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Touria Khannous. African Pasts, Presents, and Futures. Generational Shifts in African Women's Literature, Film, and Internet Discourse. Lanham: Lexington, 2013. xxv + 203 pp.

Marzia Caporale
University of Scranton, marzia.caporale@scranton.edu

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Abstract

Review of Touria Khannous. *African Pasts, Presents, and Futures. Generational Shifts in African Women's Literature, Film, and Internet Discourse*. Lanham: Lexington, 2013. xxv + 203 pp.

Keywords

Touria Khannous, Africa, Francophone, literature, film, feminism

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In her book on the contribution of representative African female authors to the arts, Touria Khannous emphasizes the relationship that connects literature, film, and internet to women's political activism. The authors discussed here come from a variety of African countries and from multiple linguistic, geographical, and cultural contexts ranging from the Maghreb to South Africa. Yet, as Khannous articulates in her introduction, these women share a common belief in political and social engagement through artistic endeavors and use their narratives as platforms to resist oppressive systems such as colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy. African women authors in the postcolonial period have consistently demonstrated their political commitment through the artistic medium. Literature, cinema, and, more recently, blogging/web activism have allowed women to progressively gain access to discourses (e.g. politics) from which they had previously been excluded. The book insightfully traces the evolution of such literary and political narratives from the post-independence years to the internet era.

Khannous's section and chapter division is not organized according to geographical criteria. Rather, it enunciates a thematic and historical reflection on three generations of postcolonial feminist authors who use their creative works to foster women's agency in the African continent. Section I, titled "Negotiating Colonial and National Politics," examines what Khannous identifies as "first generation authors" (1957-1980s), a definition she applies to female writers of the decades immediately following their countries' independence. Chapters on Assia Djebar's film *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua* (*The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, Algeria, 1978), on Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Our Sister Killjoy* (Ghana, 1977), and on South African writer Bessie Head's oeuvre elucidate the presence of common strategies of opposition to power structures in three authors who actively engage in the fight for women's equality within political regimes in the earlier post-independence period. From this perspective, Djebar's film is read as a double critique of both French colonialism and patriarchal Algeria; Aidoo's work, representative of modernism through its mix of poetry and prose, is considered an exemplary critique of colonialism and nationalism from a feminist viewpoint; finally, Head's novel is interpreted as a discourse that quickly expands beyond African feminism to include transnational feminism and ecofeminism, her works providing lengthy examples of community and development projects for/by women in rural communities.

In Section II, titled "Postcolonial Injustices," Khannous examines two novels and a play. Malika Oufkir's *La prisonnière* (*Stolen Lives*, Morocco, 1999),

Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (Zimbabwe, 2002) and Tess Onwueme's *No vacancy* (Nigeria, 2005) are, at the same time, personal and fictional accounts of resistance and reflections on the trauma caused by political violence and/or racial discrimination. The three authors voice a narrative and dramatic discourse centered on the question of social justice, moving from individual experiences and observations to a more global accusation of despotic regimes that have tortured and inflicted pain upon dissident women voices. In the texts examined, as Khannous contends, the authors strive to preserve memory, negotiating past injustices with present attempts at reconciliation. Despite the different cultural milieus that generated them, the works in this section are successfully connected through the author's stance on narrative remembrance: literary memory holds the power to heal pain from historical events that violated human rights in general and the rights of women in particular.

Section III, "Reflections on Islam, Identity, and Gender" expands the discussion of feminist activism through the arts to include cinema as a revolutionary tool. After discussing Leila Abouzeid's novel *The Last Chapter* (Morocco, 2003), Khannous turns to the analysis of three films: Farida Benlyazid's *Door to the Sky* (Morocco, 1988), Moufida Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace* (Tunisia, 1994) and Leila Merrakshi's much debated *Marock* (2005). The authors in this section explore the complexity of identity formation from the perspective of nation, religion, and gender. Their narrative in both novel and film illustrates the power of subjugation inherent to Moroccan and Tunisian patriarchal structures. The four authors also depict the dichotomy between old and new, questioning if and how women's roles and their agency have evolved over time. In this sense, Khannous's chapter on Merrakshi's film *Marock*, about a sexually liberated Muslim young girl's love relationship with a Jewish boy, is particularly effective at addressing the difficulties that women encounter in societies where religious, gender, and family boundaries are still firmly rooted in tradition.

Section IV, titled "Internet Discourse and Women as Agents of Change," is further divided into an additional subsection, "Debating Islam, Gender, and the Arab Spring: Moroccan and Tunisian Women's Cyberspace." Here Khannous's critical inquiry focuses on alternative contemporary narratives such as blogging and participation in social media. The author contends that the web in its most diverse forms offers many advantages to African feminists and women activists who want their voices to be heard. As she observes, cyberspace creates endless potential for "attracting new audiences and affecting real change" (159). Additionally, social media in particular allow women to communicate in a more direct and uncensored way, reaching a variety of audiences, both locally and internationally. Khannous looks at Morocco and Tunisia as countries in which female bloggers and web activists are successfully addressing issues of justice and freedom of expression. Her analysis does not mention women in other regions of

the continent such as Sub-Saharan Africa, a topic certainly worth investigating as African women continue to work for national and global reform.

Khannous's book offers valuable insight into African women's agency through literature and the arts. By tracing the evolution of female authorship from the late 1950s to the present time, Khannous reflects on the history of African feminism and calls for women to continue appropriating their space within dominant discourses in their countries and beyond. The author's critical angle privileges a diachronic and aesthetic approach to examine heterogeneous narratives, successfully identifying activism as the common thread that unites women's artistic endeavors in the African continent's past present and future.

Marzia Caporale
University of Scranton