



For activists and academics — and everyone in between

Who is She?

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Opportunities

Call for Contributions/workshop

The Hillary Rodham Clinton Center for Women's Empowerment at Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane (Morocco), in collaboration with the Middle East Center at St. Anthony's College at Oxford University, will host a workshop in English on the theme: ***Gender, Law, and Social Change in North Africa-March 25-27, 2015.***

Abstract Submission Deadline: December 1, 2014. Click [here](#) to know more about the workshop.

Call for Papers

Understanding Conflict: Research, ideas and responses to security threats-University of Bath 8-11 June, 2015.

Deadline for submissions: January 31, 2015. Click [here](#) to know more.

'Ideal' Sahrawi Refugees: Gender Equality or International Idealisation?

The 'uniqueness' and social superiority of Sahrawi refugees over 'other refugees' have been systematically proclaimed by academics and humanitarian aid workers since the establishment of the Sahrawi camps in South-West Algeria in 1975-1976: Harrell-Bond (1986) labels the Sahrawi camps a 'success story' amidst a failing humanitarian system which creates 'dependency syndrome' amongst refugees, explicitly referring to the Sahrawi as 'good' or even 'ideal' refugees

(Harrell-Bond, 1999, p.151); Brazier (1997) refers to the Sahrawi camps as 'the best run refugee camps in the world' (p.14); the World Food Programme (WFP) (2004) asserts that the 'school attendance level is almost 100 percent among refugee children' (p.6); and Mundy (2007) attests that the Sahrawi camps have 'the highest literacy rates in Africa'. (p.287).

One major characteristic which is commonly invoked to substantiate claims that the Sahrawi are 'the 'ideal' refugees,' is their egalitarian approach to gender relations and the position of 'Sahrawi women' in the camps. Hence, Harrell-Bond (1999)

reports that Sahrawi refugees' political representatives, the Polisario Front, built 'a twentieth-century democratic nation, women's equality being one of the strongest features of their social organization' (p.156), and that '[w]omen's equality was a most dominant theme of life in the Sahrawi camps'. (Indra, 1999, p.44). Equally, Oxfam's desk-officer in the mid-1980s wrote that

Perhaps the most impressive thing about Sahrawi society is that it is the most fundamentally balanced society I have ever come across in terms of the relationships between men and women. (Mowles, 1986, p.9).

My recent book, *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival* (2014, Syracuse University Press) examines the nature and implications of this depiction of the Sahrawi refugee camps as spaces of women's equality and female empowerment, and the repeatedly-made assertion that there is no violence against women in the camps.

International Support Systems

Although the Sahrawi refugee camps are largely run by the Polisario and the Sahrawi state-in-exile (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), Sahrawi refugees are almost entirely dependent upon humanitarian aid provided by international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the WFP. These organisations have a minimal

presence in the camps, delivering food and other forms of aid to a central distribution centre, from where they are collected and delivered to camps/families by the Sahrawi Red Crescent, and then by Sahrawi women themselves in the camps.

These support systems are paralleled by hundreds of Northern civil society and 'solidarity' groups which send supplies to, and fund projects in the camps, and also a number of transnational education programmes which have provided scholarships to Sahrawi children and youth to complete their primary, secondary and tertiary level studies outside of the camps. These educational migration programmes have enabled (or required) thousands of children to leave the camps and their families, to study in countries such as Cuba, elsewhere in Algeria, and – before the outbreak of the Arab Spring – in Syria and Libya.

Female graduates and contributions to camp life

Having returned to work in the camps upon graduation, Sahrawi women's contributions are actively celebrated by the camp leadership, given their central roles as qualified doctors, nurses, engineers and teachers¹, in addition to being members of the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) and the government-in-exile itself.

Being centrally positioned in 'solidarity events' designed for Western visitors to the camps (see



Figure 1: Female Sahrawi doctors and nurses



Figure 2: Women as producers of Sahrawi cultural artefacts and 'bearers of Sahrawi culture'



Figure 3: Woman leading a female 'military parade'

Figures 1-3), Sahrawi refugee women emerge not as victims, but rather as empowered, liberated and active agents, who, to a large extent, appear to overshadow their male compatriots in the camps. Indeed, these depictions have led to claims by organisations such as the WFP that 'Saharan society is primarily *matriarchal* and the women are *totally empowered*' (WFP, 2004, p.8); equally, the UNHCR has asserted that Sahrawi refugee women's empowerment is 'unique' and that the NUSW is an example of 'good practice on gender mainstreaming'. (Baines, 2001). These declarations immediately oppose the more frequently reproduced image of women as helpless victims of war and forced displacement.

