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Pamela A. Pears, *Remnants of Empire in Algeria and Vietnam: Women, Words, and War*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. x + 163. Bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7391-831-X.

Review by Marie-Paule Ha, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam.

Remnants of Empire in Algeria and Vietnam is a welcome addition to the by now well-established field of Francophone postcolonial literary studies. The book proposes to examine the literary self-representations of Algerian and Vietnamese women in four novels: Yamina Mechakra's *La Grotte éclatée* (1979), Malika Mokeddem's *L'Interdite* (1993), Ly Thu Ho's *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986) and Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies* (1990). The grid which Pamela Pears uses to read these works is grounded in North American postcolonial theory with a special focus on issues of hybridity and fragmentation. In her comparative examination of these two bodies of writings, the author's chief objective is to show "how the use of the colonizer's language, as well as the influence of French culture and generic standards, have created a postcolonial female subject" (p. 22). What distinguishes Pears' investigation from other Francophone postcolonial literary studies is that hers is one of the few monographs that incorporate the works of Francophone postcolonial women writers from two distinct regions of the world in her corpus.

The book starts with laying out the author's theoretical framework, which is principally built on the works of critics such as Françoise Lionnet, Deleuze and Guattari, Homi Bhabha and Christopher Miller. This is followed by a chapter entitled "Making the Link" in which Pears uses three texts, Jules Roy's *La Guerre d'Algérie*, Mouloud Mammeri's *L'Opium et le bâton* and Kateb Yacine's *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*, to demonstrate the historical, literary, and linguistic ties between Algeria and Vietnam. In both Roy and Mammeri, frequent references are made to the Vietnamese war of independence in both the French and Algerian characters' evaluations of the Algerian struggle. In *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchoc*, one finds an even more extensive use of Vietnam, in particular her history, which serves as a platform for Kateb to elaborate a universal message about oppression. At the level of form, the play also incorporates, Pears contends, certain elements of the Vietnamese popular theatrical genre.

Chapters three and four constitute the core sections of the book, each of which presents a comparative reading of two texts written respectively by Vietnamese and Algerian Francophone women authors. In the chapter entitled "War," Pears focuses on the roles of female characters in *Le Mirage de la paix* and *La Grotte éclatée* to show how war "creates a postcolonial female subject who attempts to transcend the borders erected between past, present, tradition, modernity, colonialism, and postcolonialism" (p. 58). The discussion of Mechakra's novel is centered on the multiplicity of languages, identity and naming that bring about fragmentation in the experience of the female narrator-protagonist while, in her reading of *Le Mirage*, Pears argues that it is through reclaiming traditions that Vietnamese women come "to construct a new identity for themselves, one that incorporates long-established ideals with recently altered roles" (p. 85).

The last chapter, "Postwar Fragmentation," is devoted to the analysis of Mokeddem's *L'Interdite* and Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies*. Pears' starting point is that the fragmentation which shapes the two works on both formal and ideological levels is an ineluctable legacy of colonialism. The fragmentation that confronts postcolonial subjects, Pears contends, results from the fact that they are caught between their own original culture and that of the colonizers, a split that was embodied by the two personalities of Sultana, the main protagonist in *L'Interdite*. "Like Sultana's two personalities, the

former colonizer, France, and the former colonized, Algeria, possess completely different cultural practices, mores, and norms. One could assume that because the two are *diametrically opposed*, they could not therefore co-exist” (emphasis added, p.104). The same predicament faces the first- person narrator of the autobiographical text, *Retour à la saison des pluies*, who, as a Franco-Vietnamese métisse, likewise finds herself possessing “two nationalities and *two completely opposite worldviews*” (emphasis added, p.123). The challenge confronting these women is to find ways to “reconcile two seemingly opposing traditions and backgrounds” (p.137).

If one of the contributions of Pears’ undertaking in *Remnants* is to expand the critical scholarship of a corpus of texts that have hitherto received relatively limited attention,[1] the other more substantial interest her work presents lies in the way it crystallizes a number of problems in postcolonial literary reading. Some of these problems arise from what I would call the “Orientalist reflex” which posits European and Oriental cultures as inherently and irreducibly opposite. This assumption leads to the commonly held belief among postcolonial critics that non-Europeans who have been exposed to European languages and cultures would inevitably face duality, alienation and fragmentation, whereas such ill effects seldom befall Europeans schooled in non-European cultures such as the European Orientalists or Africanists.

The perception of the West and the Orient as two conflicting cultural entities is very much at the core of Pears’ arguments. It is around such an assumption that Pears constructs her reading of the works of the four postcolonial women writers. In chapter one, we are told that “[i]n the works I examine we will indeed uncover instances where it is clear that two cultures (French and either Algerian or Vietnamese) manifestly affect one another because they are *binary opposites*” (emphasis added, p. 3). The same reasoning is used to explain why the four writers resort to the French language: “Some women turned to writing in the colonizer’s language as an alternative through which to reconcile the *two opposing worlds* they had to face daily” (emphasis added p. 20). It is on the basis of such assumed East-West opposition that Pears elaborates one of the central issues of the book, which is that since the postcolonial women writers under study and their female characters live in two “diametrically opposed” worlds, their challenge consists in finding ways to co-exist in both.

