

conversation about reading, especially books about women and diversity, but including anything that excites my curiosity

Arab & Arab American Feminisms. Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi and others.

April 24, 2012

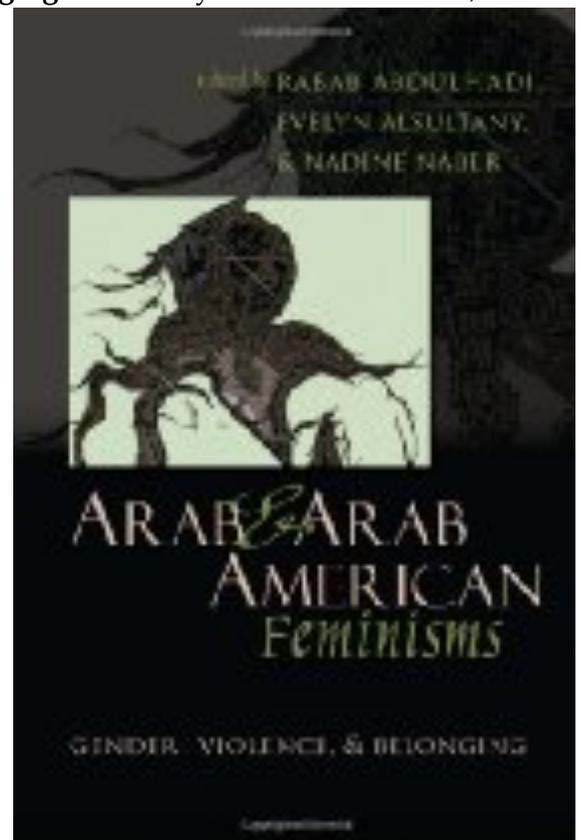
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Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging. Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber. Syracuse Univ Pr.(2010), Hardcover, 389 pages. (Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East)

An important, radical anthology of articles, poems, and stories in which Araba and Arab american feminists challenge the assumptions and practices of mainstream feminism.

In the tradition of radical women of color like Audre Lorde and belle hooks, Arab and Arab American feminists angrily point out the shortcomings of white, liberal feminism, especially as it exists in academic settings in the USA. This anthology lays out its basic challenges briefly in the introduction. Articles, stories, and poems by a wide variety of women flesh out the issues raised. The anthology itself confirms that there is no one Arab woman, but a plurality of them. Some of the writing is heavily theoretical but the message is radical: Mainstream feminists do not listen to or respect outsiders.

The writers start from the affirmation that experience is a critical part of knowledge. "As valuable starting points, experiences allow us to identify, analyze, and understand structures of power and privilege that shape our lives." Refusing to accept a dichotomy between personal stories and theory, they quote Shari Stone-Mediatore, "When writers use narration strategically to publicize obscured experiences, they enrich not only language practices but experience itself, for they provide a new lens through which we



can organize our everyday experience and historical world." Rather than simply adding Arab women's experience to a larger story, the authors ask, "How do Arab women's experiences change our understanding of gender and the transgendered experience:."

Because of their experiences in the USA and in Arab countries, contributors see Zionism and Palestine as central to their identity. For them the issue is not Arab versus Jew, but European colonialism and continuing attacks on themselves and their homelands. For them Israel is also the focal point of US imperialism, aggression, and anti-Moslem hostility. They resent that they are silenced by feminists for expressing their own pain at the actions of Israel and the USA. As they point out, feminists are not immune to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim beliefs of their nation.

The authors stress "the necessity of resistance against hegemonic liberal U.S. feminisms that reinforce Orientalist and racist discourse on Arab and Muslim women." In particular they want to end white feminist assumptions that a monolithic Islam is their only problem. They are tired of being asked to discuss specifics like the veil, the harem, or female circumcision, rather than the racism and imperialism against which Arab and Arab American women struggle. In particular, they are angry that feminists blamed all Arab women's problems on the patriarchal religion, even while accepting the patriarchal elements central to Christianity and Judaism. Leila Ahmed made the same point about non-Arab women reworking their own religious heritages while demanding that Moslem women totally reject Islam.

In her essay "In the Belly of the Beast," Zeina Zaatari uses her personal experience to elaborate on these points. Her first memory is the trauma of Israelis invading her hometown in south Lebanon when she was a five-year-old. She "carries that history in my pocket," unwilling to throw it away and become the unrooted individual that US society expects her to be. That experience also connects her to others facing ongoing Israeli, American-supported attacks. Coming to the USA for college and grad school, she faced discrimination as an Arab and a Muslim woman and says she was denied "the right to claim victimization, discrimination, and love and care." Like others she experienced Zionism as oppressive, but felt "unsafe" voicing her concerns, because they were labeled as "anti-Semitic." The "silencing" she experienced was especially powerful in academia, and after earning her Ph.D., she turned to community work.

Starting from other experiences, other authors make similar points. Kyla Wazana Tompkins writes forcefully about the importance of autobiographical accounts in shaping our politics. She belongs to a Moroccan Arab Jewish family and she writes about Arab Jews living in North Africa before the establishment of Israel. Although some of these people migrated to Israel, they were pushed aside by the European Jews who held power and controlled the narratives told. Inside Israel or outside, these Arab Jews have become invisible as polarization of Arabs and Jews has increased. Again, Ahmed confirms this account when she tells of a close childhood friend who left Cairo with her Jewish family because they feared for their future after Nasser took control in the 1950s and began to preach hatred of Jews.

I strongly recommend *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*. Readers may want to sample other articles because the overall anthology can be overwhelming. The introduction at least should be required readings for all who consider themselves feminists and all who want to understand a seldom-reported perspective on how Arabs view Israel and the United States.

Related books and my reviews:

Ahmed, Leila. *Border Passage* (<http://mdbrady.wordpress.com/2012/03/20/a-border-passage-from-cairo-to-america-a-womans-journey-by-leila-ahmed/>) and *Women and Gender in Islam*. 6/29/14 10:41 AM

[\(http://mdbrady.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/women-and-gender-in-islam-by-leila-ahmed/\)](http://mdbrady.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/women-and-gender-in-islam-by-leila-ahmed/)

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1. [Elizabeth Lhuede](#) [permalink](#)

April 24, 2012 10:55 pm

Marilyn, thanks for this very interesting review. I'm sure many of the issues raised in this anthology are equally applicable to the Australian context. I'll be interested to discover whether anything similar has been published here.

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