Ideal or Idealised Refugees?

Despite these widespread depictions of the Sahrawi as 'ideal' and 'successful' refugees, my research in and about the Sahrawi refugee camps has challenged and critiqued these unequivocally positive depictions of life in the camps, inter alia by analysing the challenges which women and girls (and also men and boys) face, both on a daily basis in the camps and when separated from their families.

For instance, while Cuban-educated Sahrawi female professionals play a central role in service delivery and camp management, many women have faced discrimination and stigmatization for being perceived to have been 'bad girls' during their time in Havana. Irrespective of their actual

experiences in the Caribbean, family and community members have often assumed that these 'Cubarau' women (where Cuban + Sahraui = *Cubarau*) will have behaved in socially and religiously inappropriate ways during their absence from the camps, leading many to face both culture shock and social marginalisation upon their return. The impression that all girls and young women had 'misbehaved' whilst abroad, no matter how they might have actually behaved, was derived from the experiences of what can only be called a minority: some of the older girls had entered into relationships and a small number of these had become pregnant, facing serious consequences both in Cuba itself and when they were promptly returned to the camps to face their parents. Indicating the severity of their treatment upon return, some of these young women have been interned in a secure holding facility referred to as the 'Centre for Maternity Assistance', where women who have become pregnant out of wedlock have been sent since the camps were created.

Furthermore, while many parents and broader community members may consider that these young women have undermined the moral integrity of the camps through their activities in Cuba, politicians have also recognized that Cuban graduates simultaneously have the capacity to challenge the representation of the camps to outsiders, and the status quo in the camps. With

the veteran members of the National Union of Sahrawi Women having monopolized the political scene in the camps since the 1970s and 1980s, Cuban-educated women have been granted roles which ensure that they are unable to directly challenge the power structures.

On the one hand, their visibility to international observers grants them greater access to material and social capital and networks, thereby leading Cuban graduates to recognize the benefits which arise from acting as the camps' 'ideal representatives', and what they could lose were they either to refute the images reproduced by camp managers during their engagements with Spaniards, or to directly challenge the legitimacy of these bodies.

On the other hand, and as became particularly apparent during the Fifth NUSW Congress held in the 27 February Camp in April 2007, the vast majority of Cuban-educated women are restricted to fulfilling their assigned roles as 'guides' and 'interpreters', rather than being able to participate as conference delegates as many of them would wish. Whilst enjoying a high degree of 'freedom of movement' around the camps, and accompanying visiting NGOs and journalists during their tours of the entire refugee setting, many of these young women are, for instance, unable to join these representative structures which continue to be run by the same women, who are repeatedly re-elected to executive positions. Even those young

Cuban-educated women who work in the NUSW regularly encounter difficulties in travelling to and from work, and find their activities being judged by family members and neighbours alike.

A final critique relates to the idealisation of the transnational education system itself. While clearly providing significant opportunities to refugee children and youth, a range of dangers have also been experienced by male and female children, adolescents and young adults during their participation in these educational migration programmes. In particular, they have experienced major physical threats whilst studying in countries which have subsequently faced major socio-economic and conflict crises, including the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Cuba as a result of the international embargo in the 1990s, but also more recently as a result of the Arab Spring in the case of students who were based in Syria and Libya at the outbreak of the violence in those countries since 2011. In the context of Libya, for instance, Sahrawi girls as young as six had been offered full scholarships by Gadhafi's government since the 1970s, and over 900 Sahrawi refugee adolescents were based in Libya when the conflict began.

By means of conclusion: future challenges?

Socio-economic shifts and ongoing conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa raise significant challenges for the future education of Sahrawi

NGO Highlight

Collective for Research and Training on Development-Action CRTD.A

It is a non-governmental organization established in 1999, and registered in 2003 under registration number 68. The organization is based in Beirut-Lebanon but collaborates with a large network of regional and international partners. CRTD.A aims through its projects and programs with the local communities and organizations to promote citizenship, social justice and gender equality.

