

Book Reviews

Gillian Whitlock. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. 248. \$55 cloth; \$22.50 pb.

Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* is a fascinating study of contemporary life narratives originating from the Middle East and Central Asia. The work offers a detailed study of various modes of life narratives including web journals, diaries, testimonials, and biographical and semi-biographical works of fiction and non-fiction. Whitlock contrasts these forms written by natives of the regions under study with fictional and non-fictional representations made by contemporary Western writers whose writings showcase the Orient, often in problematic ways. Whitlock demonstrates that harem bestsellers are valuable commodities that sell in the West more widely than genuine life stories and accounts from the East. She argues that encouraging the distribution of the many forms of life narratives is important in the struggle to improve cross cultural relations between East and West. The rise of religious extremism and the tragedy of 9/11 are central to Whitlock's engagement with the topic of life narratives and she argues that in the wake of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, tolerant, moderate voices from the East are often not heard or adequately represented in the West. Indeed, these are the voices needed to intervene against monolithic views of the Orient that are perpetuated in the West by the various forces of media, government, and the publishing industry.

The intriguing title, "Soft Weapons" refers to how images and texts are readily mobilized for Western propaganda use to promote and sanction war; the text suggests that such tactics can become dangerous if left unquestioned. Life narratives can fittingly intervene by presenting alternative viewpoints through life stories from conflict zones and by illustrating some propaganda strategies in action. Whitlock's view is that more voices of the educated masses of Islamic nations must come forth to emphasize and promote the image of a moderate, diverse, and complex Islamic world. Importantly, she proposes that life narratives offer a means of resistance, promoting activism against possibly autocratic regimes: "Life narrative can offer access to that class of younger, semi-secularized, and cosmopolitan Muslim intellectuals—teachers, professionals, journalists, students, academics, activists—who may use life narrative to explore and create new forms of social organization than offered by their ruling elites" (63).

The book is neatly divided into seven sections, each of which are topically linked in a continued discussion of Whitlock's central theses that the Orient must represent itself and that autobiographical voices from the Orient must come to the foreground in order for better cross cultural communications to occur. Some of the memorable chapters discuss for example, the divisions in the Western world over the contentious images of the chador, the veil, and the burka. Whitlock attempts to dispel some of the viewpoints that the entire Middle East and regions where veiling is practiced is primitive and that women in these regions are wholly underprivileged in an intensely and uniformly patriarchal social system. Speaking in support of social activism originating from the developing world, Whitlock examines how women's rights movements in Afghanistan are often sustained largely by native women. Further, on the politics of veiling, she shows that indeed Afghan life narratives are put to good use by human rights organizations both in Afghanistan and abroad. Yet when the associated images and texts become co-opted by Western feminists and Western governments, the life narratives take on a problematic aspect. She asserts that images of suffering women are helpful in garnering support for various human rights movements, but at the same time, the images in turn can exploit and misrepresent the women and children that they portray. The suggestion is that veiling is certainly complex and the Western reader must be culturally sensitive when grappling with the topic. To broaden the reader's vantage point, in chapter two entitled "The Skin of the Burka: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan," Whitlock draws from postcolonial feminist theorists, including Chandra Mohanty, who illustrate that the veil can paradoxically become a means of subversion of authority, enabling, for example, Afghan feminists and others to acquire better mobility through anonymity, to facilitate the transport of prohibited information and banned publications, and to promote the use of hidden cameras that allow women to take control of representing their lives and political surroundings. Eloquently expressed, Whitlock writes how one must "translate the veil more transparently, as a fluid and ambivalent garment, an interface of skin, flesh, and cloth, which is a lived embodiment for Afghan women" (68). This is a view that is not largely expressed in the Western world, and her book does much in arguing for a better understanding of the cultural practice of veiling.

Throughout the book Whitlock persuasively speaks against the monolithic portrayal of the Oriental women. Further in the second chapter, she shows how an "oppressed" woman from Afghanistan becomes a spectacle for the pleasure of Western audiences. The section deals with Zoya, who is publicly unveiled in the Madison Square Garden, watched over by the Western "feminist" figures of Oprah Winfrey and Eve Ensler. Indeed, Zoya, an image for

the struggle for women's freedom, becomes a sacrificial symbol to be unveiled publicly and intrusively by Western eyes. Whitlock argues that there is a certain pathos associated with women who are thus ceremonially unveiled in the name of democracy and gender rights and the campaign against religious and political extremism.

In the third chapter, "Testimony Incarnate: Read My Lips," Whitlock looks at the story of Sharbat Gula who is widely remembered as the "Afghan girl" with the piercing green eyes from the famous photograph published in the *National Geographic Magazine*. She notes of this enduring image that "through her translator, Sharbat Gula recalls her anger that a stranger took her photograph in 1984" (70). Whitlock observes too that "[t]here is nothing liberating about her status as an omen in the Western public sphere for Sharbat Gula; to the contrary" (71). Whitlock notes that Steve McCurry, the photographer who first took Sharbat Gula's photo, upon returning to Afghanistan in 2002 and finding Sharbat Gula again (with the aid of team from *National Geographic* television) "recognizes that the photograph that has inspired so many is a burden to the subject, and the negotiations with *National Geographic* to establish an Afghan Girls Fund secures her reluctant consent" (71). Sharbat Gula's story is an example where the subject of the photograph vanishes into the background, and the image is left to be co-opted, proliferated, and inscribed with meaning that the subject of the image holds little control.

