sexual enslavement. In these circumstances, dissident creativity is a means to re-member the abject body while denouncing the agents of violence in acts of scripting violence, witnessing, testifying and denouncing. For this reason, Arab women's writings occupy an interstitial space between dismemberment and embodiment to demonstrate how the act of writing against violence revives the historical and social traumas of marginality and invisibility in an inescapable landscape of pain. These "wounded" narratives are inscribed in socially vibrant texts that reveal the intersectional positioning of violence in prismatic contexts of war, sexual subalternity, clandestine migration, social exclusion (in France) and state dystopia.

The following questions structure the "organization" of violence in the following chapters to offer a more comprehensive reading of the different forms of local and national violence that structure and deconstruct lives. How do "trans-locational" Arab women write "against violence"? Why is the dismemberment of violence a major feminist concern for all of them? How is the body dismembered by violence? What are the different narrative modes the women choose to expose and contest the suppressed "truths" about violence? What are the multiple ways in which each writer imagines her own "revolutionary" landscapes and framings of social justice from a gendered perspective? How do they express the inexpressible in the face of social taboos, censorship, exile, war, trauma and minority representation? What is the relationship between dissidence, creativity and human integrity in an increasingly volatile world?

It must be mentioned that dissident creativity in these writings is not a reactive or reactionary praxis of negation and denial. On the contrary, it embraces a more proactive stance in its dual positioning as " … not only a struggle against but also a struggle for … a future where resistance and struggle might give way to peaceful, productive and equal coexistence," as stated by Jennifer Browdy de Hérnandez, Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho and Anne Sérafin, editors of *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* (2010, 7). In addition, the women do not seek to "uncover" violence for its sensational value or for marketing purposes. To this end, they do not privilege one particular form of dissident expression or one specific narrative form over another. The women's use of textual hybridity, as a medium to express their complex postcolonial subjectivities and transnational sensibilities, ruptures the conventional boundaries of literary genre by opening other discursive spaces, such as testimonials and docudramas. This plurality highlights the complex "in-between-ness" of their writings that decodes the violent wounds of coloniality that compromise survival and engender resistance in troubling times today. As argued by miriam cooke in *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, "dissidence is not agenda driven but improvisational. It confronts and engages with dominant discourses. Always

new and arresting, to survive, dissidence must deflect official attempts to repress it, reduce it to empty rhetoric, or co-opt it" (2007, 85). Dissidence stages discursive "arrests" through its unpredictability, spontaneity and refusal to be usurped by the state as a mouthpiece for partisan ideology. For this reason, it channels wide and varied means of expression that resist homogeneity and literalness.

Dissident creativity is more than an invitation to transform reality through the power of discursivity. I argue that it is an act of civic engagement and social responsibility that engages the writer-artist in "unruly critique" (Chakravorty 2010, 116) and in meaningful "disobedience to a directive" (Danticat 2010, 11). Creative disobedience in literature is thereby a call to produce socially committed texts by combining literary activism with ethical consciousness, a creative praxis that nevertheless has its roots in context and social relevance. These creatively committed texts express their "modernity" by contesting the privilege of an ivory tower isolationism that de-links literature from its ethical responsibilities. As stated by Salman Rushdie: "Works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; … the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, a context" (1984, 2). In other words, a postcolonial text must reveal its contemporary instance by negotiating the tensions between aesthetics and context in an active decolonizing of literature from colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal paradigms. "The writer need not always be the servant of some beetle-browed ideology. He can also be its critic, its antagonist, its scourge … writers have discharged this role with honor" (1984, 4), asserts Rushdie.

Dissident Writings of Arab Women makes a case for the creative dissidence of contemporary Arab women writers by demonstrating how the women further problematize this trope through their particular gender preoccupations. These concerns demand feminist re-negotiations of questions related to identity, citizenship and personal liberties according to more inclusionary paradigms. The women nevertheless inherit a long tradition of social consciousness, wherein "gender consciousness is hardly new to Middle Eastern society." According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995, 16), "social, cultural, historical and legal questions relating to male-female roles, equality of women, and so forth, have been part and parcel of Arabo-Islamic discourse for centuries." However, these twenty-first-century writers reveal the contemporary relevance of their struggles by demonstrating how dissidence against injustice is still a work-in-progress due to the ongoing violence of history, coloniality, refracted gender ideologies, and politics.

