224 pages. Paperback $18.95

With the ongoing war in Yemen that has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, *Yemen* is a timely publication. This primer by Asher Orkaby about the complex history of Yemen relates its long history from the Biblical times through the contemporary period. The author points out Yemen’s geographical significance in linking the Red Sea and the Indian Sea and beyond through the Bab El-Mandab waterway. As a global trade center, Yemen’s history boasts rich civilizations in terms of archeological findings. Its distinct architecture has prompted UNESCO to designate it as a site of world heritage. The book comprises 11 chapters, with an introduction, three maps, and a helpful index.

Chapters 1 through 3 tell us of Yemen’s material and cultural diversity, given its geography, topography, and history, as well as its multi-tribal and multi-religious affiliations. The North–South divide has resulted in a fragmentary sense of citizenship, national identity, and civil war. Chapters 4 through 6 explore the modernization process of Yemen, with Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s as its unifying ideology. We learn about the 1962 coup that overthrew the old imamate and founded the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in North Yemen, a nation-state that had been inspired by the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and Jamal Abdel Nasser’s leadership. When YAR sought Egypt’s aid to resolve the North–South conflict, Nasser’s intervention resulted in a six-year civil war, pitting Egypt against Saudi Arabia; it also spilled into international interventions during the Cold War. While Chapter 5 narrates the rise of Ali Abdullah Saleh as President of United Yemen (1990), Chapter 6 focuses on the Houthi Wars (2004–2010).

Chapters 7 through 9 address Yemen’s economy, the Jewish minority, and education. Economically, oil reserves were discovered in 1986, at the North–South border, hence the creation of United Yemen under Saleh. Other natural resources are coffee (Mocha), labor, and Qat, a plant with psychoactive stimulants considered a drug outside Yemen, but it is widely used by Yemenis. Orkaby informs us that due to its arid land, civil wars, and poor economic and agricultural planning, Yemen is the poorest among Arab countries; it is currently facing a water crisis, the culmination of technical development and mismanagement of public infrastructure to preserve rainwater. The country is dependent on the World Food
Program and aid from western countries. Likewise, education does not fare well either, though there has been improvement in school enrollment. The literacy rate is 50 percent with 30 percent for women. The last two chapters home in on the 21st century when Yemen participated in the Arab Spring and the current civil war that had begun in September 2014.

Organizationally, the book offers undergraduate students a good plan for learning different segments as answers to specific questions. Yemen could easily be adopted as a history textbook for undergraduates majoring in Middle East studies, history, and the CORE program.


Traditionally, Taha Hussein has been hailed as the “Dean of Arabic Literature.” As a prominent figure of the Arab Nahda (Renaissance), he is acknowledged for his literary contributions. Hussam R. Ahmed’s social biography opens new, unexplored vistas in Hussein’s intellectual and political life. Having graduated with a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1919, Hussein returned to Egypt and began his literary and educational projects for building Egypt’s academic institutions. Tapping into private papers and Egyptian and French archives, the author puts forward the argument that Hussein’s focus on education and culture was as political as cultural. His career, which had been criticized for favoring the stance of “art for art’s sake,” is reassessed in light of his commitment to democracy, the Arabic language, the study of the humanities, and culture. The book comprises five chapters with an introduction, conclusion, and 18 pictorial illustrations.

Chapter 1 examines Hussein’s confrontation with the French negative reception of Egyptian cultural collaboration with North Africa. As Egypt’s Minister of Public Instruction, he inaugurated Egypt’s scientific and cultural mission as the leader of the Arab-Islamic world. In the 1940s and 1950, he had created collaborative cultural institutions between Egypt on the one hand and on the other, France, Spain, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunis. These actions angered the French who feared Egyptian presence in Arab North Africa (42–43). In response, Hussein suspended French archeological digs and threatened action against French cultural presence in Egypt. Hussein’s response is seen by Ahmed as cultural pollicization, a view that contrasts with the mainstream perception of Hussein as being apolitical. Chapter 2 delves into Hussein’s project of establishing the private Egyptian university as a secular, independent, and separate institution from the state.
university’s mission was to prepare young Egyptians for democracy after independence from Britain [Egypt was occupied by Britain since 1882 though it was nominally declared independent by 1922]. Hussein’s firm trust in secular education is the subject of Chapter 3. Ahmed speaks of Hussein’s belief that only liberal education would prepare future generations of Egyptians to become “soldiers’ or educated citizens” (104). It behooves the current Egyptian government to look back at Hussein’s design and implementation to provide a free and solid education for its citizens in 2022.¹