Chapter Four, "Branding: The Veiled Best-Seller," offers an insightful analysis on the topic of harem literature. Whitlock notes that "[c]learly the veiled best-seller is a potent weapon in propaganda wars now. But I see it as a "soft" weapon ... not because of its peony-pink tint but because of its susceptibility to taint" (105) and to how it falls "hostage to fortune" (105). She goes on to analyze the popularity of Jean Sasson's "Princess Trilogy" and her later publication of the work, *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* that deals with the occupation of Iraq in 2003. In this work, Sasson serves as a ghostwriter to an Arab woman to offer the world a purportedly genuine account of a woman's life of oppression behind the veil. Such books cater to a desire for sensationalist literature and Whitlock notes: "We are blind to the more banal forms that deliver stories shaped by the colonial present, and veiled best-sellers are a case in point: they reproduce haunting and exotic oriental fantasies and engage our consent to trespass without shame" (88). Whitlock examines the intersections between politics and literature in a manner that is praiseworthy. She notes that "In *Mayada* the devices of romantic nonfiction ostensibly celebrate the Western intervention in Iraq" (88), and that the text "invites interventions from the West that are literal and metaphorical, military, and literary,

that will liberate Iraqis from their oppression” (88). Essentially deeming the native woman voiceless, it is significant that Sasson acts as the authoritative voice and designated agent that speaks for the native female. And as Whitlock notes: “Sasson dedicates the book to these shadow women, but readers have been quick to recognize that their presence remains spectral” (90).

In chapter five “Tainted Testimony: The Work of Scandal,” Whitlock looks at the case of Norma Khouri, whose narrative entitled “Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern-Day Jordan” focuses on honour killings in Jordan. This work is soon revealed to be a hoax, full of factual errors and utterly false in its claims to authenticity—this section thus draws our attention to the issue of authenticity and life narratives. Whitlock observes that the “hoax testimony is a parasite. . . . it travels on a dominant testimonial current, and it saps its power and authority by drawing all testimonial narrative into disrepute” (119). Yet such works too serve a function and “the spectacular success of *Honor Lost* and its charismatic author suggests how buying and reading life narratives becomes an act of solidarity through which women can understand themselves to be part of a powerful cross-cultural collective” (118). Fact and fiction collide and are contrasted in this section and Whitlock argues that Western readership may at times favor sensationalist works that reinforce certain stereotypes. She states: “*Honor Lost* appeals to the global campaign against honor killing, and it recycles stereotypes of the endemic primitivism of Arab culture in Jordan as anxieties about Islamic fundamentalism are on the rise” (118). Again, the suggestion is that one must be sensitive to the lived experiences of peoples and that the Western reader must actively question various manifestations of cultural stereotypes of the Orient presented by media and the publishing world. While asserting that “more historical and appropriate ways of representing Arab cultures, societies and communities” (129) must be acknowledged and popularized through works such as life narratives, Whitlock stops short of providing a clear guideline to the question: how do we best read and sensitively and adequately represent cultures?

Gillian Whitlock’s work is a valuable contribution to Middle Eastern Studies and Cultural, Literary, and Political Studies. Her text is ambitious and its wide scope might be seen as a shortcoming. Moreover, the text appears to be written specifically for a Western audience, which may ironically weaken Whitlock’s aim—present throughout the text—to promote cross-cultural dialogue. Women feature more prominently in the text than men and this can be viewed as a potential weakness. In an attempt to include a wide range of life narratives, focus is at times blurred. Yet, the intertextual connections impart great strength to *Soft Weapons*, and the text is indeed a worthy resource for scholars, students, and the general population who

are interested in gaining insight into different ways of seeing and analyzing representations of the Middle East and Central Asia. Gillian Whitlock's work admirably traces the intertextual connections between life, history, autobiography, and politics and shows how the "war of words and signification [are] attached to the war on terror" (68) and how "book markets are connected to boardrooms and centers of command" (10). In short, in order to dispel the myths of "Orientalisms new and old" (93), the Orient must represent itself through works such as the life narrative and the Western reader must be wary of the text that "renews the fantasies of Occidentalism" (129).

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Ann Thwaite. *Passageways: The Story of a New Zealand Family*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2009. Pp. 352. \$45.00 (US and NZ).

Surely the most difficult burden in writing a family history is in rendering the story interesting and relevant to readers outside one's own family. The challenge must be even greater when the family has been ordinary and unremarkable—that is, in the sorts of ways that typically gain public notice, such as acts or lives of scandal, glamour or eccentricity. What makes Ann Thwaite's family so remarkable is perhaps its very ordinariness. Here were no criminals or lunatics, no celebrities or public figures, no egoists or seekers of the spotlight. The stuff of Thwaite's tale is indeed distinct in the absence of the usual weebegone clichés of a miserable childhood, of alcoholic parents, abusive uncles, and so forth. Instead, this is a tale, carefully documented with extensive research, lavishly complemented with genealogical charts and more than 300 images, of a family remarkable for their hard work and ambition to improve the lives of their offspring and for their love and commitment to each other.

In truth, there was nothing ordinary about Thwaite's family. Beginning in 1851, each of her great-grandparents—carpenters, farmers, servants and rail-workers—emigrated to New Zealand from the British Isles, and *Passageways* tells the stories of their difficult lives in nineteenth-century Britain, their often arduous ocean passages, and their struggles to establish themselves in their new world. In each case, the allure of a fresh start and of financial improvement overpowered their attachment to home and family as well as their fear of the unknown. All were willing to endure the miseries and indignities of a three- to four-month passage to New Zealand. Some of them witnessed