At the same time, these writers further strengthen Arabic literature's critical and creative engagements with "the word" by using creativity to reflect on a particular society's cultural and collective ethos: "Literature is the archive of a culture," states feminist Toril Moi, who makes a case for literature's importance as a narrative of shared vision, hope, generosity and human understanding. She adds:

> A novel or a poem or a play, or a theoretical essay for that matter, is an attempt to make others see something that really matters to the writer … In this gesture, there is hope – not certainty – that perhaps others may come to share her vision, if only for a moment. This hope makes a writer vulnerable. She has to be willing to say what she sees, to stake everything on her vision, without any guarantee that she will be understood. To write is to risk rejection and misunderstanding. To create a work of art, Sartre writes, is to give the world a gift nobody has asked for. But if we don't dare to share with others what we see, the world will be poorer for it.
>
> (2008, 268)

Moi does not advocate literary authoritarianism, wherein literature morphs into an ideological and homogenous point of view dominated by the writer's uni-centered vision, a dangerous positionality that has been manipulated and exploited by writers and critics worldwide. Instead, this "literature of conscience" encourages its readers to see the world differently through the lens of what Tariq Sabry calls "an ethics of otherness" described as "an ethics of radical exteriority … otherness-as-care, an otherness 'for-the-other,' and a way of being 'otherwise'" (2012, 17). This revised ontology represents the very crux of creative possibility for Sabry, who focuses on "otherness as a heuristic and necessary ethical modality, a kind of precursor to a more universally inclusive and non-immanent way of thinking the other" (16). Sabry advocates a transformative consciousness that goes beyond the limited and opposing binaries of alterity that remain immobilized in a "self-versus-Other" dialectic. Instead, he proposes more synchronic engagements with otherness through an affirming ethics of accountability that is of particular relevance to the woman writer who has been systematically and dually displaced by the constructed marginality of her gendered Arabness in colonial and neocolonial discourses. As miriam cooke confirms in *Women Claim Islam*, Arab women

> … have been left out of history, out of the War Story, out of narratives of emigration and exile, out of the psychical and hermeneutical spaces of religion … Only by concentrating on their collective cultural production can we see that Arab women intellectuals are everywhere challenging meta-narratives that write them out of active political presence.
>
> (2001, viii, xxv)

By reclaiming literary spaces on which to inscribe their engagement with an "otherness-as-care" ethic (Sabry 2012, 17), the women's writing "seek justice wherever it can find it" (cooke 2001, x). On the one hand, their search exposes the historical and cultural violations that have marginalized their creative output. On the other hand, according to Anne Donadey (2001, xx), this quest creates sites of intellectual recovery "in which they reconstruct their history through the blanks of the other's discourse (be it the colonizer's or

that of the patriarchal tradition)." This social justice perspective both "humanizes" literature and expressively articulates dissent in deeply embodied form, a discursive strategy that, according to Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber:

> belongs to the tradition of Arab and Arab American knowledge production and further engages in a "theory in the flesh" or knowledge derived from narrating lived experiences and producing critical lenses through which we see and analyze the social and political world.
>
> (2011, xxx)

Embracing the personal and the human within a politicized economy of awareness, Arab women thereby articulate what Lebanese author Evelyn Accad calls their "femi-humanism" (Zahnd 2010, 7).

This "humanistic ethos of being" situates gender at the intersection of human concerns with oppression, exploitation, survival and historical violence framed within local, national, personal and transnational geo-positionings of self and culture. In so doing, these writers become informed advocates for social change through their revolutionary voices that complicate and nuance the intentionality and scope of dissident literature from the region: "I write against my hand," emphasizes Lebanese author Hoda Barakat in her autobiographical essay from Fadia Faqir's edited volume, *In The House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (1998). Barakat's statement reveals how writing is not only an act of coming-to-consciousness, but also a strategy of "bringing-to-consciousness" all that remains repressed, disavowed and concealed from public disclosure. Dissident creativity expresses the inexplicable *non-dit* ("the unsaid") through narrative rupture, silence, memory, trauma, pain and the "resistant" subjectivities of the women themselves. These women refuse to accept the unacceptable dictates of intellectual chauvinism and social submission by engendering discursive *fitna* ("chaos") in text. As stated by El Saadawi:

> Creativity channeled in such a way paves the way for change, demolishes outmoded, reactionary antidemocratic structures, and strengthens political and social movements grounded in the struggle for peace, democracy, justice and gender equality … Creative women know how to live with chaos because they understand that every creation is an inspiration that surges up out of chaos.
>
> (2010, 73)

The act of creating chaos in text is a public intervention that brings the private art of writing to the open forum of readership and analysis. In so doing, the writer has the potential to "influence public life and public debate" (Bamyeh 2011, 1) through the social relevance of his/her work that refuses indifference, disengagement, jingoism and isolation when confronted with

situations of urgency. As confirmed by dramatist Mamduh 'Adwan in a conversation with miriam cooke:

> No poem, no piece of music can overthrow a dictator. But, it can resist the normalization of oppression. It can focus on human beings and their deep humanity, reminding them constantly that they are human. Artists must create works that will help others to understand what is going on and why and what is the possible outcome.
>
> (2007, 91)

These oppressions that necessitate a non-conforming response include war, imprisonment, socio-economic crisis, gender anomie, sexual oppression, political repression, among other violations. For example, El Saadawi expresses the urgency to write as a form of denunciation of Anwar Sadat's authoritarian state in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. In this text, writing is a life-sustaining force used to combat the mental and physical desolation of prison on the one hand, and a medium of reckoning on the other: "Nothing matters, except the birth of words on paper, the dawn's birth, the gloom dissolving … " (1986, 83), claims the dissident. The urgency to write and indict complements the will to survive the prison experience through the physical dimensions of creativity.

The Egyptian dissident was arrested and incarcerated by President Anwar Sadat in 1981 for her campaign against intellectual censorship and the Camp David agreement between Egypt, Israel and the United States. She wrote *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* during her nine-month imprisonment at Qanatir Women's Prison using pieces of toilet paper and an eyebrow pencil borrowed from one of the female inmates. Like the physicality of the prison experience, writing also assumes a physical function like breathing or sleeping. Its deprivation is tantamount to a death sentence in the absence of revolutionary thought and creative action. El Saadawi states: "I think as I wish and I write – with my fingers, on the ground – what I wish to write" (46). Creativity thereby bears witness to a personal ordeal in testimonial form. It is a call for revolutionary action through the liberating power of the intellect that creatively writes itself out of imprisonment and thereby eludes victimization: "I cannot pull my body out between the steel bars … but I can extract my mind," declares El Saadawi (135).

This does not mean that Arab women's literature from the region should only be a political response to crisis. To make this claim would be tantamount to depriving Arabic literature of its depth, passion, complexity, intensity and breadth. Instead, dissident creativity is a reflection on "the intellectual's self-understanding of his responsibility to a given community" (Bamyeh 2011, 11), a consciousness needed to establish the writer's own sense of integrity given the power of the written word to either effect change or surrender to co-optation. This is in keeping with Christopher Miller's view that "the whole notion of what is 'political' has changed in the postcolonial era:

political vision and symbolic representation are no longer held to be mutually exclusive" (1990, 124). The synergies between the political and the symbolic condition the writer's "visionary" point of view as he/she negotiates the charge and "burden of commitment" (Cazenave and Célérier 2011). In this equation, the personal is the political, just as the political becomes part of the collective ethos. This vision is nevertheless mediated by the writer's personal choice of opposition or surrender – the decision to be a part of the state machinery or oppose its oppressive dysfunctionality. As stated by 'Abd al-Rahman Munif:

> The intellectual can not be impartial … but must be completely engaged in the present epoch, using culture to influence the times … There must be coordination and equivalence between words and their meanings. If not, these words will turn into curses and the one who is best versed in this craft will be the most dangerous … This is what has made many instrumentalize their knowledge and skills on behalf of the state. This is what has made them wealthy whatever their motives.
>
> (1996, 118 and 131)

A dissident cannot be a self-serving cultural mercenary. On the contrary, dissidence should be a selfless act of good faith. It is particularly vital at a time when Western interests and ambivalent local leadership in North Africa and the diaspora make socially committed literature or *littérature d'engagement* politically expedient and inevitable in an effort to document this "chaos" in text.

In her prison narrative, El Saadawi underscores the "chaotic" power of words in a conversation with the prison warden. When the author initially asks for writing material, she receives the following answer from a shocked warden: "This is utterly forbidden. Anything but pen and paper. Easier to give you a pistol than pen and paper" (1986, 49). This exchange reveals the incendiary scope of the written word in the hands of the dissident writer; words have a more explosive impact than an armed insurrection. The chaos engendered by these discursive insurrections leads El Saadawi to state: "I had not imagined that pen and paper could be more dangerous than pistols in the world of reality and fact" (4). The creation of literary chaos has special resonance for the woman writer who must unpeel the many layers of alienation that obscure her subjectivity through intellectual chauvinism, outmoded traditions, oppressive state legislation and irrelevant gender prescriptions that are not in consonance with the revolutionary demands for change taking place in North Africa and the Middle East. El Saadawi provides the necessary framework to inscribe these ongoing waves of protest when she proclaims: "Revolution is a natural result of creative action, and freedom is the daughter of the revolution. Revolution and freedom together constitute the form and content of any creative action" (165).

