

Bodies, Voices, Gendered Identities  
and Postcolonial Subversions of Maps

Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman. Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 208 pp.

Merete Falck Borch, Eva Rask Knudsen, Martin Leer and Bruce Clunies Ross, eds., *Bodies and Voices. The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), 459 pp.

In Assia Djebar's short story "The Woman in Pieces" (1997), a murdered schoolteacher continues talking after her head has been cut off by fundamentalists in Algeria. The teacher's voice resounds and goes on with her lesson on the *One Thousand and One Nights*, in a pool of blood staining the desk, the floor, the classroom. In this paradigmatic scene, Djebar fixes the coordinates of subalternity, of its suppression, and, at the same time, its survival through the (female) voice. The woman speaks on, her voice not silenced by knives or bullets, her stories told despite repression. The voice, here, is shown to be the key not only to a form of immortality, but also to resistance. On the battlefield of culture and in the construction of dominant discourses, resistance is articulated (not only) against physical violence, but also as a response to epistemic violence, and the voice becomes, then, both locus and means for the construction of challenging epistemes, critical discourses and 'other', unpredictable representations of the world.

It is useful, with reference to the concept of representation and its articulation with the coordinates of the subaltern voice, to recall Stuart Hall's definition:

Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer to* either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall,  
*Representation: Cultural  
Representations and  
Signifying Practices*  
(London: Sage, 1997), 17.

Hall further elaborates on the different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them, referring to such multiple systems of representation as "conceptual maps":

[I]t could be the case that the conceptual map that I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make

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sense of the world in totally different ways ... However, we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. That is indeed what it means when we say we 'belong to the same culture'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

The formation of conceptual maps, of course, involves power struggles – both on an individual and a broad, collective level – between signs, resistance and the affirmation of certain semiotic relations over others: representation is deeply connected to politics, where the production of meanings – and of systems of meanings – produce, in turn, entire cultural systems and the way the world is narrated: the way in which it is 'registered into existence'. It is what Foucault calls the "production of knowledge" (and what Hall himself grounds his study of representation on): the power-knowledge relation constitutes the very canvas of the conceptual maps upon which we draw our sense of the world. As Hall investigates, the rupture brought upon the shared conceptual maps of Western modernity by postcolonial voices crucially challenges, rearranges, mixes up, and basically re-writes the maps of our senses.

The politics of representation in relation to postcolonial voices and their irruption in the systems of representation of Western modernity are exactly the main focus of the two volumes reviewed here, both addressing the production of meaning in highly charged systems of signification, such as the colonial and postcolonial body and voice and the performance of a gendered identity in the postcolonial Arab and Muslim world.

In *Arab, Muslim, Woman*, Lindsey Moore engages with an urgent and fundamental area in contemporary postcolonial studies, namely the themes and techniques that Arab women writers, filmmakers and visual artists foreground in their representation of postcolonial experience. In particular, Moore investigates ways in which women, working in North African, Middle Eastern and Western contexts, appropriate visual and textual modes of representation, challenging Orientalist/colonialist, nationalist, Islamist and 'multicultural' paradigms.

Analysing literary and visual works by women from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, Tunisia and (postcolonial) Europe, the text constitutes an important and broad overview of those voices that make up a very lively and composite network of re-signification of discourses on women in the Arab world, of the relation of postcolonial studies to Islam and religion in general, of gender as it is articulated within Arab/Muslim contexts, and of the inscription of identity within the terms of tradition and modernity, especially insistent in discourses on and around the Arab and Muslim world.

As Moore writes, "'Arab', 'Muslim', and even 'woman' are categories that place dynamic and heterogenous identities under erasure and, while this may be done strategically, the position from which one does so matters"

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(10). This premise serves as a precious and basic assumption in Moore's analysis, a reading which never fails to contextualise the layers of significance that both the bodies and the collective spaces accrue in the works selected. Under such perspective, Moore proposes the presence of "an overarching *poetics of the threshold* in work that resists in advance a hermeneutical approach" (16; italics in the text). This means attending to "sartorial, temporal, historical, spatial and translational threshold motifs generated *within* creative works..." (ibid.). Moore thus addresses feminism not as something predetermined elsewhere, but rather as the production of challenges to patriarchal discourses as well as the affirmation of an "oppositional tracing of existing modes of representation" through performance, translation, strategic visibility/invisibility, and "third-eye tactics" that reconfigure the very field of representation.

