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Maria Kathryn Tomlinson, *From Menstruation to the Menopause: The Female Fertility Cycle in Contemporary Women's Writing in French*, Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures, 77. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. 234 pp. Index. £90.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781800348462; £90.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9781800345539.

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Maria Kathryn Tomlinson's first monograph, based on her PhD thesis at the University of Reading, surveys a large transnational corpus of francophone fiction referring to menstruation, puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, which she clusters under the category of "the female fertility cycle." It is a highly original book which will undoubtedly make Tomlinson a much-cited scholar in the growing areas of menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause studies in disciplines as diverse as literature, sociology, history, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy, journalism, and public health. The first chapter on second-wave feminist scholars such as Annie Leclerc, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Marie Cardinal, and Julia Kristeva provides a template for comparison of the three other bodies of more recent fictional writing the book treats: metropolitan French writers such as Michèle Sarde, Agnès Desarthe, and Hélène Villovitch; Algerian francophone writers such as Maïssa Bey, Nina Bouraoui, and Leïla Marouane; and Mauritian francophone writers such as Ananda Devi and Shenaz Patel. The greatest strengths of the book are undoubtedly its transnational, comparative breadth, and its careful consideration of numerous lesser-known works.

A central theme of the book is how the recent literary works discussed compare both to recent sociological research on the book's themes, and to second-wave feminist scholars treated in the first chapter. Second-wave feminist views of women's reproductive physiology are defined by the critique of shame, silence, and negative stereotypes broadly attributed to patriarchal oppression, along with the perception that a creatively imagined positive language about women's bodies could remedy the culture of abjection and denigration to which women are subjected. The book's two central analytic questions then appear to be, firstly, how much does recent francophone women's writing about the fertility cycle variously align with, transcend, or show the bounded limits of second-wave feminist understandings? Secondly, how similar are the representations of women's corporeal experiences in the literary works discussed to the analyses of sociological researchers on matters of women's reproductive health?

Tomlinson particularly praises the under-recognized work of Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme*, with its emphasis on "breaking the silence" around menstruation which she relates to the recent worldwide movement for the rights of menstruators (pp. 4, 26).^[1] Nonetheless, throughout the

other chapters of the book, it is Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* that is by far the one work from this comparative corpus to which Tomlinson most refers.[2] She acknowledges that second-wave French feminist scholarship has offered little in advancing a similar revision of language for talking about menopause, but the complexities of why are not broached. Indeed, given the book's emphasis on fertile fluids (especially menstrual blood and breast milk), it is less clear how the post-menopausal fact of not menstruating or lactating might fit the radical critique of abjection at its heart. Tomlinson addresses that problem by drawing on the work of Australian feminist scholars, such as my own colleague at Western Sydney University, the sociologist Jane Ussher, and the Macquarie University medical ethicist Wendy Rogers, who both have extended Kristevan thought into questions of "the monstrous feminine" and women's aging (p. 183).[3] Nonetheless, one is left often in this book with the sense that its central theoretical apparatus has been built around the matter of fertile bodily fluids in a way that leaves the menopause examples less richly theorized and analyzed. To some extent, this not Tomlinson's lack, since not all the writers she discusses have much to say about the cessation of menses, leaving her with a limited scope for original analysis. The discussion of menopause is the most replete in relation to Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine*, since it is a novel primarily focused on the topic.[4] There is also highly original consideration of the themes of older women and same-sex love, and older women on Hindu pilgrimage in Ananda Devi's *Indian Tango*. [5] But in several of the other French, Algerian, and Mauritian novels, there is less material to work with despite Tomlinson's effort to draw meaning from them relative to the menopause questions, leaving her, in places, simply repeating the negative stereotypes of older women recounted by these writers.

Curiously, there is also some discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's ideas about feminine aging in chapter one, even though de Beauvoir falls well outside the temporal scope of this chapter's focus on post-1968 feminism. Tomlinson justifies this with reference to the importance of *Le deuxième sexe* for second-wave feminists.[6] Nonetheless, this 1940 work by de Beauvoir was not the last thing she wrote which referred to women's aging—both *La force de l'âge* and *Une mort très douce* elaborate in more original ways on the theme; nor does *Le deuxième sexe* discuss matters of menstruation or menopause particularly.[7] It was produced in a very different context than the works of the 1970s that are the focus of the chapter, but it is not given the same level of contextual consideration. One can see though how it might have seemed unthinkable to omit de Beauvoir in the discussion of French women's writing on menopause, given the large scholarly interest in her views on women's aging.

The book's interdisciplinary engagement with sociology certainly refers to the largest body of relevant scholarship on matters of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, which is already a significant feat within the context of a book largely grounded in literary analysis. Had Tomlinson also sought to engage with the—albeit smaller, but still substantial—bodies of relevant scholarship in history and anthropology, this may have complicated many of her conceptual tools and terms. It would have made the project vastly more time-consuming to complete too—perhaps not something many early-career scholars can afford in the competitive academic job market today; but it may also have brought greater nuance to the analytic perspective. In particular, the repeated reference to menstruation and menopause as "taboo" throughout the book does something of a disservice to Tomlinson's attempt to provide a specific account of different cultural values and concepts relating to how, with whom, and in which contexts it is deemed appropriate to discuss women's fertility cycles in the three cultural settings she considers. The limitations of the concept appear particularly stark in the example of Marouane's account, in *La fille de la Casbah* of Algerian police questioning young women in restaurants about whether they

were menstruating.[8] Clearly here, it is not matter of menstruation being silenced, but of a very particular kind of attention being brought to it as a threat of pollution and feminine power. On the other hand, in discussing Marouane's *La jeune fille et la mère*, Tomlinson is indeed attuned to the character Djamila's explanation of the power of silence about menstruation in the family home as an expression of solidarity between mother and daughter.[9] This silence is underlain by the mother's wish for Djamila to escape the restrictive gender order in which she has been raised and where menstruation is viewed as a cause for daughters to be sequestered. Here, Tomlinson indeed permits her literary examples to exceed the qualities of western feminist analysis, recognizing the specific cultural pressures and affective possibilities women have experienced within Algerian familial relations.

