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Peer reviewed

Women in the Modern History of Libya, edited by Barbara Spadaro & Katrina Yeaw (Routledge, 2020)

Women in the Modern History of Libya (2020) is a slim volume comprised of five articles originally published as part of a special issue of the *Journal of North African Studies* (23/5, 2018). The subject matter included in this volume ranges across an expansive time period from the Ottoman era to the present day, resulting in a loosely connected collection on the underexamined subject of women and gender in Libya. The chapters cover a variety of subjects, including space and gender in Libyan Jewish life during the Ottoman era, the silences on women in extant historical documents, the role of Libyan women in the resistance to Italian occupation, the memories and complex identities of Jews displaced from Libya to Italy, and the revival of Amazigh culture in the wake of the 2011 revolution. The introduction by the editors Barbara Spadaro and Katrina Yeaw gestures to the difficulties of cohesively framing such wide-ranging material, even as the effort to produce this series of articles speaks to the landmark nature of this work. As Spadaro and Yeaw write, “Libya remains one of the least understood and theorised regions in the Middle East and North Africa” (p. 746). Given the sparse scholarship on women and gender issues in Libya, the varied material gathered in this book provides multiple entry points into the subject as well as avenues for future research and collaboration.

The sources consulted in the chapters include the archives of three countries, Italy, Britain and the US, as well as the collection *Mawsūʿat riwāyāt al-jihād* (Oral Narratives of the Jihād) at the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli. The first chapter in the book, “Centre and periphery: variations in gendered space among Libyan Jews in the late Ottoman period” by Rachel Simon, presents a report on gender, space and interaction in Libyan Jewish life during this period, largely selected from Mordecai Hacoheh’s ethnographic accounts, interpreting and imagining the realities of life during this period. In this chapter

and throughout the volume, there is an insistence that the silence of records must be scrutinised, as the authors grapple with interpreting the lacunae within extant sources and what might be distorted or missing from the records. This work is most evident in the second chapter, “Finding women and gender in the sources: toward a historical anthropology of Ottoman Tripoli,” where Nora Lafi addresses how to write history without depending entirely on those traces of the past that we are able to salvage. In a resonant example of such silences, Lafi mentions a murdered woman who appears in the records only in the anonymous form of “wahda mafsûda,” a corrupted girl.

The issue of access to existing archives and the silence on the colonial period is discussed at length in the chapter “Gender, violence and resistance under Italian rule in Cyrenaica, 1923–1934,” where Katrina Yeaw notes that “[t]he vast majority of the Italian sources from this period remain inaccessible to researchers” (p. 794). Yeaw turns to alternate sources, creatively stitching together accounts to study “the pivotal relationship between gender and violence under Italian colonial rule, which shattered existing forms of social organisation through a variety of policies, most dramatically the use of internment camps” (p. 792). Yeaw cites the important work of Ali Ahmida on the making of modern Libya, and the discussion in this chapter resonates with both the methods and ideas in Ahmida’s scholarship, including his recent book *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (Routledge, 2020) which seeks to counter the ignorance of and indifference to the atrocities committed during this period. Ahmida and Yeaw’s accounts constitute the beginning of a conversation which should hopefully provoke wider debate about the enduring legacies of Italian colonialism in Libya.

The theoretical and methodological frameworks deployed in *Women in the Modern History of Libya* vary greatly, as promised by the introduction, which lists inspirations in gender and postcolonial studies, transnational history, feminist intersectional methodology, memory studies and literary criticism. Some of the chapters are more clearly motivated by engagements with these fields than others. Memory studies is most central to Barbara Spadaro’s chapter, “Remembering the ‘Italian’ Jewish homes of Libya: gender and transcultural memory (1967–2013)” which turns to oral histories to reflect on different modes of remembering, usefully positing three mnemonic processes (remembering, forgetting, fantasising) through which to understand the performative and gendered dimensions of memory narratives.

Ideas drawn from performance and affect studies add to the rich reflective quality of the fifth and final chapter, “Our star: Amazigh music and the production of intimacy in 2011 Libya” by Leila Tayeb, which weaves together ethnographic material and interviews to reflect on issues of Amazigh indigeneity, intimacy, and the potential of imagining alternatives during the revolutionary period.

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The volume at times misses the opportunity for more substantial engagement with writing by Libyan intellectuals and writers, in particular women. In their introduction, Spadaro and Yeaw present a case for the ground-breaking nature of the volume by stating that the research on Libya is so scant that “to date no publications on women and gender have targeted the region” (p. 746). Nora Lafi somewhat modifies this statement in her chapter, naming scholars from North Africa, including Amal Obeidi in Libya, who have “dedicated their work to the writing of the history of women” (p. 770). The relatively rare references to Arabophone scholarship in Anglophone research is testament to a broader problem: the divides that remain between scholarship in globally dominant languages and the work of scholars and writers in the region. With this caveat, this volume is a vital introduction to this subject, doing its part to overcome the lack of scholarship on gender issues in Libya in the global north and condensing a rich variety of material within its 120 pages.