Moore's volume opens with what she calls a "preliminary case study" on Egyptian writer and doctor Nawal el Saadawi. Indeed, Saadawi's work lays out some of the main tracks that the volume follows, dealing with the painful relationship between mother and daughter, an equally painful search for an identity based on a founding lack, the need to go back and fill such lack with writing (in connection, for Saadawi, also with the return to a pre-symbolic/feminine/mother), and finally the relation, overarching this inner search, to an anamnesis that is in contrast with what Saadawi calls "sanctioned memories surveyed by a censorious single eye" (20). Saadawi thus offers much of the alphabet that serves to articulate Moore's analysis of further (and also more recent) literary and visual works: the alphabet of a feminist genealogy.

An entire section of *Arab, Woman, Muslim* is dedicated to Algeria, which, as Moore rightly observes and demonstrates, comes to represent "a site of radical contestation over the meaning of women's bodies, in which the stakes of transmitting oppositional perspectives have been particularly high" (49).

Reading, among other Algerian women's works, Fettouma Touati's novel *Desperate Spring* (first published in 1984 as *Le printemps désespéré*), in which a generation of women's stories is narrated in relation to their grandparents, Moore finds an overall didactic generalization about women's lives and their physical relations to the scopic, male eye, both in Algeria and abroad, that leave "Algerian women ... locked into private and public conceptions of the female body that define it as the symbolic repository of kin-based honor" (51). By contrast, Malika Mokeddem's first novel (and the only one translated into English), *The Forbidden Woman* (1993), is seen by Moore as taking a more nuanced position against the postcolonial Algerian context, influenced in its articulation by the pains of exile.

Algerian is also the 'poet-theorist' that serves Moore with the thematization and aesthetic research that outline the critical approach of

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the volume: Assia Djébar, who indeed holds a fundamental place in the subversion and re-definition of a colonial map of representations with reference specifically to women's bodies and the "feminist genealogy" mentioned above.

Analysing both her writing and her first film, Moore rightly describes Djébar's aesthetic choices as a "creative archeology of *petits récits*". Particularly interesting is the analysis of the 1978 film *La Nouba des femmes de Mont Chenoua*, which Djébar authored after a long period of silence and self-questioning. The film is made up of flashbacks, fantasies, dreams, documentary footage and re-enactments of historical events. It also includes a polyphonic voicing through the juxtaposition of the protagonist's voice, that of other women, and of the narrator.

Among Djébar's other works, *Women of Algiers in their Apartments* (1979) is widely analysed and offers a poignant view of the "emancipatory potential of corporeal concealment" (57), reversing what Djébar sees as a "culturally specific structure of scopic mastery" and delivering a representation of the circulating woman as a 'blind spot' emasculating the observing male through the slit in the cloth covering her body.

This passage introduces the other fundamental critical thread underscoring the analyses Moore has excellently interwoven in her book: the theme of public versus private space and the way such spaces are construed in relation to gendered discourses and women's sartorial practices and performances. Following Blunt's and Rose's invitation to think of gendered space "less as a geography imposed by patriarchal structures, and more as a social process of symbolic encoding and decoding" that produces homologous spatial, symbolic, and social orders" (100), Moore addresses the fundamental issue of spatiality and the production of heterotopias in the re-imagined maps of Arab Muslim female identity.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to space and the charged terms associated with feminine space and Islam, Moore re-inscribes the concept – and the object – of *hijab*, underlining how complex and rich its semiotics are: it can be used and read as a boundary marker, to extend private space into the public domain, redressing women's relationship to embodiment and space in much richer and more mobile ways than the media currently do.

One of the texts Moore reads with reference to the trope of private and domestic space is Jordanian-born writer Fadia Faqir's second novel, *Pillars of Salt* (1996). In this work, the theme of women's confined bodies conflates the spaces of 'home' and a psychiatric asylum in a re-writing of the hegemonic representation of woman's 'proper place'. Franco-Algerian novelist Nina Bouraoui also re-inscribes the home as prison and asylum, especially in *Forbidden Vision* (1991), where the Algerian domestic space is configured as "a site in which the experiences of Algerian women are silenced and encrypted and these acts are legitimized" (103). Both authors

<sup>3</sup> See Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York: Guilford, 1994).

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point to a reading of the home as it has been produced in Arab Muslim contexts as akin to a prison or asylum, drawing however our attention to “the heterotopic nature of marginal space” (ibid.).