Click [here](#) to know more about **CRTD.A**

children and youth, including girls and young women. No longer able to leave the refugee camps to study in Syria or Libya due to the violence spreading across the region, it is unclear what the future holds for these refugees, and what the implications will be for the division of labour in the camps in the decades to come: with fewer girls acquiring professional degrees abroad, what space will exist for them to contribute to service delivery and political structures in the camps in future? While conditions tentatively improve in some countries in the Middle East, protracted refugee situations, such as that of the Sahrawi refugees which has now existed for over 35 years,

continue in stagnation, challenging us to go beyond the positive and celebratory declarations of their 'ideal' nature.

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Ph.D.
Lecturer in Human Geography at University College London, and Visiting Lecturer at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

Her recent publications include *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival* (2014, Syracuse University Press) and *South-South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development: Views from the Caribbean, North Africa and the Middle East* (forthcoming in 2015, Routledge), and *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (2014, Oxford University Press).

End note:

¹ Sahrawi women reportedly constitute 80 % of all health workers in 29 health centres in the camps, and 60% of both medical and paramedical staff and camp teachers.

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Announcing the Organizing Meeting at MESA of the Women Historians of the Middle East (WHOME)

The meeting will be at 1:00 pm, on *Sunday November 23, 2014* at the Marriott-Wardman hotel's front desk (and proceed with our bag lunches to the meeting room).

Open to all women who study any aspect of Middle Eastern and North African history to help form a scholarly community where we will share our research and other professional interests.

For more information, please contact Elizabeth F. Thompson, Professor of History, University of Virginia, at: eft3k@virginia.edu

Want to Share your Thoughts & News?

Write to Us!

We are interested in articles, announcements, conference reports, workshop updates, film-screenings, and social initiatives related to women and gender issues in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

Please e-mail: amewsbulletin@gmail.com



Remembering Annie Higgins

Annie Higgins passed away unexpectedly on this past September 18. Many of you knew Annie from her work in the Syrian Studies Association, for which she served as treasurer from 2007-2008, and in the Association for Middle East Women's Studies, where she served on the Editorial Advisory Board of JMEWS in recent years. Annie had also been Assistant Professor at the College of Charleston and Researcher at Bilad al-Sham Center at the University of Jordan.

I met Annie when we were in the final years of our doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. I remember Annie as an active and enthusiastic member of the intellectual community of students and scholars of Arabic and the Middle East in Hyde Park. Many of Annie's fellow graduate students, myself included, were in awe of her profound knowledge of Qur'anic, Modern Standard and Egyptian Arabic. My admiration for her linguistic skills and scholarship only grew when we ended up in Cairo at the same time for dissertation research. She was not only tremendously knowledgeable about linguistic and literary matters but also always

willing to share her erudition. Her enthusiasm for Arabic, Qur'anic studies, and for Cairo and its inhabitants was entirely contagious.

Perhaps what I admire most about Annie's life however, was her unwavering desire— and her remarkable ability— to discern and interpret less powerful, or even marginalized voices of history, whether it was the *Kharijites* of early Islam or the Palestinians currently suffering in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and elsewhere. Annie devoted a great deal of time to volunteering in camps, and to writing about the situation—and endurance—of the Palestinians she met and lived with. She lived and worked in both the Balata Refugee Camp near Nablus and in the Jenin Refugee Camp. As Annie once said in an interview with Al-Ahram weekly online, '[I wanted] to use my presence to help people in ways they felt would be beneficial and to acquaint people outside Palestine with Palestinians at home, in more normal settings...to get to know them as friends rather than as victims' (27 March-2 April 2003).

Much of the fruit of Annie's scholarship will appear this fall in her book *Secession and Identity in Early Islam: Redefining the Kharijites and their Challenge to the Ummayyads* from I.B. Taurus Publishers.

Annie's passing is a loss to so many of us, as a friend, a teacher, a scholar and as a passionate advocate for the oppressed, who always worked to 'honor the right to speak'. She will be dearly missed.

Caroline Seymour-Jorn, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Milwaukee, WI

Who is She?