Writing dissidence

Dissident postcolonial Arabic literature enjoys a celebrated historicity in North Africa and the Middle East. As asserted by Barbara Harlow in her work on resistance literature, literature is the medium of "writing human rights and righting political wrongs" (1992, 256). Writers as diverse and distinguished as Mahmoud Darwish, Naguib Mahfouz, Adonis, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar, Nawal El Saadawi, Ahdaf Soueif, Laila Soliman, Leïla Sebbar, Jalila Baccar, and a plethora of others, are noted for their creative stance as writer-activists. These authors use literature as a medium of contestation, resistance and denunciation to expose and condemn human rights violations in the region through the beauty and power of the written word. As affirmed by Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi in his seminal text *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence*, these "narratives assume multiplicity and polyphony through a number of strategies that are central to the decolonizing and decentering endeavor that makes up the postcolonial Arabic novel … " (2003, 13). These writings "assume their postcoloniality not only as partial representations of change and reflections of awareness … but more significantly as dynamic cultural proponents of socio-political consciousness, especially in its local manifestations" (16). The decentering of coloniality together with the decolonization of gender represents the added preoccupation of the woman writer who must reclaim and re-center her femi-humanist preoccupations through "alternative socialities and oppositional responses" (Lugones 2010, 748) to standardized hetero-patriarchal discourses on identity and subjectivity.

In an influential publication titled *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, editors Lisa Suhair Majaj, Therese Saliba and Paula W. Sunderman provide an important framework for "locating" the socio-historical context of contemporary Arab women's literature:

> The novelists … write within the turbulent postcolonial context of the post-1960s, a period marked in the Arab world by the rise of national liberation movements, the defeat of Arab nationalism, the fragmentation of Arab identity, and the increasing militarism of the Israeli state. They contend with the intersecting hierarchies of gender, religion, class and ethnicity within their societies, as well as with the patriarchal, colonialist, Zionist, and militarized violence linked to these hierarchies. Situating gender issues within these historical moments of flux and change, these authors seek to recast national narratives and to redefine boundaries of identity and community.
>
> (2002, xix)

Dissident Writings of Arab Women further expands and updates this framing in two areas – firstly, a narrative diversity that does not focus exclusively on novels and secondly, historical timelines related to the Arab Spring uprisings

(2011). These historical events have both enhanced and complicated literature's timeliness and appropriateness in periods of political crisis and tragedy.

Arab women writers thereby stress the urgency of "righting" these violations through public condemnation in texts that foreground the desire to salvage human dignity from the throes of loss, capitalist warmongering, repression and racialized and sexualized violence. Their writings represent a counter war cry, "a ululation for survival," according to Sarah Husain (2006, 12) that joins forces with Assia Djebar's revolutionary "wild collective voice" (1993, xxii). This collective "scream" is inscribed in a landscape of loss as it looks for a sense of wholeness beyond the fractures of coloniality. As stated by Fathi Triki: "Postcolonial Arabs … must learn how to situate themselves in this 'new geo-political landscape' of a world that remains divided, contested and conflicted" (1998, 14).

Personal and/or political traumas characterize the writings of all the women in this book, who make explicit connections between violence, pain and trauma in their work. They have either been victims of traumatic experience themselves, like Maïssa Bey, who witnessed the execution of her father by government forces, or have been first-hand witnesses to trauma in their societies, like Aïcha Ech-Channa, whose social activism exposed her to the violent underbelly of Moroccan society. Literature in its most expansive forms has provided them with an avenue to reclaim the humanity of all those who have been traumatized by the violence of coloniality represented by war, poverty, minority citizenship, detention and imposed codes of illegality. These "bruised" (Soueif 2004, 234) narratives reflect the primal wounds of coloniality, wounds that are in need of healing by the restorative power of creativity and its discursive engagement with broader social preoccupations. As Iraqi art activist Dena Al-Adeeb explains in an interview with Nadine Naber, creative expression:

> builds social movement by documenting and creating an interpretation of historical moments and memory. It is an important branch of political movement work that aims to educate and to invigorate and inspire critical thought … It can potentially serve to heal the wounds of injustice by accessing an emotional and psychological realm that can also channel people's creative energies toward envisioning and manifesting a political vision.
>
> (Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber 2011, 223)

In the women's writings, creativity, social consciousness and political movement are an active and thoughtful form of non-violent resistance, a mosaic-like piecing together of fragmented postcolonial subjectivities that are further ruptured by coloniality's dissonance. This does not mean that the writers assume or should assume a position of self-aggrandizement as victimized purveyors of transcendent truths accessible only to the initiated. On the

contrary, the act of reclaiming is a precarious negotiation of humility, defensiveness and vulnerability to public exposure when faced with the burden of "living in truth" (Havel 1987, 104), which is to say, the charge of "paying attention to the power discourse and rejecting its falsifications," according to cooke (2007, 24). Literature in all its forms cannot lay claim to being a narrative of pure truth. Yet, it can problematize the writer's mediation of social engagement in text by blurring the boundaries between writing and activism.

Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif best describes this positionality by asking an important question:

> Is a novelist a literary activist? An activist is impelled by a cause and adopts it. Most people are content to live their lives within prescribed and personal boundaries. But one of the points of artists surely is that they live outside their skin, that they're connected, that they hurt with the hurt of their fellow humans. How, then, can they disengage? How can you – if our task, if your gift, is narrative – absent yourself from the great narrative of the world? Our duty is to tell the story that comes to us in the most effective way possible. But we don't choose the story. We're drawn in where the feeling is deepest. A work of fiction lives by empathy – the extending of my self into another's, the willingness to imagine myself in someone else's shoes. This itself is a political act; empathy is at the heart of much revolutionary action.
>
> (2012a)

Empathy is a human act of *reconnaissance*, a willingness to transcend the self-serving limits of the ego toward a more expansive consciousness in the name of world citizenship and creative responsibility. The act of "living outside the skin" (Soueif) parallels the strategy of "theorizing in the flesh" (Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber), wherein the skin, as a binding agent, reveals the intimacy between self and "another" (Soueif) in visceral bonds of reciprocity. These bonds acquire a special resonance when bodily aggressions, through war, trauma and abuse, create corporeal dissonances in the form of rape, mourning and mutilation. These violations strip the aggressed body of its autonomy; at the same time, however, they script a creative "body-politic" – a concept articulated by Evelyn Accad when she discussed her ordeal with breast cancer in an interview with Elizabeth Zahnd. Accad reaffirmed the body's value "as a living scroll," (2010, 11) wherein it transcends its objectification as a diseased entity by becoming a repository of knowledge.

In other words, the women make a case for *une littérature autre*, another kind of literature in which embodiment provides the focal point of narration and creativity. The body engenders its own language in "unscripted" form when violence alters its defensive mechanisms and sensory affects through alienation, pain and horror. The uncharted landscapes of pain, for example,

necessitate other forms of literariness to give these inexpressible emotions and experiences form and meaning in text. The relatively unstructured parameters of testimonial narratives provide victims and survivors with an expressive space to voice their abjection as they seek to document their ordeals in textual permanence. The *text-as-body* and *body-as-text* paradigm straddles the in-betweenness of literary "fictionality" (Derrida 1992, 49) and testimonial "veracity" in an indeterminate off-centered spatiality that nevertheless re-centers the body as witness. The body is a symbolic mediator between the writer and testifier when it engenders its own discourse in the form of what Abdelkébir Khatibi (2008, 28) calls a "syntax of gestures, which to a greater or lesser extent grant access to writing." Khatibi's gesture as expressive "handicraft" can be associated with Hélène Cixous's pre-symbolic interventions of body language referred to as the following:

> the signs of the body: not those of the unconscious, which is already speaking – the unconscious is a language – but the body signs that are of the same order as those of the unconscious, though before language … beneath thought, form or codes.
>
> (1993, 136)

The as-yet-to-be coded language of corporeality maintains its free expression by subverting the law of the letter in de-structured free-form narrative best expressed in Jalila Baccar's play *Junun* (Chapter 5) and Ech-Channa's compiled testimonies (Chapter 2).

At the same time, can creativity and dissidence meet on common ground without compromising each other's scope and intent? What are the risks of tipping the balance in favor of one or the other? At what point does art degenerate into propaganda and state ideology without the necessary creative integrity and expressive freedom? When does dissidence become a meaningless act in the absence of creative potential? Is it possible to create in times of socio-political dis-ease and still maintain the writer-activist equivalence? As Soueif comments:

> … the novelist, like the activist, is also a citizen of the world and bears the responsibility of this citizenship. The question is, then, can you honor your responsibility as a citizen of the world and fulfill your responsibility to your art? The question becomes critical in times of crisis.
>
> (2012a)

In other words, how does creativity remain "honest" in a difficult predicament? As Edward Saïd suggests, the author's "honesty" depends upon the ability to creatively frame the right questions in his/her dual role as a relentless "disturber of the status quo" (1996, x) and as a "spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation" (xvii). This oppositional positionality conditions the artistic imaginary, according to Saïd, wherein the writer "must

develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he can become an artist" (16). El Saadawi echoes Saïd's sentiments when she states: "Creativity flourishes when the mind and the imagination are freed from the chains of taboos and traditions, from the false consciousness and knowledge generated by the media and educational systems, and from the commercialization of values and morals" (2010, 67-68). However, the woman writer must go further in her interrogations by first posing and then reiterating the disturbing questions that are either unacknowledged in master narratives or that remain unarticulated by the "false consciousness" of the women themselves (69). The women must therefore "bend the question" creatively to include their disavowed gender concerns that call for "alternative courses of action" (Saïd 1996, 22) and alternative framings. *Dissident Writings of Arab Women* raises these disturbing questions through the voices of the women. Their faith in the written word as a locus of "alter-narration" is both an act of creative consciousness and political dissidence within a more balanced decolonizing ethic.