While there is no disagreement that differences do exist among Vietnamese, French, and Algerian cultures (and not just between French culture on the one hand and Algerian or Vietnamese culture on the other), it is unclear why these differences are systematically construed as incommensurable. Why could it not be the case that some of these differences may be mutually complementary while others are simply neither? In Pears’ view, this East-West opposition creates a real dilemma for those French-educated Vietnamese and Algerian women. “This is especially problematic for the minority of young women who were educated in the French-language tradition at school, but expected to maintain traditional positions at home and in their society,” contends Pears (p. 19). The conjunction “but” is used here to set French education in contrast to Algerian or Vietnamese tradition, thereby suggesting that it would be well-nigh impossible to expect French-educated Algerian or Vietnamese women to follow their respective cultural practices.

Yet interestingly enough, this presumed incompatibility between French education and “native” teaching does not seem to be borne out in Ly Thu Ho’s *Le Mirage*, as seen in the story of one of its French-educated female protagonists, Tran Ngoc-Suong. In her assessment of the young heroine, Pears finds her highly traditional, being only concerned with getting married and having children, in brief “a typical model Vietnamese woman” groomed to “[follow] Confucianism’s teachings of filial piety and virtue” (p. 86). If Ngoc-Suong is indeed represented as a paragon of female virtue and piety at the start of the novel, this “happy” outcome, the narrator explains, is the fruit of both the Catholic education she received from the religious of the Couvent des Oiseaux and the ancestral precepts acquired at home.

“The precepts acquired since early childhood in a family that observed ancestral traditions, and the ten years spent at the convent where the religious ... confined her in studies and devotion, made of her a model of virtue and piety....”[2] Moreover, nothing in the novel indicates that those “ancestral traditions” in which the young woman was brought up were necessarily and/or exclusively Confucian since Huu-Phuoc, the patriarch of the Tran family, was a devoted Buddhist and his most trusted friend-cum-counselor was the Venerable Buu-Tam, a Buddhist monk, not a Confucian scholar. In fact, if the young heroine were truly a Confucian woman, she would not have forced her lover to take her to a hotel in Cholon where she gave herself to him before their marriage. Such behavior would indeed be considered quite unbecoming to a virtuous lady schooled in Confucian womanhood and neither would it be condoned by the protagonist’s former teachers at the Couvent des Oiseaux.

While Pears’ book most probably targets a literary audience, some of her statements about Vietnamese history and Confucian culture may appear questionable to readers with a historical bent. A case in point is her claim that Vietnamese intelligentsia and revolutionaries were better trained in French than in Vietnamese and that it was their knowledge of European languages that enabled them to gain access to popular European models of nationalism (p. 11). While it is true that a number of Vietnamese nationalists went to study in France, many of the well-known Vietnamese patriots were mandarins and Chinese-trained literati who had not received any European education. Furthermore, during French rule, Vietnamese intellectuals did not always have direct access to Western ideas because of colonial censorship. They often had to turn to the writings of China’s May-Fourth writers such as Hu Shih and Ch’en Tu-hsiu to learn about Western culture.[3] Equally problematic is Pears’ contention that in a Confucian system, women “often became quite literally beasts of burden” and that the French sought to have Confucian patriarchal and feudal systems “kept in place in rural villages” in Vietnam (p. 79). Such generalizations ignore, on the one hand, the diversity in women’s conditions in Confucian societies that varied quite significantly in accordance with social and cultural backgrounds and, on the other hand, that Confucianism, which was adopted by the Vietnamese ruling class under the Nguyen dynasty, in fact made little headway in peasant communities.[4]

If we were to evaluate *Remnants* within the parameters of North American postcolonial literary studies, this monograph has the merit of illustrating many of its established issues such as the questions of hybridity and fragmentation. Nevertheless, one of the limitations of such an approach is its tendency to confine the postcolonial condition to the vertical relation between former colonized and colonizers at the expense of other perspectives.[5] The challenge is to elaborate alternative readings of postcolonial texts that explore the roles of other factors such as social, regional, religious, ethnic, generational and cultural differences in the formation of postcolonial identities.

NOTES

[1] Of the four authors, only Malika Mokeddem’s work has been the subject of two edited volumes: Yolande Aline Helm ed., *Malika Mokeddem: envers et contre tout* (Paris: Harmattan, 2000); and Najib Redouane, Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt and Robert Elbaz, eds., *Malika Mokeddem* (Paris: Harmattan, 2003).

[2] Ly Thu Ho, *Le Mirage de la paix* (Paris: Les Muses du Parnasse, 1986), p. 79. Translation of the reviewer.

[3] See David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[4] On the conditions of women in Confucian societies, see Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Francesca Bray, *Technology of Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). On the conditions of women of different classes in Vietnam, see Paul Grace et al, eds., *Vietnamese Women 1. The French Colonial Period* (Cambridge, Ma.: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974), in particular Part One which describes the positions of bourgeois women, peasant women and proletarian women from the Nguyen dynasty to the French colonial era.

[5] For a critique of the practice of vertical analysis in postcolonial studies, see Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, "Introduction" in Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1-23.

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