Tawhida Ben Cheikh (1909-2010), is a celebrated physician and a pioneer in women's medicine. In 1936, Ben Cheikh obtained her medical doctorate from the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and was the first woman physician in Tunis. Despite the political and social challenges, in colonial France and the conservative Tunisian milieu that existed at the time, her pioneering work was unbounded. She also became editor-in-chief of *Leila*, the first Tunisian feminist newspaper in the French language.

Specializing in gynecology, Tawhida Ben Cheikh directed a women's clinic in Tunisia and was an active supporter of family planning. Between 1955 and 1977, she worked in the Public Health Service, first at the Charles Nicole Hospital and then at the Aziza Othmana Hospital. In 1963, she primarily contributed to the first Tunisian family planning policy, and in 1968 she

founded the first African birth control clinic in Montfleury.¹ In 1970 she served as the principle of the National Council for Family Planning. She claimed women's right to health and to special treatment and care, in particular in having access to contraception and abortion facilities.

Tawhida Ben Cheikh founded a number of welfare societies during World War II, notably The Society for Social Aid (*jami'iyat al-Is'af al-Ijtima'i*), which was the incentive behind the founding of two Homes: The Orphanage Home (*Dar al-Aytam*) and Women's Home (*Dar al-Mar'a*) in 1950. She also founded the Qammata Society for child care and maternal education aimed at building consciousness and training mothers of poor families to acquire health care. As vice president of the Tunisian Red Cross, she adopted a humanitarian approach that makes her a role model for Arab women in medicine and social welfare.

A film "The Struggles of a female Doctor" (*Nidal Hakima*) was produced in Tunis (first screening 12/5/2013), in her honor, to document the life and struggle of Tawhida Ben Cheikh. Likewise a postal stamp was issued to celebrate her career. On the occasion of the International Women's Day, the Tunisian Association of Research and Study held (on 6/23/2012) a symposium on the thought and career of the first physician in Tunis, Tawhida Ben Cheikh. Today Ben Cheikh is considered among the great scientists who contributed to making science an opportunity for sustainable development and peace in their own countries.

Tawhida Ben Cheikh was the niece of Tahar Ben Ammar who led the negotiations for Tunisia's independence in 1956. Her daughter, Zeinab Benzina Ben Abdallah is a prominent Tunisian archeologist and director of Research at the National Heritage Institute in Tunisia.²

Hosn Abboud, Ph.D.

Author and lecturer on gender issues in Islam and literature

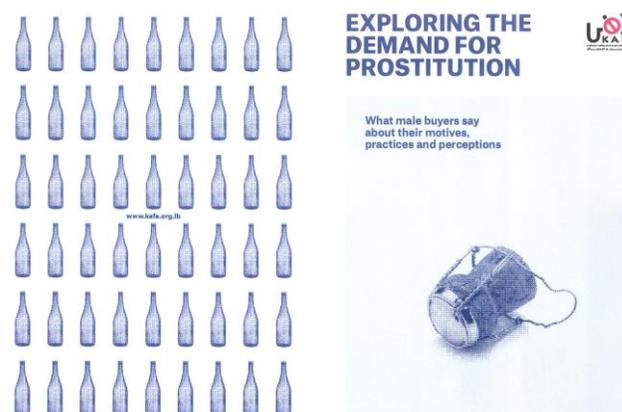
¹ See a profile of Tawhida Ben Cheikh in Shemera (She euromeditarranean research area) newsletter, October 2012, Issue 2 (*cf. Sveva Avveduto, Arab Women and Gender Progress in Science, CNR, Italy*).

² See Andrea O'Reilly (Ed.). (2010). *Encyclopedia of motherhood* (vol. 1, p.399). SAGE Publications.

Exploring the Demand for Prostitution

Prostitution is rarely questioned. It is often the case that prostitution is normalized by a society, tolerated, and considered as a ‘necessary evil’. But what is less questioned is the demand side, or the buyers of sexual acts, who constitute *the raison d’être* of the prostitution industry and sex trafficking – two issues closely linked to each other. The fact is that without the demand by buyers (who are almost exclusively males), there would be no supply of persons for prostitution purposes; there would be no pimps or traffickers and businesses recruiting, managing, and trafficking predominantly women and girls to meet the varied needs of the male buyers. These buyers are often invisible and are rarely held accountable by the society and by laws and policies such as in the case of Lebanon where persons in prostitution are criminalized but buyers of prostitution enjoy impunity for their actions.

