

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Arabic Languages and Literatures

Languages, Literatures and Culture Faculty
Research and Publications

2-2022

Book Review of *Transnational Identity and Memory of Making in the Lives of Iraqi Women in Diaspora*

Enaya Othman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/arabic>



Part of the Arabic Language and Literature Commons

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Foreign Languages and Literatures Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION.

Access the published version via the link in the citation below.

Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 45, No. 3 (February 2022): 561-563. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor & Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Taylor & Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge).

Book Review of *Transnational Identity and Memory Making in the Lives of Iraqi Women in Diaspora*

by Nadia Jones-Gailani, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2020, viii+187pp., \$48.75 (paperback), ISBN 9781487503161

Enaya Othman

Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Nadia Jones-Gailani's *Transnational Identity and Memory Making in the Lives of Iraqi Women in Diaspora* is an engaging book discussing Iraqi women's negotiations of identity, nation, immigration and memory outside of Iraq. The author uses Iraqi women's reflections on their lives before immigration, their experiences of dislocation/relocation, their perceptions of their positions in the "nation" of Iraq, and how these translate into their lives and identities in their new homes. In relation to this, Jones-Gailani states that her secondary objective is to "contribute to the disruption of the hegemonic 'truth' of Iraq's recent past with a history of resistance as told through the storied lives of women" (6). Through oral narratives collected from Iraqi women with Sunni,

Shi'a, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Chaldean backgrounds in three sites – Aman, Detroit and Toronto – Jones-Gailani offers a critical reading of the state's hegemonic construction of nationalism. This state-imposed collective memory meant to consolidate Sunni national identity was promoted by historical narratives created and disseminated through "political, social, and cultural institutions" (4). Oral accounts of Sunni women significantly reflect and align with the state-led nationalism while other Iraqi women destabilize it. Strikingly, Jones-Gailani encourages both her interviewees and readers to take a journey between the two *places* of remembering through her close engagement with their stories.

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the book consists of five chapters covering the state's rewriting of history; responses and challenges from Shi'a, Chaldean and Kurdish women to state narratives; elaboration on the methodology; cookbooks and coffee as mnemonic devices; and a comparative analysis of the cultural perceptions regarding women's bodies within their communities in Toronto and Detroit.

Chapter 1 gives an account of how "[m]emory is politicalized" (24) and history has been manipulated by Iraqi political elites since the creation of its modern state. The chapter also illustrates how women are controlled by, and also expected to be loyal and contribute to the "Sunni" state ideology. Chapter 2 offers detailed insights into the counter narratives of Iraqi Shi'a, Chaldean and Kurdish women who question what it means to be "Iraqi" and claim their belonging to the nation. It demonstrates the complexities of the meanings and politics of exclusion, home and space. Chapter 3 seems an intervention in the interpretation of women's narratives by moving to examine the methodology; however, it simultaneously continues to address the central questions of identity and memory while detailing the methodological challenges and process. Jones-Gailani delineates her journey – literally and metaphorically – in which she encountered refusals, tense situations, displays of fear/trauma, a dominating translator, gazes informed with gendered norms and friendships. Incorporating into discussions on her position as the researcher, Jones-Gailani also compares Kurdish and Chaldean women as objects of state oppression, with respect to the different ways and levels they internalize trauma in their memories and narratives. The rest of the book draws on metaphors and other rhetorical tools in perusing women's narratives and negotiations. The interpretation of the interview process continues in Chapter 4 with a focus on the authority of interviewees who claim their own space and assume the role of the host. Their authority is also explored in their authorial voice in cookbooks. Chapter 5 turns to examine community ideals of womanhood and female body in diasporic context, and the ways women respond to these ideals.

Jones-Gailani skilfully deals with the background, particularities, and analyses of ethnically and religiously diverse groups that together problematize the actual diversity and cultural/religious map prevailing across the "Iraqi nation". The book is wide-ranging in terms of the historical period, ideological insights, and the diasporic contexts it addresses. In addition, the book's central arguments have been informed by a number of theoretical underpinnings from areas including political science, history, feminist research, migration studies, transnationalism and memory. Jones-Gailani works efficiently and successfully within these frameworks spanning disciplines and contexts. Notable to her analysis is the way she blends her own affiliation with the community through an "affective methodology".

The ethnographic research is enriched by feminist holistic reflexivity. Jones-Gailani acknowledges her role as a researcher and a transnational migrant in questioning the link between (national) culture and state. Not only does she devote a single chapter to explicating her position as an insider and outsider simultaneously, throughout the book she informs the reader about what happened before, during and after her interviews. She continuously reflects on her relationships – and their development – with those interviewees. Her analysis is reinforced by vivid depictions and emphatic reports of the powerful moments in the interview process and her close engagement with the interviewees. However, there are moments when the author does the opposite of what she aims to do. Though she intends to share her authority with the interviewees, she on occasion over interprets and reads too much into their acts and speeches. Although the amount of these reflexive notes may,

at times crowds out women's voices, her methodological approach which dynamically shapes her critical points is one of the noteworthy contributions of the book. As she noted, she did "listen carefully to the said and the unsaid, the use of authorial voice, and the demonstrable utility of silence" (61). Such "trace" of the process of producing knowledge together cannot be dissociated from her broader frame and aim of "tracing" the memories of women.

Jones-Gailani prefers to concentrate on the narratives of few particular interviewees representing their ethnic or religious groups' views. This allows for a deeper understanding of the perspective they (re)present and powerful analyses; however, it would be welcome if more elaboration and information would be provided regarding the diversity or divergent points within one specific ethnic or religious group. Ultimately, the book is undoubtedly to become a core point of reference for researchers or anyone interested in the histories of Iraq beyond its national (both spatially and ideologically) borders.