Chapter 4 looks at the possibilities of modernizing classical Arabic, an issue that resulted in controversy with “men of religion” (137) due to the interconnection between religion and the Arabic language. Hussein’s stance toward preserving classical Arabic and literary heritage was firm, as opposed to the use of colloquial Arabic. Hoping to make classical Arabic more accessible to young generations of writers and students, he insisted on the teaching of Adab. Hussein’s innovative and revolutionary suggestion launched the project of simplifying grammar rules and making writing more reflective of correct pronunciation. He collaborated with the university faculty and created the Arabic Language Academy in 1932, whose sole mission was to sustain classical Arabic as separate from al-Azhar; the religious institution had had sole monopoly over teaching classical Arabic. Chapter 5 probes Hussein’s response to the 1952 Free Officers’ revolution and its impact on Egypt’s political and educational domains. Although his journalistic writings had commended the revolution’s successes, especially the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, a rift in Hussein’s relationship with Nasser occurred by the late 1950s. Nasser’s misreading of history and the roles of the intellectual, liberal education, and the university were sources of contention between the politician and the intellectual. Ahmed reveals that when Nasser designated the inter-war years as a “setback,” demeaning the cultural achievements of the older generation, Hussein included, he responded critically. Nasser also viewed education from a utilitarian perspective, that being to instill in students the need for collaboration between democracy and socialism for the benefit of the people (189). Hussein, on the other hand, strongly believed in constitutional democracy, the teaching of the humanities to develop critical thinking, and maintaining the freedom of intellectuals, all of which did not fare well with Nasser. As the new regime began to suppress dissent and become more authoritarian, the Nasser-Hussein relationship came to a head, according to Ahmed. Hussein’s public

¹ According to the 1915 and 1916 studies, UNICEF reveals that the quality of education in Egypt remains a major challenge. Since teaching styles remain traditional, corporal punishment is permitted, and children’s participation is discouraged, education hampers children’s development to reach their potential. One in five school buildings are unfit for use, lacking adequate water and sanitation facilities, www.unicef.org/egypt/education.
disagreement with Nasser over the teaching of the humanities and the sanctity of
the university as the space for freedom and critical thinking were the last straw that
broke the camel’s back. On July 30, 1964, Taha Hussein was fired from his civil
service post in the Nasser government.

The Last Nahdawi is a welcome revisionist social biography of Taha Hussein,
“Dean of Arabic Literature,” and Egypt’s cultural endeavors between the two
world wars and the incoming modern state. The book would be of interest to schol-
ars and students of political science, Middle East cultural history, and education
and state formation.

Hartman, Michelle, and Malek Abisaab. Editors. Women’s War
Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women’s Labor, and the
Creative Arts.
Paperback $26.95

Women’s War Stories is an outstanding gendered study about women’s experi-
ence of war in Lebanon. For one thing, ordinary women’s experiences and the
telling, or not telling, of their trauma are the central focus of the book. Having
been ignored by scholars, the collection of essays and the stories by women are
diverse and comparative in approach. It makes no claim on being the one and
only conclusive narrative; the book highlights the power of women’s orality, work
labor, performance, and creative arts as they deal with “challenges, struggles, and
resistance” to war, trauma, and loss (2–3). What this reviewer finds intriguing is
the dialogue with narration and resistance to narration, as well as the dialectics of
interviewing women, transcribing, and translating their conversations with their
interlocutors. The politics of translation, according to editors Michelle Hartman
and Malek Abisaab, is complex, calling for ethical consideration between the pro-
ducers of the traumatic stories and the mediators, on the one hand, and the con-
straints of language and the targeted English-speaking audience on the other (the
stories were told in Arabic and translated into English).

The book is in six chapters with an enlightening contextualization of the emer-
gence of modern Lebanon, after World War I. A brief summary of the sectarian
divisions within Lebanese society is provided, but no mention is made of the
French occupation or the concept of the nation-state as being the cause behind
initiating sectarianism. Sectarianism was the major internal cause behind the
15-year civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990). Chapter 1 narrates the life struggles of
eight women workers in the tobacco industry in Southern Lebanon. Grounding her
analysis in oral history rather than written history goes against the grain of written
history that traditionally focuses on victors and victims; the formerly invisible makers of history are at the forefront. Chapter 2 shifts the discussion to juxtapose productions that challenge the question of motherhood. The essay explores the “rich landscape of women’s political action,” one in which Lebanese and Palestinian women engage in resistance against the Israeli army, from 1978 until 2000. Mary Germanus Saba’s reading of two films raises questions about women’s role in the creation of national culture. We learn about how women struggled to survive, work, sustain their families, and manage migration and displacement, as well as imagine “alternative futures” for their families (61).