De-orientalizing "the" Arab woman

As several Arab women scholars, writers and activists have asserted, Arab women bear the burden of representation in Orientalist and colonial feminist discourses that have fabricated a Euro-centered "idea" of essentialized Arab womanhood deprived of subjective particularity. This practiced myopia is a racist and violent disengagement with "difference" by corroborating with "the persistent Orientalist fascination with Arab women that reduces their lives to gender and sexual oppression under the purportedly unchanging, backward traditions of Arab-Islamic society," as stated by Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba (2002, xix). In these colonialist mappings, "the" Arab woman is always already oppressed by the timelessness of recalcitrant traditions that are in desperate need of "modern" Western interventions in the form of war, occupation and corporatized media onslaughts. The mediated violence against Arab women repeats, in the words of Donadey, "the violent history of conquest and colonization" (2001, xx). Within these parameters, how do Arab women writers extricate their subjectivity from the weight of colonial rhetoric and the violence of mediated representation without compromising their selfhood or their craft? How do they "save their skin" from contamination by oil and "the women's rights civilizing mission stance" (Jarmakani 2011, 228)? How have these confining paradigms compromised the full scope of the women's potential on account of what I call the "media militarism" of those who refuse to see otherwise? By enforcing the invisibility of Arab women and by undermining their creative productivity as writers and thinkers, these levelling discourses complement the "scorch and burn" strategies of the colluding "military-imperialist and feminist-imperialist stances to reify stereotypical notions of Arab and Muslim womanhood" (228) through overdetermined and oversimplified signifiers, such as Western obsessions with veiling and unveiling, for example. As stated by Amira Jarmakani:

> Invisibility here is meant to signify both the ways that Arab and Muslim women are silenced and the ways they are made hyper-visible paradoxically, as markers of invisibility, exoticism, or oppression. The continuous need to identify and deconstruct stereotypical images of Arab womanhood functions as a double silencing of Arab [American] feminists whose energy could be better spent theorizing new spaces of possibility for Arab [American] women rather than respond to the misinformation promulgated by the dominant discourse. To the extent that Arab and Arab American women and particularly Arab and Arab American feminists have been able to carve a space in which to give voice to their own issues and concerns, they have found much of that space reluctantly, yet inevitably, filled with corrective responses to mainstream misunderstandings.
>
> (2011, 236)

In addition, Arab women have also been further marginalized in and by the resistant patriarchal underpinnings of nationalist ideologies uncovered during Algeria's transition to independence. Patriarchal symbols of the modest, self-deprecating "mother of the nation" have fit in well with political and religious credos that have depended on women's essentialized spirit of immolation in the struggle for national liberation. As stated by Marnia Lazreg (1994, 145) with reference to the nationalist disavowals of Algerian female revolutionaries in the post-independence area: "Sacrifice, not duty complemented by right, was the cornerstone of the new state's view of women … Sacrifice does not always beget recognition." Lazreg's comments reveal how the women revolutionaries, despite their active service in the war of liberation against the French (1954-1962), were expected to conform to a certain ideal of post-independence womanhood that was almost as limiting in its conception as the Orientalist stereotypes.

At the same time, women have also been "punished" for their going out in public during the popular resistance movements of the Arab Spring. The violence against women by the police and military represents an inglorious chapter in the history of the uprisings. Women demonstrators were regularly molested, verbally attacked, beaten, detained and subjected to intrusive "virginity" tests to "monitor their ethics of morality" in shared public spaces with men during the Egyptian revolution. The use of brute force against female protestors is best concretized in images of the aggressed "woman in the blue bra" from Cairo's Tahrir Square. This image shows an unidentified young woman being dragged by military personnel through Cairo's Tahrir Square; her *abaya*, or body veil, has been "manhandled" to expose her bare midriff and a vibrantly colored blue bra.[2] The woman's forced public unveiling is tantamount to an act of rape. Instead, she is perversely brutalized for "indecent exposure" by a militarized patriarchal dictate of morality that evicts her from public space. She is aggressed for two supposed violations – her non-conforming feminine presence in public space and her explicitly "immoral"

demeanor represented by the exposed bra. Images of this violence went viral when the incident was captured on smart phones, cameras, videos and television. The YouTube clip[3] shows a soldier covering the woman after she has been seriously beaten. This gesture could be interpreted in two ways – an act of kindness or a hasty cover-up to expunge any accountability for the crime. To date, none of the perpetrators of this crime have been brought to justice, even though the woman's ordeal sparked open demonstrations against the military by 3,000 women who chanted: "Our revolution, the military stole it, the women of Egypt will restore it" (Soueif 2012b). The "blue bra" incident has nevertheless been documented in Laila Soliman's short play "Blue Bra Day," to be analyzed in Chapter 6.