The taboo matter is particularly problematic if one considers the comparative sociological, anthropological, and historical scholarship on menopause, revealing modern biomedicine's view of the cessation of menses as an elaborate symptomatology in need of treatment (hormone replacement therapy), compared to the wide variability of ways women have understood their aging in cultures lacking any concept of the end of menstruation as a specific life stage.[10] There may be a silence around menopause in many cultures, not because it is taboo, but because the end of menstruation is simply not viewed as requiring any particular kind of attention. Are we then more liberated by the introduction of the medicalized concept of our reproductive aging as menopause, or is this consciousness not itself perhaps part of the very problem of how older women are viewed as deficient or monstrous? These are not straightforward questions, to be sure and Tomlinson certainly identifies prevalent French critiques of the biomedical view of menopause. One is left wondering if ending the silence about it is really in all older women's interest.

The relative lack of historical perspective on the concepts considered is also striking (at least to this historian reviewer) given the importance of French medicine in the global spread of pathologizing discourses about women's physiology throughout the modern era since 1750, in relation not only to menstruation, pregnancy, puberty, and menopause, but also to hysteria, the vapors, and nymphomania.[11] It may be expected that a book primarily focused on contemporary fiction would avoid wandering-off on a big tangent about that longer historical thread, but it is also surprising to see no mention made of it whatsoever. Nor is there much consideration given to the role of post-colonial health and development organizations, global research, and clinician networks in the dissemination to Algeria and Mauritius of western medical approaches to women's gynecological health in the very temporal period of the book's focus, aside from brief mention of the contraceptive pill in Algeria, since it features in one of the literary works discussed. Malika Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli* (2008) evokes the anti-natalist ethos shared by the women characters in Algeria of the 1960s-70s, but without the important global context of development discourses about overpopulation that were promoted throughout Africa and India by the World Bank, the League of Nations, and the Population Council during this period.[12] One is left with the false impression of this anti-natalist sentiment being merely an idiosyncrasy of Mokeddem's characters.

The book is most certainly transnational in scope but attends relatively little to intercultural questions in considering the relation between the different contexts considered, rather than merely how they compare to one another. There is consideration given to Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial-studies objection to applying the class and race-privileged analyses of French feminism to cultures outside the West—highly pertinent to this book's comparative

approach.[13] Here there is a genuine effort both to acknowledge the frames of privilege inherent in French feminist works relative to the concerns and experiences of the Algerian and Mauritian writers, and to situate these writers relative to more appropriate sociological studies conducted from within their own cultures. There is also a great deal of appreciative, close reading of the Algerian and Mauritian literary works studied, giving nuanced attention to their unique ways of describing women's corporeal experiences, and helping to whet the reader's appetite for the riches of this relatively little-studied literary corpus. But what of the French influence on Algerian and Mauritian views of women's bodies? The underlying assumption seems to be that negative ideation about fertility cycles in Algeria and Mauritius derives from internal concerns inherited from traditional cultural and religious values; but both these countries have also been historically impacted by French medical culture which developed more pathologization of puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause than any other on the planet.[14] Might this not also have something to do with the way such matters are understood in postcolonial francophone societies today?

A highly unusual book in its interdisciplinary scope and its study of lesser-known writers, *From Menstruation to Menopause* fits the genres of both comparative postcolonial literary studies, and of interdisciplinary feminist literary studies engaging with sociology—two relatively novel and exciting areas of scholarship in French studies globally. The book thus makes an important contribution to the study of new developments in diverse francophone women's writing and would make a superb reading assignment in undergraduate courses on French fiction, gender studies, cultural studies, and medical humanities.

NOTES

[1] Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme* (Paris: Grasset, 1974).

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).

[3] Jane Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[4] Michèle Sarde, *Constance et la cinquantaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

[5] Ananda Devi, *Indian Tango* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

[6] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

[7] Simone de Beauvoir, *La force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) and *Une mort très douce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

[8] Leïla Marouane, *La fille de la Casbah* (Paris: Julliard, 1996).

[9] Leïla Marouane, *La jeune fille et la mère* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

[10] See Elizabeth Siegal Watkins, *The Estrogen Elixir: A History of Hormone Replacement Therapy in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) and Susan P. Mattern, *The Slow*

Moon Climbs: The Science, History and Meaning of Menopause (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[11] See Alison M. Downham Moore, *The French Invention of Menopause and the Medicalisation of Women's Ageing: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 in press).

[12] Malika Mokeddem, *Je dois tout à ton oubli* (Paris: Grasset, 2008).

[13] Gayatri Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 154-184.

[14] See Alison M. Downham Moore, *The French Invention of Menopause and the Medicalisation of Women's Ageing: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 in press).

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