

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3v40247h>

Journal

Contemporary Women's Writing, 10(1)

ISSN

1754-1476

Author

Rahimieh, Nasrin

Publication Date

2016-03-01

DOI

10.1093/cww/vpv024

Peer reviewed

Georgis, Dina. *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Print. \$26.95. Paperback.

Dina Georgis prefaces her book with the description of a niece's frightening dream about her Iraqi grandfather who had died before she was born. What she knew of this grandfather she had learned through her father's memories of their lives before their migration to Lebanon and subsequently to Canada. Georgis sees this dream as emblematic of her niece's attempt at grasping her family's turbulent past and shaping a sense of belonging; the story is not delimited by her hyphenated Iraqi-Italian-Canadian identity as an exemplar of a triumphant multiculturalism, but rather acknowledges the family's experiences of loss and displacement. In this need for a story, Georgis identifies a transgenerational haunting that her family shares with countless individuals whose lives have been touched by colonialism and its aftermath. They are today's postcolonials, still bearing the psychic burdens of the past. Thus, Georgis's turn to story, understood both psychoanalytically and metonymically.

Stories are ways of recounting the past, transmitting knowledge, shaping collective identities, and making sense of difficult and traumatic experiences. To come to terms with experiences and give them coherence, Georgis argues, "every story is a better story, or the best possible story we have invented to allow ourselves to go on living" (1). From this vantage point, Georgis does not set out to read stories for their representational content. Instead she turns to them for what they perform psychically. Paying homage to Frantz Fanon's pioneering work *Black Skin, White Masks*, she situates her work in postcolonial studies, as well as the study of affect. She offers a refreshing critique of the paradigms invested in resistance as a path to liberation and national autonomy, as well as theories saturated with the "culture of happiness" that gloss over loss and mourning. She also challenges narrowly defined categories of subjectivity that do not correspond to prescribed and normative forms of affiliation. Her objective is to search for stories that are marked by queer affect. What she foregrounds in her use of the term *queer* "is the kind of wrong desire that brushes up against the symbolic" that "has no place in the social symbolic" (15). The material on which she bases the five chapters of *The Better Story* offer varying illustrations of queer affect in the Middle East.

Chapter 1 offers a reading of Nadav Gal's film *A Different Kind of War*, which revolves around a queer Jewish young man who wants to dance before the Palestinians he is supposed to fight. Interweaving her analysis with a compelling reading of both Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and Edward Said's *Freud and the Non-European*, Georgis shows how embedded Israeli and Palestinians are in each other's traumas.

Though not strictly devoted to the Middle East, chapter 2 takes up Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," for a reassessment of the suicide note written

by the young subaltern Indian woman who admits that she cannot go through with the assassination assigned to her. Challenging Spivak's view that the subaltern cannot speak for herself, Georgis argues, if not entirely persuasively, that the suicide note attests to the subaltern's refusal to take part in the customary modes of resistance.

The next chapter is devoted to the figure of the terrorist in Rawi Hage's novel *De Niro's Game* and Hani Abu-Assad's film *Paradise Now*. This is a bold move committed to seeking the roots of what is reductively labeled *terrorism* in traumatic legacies of past subjugation. What she gleans from aesthetic representations of the terrorist is the possibility of grasping the anguish underwriting acts of terrorism and the futility of waging war on terror.

The next two chapters of the book have a similar attentiveness to the complexities, ambivalences, and unresolved emotions we glimpse in fiction and film. In chapter 4, Georgis offers a reading of part two of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel, *Persepolis*, not as an instance of a young postcolonial woman's heroic self-assertion against religious nationalism, but rather as a story that reveals the hardships and traumas of postcolonial histories. In the final chapter, she explores Eytan Fox's film *The Bubble* and its depiction of a gay relationship between an Arab and Jew in Tel Aviv and the pain of occupation and imperialism it reveals. What complicates and threatens such a same-sex relationship is the demand for an unambiguous sense of national belonging and its conflation with normative sexuality. Her analysis of the film is based on a method she identifies in Anne Carson's novel in verse, *Autobiography of Red*, for reading history for its discarded queer content. Against the long history of conflict between Israel and Palestine, Georgis asks what a queer relationship might reveal and make possible.

The Better Story has much to offer scholars of postcolonialism and Middle Eastern Studies and a broader public consumed with the ever-growing conflicts in the Middle East. It guides the reader to an ethical path that recognizes the psychic dimension of today's politics.

doi:10.1093/cwwrit/vpv024

NASRIN RAHIMIEH
University of California, Irvine, USA
nasrin.rahimieh@uci.edu

Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Gut Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. Print. \$23.95. Paperback.

Liz Wilson rarely disappoints, and her latest offering, *Gut Feminism*, takes up her long standing project to bring feminism into irreducible and unruly alliance with biology several provocative steps further. Taking as her starting