

# BOOK REVIEW

**Rajeshwari S. Vallury. *Metaphors of Invention and Dissension: Aesthetics and Politics in the Postcolonial Algerian Novel*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. Bibliography. Index. \$126.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781786603166.**

*Metaphors of Invention and Dissension: Aesthetics and Politics in the Postcolonial Algerian Novel* by Rajeshwari S. Vallury fills a gap in the study of the Algerian novel. Often, this field is treated as merely a subcategory of *le roman maghrébin* of French or Arabic expressions. The Algerian novel is usually read as part of a much larger aggregation known as the literature of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, and book-length studies that focus exclusively on Algerian literature are very much the exception.

Vallury's contribution counters lingering stereotypes, which usually display Algerian authors as alienated or brainwashed westernized idealists, who, while aspiring for democracy, are often at odds with their society, which remains stranded between chronic underdevelopment and Islamism. The irrefutable merit in Vallury's undertaking lies in specifying how such unfounded but powerful allegations wreck Algerians' future and ensure their domestication by global capitalists. The *Hirak* of February 22, 2019, (which toppled Bouteflika after his twenty years in power) is a testimony to Vallury's emphasis on the close proximity between creative imagination and the lived postcolonial experience.

*Metaphors of Invention and Dissension* borrows its approach from the illustrious work championed by Edward Said. This approach arms Anglophile audiences against allegations of a dysfunctional economy or its abysmal failure in living up to the aspirations of the revolutionary war (1954–1962). Beyond this, there exists, perhaps, little opportunity for the well-informed scholar to advance the discussion affecting the Algerian novel. Early on in the introduction—indeed in the first paragraph—Vallury specifies the scope of the study: “Taken together, they [the three claims] affirm a conviction to which few critics of postcolonial literature may be willing to lend credence” (1). Vallury discusses six novels by two Francophile authors (both over a quarter of a century dead) and extrapolates findings deemed timelessly binding on Algerian literature. Synthesis is a must, but still one should not offer such sweeping statements.

Critics of, say, Victorian literature or the Modernist novel would justifiably raise serious questions if faced with a study based mainly on extrapolation. The landscape of the postcolonial Algerian novel has become too nuanced and broad to be succinctly covered through the examination of only six novels, by two authors writing in one language, French. Despite reservations about national literature, as Aijaz Ahmed reminds us, and when considered from the point of view of language choice, the Algerian novel boasts of four means of expression: Arabic, French, Kabyle, and recently English. Discussions and conclusions such as those proffered by the author, while helpful in mapping out the field, remain problematic in generating constructive opinions about it.

A second concern with Vallury's study is how she heavily leans on theory, or perhaps, even abuses theory. In sections pertaining to Part I, such as "Why Rancière and Balibar?" and "What is a Nation?" readers will be aware of these excesses. While such sections are, indeed, informative for beginners as well as educators, who would want to engage with such names and ideas in literary theory classes, they do little to advance an overall argument or illustrate a major aspect of the studied texts. In discussing literary works, readers expect a theoretical approach. It could be seen as a little preposterous, however, to split the entire study into half theory and half literary discussion. And, even in sections in which Vallury openly states she is discussing the selected novels, she remains enamored with her favorite theorists, even if they are sometimes irrelevant to or even digressing from the central discussion.

Indeed, only when defined from a Eurocentric and pro-capitalist perspective do the French Revolution and Immanuel Kant emerge as heralds of cultural Modernity. If ever such a presupposition becomes theoretically challenged, then the storming of the Bastille and the three Critiques as insurmountable junctures simply shine, because they translate as needed spectacles put forward by capitalism in its self-development. Likewise, why not Hegel's phenomenology as a framework of analysis? The two authors Vallury discusses subscribe only dialectically with Modernity and man's universal predisposition toward freedom. Indeed, democracy rarely comes without a qualitative stipulation of whom it serves. Rachid Mimouni, for one, in *The Honor of the Tribe* (1989), illustrates the sacral (not sacred) order, the order predating both the industrial and Neolithic revolutions. Such pathways, when blended into Vallury's theoretically rich insights, might generate still richer discussions of the postcolonial Algerian novel.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Lewis, William H. 1969. "Algeria: The Cycle of Reciprocal Fear." *African Studies Bulletin* 12 (3): 323–37. doi: [10.1017/S0002020600037616](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600037616).
- Mundy, Jacob. 2013. "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited: The Study of Warfare in Civil Conflicts and the Historiography of the Algerian Massacres." *African Studies Review* 56 (3): 25–55. doi: [10.1017/asr.2013.78](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.78).