



**Souhir Zekri Masson.** *Mapping Metabiographical Heartlands in Marina Warner's Fiction* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, ISBN: 9781527533745).

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Souhir Zekri's book makes up for the relative neglect around British author and public intellectual Marina Warner's oeuvre, which started receiving critical attention only a decade and a half ago. Among such studies, I number Natali Boğosyan's *Postfeminist Discourse in Shakespeare's The Tempest and Warner's Indigo: Ambivalence, Liminality and Plurality* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); F. Tuba Korkmaz's *Rewriting Myths—Voicing Female Experience in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and The Penelopiad & Marina Warner's Indigo and The Leto Bundle* (Lampert Academic Publishing, 2011); Laurence Coupe's *Marina Warner* (The British Council, 2006).

Zekri's thin but dense book anticipates Lisa Propst's *Marina Warner and the Ethics of Telling Silenced Stories* (2020), which is about to be published by McGill-Queen's University Press, in that it is concerned with silenced stories. *Mapping Metabiographical Heartlands*, which echoes Warner's subtitle to *Indigo* (1992)—'Mapping the Waters'—explores three other heartlands besides *Indigo*, that is, *In A Dark Wood* (1977), *The Lost Father* (1988), and *The Leto Bundle* (2000). Zekri uses the notion of 'metabiography' to refer to 'self-reflexive biographical subtexts' (2) in these novels, which roughly span the second half of the twentieth century. Each of these novels is a furious admixture of fiction, history, and life-writing, and hosts biographies, memoirs (and even meta-memoirs), charters, annals, diaries, letters of officialdom or more discreet epistolary documents, chronicles, epitaphs, and, as the past millennium draws to a close, emails. The embedding of such implants is called 'engrafting,' a horticultural-critical concept of Zekri's own alloy.

Throughout her meticulous study, Souhir Zekri intimates that the grafted shoot did successfully take root in the Warnerian arboretum, which is to be expected since the graft and the grafted both belong to

the same species, that is, fiction. Through such a process, Zekri further contends that Warner, ‘a white Creole and privileged female historian’ (10), manages to voice the postmodernist distrust of official accounts of history and of the very transparency of language, while being ‘inclined towards the lyrical’ (17), presumably because of her mixed Italian origins and her Belgian education.

Through four chapters, Zekri very aptly unravels Warner’s excavation or retrieval of these subtexts, across a broad geographical and historical spectrum, from Greek Antiquity (in *Leto*), the Caribbean colonial past (in *Indigo*); and Italian fascism (in *The Lost Father*). A recurrent preoccupation in these subtextual heartlands is not only ‘gender discrimination and derogatory representations of the female’ (12) but also female empowerment and capacity for subversion. Zekri’s stance is thus resolutely feminist, like Warner’s, but with this difference that she provides a meta-critical commentary of Warner’s ties with second-wave feminist critics (89–91).

The author’s overarching method is, by her own reckoning, close textual analysis which is pedagogically very useful in its careful attention to the use of words belonging to the same ‘lexical field’—a French methodology—, which is here put to good use. Pedagogy is central to Zekri’s work, as it is seemingly also to Warner’s since she aims at devising ‘an innovatively ludic way of “teaching” history to lay readers’ (17). Zekri’s acute attention to detail also helps draw larger conclusions for the end of the twentieth century in what I would venture to call a *literary nanotechnology*. To achieve this nanocriticism of subtexts in filigree in Warner’s texts, Zekri develops a sustained conversation with Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Adrienne Rich, Vita Sackville-West, Gayatri Spivak, Virginia Woolf, and others; theoreticians of life-writing such as Paul John Eakin (on ‘collaborative autobiography’), David Ellis, Ira Bruce Nader, Liz Stanley; and specialists of Marina Warner like Daniela Corona and Richard Todd; as well as historians of the Caribbean like Peter Hulme.

The mapping unfolds in four chapters. The first one examines ‘the processes and rationale’ for ‘engrafting,’ which is here cast as a feminine strategy, akin to Shari Benstock’s idea of female discontinuity, as it is reflected through ‘mother-daughter or sisters’ dialogues’ (35) by female narrators who are either dead, alive or even time-travelling like Leto in *The Leto’s Bundle*. The chapter also explores Warner’s ‘multiple character narration and more inclusive characterization’ (34).