In September 2015, [Kafa \(enough\) Violence & Exploitation](#) - a Lebanese, secular and feminist women’s rights group - published an action-oriented research entitled: [Exploring the Demand for Prostitution: What Male Buyers Say About Their Motives, Practices, and Perceptions](#). This research is a first attempt to explore and better understand the demand side in Lebanon where little has been written on this critical component of the prostitution industry. Analyzing 55 interviews with



The cover of Kafa’s newly released study

male buyers, the research collects and compiles insightful data and information on the profile of the buyers, their motivations and rationalizations for buying sexual acts, their behavior and practices, and their gendered interactions with and perceptions about women in prostitution.

The study concludes that prostitution does not establish a contractual relationship between two equal parties where a service is rendered in exchange for money. What is in fact established is an exploitative relationship, which is normalized by a complex scheme of patriarchal justifications and rationalizations presented by male buyers as truths.

The study reveals that prostitution is about male sexuality, and is justified by male buyers of sexual acts as a necessity for satiating their sexual impulses and needs, and for maintaining public order. Without the possibility of buying sexual

acts, men claim they would become uncontrollable and society would suffer, particularly women not in prostitution. According to the majority of the interviewed male buyers, prostitution reduces the rape of women who are not engaged in prostitution, and prevents other forms of abuse. Many male buyers claim that it is easy and convenient to use women in prostitution as opposed to going through the hassle of dating and commitment. Prostitution is also justified as a means to seek variety, leisure, entertainment, discovery, and experimentation, and as paving the way to adulthood and manhood. These patriarchal assumptions about men's sexuality institutionalize prostitution and normalize it as a viable 'profession' for women that they may 'choose' and even 'like'.

Moreover, sex buyers rationalize prostitution through the act of paying money. The vast majority of the interviewed buyers believed that when a man pays money for a sexual act, the woman in prostitution is required to answer to all his wishes and desires. By buying, men not only commodify the woman and consider her as an object— just like any other product on the market – but they also buy the right to control the woman for the duration of the encounter and to exploit her. In this 'transaction', buyers are in a position of power where they dictate matters and control the real choices. It is this context and this reality that forces women and persons in prostitution to develop different self-defence mechanisms and tactics in

order to reduce, often unsuccessfully, the inevitable harm generated by the exploitative nature of prostitution.



Showing a street banner during the launching of the study and the media campaign: *You cannot buy love* #Fight prostitution, # Fight Human Trafficking

Such justifications and rationalizations allow men buyers, despite their awareness of the deplorable conditions of women in prostitution, to continue to purchase and exploit women, causing the expansion of this profitable industry. The prostitution buyers in the study did not change their behavior despite being fully aware that it is often the difficult socio-economic conditions and an acute need for money that lead women to enter into prostitution. Nor did their awareness of the level of control and abuse exercised by pimps, traffickers, or clients impact in any way their choice to purchase and exploit women through different prostitution activities in Lebanon.

Palestine: Activism, Militancy and the Arts at McGill University

The Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University hosted a series of events, 'Palestine: Activism, Militancy and the Arts', from 1-4 October 2014. One goal of this series was to focus on Palestine within the larger context of the many events held over the past two years to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Institute. In particular we wanted to emphasize activism and the creative arts as well as many creative forms of resistance in Palestine and by Palestinian artists. We were specifically interested in highlighting women artists and the roles of women in creative arts and resistance. Throughout the series, we had many discussions about the role of militancy, resistance, resilience, gender roles and the many different kinds of activism inside and outside Palestine.

Another reason for the timing of this series of events was to bring together activists, artists, students and faculty across the university and city at a moment when activism around Palestine is gaining momentum, particularly in the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In Montreal, a great deal of momentum has been gained for BDS in general, and the academic boycott in particular. This meant that these events were timely as a way to think and meet together particularly in thinking about the possible role/s for students, teachers, academics and artists in

activism and politics more generally, and the boycott movement specifically.

