

in part or in whole, for courses on Shakespeare, performance theories, and Renaissance studies.

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Anastasia Valassopoulos. *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context*. London: Routledge, 2007. Pp. 176. £60.00 hardcover.

Anastasia Valassopoulos's book covers a wide range of Arab women's literature and advocates a critical engagement with Arab women's writing that goes beyond tried and tested feminist paradigms. Valassopoulos discusses novels from Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria and Palestine but emphasizes that her choices were not "guided by location but by issues of theme and form" (2). Enabled by the "growing field of translation and distribution of Arab women's literature" (1), Valassopoulos considers it necessary to broaden the disciplinary forum of discussion of these works. Thus her ambitious and insightful book has a clear agenda: it seeks to promote the study of Arab women's writing as an integral part of postcolonial and feminist studies.

This book is directed at an English speaking audience. Valassopoulos goes to great lengths to justify the use of translated material; besides being concerned with raising the visibility of these novels, she feels the need to discuss material which is available to a wide readership: "I did not want to engage with material on which I would have the last word. I write in the spirit of transcultural and transnational communication, and if a work has been translated and is readily available, then I invite a community of readers to participate openly in its interpretation" (2).

Throughout the book, Valassopoulos emphasizes the need to contextualize Arab women's writing and cautions against employing critical approaches that may stifle rather than open up new possibilities for reading these texts. A commonly held critical assumption, which Valassopoulos finds problematic, is, for example, that "Arab women's writing only has one thing to offer: an affirmation of oppression. Read critically, many of the works that I discuss reveal a deep-seated mistrust of any foreclosing arguments that would seek to pre-terminate their meaning" (4). Valassopoulos also avoids focusing on "questions of faith and ethnicity" as these issues threaten to "dominate the discussion on Arab women's literary production" (2). Instead, she argues for employing a variety of critical approaches such as "feminist, queer, postcolonial and cultural theories." Not only will those approaches benefit the study of Arab women's

literature, a critical engagement with their writing can in turn enrich and productively “inform contemporary literary criticism and theory” (3).

The first chapter outlines the critical reception and study of Arab women’s literature. Not only is this chapter very well-informed and useful for those outside the field of Arab literature and criticism, but it also lays down clearly and concisely the methodological framework of this book and clarifies the author’s stance on key concepts such as Arab feminism and her championing of an inclusive and mutually informed employment of feminist and postcolonial theoretical concepts. The following chapters expand on these programmatic statements but are by no means confined to proving their validity. In fact, every chapter has a very distinct focus and agenda, both in terms of thematic treatment and methodology.

Valassopoulos dedicates one chapter to the discussion of the early novels of Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, and *Two Women in One*. Valassopoulos produces sensitive and meticulous close readings of the novels in dialogue with feminist and postcolonial theory, and persistently probes and interrogates the relations between the literary, theoretical and contextual and offers complex and bold conclusions: “I am not certain that it is possible to speak of a postcolonial feminism without referring to El Saadawi’s polemics and her early fiction. To do so would be tantamount to ignoring an organising principle around which I hope much Arab women’s writing is forming: that of a productive solidarity that risks exposing the local in order to engage at the global level” (53). In another chapter, she closely analyzes Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s *Memory in the Flesh* and Ahdaf Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* in order to examine the ways in which the novels represent the relation between the political and the personal. In a fascinating reading of *Memory in the Flesh*, Valassopoulos argues that novels can explore the relationship between the historical and political with the personal in unique ways, and that this novel in particular breaks new ground: “*Memory in the Flesh* seems to me to be an exceptional event in Arab women’s writing [...] forcing the reader to re-establish ideas of agency and to rethink, however difficult this may be, the paradigms of gendered identity in Arab women’s writing” (115).

The third chapter concentrates on Hanan Al-Shaykh’s novels *The Story of Zahra* and *Beirut Blues*, and Mai Ghousseub’s *Leaving Beirut: Women and Wars Within* “as instances of Lebanese women’s war literature where the ‘intolerable’ is written” (55). In this chapter, she argues “for the recognition that war opens us new spaces for the understanding of how gender is socially configured” (4). Valassopoulos explores the controversial pleasures and liberated desires women and women writers may discover in the event of war “that allows for the influx of new experiences and a reassessment of old lives” (59)

and discusses the female characters' actions with reference to psychoanalytic theory. In this context Valassopoulos develops the concept of a "narcissistic masochism" (68) and, borrowing from Jean Laplanche, discusses "a feminine appropriation of the death drive that would seem to give it a new meaning outside of war by investing it with libidinal energy" (p. 72). This original use of psychoanalytic theory, however, is not as clearly developed as other aspects of this book but could be productively expanded on by the author or other critics working in the area of women's war literature.

In another innovative chapter, Valassopoulos considers issues of translation and publication by discussing the Garnet 'Arab Women Writers' series and how it framed the distribution and marketing of novels by Liana Badre, Hamida Na'na, Salwa Bakr and Alia Mamdouh. In her final chapter, Valassopoulos interestingly argues for a more nuanced reading of the Orientalist elements in Arab women's writing. She discusses the way Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* and Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade* employ and explore Orientalism and exoticism, analyzing how both novels examine and represent Orientalist art, in particular Delacroix's painting *Femme d'Alger*. Without underestimating the risks and challenges involved, Valassopoulos argues that the two novelists manage to participate in Orientalist discourse in way that allows them "to *interrogate* the discourse from within, whilst at the same time *immersing* themselves in it" (133). Instead of dismissing Orientalist features in their novels as politically reactionary, Valassopoulos reminds us that we should read literature closely and explore the terrain they open up for us without taking anything for granted, rather than read for features and political stances we either welcome or 'already know'. In this chapter in particular, Valassopoulos reaches surprising and provocative conclusions, and it therefore forms an apt ending to a book which seeks to initiate new ways of reading and engaging with Arab women's literature in the spirit of dialogue.

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Sarah Phillips Casteel. *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007. Pp. ix, 272. \$59.50; \$22.50 pb.

What happens to the desire for home and a situated sense of belonging in a globalized, diasporic world? Following the siren call of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, are we really all content to be rootless nomads? Or does the desire for a space, landscape, environment to call one's own persist? These