

BOOK REVIEW

Rakha, Youssef. *The Dissenters*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2025. 296 pages. Paperback \$17.00

Reviewed by Shurouq Ibrahim

In his forthcoming novel *The Dissenters*, Egyptian writer Youssef Rakha expands the usual subject matter of the 2011 Egyptian revolution to deliver a bold and perplexing story about a Cairene woman's voracious desire for freedom on all fronts. The novel is Rakha's first to be written in English and his first to center a female subject, a sharp departure from his novel *The Crocodiles* (2013) and its acclaimed sequel *Paulo* (2016). *The Dissenters* weaves colloquial Egyptian–Arabic transliterations and French interjections with a robust English lexicon, reflecting the complexity of Egyptian aristocracy at the fringe of modernity. From its opening pages, the novel postures political despotism, sectarian violence, and patriarchy as interlocking systems of oppression in modern Egypt. The novel spans 70 years of Egyptian history and presents a fresh perspective on the all-too-familiar trope of post-Nasser Arab melancholy.

In Rakha's narrative, Egypt's history is narrated as the macrocosm of the eventful life of a single Egyptian woman who goes by many names: Amna, a name assigned by a pair of maladroit aristocrat parents; Mouna, a name proscribed by a despondent husband and three children; and Nimo, a nickname used by wayward friends in her youth. *The Dissenters* illustrates the multitude of roles that Mouna (as the character prefers to be called) undertakes throughout her life: a patronizingly pious matriarch; a secret agent to the Nasserist regime in the 1960s; a feminist and anti-Islamist activist in the 2011 Tahrir Square demonstrations; and a cunning translator and businesswoman – to name only a few.

Rakha, however, uses a male narrator, Mouna's middle-aged journalist son, Nour, to tell the larger part of Mouna's – and by extension Egypt's – history. After his mother's death in 2015, Nour frequents the attic of his soon-to-be-sold family home and vicariously experiences the events of Mouna's life through what he calls "attic visions." Via erotic, almost incestuous, hallucinations, Nour rediscovers the mother he and his two younger siblings have long misunderstood. The narrator reminisces, fabulates, and feverishly recounts Mouna's life in letters to his

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estranged sister, Shimo, in hopes that she, too, will reevaluate what she presumes to know about their mother. Importantly, Nour's recollections reveal how Mouna's maturation into a politically conscious citizen influences the choices she makes as a mother and wife. While the novel verges on a controversial practice of writing "woman" as an allegory for nation, Rakha's work also complicates the conventional usage of this allegory. *The Dissenters* illuminates how *everyone* – especially women – participates in their country's destiny.

The Dissenters is a very busy novel, one that is unrelenting in its provocative content. The novel's protagonist, Mouna, confronts a series of incredible hardships, formative experiences, and complex relationships. The novel tackles issues of female genital mutilation, abortion, lesbian and cross-faith sexual encounters, suicide, blasphemy, and much more. *The Dissenters'* deluge of unsettling scenes is highly reminiscent of the fiction of the late Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, specifically her novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1977). And like El Saadawi's novel, *The Dissenters* should be read as a critical *repertoire* of all that is utterly regrettable of patriarchal Egyptian history rather than the story of one woman.

The novel's structure is similarly complex. *The Dissenters* is divided into four major chapters: three letters written by Nour, and a chapter entitled "The Myth of the Holy Jumpers," which is narrated by Mouna herself and is arguably the most captivating chapter of the novel. At the conclusion of the novel, the reader will find a timeline of major political events in Egypt's modern history. While crucial for understanding the significance of different political moments and their relevance to Mouna's character development, this timeline would have been more efficacious at the very beginning of the novel. Rakha, nonetheless, successfully demonstrates how literature can be a source of historical insight even as it problematizes national memory.

The four chapters of the novel shuttle the reader – sometimes abruptly – among different eras in Mouna's life. Each of Nour's letters, for instance, links Mouna's life events to different parts of the family home – the attic, the verandah, and the roof – and to different periods of Mouna's past. The attic is where Mouna recalls the traumatic experience of her mutilation as a teenage bride. The verandah is where the character's interest in the 2011 revolution peaks and where she decides to shed her "pious-mama look," to become a "dissenter"/protestor alongside Nour in Tahrir Square (86). And the roof is where the mysterious "Cataclysm," as Nour calls it, occurs.

On the other hand, Mouna's myth, which is sandwiched between the second and third of Nour's letters, chronicles her first-hand investigation of the deaths of Egyptian women who spontaneously take to jumping from windows at the beginning of the revolution. The "Jumpers," according to Mouna, are mothers, sisters,

and wives of all ages, social strata, and religious backgrounds who turn to suicide to defy “the patriarchy, the piety, the people” (132). Mouna makes it her own end-of-life mission to record the deaths of these women as femicide and to amplify their cause as one born out of failed revolutions. As such, Mouna blames not only sheikhs, officers, politicians, revolutionaries, and dissidents for the deaths of these women, but also the entire Egyptian People “embodied by the male population” (131). According to Nour’s final letter, however, Mouna realizes that with the rise of Abdel Fattah Sisi (the new Nasser as he is called in the novel) the course of the nation will not change, and so women will continue to die. Thus, the novel offers a critique of all political ideologies – the deification of national leaders, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and his successor Anwar Sadat, Islamism, performative communism, and a string of other *-isms* – outlining how Egyptian history continues to repeat itself through a number of failed revolutions since the 1950s.

Youssef Rakha’s *The Dissenters* offers significant insight into how Nasserism, revolution, and Islamism continue to shape Egypt’s political landscape in the 21st century. This book, however, is not merely a historical novel that tells the story of Egypt’s many revolutions; it is also a daring depiction of everyday challenges confronting Egyptian women and Arab women more broadly. In this way, the novel doubles as an important feminist contribution to a growing body of post-Arab Spring literature.