Four invited guests presented their own artistic works in formats they chose and we held one roundtable discussion at the end, involving all of the artists, as well as a range of people from across the university and city. Dahna Abourahme, director, and Lena Merhej, animator, discussed their collaboration on the film: *Kingdom of Women: Ein al-Hilwe* about women in the Ein el-Hilwe refugee camp in the South of Lebanon who rebuilt their homes—and indeed their camp—when it was destroyed during the 1982 occupation.



Kingdom of Women

The discussion focused on the resistance and roles of women who rebuilt the camp when all of its men were imprisoned and how they chose to tell their stories. Dahna and Lena were also able to speak about their film to local activists and journalists [<http://freecityradio.org/post/99383077750/interview-the-kingdom-of-women-ein-el-hilweh> and

<http://www.mixcloud.com/UnderTheOliveTree/>
(October 2, 2014)].

Diana Allan presented her two short films, *Terrace of the Sea* and *Still Life*, artistic documentary films growing out of her fieldwork as an ethnographer in refugee camps in Lebanon. She also talked about activist practice and filmmaking in relation to her work on the Nakba Archive project. In addition, she launched her recently published ethnography of the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, *Refugees of the Revolution* (2013, Stanford UP). The final event was Ibrahim Nasrallah's poetry recital in Arabic, with translations of his poetry into English and French. Following the roundtable conversation the night before, these few hours of poetry brought all of the themes and discussions of the week before it together in celebration of Palestinian poetry and creative arts, and also left us with much to think about.

Michelle Hartman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor,
Arabic Literature at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University.

Al-Raida

The editorial committee of *Al-Raida* invites submissions to a non-thematic double-blind, peer reviewed issue.

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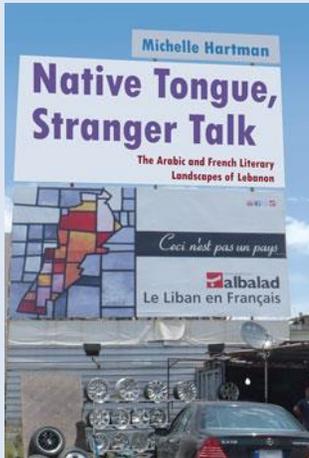
Cairo Papers in Social Science, a quarterly monograph series published by the American University in Cairo (AUC), has released its latest issue entitled [**Masculinities in Egypt and the Arab World: Historical, Literary, and Social Science Perspectives**](#) edited by Helen Rizzo.

This issue presents a set of papers delivered at Cairo Papers Annual Symposium in spring 2012 on "Masculinities in Egypt and the Arab World: Historical, Literary, and Social Science Perspectives". While reflecting upon the Arab Spring, these papers cover several themes that include utilizing the concept of hegemonic masculinity in productive ways, the role of the state in promoting certain types of masculinities while devaluing and disciplining others, the potential role of feminism and activism in influencing masculinities, and the effects of colonialism, nationalism and post colonialism, as well as war and violence. Presenting cases from Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia, they seek to humanize, contextualize, and historicize masculinities to particular times and places in the Middle East.

Contributors: Mustafa Abdalla, Samira Aghacy, Wislon Jacob, Hanan Kholoussy, Florence Martin, and Helen Rizzo.

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Highlights



Native Tongue, Stranger Talk *The Arabic and French Literary Landscapes of Lebanon*

Author: Michelle Hartman
Year of Publication: 2014
Publisher: Syracuse University Press

Can a reality lived in Arabic be expressed in French? Can a French-language literary work speak Arabic? In *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* Hartman shows how Lebanese women authors use spoken Arabic to disrupt literary French, with sometimes surprising results. Challenging the common claim that these writers express a Francophile or 'colonized' consciousness, this book demonstrates how Lebanese women writers actively question the political and cultural meaning of writing in French in Lebanon.

Hartman argues that their innovative language inscribes messages about society into their novels by disrupting class-status hierarchies, narrow ethno-religious identities, and rigid gender roles. It investigates specifically how creative writers can use the contours of language/s in order to disrupt conventional notions of gender roles and gender hierarchies.

Because the languages of these texts reflect the crucial issues of their times, *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* guides the reader through three key periods of Lebanese history: the French Mandate and Early Independence, the Civil War, and the postwar period. Three novels are discussed in each time period, exposing the contours of how the authors 'write Arabic in French' to invent new literary languages. Within each section, writings by women are put in dialogue with each other and those by men, to contextualize them within larger contexts.

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