

Kifah Hanna. *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in the Levantine Novel.* Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 198 pp. \$95.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-349-71489-6.

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In this book, Kifah Hanna argues that the series of books she classifies as Ghada Al-Samman's Beirut tetralogy (*Beirut '75* [1975], *Beirut Nightmares* [1976], *The Night of the First Billion* [1986], and *Sahrah Tanakuriyyah lil-Mawta* [*A Masquerade for the Dead*] [2003]), Sahar Khalifeh's West Bank series (*Wild Thorns* [1976], *Sunflower: The Sequel to Wild Thorns* [1980], *The Gate of the Courtyard* [1990], and *The End of Spring* [2004]), and Huda Barakat's Civil War series (*The Stone of Laughter* [1990], *Disciples of Passion* [1993], *The Tiller of Waters* [1998], and *My Master, My Lover* [2004]) constitute a particularly Levantine movement of feminist avant-garde literature. Reading these novels as responses to and reimaginings of the post-Nakba period and the Lebanese Civil War, the author maintains that the three novelists break with the exclusionary and depoliticized feminism of the 1950s in favor of a "relational" and politically engaged feminism. Hanna contends that the writers of this movement were able to create a feminism-nationalism synthesis by exploring the political and social ills caused by war, all while maintaining a great degree of empathy toward Levantine masculinity. She argues that unlike their feminist predecessors who "turned inward," these three authors reached out to the

male Other in an attempt to make sense of—and heal—the traumas of occupation and civil war. For Hanna, one of the ways in which the authors achieved this new feminism-nationalism synthesis is through their focus on male protagonists. By centering many of their plots around male protagonists, they were able to probe the estrangement and vulnerability of Levantine masculinity and to ultimately deconstruct the myths of masculinist heroism. According to Hanna, the political avant-gardism of her authors lies specifically in their rejection of individualist approaches to feminism and their call for a collective coming-into-consciousness about the historically sedimented layers of political and economic oppression in the region.

Hanna pays great attention to the aesthetics of this avant-garde feminist movement. She sees this avant-gardism as a "translation" of European forms and tropes into the Levantine context. Postulating that tropes and forms are transnational and translational in nature, the author asserts that Al-Samman's existentialism, Khalifeh's critical realism, and Barakat's surrealism should not be read in terms of "influence." Rather, she argues, these translations should be understood as a necessary aesthetic corollary to the metamor-

phoses of the Levantine subject in the face of war, occupation, and trauma. Hanna also shows the many ways in which the three authors expand on and rework these translated aesthetics. For example, she indicates that unlike Simone de Beauvoir's feminist characters who "only discover their national affiliations in reaction to emotional disappointments or crises," Al-Samman's feminist characters in the Beirut tetralogy are "committed to both feminism and nationalism" (pp. 63, 64).

The book begins with a historical overview of feminist public activism and feminist literature in the Mashriq. The overview covers both the Levant and Egypt in an attempt to account for the mutual influences between the different countries of the Mashriq. The author concludes that feminism in the region is caught in a vicious cycle whereby contemporary feminists are forced to reiterate the demands made by the feminist pioneers of the early twentieth century given the strength of traditional social hierarchies and the resurgence of Islamic revivalism. Hanna believes that her three avant-garde writers were able to combine these demands with the demands of the national struggle. This survey not only places Al-Samman, Khalifeh, and Barakat at the forefront of the Arab feminist movement but also repositions them as key figures in the intellectual history of the Arab world, a history that has often been denied to women writers and thinkers.

In the next three chapters, the author engages in a careful textual analysis of the main avant-gardist aesthetic and political features in the work of her three authors. Al-Samman's existentialism is shown to be a literary response to the war and an attempt at facing its traumatizing effects on men and women. Hanna argues that this existentialism is feminist, pan-Arabist, and nationalist and that it is more empowering for the characters (and the readers) because it brings all these political strands together. Khalifeh's critical realism is conceptualized both as a reinvigoration of Palestinian resistance literature (politically and stylisti-

cally) and as a deconstruction of the sociopolitical pieties of masculine nationalisms. Hanna sees this political reinvigoration in Khalifeh's empathetic characterization of Palestinian traumatized masculinity and in her creation of rebellious and resilient feminist characters of various economic backgrounds. Hanna also contends that Khalifeh's hybridization of Standard Arabic with Hebrew and her free use of profanities are unprecedented in the Arabic literary tradition. Finally, the author examines Barakat's "nationalism-feminism synthesis" through its formal manifestations in the aesthetics of surrealism and androgyny. Maintaining that both surrealism and the aesthetics of androgyny challenge socially embedded binaries, Hanna concludes that these aesthetics are an avant-gardist rendition of the cataclysmic effects of the war.