Moore analyses a number of other authors, among them Fatima Mernissi, who engage with the construction of space and notions of boundary-building and crossing. On the textual-textile performance and production of space, a particularly interesting passage is devoted by Moore to French-born Algerian – now British resident – visual artist Zineb Sedira, whose *Self Portraits of the Virgin Mary* triptych projects computer generated full-length images of the artist covered in full *haik*. As Moore writes, “Sedira evokes purity through the white-on-white mis-en-scène but, by juxtaposing hijab and Mary, reminds us that chaste female bodies are ideologically imbued in more than one cultural context” (133). Among the artist’s intentions is that of issuing a statement that can remind the public that female veiling did not originate with Islam.

Within the works of the wide number of writers and artists selected in her volume, Moore indicates what she sees as the possibility of restoring a conversation between women, both in the reconstruction of often silenced or suppressed legacies, and in the transversal and horizontal level of solidarity and community building through shared experience. In such direction, women’s artistic work, Moore argues, resonates beyond a single national discourse, building instead heterotopias where boundaries are subverted or even erased.

The issue of subaltern voices charting a cartography of problematic if not often subversive embodiment proves to be a pressing and widely debated one, so much so that the 2002 EACLALS (European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Conference, held in Copenhagen, was dedicated to this theme. The *Bodies and Voices* volume contains the conference proceedings and presents a reflection on representation and its power, as the editors state in their Introduction. The volume includes a consistent number of articles, covering a wide range of topics, particularly around the representation of ‘the body’, and, to a lesser degree, that of ‘the voice’, in postcolonial contexts, through the lenses of literature, anthropology and cultural studies.

In many of the essays, the voice is explicitly referred to and analysed as a fundamental key in the ethics of representation, as is underlined in the Introduction, which quotes Mladen Dolar:

the voice cuts both ways as authority over the Other and as an example to the Other, an appeal, a plea, an attempt to bend the Other. It cuts directly into the interior, so much so that the very status of the exterior becomes uncertain, and it directly discloses the interior, so much so that the very supposition of an interior depends on the voice. (xxv-xxvi)

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This direct link between the voice and the Other underlies the editors' choice of bringing together critical works on embodiments and voicings of bodies that have been 'othered' and deprived of voice. The idea followed by both the editors and the conference organizers in putting the volume together is that "[w]hat language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part of neither language nor of the body. The voice stems from the body, but it is not its part, and it upholds language, without belonging to it" (xxv).

Indeed, the introduction to the volume is in itself an excellent piece of critical theory, not only on 'bodies and voices', but also on the misrepresentations and representations of cross-cultural and postcolonial body/bodies and the discourses produced by the voicings of silenced stories and histories. The richness of the volume is obviously not conveyable in the space of a review, and the outstanding essays mentioned here are only part of a complex and multivocal critical reflection.

The book is organized regionally, with separate sections on Africa, Asia, the Settler Colonies, the Caribbean, Britain and Eire, and a final section titled "Other Perspectives". Despite the apparently rigidly geographic subdivision, the essays do "have an implicit, highly polyphonic, argument" (xxvi).

The first section, dedicated to Africa, includes articles on a number of different literary works, as well as social and cultural constructions of bodies and voices, focusing principally on South Africa during and after Apartheid. The opening essay, by the late André Viola, "Martyred Bodies and Silenced Voices in South African Literature Under Apartheid", is a particularly interesting analysis of the way in which Apartheid South Africa constitutes perhaps the most systematic colonial attempt at segregating "the corporeal envelopes of its inhabitants" (3). It studies figures of confiscated dead bodies and the traumas left by these bodies on the victims' relatives, as well as apartheid narratives in which martyred bodies become substitutes for the silenced voice of the land. Viola's article ends with an analysis of the construction of the suffering body as central to post-apartheid South Africa.

Alongside the quite amply covered South African scenario, the section on Africa includes an essay by Eleonora Chiavetta on the symbolic bodily function of clothes in stories by African-Caribbean Nigerian-resident Karen King-Aribisala, and a study by Gregory Hacksley of the colonial period in Southern Rhodesia, concentrating on the struggle by the English-born poet Noel Brettell to find an aesthetic form for his new surroundings, in verses always uncannily and self-reflexively sounding like the voice of a stranger.

