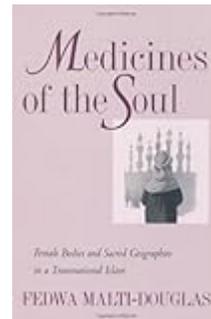


# H-Net Reviews

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**Fadwa Malti-Douglas.** *Medicines of the Soul: Female Bodies and Sacred Geographies in a Transnational Islam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xxi + 224 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22284-7; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21593-1.



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In *Medicines of the Soul*, Fadwa Malti-Douglas examines the relation between gender, culture, and religious revival. This is an extremely timely project. As in her other work, she is concerned with the relation between gender, religion, and discourses of the body in Arabo-Islamic culture. In this latest work, she explores those discourses as present in contemporary Muslim revival and through the life stories of three different women: Kariman Hamza from Egypt, Leila Lahlou from Morocco, and Sultana Kouhmane from Belgium. Malti Douglas reads these accounts as stories of spiritual transformation that interrogate secular hierarchies but reaffirm patriarchal ones. This reaffirmation is hardly surprising, and one wonders early on what Malti-Douglas expected to find in looking at these conversion accounts. Malti-Douglas does not leave us wondering long, for she relates that she sought “a simple dialogue” with these three women. On the one hand, her work is truly that, a constructive dialogue. On the other hand, it is much more actively engaged in analysis of the corporal discourses that are engendered by other discourses from the medical and spiritual to the political, as the questions she outlines at the outset clearly reveal. “But what do the women themselves have to say about this [Islam or Islamic revival]? How does their gender affect their participation in the transnational Islamic religious revival? How do illnesses ... play across religion? Is there a female spirituality in

the Islamic revival?” (p. xviii).

Throughout, Malti-Douglas gently points to the possibilities and the limits of these narratives. All the women’s journeys begin with a dream, and yet the spiritual vision is overshadowed with male guidance and orthodox practices, as Malti-Douglas implies through her subtle emphasis on the discordances of their narratives and through the occasional commentaries and questions she asks.

The book begins with Kariman Hamza’s account, in which she presents her life story as “exemplary” “self-discovery” and where she leaves a secular lifestyle behind for a religious one. Malti-Douglas points to the limits of self-discovery that is predicated on external appearance where the prized hair and clothes are now covered (p. 21). It is one founded on containment of the body but one that continues “the scopoc game by looking for approval in their [the male teachers’] eyes, something she does not see” (p. 36). Malti-Douglas ultimately argues that Hamza’s spiritual transformation will be mediated and defined by male voices. In Hamza’s journey sisterhood is barely there, even though women mystics are a notable part of Islamic tradition. Gender hierarchies are reinforced through this narrative of transformation.

Leila Lahlou’s story speaks of seeking medical treat-

ment for breast cancer and finding a miraculous cure in spirituality. Malti-Douglas notes the absence of the personal in Lahlou's narrative, especially as she is subjected to objectifying medical discourses and redemptive religious ones. "Religious agency means that the narrator need not take any action vis--vis the dilemma between her and her own corporality. The Deity will battle the cancer alongside the male representatives of the medical establishment. And it is no surprise that the Deity should be the winner" (p. 91). In fact it is the absence of a female subjectivity that marks this narrative and that of the other women. Malti-Douglas reveals fundamental discordance in the life story of Leila Lahlou herself. She will eventually die of cancer not long after her miraculous cure, revealing the unfortunate limits of Lahlou's narrative closure of miraculous cure.

The narrative of Sultana Kouhmane begins with discordance, the nature of which is authorship. She includes her husband's name as co-author, yet the book is exclusively a journal of her life. Presence of the female sacred is suppressed here, too, argues Malti-Douglas. The female self in the West apparently has to be more strongly anchored by a male presence. Affected by the racism in Belgium, Kouhmane uses her book to launch a defense of Islam and an attack on Western feminism (p. 119). Malti-Douglas appears to render the narrative of Kouhmane with little commentary. Malti-Douglas does provide a critique and points to the silences of Kouhmane's narrative, but often times she falls into silent commentary. In one of the rarer moments, she explicitly responds to Kouhmane's rendition of the story of a man who desires to remarry because his wife is partially paralyzed. "[T]he reader is not told why sexual intercourse is impossible for

the couple ... Is Ali unwilling to have sexual intercourse with his wife? This is yet another silence.... A Muslim woman whose husband was rendered conjugally unfit would not have the recourse of a second husband--only the choice between resignation and divorce" (p. 141). Kouhmane's story ends and Malti-Douglas points to the unhappy rupture of divorce that will follow beyond this collectively authored story.

Malti-Douglas is acutely aware of the tension caused by the paradox of a spiritual transformation that leads to the trenchant reinforcement of a dominant social and ideological system of patriarchy. However, she chooses to comment on it unobtrusively through the outcomes of the spiritual lives of these women: one woman's spiritual trajectory defined by men, one dead of cancer after proclaiming a miraculous cure, another divorced. It is only in a few places that Malti-Douglas lays out her view of what this spiritual transformation, achieved through the corporal, is. "Each of the three female heroes ... begins her spiritual journey with a lack. The journey functions as a rectification of this lack.... The breast cancer in Leila's journey functions like the possible suicide in Kariman's text or like the AIDS in Sultana's work. All three corporal threats intensify the redemptive power of religion and spirituality" (p. 171). Is the spiritual trajectory of these Muslim women revivalists then no more than an act of desperation and a remedy against effacement and physical annihilation? Having come to expect astute and daring analyses in her other works, glimpses of which are here, too, this work seems strangely restrained to tracing the stories of the women themselves. Perhaps this is due to the demands of a genuine dialogue. One can only commend her for her attempt at and desire for dialogue.

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