Art therapy as employed by artist Seta Manoukian is the subject of Chapter 3. Manoukian, whose faith in the arts defined her “spiritual quest” (80), worked with traumatized children during the civil war; this is yet another example of women’s innovative approaches to dealing with war violence. We learn of how she not only provided children with space, paint, and paper to express their feelings freely, but she also gave them the opportunity to heal their psychological and spiritual traumas through art. Children’s art productions, as well as Manoukian’s, are pictorial records of the Lebanese Civil War, published in 1977 and 1983, under the titles, “Lebanese Children and the War” and “Traces rouges et bleues: Expresées par les enfants durant l’occupation,” respectively. Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the direct production of fine arts, including sculpture, by Lebanese women artists. While Chapter 4 analyzes the artistic productions from the perspectives of three generations of women, Chapter 5 looks closely at one performance-art piece. The former works depict the war as a “disaster,” and the latter provokes the audience by illustrating the affective impact on the “warring body,” literally and figuratively (14). The last chapter presents the narratives of the “Sabra and Shatila Massacre” by four Arab women writers, a subject that was rarely included in the scholarship about the Lebanese Civil War. Hartman writes an excellent essay about how these events that are “too horrible to speak of or narrate” make their way into fiction, to tell historical truths (155).

Women’s War Stories is destined to become a required textbook in history; Middle East, war, and gender studies; and postcolonial and cultural studies.


The controversy in many European countries over Muslim women’s hijab or niqab has attracted much scholarly attention since 2001. The United States has been able to dodge the question, or has it? Not so, according to Falguni A. Sheth. In her
highly researched, theoretically-based philosophical theorization of the issue, she reveals that the US has managed this threatening aspect of “Islamic terrorism” (3) through a number of disciplinary strategies that regulate the courts, bureaucratic processes, and their liberal tenets, i.e., governmentality (15). The book comprises eight chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The garb of Muslim women is seen as a “disruption of the hegemonic aesthetic norm” (3) by the West. Sheth argues that this discourse and the policies that implement it – legal, social, and cultural – challenge Muslim ethos. She proposes that it is in fact a challenge to “American and settler colonialism” into which the political and legal neutrality of the capitalist economy are embedded (3). Harking back to neutral liberalism and secularism of the past that camouflaged colonial racism and the civilizing mission, the book re-anchors the discussion in the grammar of neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Sheth informs us that unlike colonialism’s focus on territory and culture, neocolonialism and neoliberalism are more interested in markets that undergird the globaliziation of the free economies and privatization within “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (7). Although this brief review will not do justice to the in-depth scholarly analysis of the subject, I want to mention a few points that make this relatively short, but rich exposé of philosophical reflection an excellent addition to the scholarship about secularism, Islam, and gender.

Chapter 1 explores how neocolonialism does not mean a continuation of colonialism. While colonialism had depended on biopolitical management to regulate populations through life and death processes, ontopolitics adds the legal, social, cultural – ontological divides to the mix. Perceptions about the hijab go beyond the apparel as a signifier, inscribing racism within governmental power in which law and discipline are transformed into “vehicles of power” (18). An interesting contrast between French laïcité and American secularism is drawn in Chapter 2, revealing the anxieties of liberalism in both countries. For French governmentality, the hijab is a reminder of French cultural racism, especially with regard to their sordid colonial experience in Algeria. French insistence on laïcité relegates religion to the private domain, i.e. invisibility, excluding the discourse from the public domain. As for the US, governmentality has to do with accommodation as per the First Amendment and the ban on state interference in religious affairs. Unlike in France, religious discourse is open to the public domain in America. Another interesting comparison is made between the Indian Sari and the hijab in Chapter 4. The sari, which has been worn for thousands of years, is perceived by the West as immodest, “sexy,” exotic, and charming, etc. The hijab, on the other hand, is seen as strange and constraining due to the perceived rationale that Muslim women are forced to wear it so that the patriarchal or religious powers could regulate women’s sexuality. Because the sari is worn by many Asian women, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliations, Sheth reads the oppositional view about the hijab as
“racial aesthetics” (84). She argues that because the sari had undergone political and cultural “domestication” by Gandhi (85), and clothing was a successful moment in India’s political and cultural struggle against British colonialism, the sari evolved to being acceptable. The hijab, however, is undomesticated, hence the hostile view toward the Muslim garment.

*Unruly Women* is a brilliantly researched and lucidly written study of the intersectionality of race, gender, political theory, and Western neocolonialism, exposing the contemporary mechanisms of racial exclusion of Muslim women within the presumably liberal and democratic West. The author’s clarifications of all the employed terms would be a welcome feature for undergraduate students, and graduate students would find the ample references to contemporary philosophers inspiring. The book would be of interest to scholars and students in philosophy, gender and Islamic studies, and global studies.