The chapter dedicated to Asia includes a work by Aparajita Nanda addressing another multi-bodied, polymorphic voice; that of the protagonist



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of Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* (1991). In this novel, Nanda observes, the multiple voice and body of the main character is not only tied to the experience of returning after having expatriated, but also to the specific (and strategic) experiences of women and variously embodied identities. As Nanda writes,

By 'voicing' a history and a language ensconced in the female 'bodies' of [the novel's female protagonists], Alexander creates the multi-layered personality of Mira Kannadical. Drawing on ideas of simultaneity (of multiple identities) and the hybridization of metaphor, she creates Mira, whose identity is in constant flux. (124)

The "Asia" section also includes, among others, essays on representations of the Indian immigrant labourer in Malaya, and on the changes in the social function of the Tingayyun, a dance and song belonging to the tradition of the Sama-Bajau, the most widespread sea nomads of South East Asia. Perhaps the most interesting work in this section is Maria Pimentel Biscaia's "Can Women Speak? Can the Female Body Talk?", which studies the figure of Shahrazad as appropriated and subverted by Githa Hariharan in her novel *When Dreams Travel* (1994). For Hariharan, Dunyazad and Dilshad (a slave girl who is also Dunyazad's lover) re-narrate the stories both of Shahrazad and of Satyasama, who has turned into a half-monkey, and becomes completely silent when the eunuch she has fallen in love with is killed in Shahryar's harem. Monstrosity, Biscaia argues, is shown in the novel to be a politically central figure of womanhood within the symbolic order. The monstrous body, no longer speaking but moaning and breathing, does indeed produce a voice that continues to narrate, like Shahrazad.

The sections dedicated to the Settler Colonies, the Caribbean and Britain and Eire are as abounding as the previous ones, both in terms of the variety of themes and literary works analysed, and of the approaches and perspectives adopted. The topics span from the monstrous and mutant bodies of Cronenberg's films, to contemporary Maori literature; from the history of education in Trinidad from a postcolonial perspective, to "carnavalesque strategy" in Sam Selvon's works, and, finally, to the status of Scotland as a postcolonial nation through the works of Jackie Kay and Liz Lockhead.

Perhaps a conclusive note on *Bodies and Voices* should address the essay titled "Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak – And If So, Who Is Listening?", by Marc Colavincenzo, included in the section titled "Other Voices". The author formulates a critique of the "dissociation of postcolonial studies from the still-colonized world" (406), strongly advancing the hypothesis that academic discourse has limited influence beyond the academy. While the claim that this limitation is (at least in part) due to the hermetic language

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used in postcolonial studies may perhaps be considered somewhat frail, the essay does raise questions that though in no way new or groundbreaking are indeed always useful to keep at the fore, especially with the institutionalization that postcolonial studies is undergoing inside the academia.

The two volumes reviewed here both engage with the relation between power and representation, and the way such relation becomes fundamental in the construction of our 'conceptual maps' of the world. The subtitle of *Bodies and Voices* offers a term that indeed conflates the tension and articulation of representation, power, production of meaning and the coding and de-coding processes involved in such maps: the "force-field". The term is used alongside the Benjaminian term of 'constellation', recalling Benjamin's statement that "[e]very historical state of affairs presented dialectically polarizes and becomes a force-field (*Kraftfeld*), in which the conflict between fore- and after-history plays itself out. It becomes that field as it is penetrated by history".<sup>4</sup> Both the terms 'constellation' and 'force-field' are often rightly understood as an "intellectual attempt non-deterministically to locate and dynamically connect elements (historical, socioeconomic, cultural) that are not initially given as relational, but that, when animated – constellated – into conjunction create or reveal a signifying force-field".<sup>5</sup> Adorno also frequently uses the term to refer to a "nontotalized juxtaposition of changing elements, a dynamic interplay of attractions and aversions, without a generative first principle, common denominator, or inherent essence".<sup>6</sup> The same term, moreover, is often employed in science fiction to indicate a barrier enabling work in areas that can be exposed to the vacuum of space, keeping the atmosphere inside while allowing certain other objects to pass through.<sup>7</sup> This use is particularly evocative as it indicates a 'space' in which only 'certain objects pass through', and the presence, in such space, of a vacuum-force determining the conditions inside it.

The forces at work in the force-field of representation of postcolonial bodies and voices are shown, in the two volumes reviewed, to be drawn, interrupted, reconfigured and often subverted by new 'objects' thrown into the force-field, diverse or interrupted vacuums of space, or different spaces altogether, be they embodied by Arab Muslim women writers, or voiced by postcolonial subjects claiming new sounds from confiscated vocal chords.

Both *Arab, Woman, Other* and *Bodies and Voices* trace important lines of critical thought in the field of postcolonial studies, and particularly in that very force-field of representation constituted by 'othered' voices, contributing to the (multi-layered) definition of 'the voice' as both power of representation, and point of intersection between body and language: the performative assertion of an impossible silencing.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

<sup>7</sup> See for example <<http://stardestroyer.net/Empire/Tech/Shields/Nature.html>>, 12 September 2009.