The second chapter examines ‘strategic patriarchy and feminine resistance’ (39) through devices such as free indirect speech, which allows ‘female characters’ secret thoughts while exposing the muzzling force of patriarchy’ (40), especially in times of crisis as in Italy under Mussolini

(in *The Lost Father*). Zekri shows how Warner subtly denounces ‘the collusion between patriarchal Mediterranean cultures and Catholicism in the containment of the female body’ (58). A most poetic example of the demystification of Christian symbols is provided by having a baby teething on a holy piece of wood (50). In *In a Dark Wood*, Zekri further argues, Warner exposes the deceitfulness of Biblical historians as well as religious fanaticism masquerading as ‘sacrifice’ to the glory of a demanding Judeo-Christian deity.

The two remaining chapters chart the ‘metabiographical traces of the oppressed,’ whether it is *Indigo*’s Ariel and Sycorax, Shakespeare’s *Tempest* characters, here morphed into early seventeenth-century Caribbean native women faced with the ruthless ambiguities of English colonization, or the victims of the early twentieth-century occupation of Abyssinia and Libya by fascist Italy. Zekri then returns to the ‘voices of the reincarnated,’ that is, ‘these living-dead, or soon-to-be-dead female voices’ (112) and ‘anonymous females’ (91) against a Kristevan background of ‘myths of resurrection’ (92). Taking her cue from Linda Hutcheon, Zekri argues that in charting ‘a genealogy of “Others”’ (122), Warner parodies ‘these various types of traditionally male “grand narratives” of history and juxtaposes them with her own imaginatively reconstructed version of the story of the female “dominated”’ (94).

Souhir Zekri is often enraptured by the ‘literariness and lyricism, a sophisticated diction, and aesthetic relief’ (122) of Warner’s prose, which has been faulted with further muzzling her characters by the sheer weight of her erudition; yet, Zekri is also able to step aside, as when she takes a hard look at what she concedes to be Warner’s essentialist view of female transmission as oral (35, Footnote 16).

Given that Zekri often speaks of *mise-en-abîme* and of the plurality of voices, one would have expected her to conjure up the self-reflexivity of postmodernist thinking and, possibly more accurately, the notion of intertextuality as it was used by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.<sup>1</sup> Do these subtexts partake in what Michael Worton and Judith Still called ‘the transgressive inscriptions of (feminine) fluidity into textuality’ (9)? Is the textual past, as it is presented through quotations, epigraphs, or allusions in postmodern novels such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1968), the same as the subtexts which Zekri unravels here? Additionally, is the postmodern textual past the same as that in postcolonial novels and, in that sense, is not *Indigo* more of a postcolonial than a postmodern novel? Or is it both, simultaneously, as in Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit? And which of these is more amenable to hosting life-writing? Zekri’s metabiographical heartlands in Marina Warner’s fiction do inevitably raise such questions but they arguably lie beyond Zekri’s purview and her present

project, which is to frame Warner's efforts within 'an aesthetical revival of such life-writing types' (122).

The book is elegantly written. However, the ellipses used in lengthy quotations are at times too many; they obfuscate the reader's access to the whole meaning and give the partially quoted excerpt a staccato style, which hampers the reading process. Some proper names are misspelled and some authors like Bray and Sartorio do not feature in the bibliography. The few glitches that are left are to be attributed to the publishing house, which failed to provide its authors with editorial care. It remains that Souhir Zekri's debut book meaningfully contributes to advancing our knowledge of self-writing and the deconstruction of 'the myth of factualism' (33). It helps us remember that 'a memoirist does not necessarily need to be a direct witness of events' (21). More importantly, Zekri's feminist approach acts as a reminder that the things that women mumble under their breath might have more veracity and import than any (often male) official discourse enunciated loud and clear but fraught with untruths.

#### WORK CITED

Worton, Michael and Judith Still. *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990.

#### NOTE

1 Kristeva, Julia. 'Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman.' *Critique* 239 (1967) 438–465.