In addition, manufactured representations of "the Muslim woman" suffer a third level of obscuring in power-inflected Arabocentric discourses aimed at immobilizing women within patriarchal discourses. As argued by Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon:

> In contrast with the western narrative of the victimized "Muslim woman," and in opposition to the Arabocentric narrative in which "the Muslim woman" has no claims because Islam elevated her position fifteen hundred year ago … as a single "category," the "Muslim woman" is an "invention," whether in the western discourses of Orientalism and western psychoanalytic feminism or in the discourses of Arab nationalism and Islamic feminism in colonial and postcolonial North Africa. The "Muslim woman" is a semiotic subject who is produced according to the law of supply and demand to serve various political and ideological ends.
>
> (2005, 1–2)

In other words, the branding of "the Muslim woman" is a political ploy to justify Western invasions, as well as a cultural ruse to deny the women their equal rights in the name of politicized and masculinist interpretations of religion.

This distortion is exposed by social activists like the Moroccan femihumanist Aïcha Ech-Channa, who uses the strength of faith-based activism to highlight the social justice aspects of Islam, its emphasis on social welfare for the dispossessed and the spaces it creates for female leadership. These attributes are revealed in *Miseria: témoignages* (1996), Ech-Channa's testimonial narrative that gives visibility to abused street children and exploited underage domestic maids in postcolonial Morocco, where a privileged elite supports a system of human slavery (which will be discussed in Chapter 2). At the same time, I argue that the women's corrective narratives outlined by Jarmakani (2011) are a strategy of "unlearning," de-centering and re-evaluating the mediated discourses on "the Arab/Muslim woman" by dispelling falsehoods and prejudice through revision, information and "a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity" (Sandoval 1990, 66). This radicalized positionality partakes in the dissident act of both de-Orientalizing and de-nationalizing stereotypes

by giving the women a chance to express themselves. The women create ruptured texts to highlight the many fault lines in their lives using literature as a medium of interstitiality and border crossing that affirms and complicates their multiple postcolonial selves.

Language plays an important part in these re-positionings of self, identity and culture. These writers write between and beyond many world sites in Europe, Africa and the United States. Refusing to be limited by identity politics in terms of language choice, they embrace a translingual ambidexterity in writing with the hope of creating transnational communities of understanding between and among women and men. This book includes the voices of women who write in English, French, Spanish and French *verlan*, or street back slang, with the exception of Egyptian dramatist Laila Soliman, whose plays are performed in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. However, Soliman uses the "international" language of technology and social media in each performance to lend an air of worldliness to her plays. Performances outside Egypt are translated simultaneously or subtitled in different languages to create an implicit bilingualism in text. *Dissident Writings of Arab Women* thereby broadens the scope of the linguistic plurality of contemporary Arabic literature instead of focusing exclusively on monolingual writings in Arabic, French, English or Spanish. Writer Zina Alani Mougharbel raises an important question in terms of the transnational aesthetics of writing. She asks:

> What is more frightening for a writer than a blank page? Better yet, what is more frightening for a female Arab writer than a blank page: an audience indifferent to the content of that page, once it's been filled … or one intently waiting to read what the author has to say? … What if the audience is ten-fold larger, multicultural and from various parts of the world instead of being confined to the geography of the Arab world? In a world plagued with controversy – smaller than ever, more complex than ever, where every speech about change and democratization brings up the issue of women, their rights and conditions – can the voice of Arab women writers, endowed with the tools necessary to reach English-speaking audiences, be a key element in creating dialogue, or at least providing a more credible "other" point of view?
>
> (2009, 20)

Mougharbel makes a plea for the creation of transnational "reading" communities as a stepping-stone to cultural understanding and dialogue without the intervention of parochialism and cultural chauvinism. Literature represents a medium to unlearn stereotypes about Arab women through an "insider" perspective, even though some transnational writers have also been accused of colluding with dominant stereotypes in an effort to get published in the West.