By centering the book on the intersection of feminism-nationalism in the Levant in times of national crises, *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in the Levantine Novel* contributes to the ongoing decolonization of trauma studies. It brings to the fore the experience of male, female, and queer subjects whose lives continue to be affected by colonial mappings and whose traumas are frequently misunderstood and racialized as "inherent violence." The book also breaks with the modernist bias of traditional European trauma studies. More particularly, it does not engage with the classical ideas of the ineffability of trauma and it does not privilege the aesthetics of fragmentation. Hanna's inclusion of Khalifeh's critical realism highlights the possibility both of expressing trauma and of expressing it through modes like realism.

One of the most important achievements of this book is its successful balance between the encyclopedic scope required to prove the existence and the importance of a literary movement and the close readings necessary to demonstrate the movement's avant-gardism. Hanna looks at an important part of the oeuvre of three prominent

women authors, all while maintaining a clear political and aesthetic argument throughout her textual analyses. She traces the aesthetic innovations of Al-Samman, Khalifeh, and Barakat in multiple novels and even creates a narrative of aesthetic evolution for each of these authors. For example, she studies the sexualization of the characters in Barakat's Civil War series and is able to detect a steady movement toward "androgyny" as an "existential core" and a necessary deconstruction of war masculinities (p. 122). She suggests that reading Barakat's male protagonists alongside each other allows us to see them as successive or overlapping points on the spectrum of gender and sexuality and gives us a better understanding of Barakat's overarching project. More particularly, she finds in Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* the beginning of a deconstructive project that presents homosexuality as an alternative masculinity, in *Disciples of Passion* a further intensification of the probe into the "underlying androgyny of the subject," in *The Tiller of Waters*, even more experimentation with homosexuality as alternative masculinity through the figure of the homosexual flaneur, and in *My Master, My Lover*, a "final" crystallization of the notion of androgyny as "an existential core of all gender and sexual experience in its purest form" (p. 122).

Hanna's book is unfortunately a bit remiss in its lack of engagement with the conceptual arsenal of contemporary gender studies. Her argument about the movement's "relational feminism" could have perhaps acquired more theoretical backing had the texts been approached through the lens of intersectional feminism. The perspective of intersectional feminism could have given us more insight into the class, ethnic, religious, gendered, physical, and mental aspects of character development in the oeuvre studied in this book. In the same context, Hanna's detection of a trajectory toward "androgyny" in Barakat's work qualifies as a queering of Arabic literary criticism just as Barakat's characterization qualifies as a queering of the Levantine subject, but Hanna

prefers to call this queering a "re-sexualization" of the discourse (p. 102).

Additionally, Hanna attempts to highlight the formal innovations of this movement by repeatedly stating that the series of novels studied in the book represent a form of avant-gardist "unconventional serialization." Perhaps this argument needs to be slightly nuanced. The author herself admits that there are no precise structural continuities in the texts she studies. She bases her argument solely on the thematic and aesthetic continuities of the works. The novels are therefore much more indicative of particular stages in the writers' trajectory than a form of serialization.

To conclude, Hanna's *Feminism and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in the Levantine Novel* represents a valuable intervention in Arab feminist studies, Arab modernist studies, and trauma studies. By reading Al-Samman, Khalifeh, and Barakat together, the author proves the importance of expanding the Arab modernist canon as well as the canon of resistance literature to include avant-garde feminist writers. Moreover, Hanna's book re-centers the question of the aesthetic in Middle Eastern literary criticism and invites the reader to appreciate the texts both as art and as political intervention.

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