In turn, the award-winning poet Abdellatif Laâbi captures the spirit of what I call a "discursive dual handedness" that remains integral to the writing

process in a poem titled "Une seule main ne suffit pas pour écrire" ("Writing Requires More Than One Hand"): "Une seule main ne suffit pas pour écrire/ Par les temps qui courent/il en faudrait deux/Et que la deuxième apprenne vite/les métiers de l'indicible" (1993, 47) ("Writing requires more than one hand/These days/it takes two/And the second needs to quickly grasp/the craft of the unspeakable") (George 2003, 91). A solitary hand can only reflect a monolingual reality devoid of nuance and complexity as opposed to the interstitiality of multilingualism. As argued by Waïl Hassan:

> A major language in the hands of a minority writer is defamiliarized through its infusion with words, expressions, rhetorical figures, speech patterns, ideological intentions, and the worldview of the author's minority group, which differentiates the writer's language from that of the mainstream culture, producing all sorts of estranging effects.
>
> (2011, 4–5)

These estranging effects revolutionize language through a dynamic "creolizing" effect that reflects the complex realities that the author wants to portray in her writings in the first place.

Moreover, language choice is an explicitly political act of disavowing the prescribed linguistic norm of the *non-dit* (the "unsaid") by embracing a poetics of the *tout dit* ("everything said") instead. This choice is reflected in the decision of francophone Algerian women writers to write in French, the simultaneously estranging and intimate "langue marâtre" ("stepmother tongue") (Djebar 1995, 239-240). Without having to choose between Arabic or French, or between Arabic and English to claim their "Arab authenticity" for example, these writers can engage in the revolutionary poetics of literary worldliness as "Arab Mezzaterrans" (Soueif 2004, 7) meeting on "common ground with avenues into the rich hinterlands of many traditions" (6). This meeting point is not a site of utopia or naïve idealism. Instead, the search for common ground highlights the struggle to carve safe spaces of mutual understanding, compassion, justice and tolerance when engaging in the boldly expressive ethos of creative dissidence – a much-needed initiative in a world where Mezzaterra is under siege.

The general framing of dissident creativity provides the context for a more detailed analysis of the ways in which Arab women writers engage with the multiple aspects of dissidence-in-writing against violence in individual chapters. This book comprises six chapters divided into three independent sections structured around the theme of violence.

PART I: *Violence and war*. This section comprises one chapter divided into four sections.

The violence of war represents a common theme in Algerian women's writings; these writings focus on the physical, social and economic aspects of war.

The women redefine the scope and intentionality of war by exposing its "physicality" and its violent psychological and emotional consequences.

CHAPTER 1: *Contesting violence and imposed silence: the creative dissidence of contemporary Algerian women writers Maïssa Bey, Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar.* Arab women's writings against war are inscribed in a historical continuum. This literature finds its roots in what I call the "Algerian war story" for francophone Algerian women. These authors chronicle the multiple wars faced by Algeria beginning with the 1830 war of French conquest, moving through the war of decolonization (1954-1962) and culminating in the bloody decade of civil war in the 1990s. Using a woman-centered perspective to expose both the violence of coloniality and its gendered ravages on the bodies of women, I examine how these writers evoke and condemn the horrors of war; patriarchal credos of targeted violence against civilians; the un-making of Algerian identity; the gendered intentionality of war and militarization; and the gaping omissions in Algerian history with reference to the active contributions of female revolutionaries and their participation in the nationalist struggle against the French. Primary sources include Maïssa Bey's novel *Pierre papier cendre et sang (Stone Paper Ashes and Blood)* and short story *Nouvelles d'Algérie* (*Algerian News*), Leïla Sebbar's novel *La Seine était rouge* (*The Seine was Red*), and Assia Djebar's lesser known war play *Rouge l'aube* (*The Red Dawn*).

***

PART II: *Violence and social/sexual oppression.* This section comprises three chapters

While the authors in this book have the freedom to migrate back and forth in their writings and across geographical spaces, they are, at the same time, acutely aware that this privilege eludes the poor and the working class. The mobility afforded by transnational travel for the privileged morphs into an act of illegality for all those who are immobilized by the borders of race, class, gender, disavowed citizenship and religion, as exemplified by the three texts chosen for this section. Delimiting distinctions between "grievable" and "ungrievable" lives (Butler 2010, xix) create life and death situations for the socially dispossessed. These populations are subjected to the coloniality of maps, disfavored economic realities and politically devised territorialities exposed by authors Aïcha Ech-Channa, Faïza Guène and Laila Lalami in a testimonial narrative, novel and novella, respectively.

CHAPTER 2: *Sexual violence and testimony: Aïcha Ech-Channa's Miseria: témoignages.* In this chapter, I examine the social violence that targets the Moroccan poor, especially women and children, who are dispossessed by an elitist economy of hypocritical morality codes and sexual slavery. Ech-Channa's testimonial narrative focuses on the rape and physical abuse of society's most vulnerable members represented by underage domestic maids