

Book review

Jacqueline Rose. *Women in Dark Times*.

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In the current ideological climate, what can one expect from a book that makes a passionate plea for a “bold, scandalous feminism?” Perhaps an upbeat feminism that asks us to stand on chairs and shout “I’m a feminist,” while advising us what to do with our pubic hair and reassuring us there’s nothing “unfeminist” with having body image issues and eating disorders – another version of the young hip feminism that now colonises the weekly columns of Anglophone newspapers and magazines, and churns out best-sellers with catchy titles full of “sass” and confidence-building, nonchalantly equating female emancipation with a self-pampering consumerism?

The high seriousness and integrity of *Women in Dark Times* could not be further removed from this. Without decrying the value of other forms of contemporary feminism, Jacqueline Rose’s new book is a radical departure from their rhetoric and illusions. “It is time to return to what feminism has to tell us,” Rose proposes in her preface. And, indeed, *Women in Dark Times* is in many ways an attempt to return feminism to what it has lost sight of in the past two decades, with its focus on the micropolitics of individual emancipation, at the expense of a more wide-ranging political engagement linking the urgent political issues of violence perpetrated against women, discrimination, inequality, and misogyny with the psychoanalytic complexities of inner life. In sum, a reaffirmation of the motto “the personal is political” that informed the debates of the second wave of feminism. And a reaffirmation, too, of its founding idea put forward by Juliet Mitchell in the mid-1960s: feminism is “the longest revolution,” a struggle for women’s freedom that is far from won and continues,

unabated, despite periodical setbacks and backlashes.

The foregrounding of the link between the deeply personal and the political through an emphasis on “the unspeakable” – that which cannot be admitted to consciousness and forms thereby the subject of psychoanalysis – has been one of the abiding concerns of Jacqueline Rose’s work over the past thirty-five years. It has given birth to definitive contributions to feminism, film theory, psychoanalytic criticism, as well to compelling meditations on the most difficult political and historical issues of our time: apartheid, Zionism, suicide bombers, and honour killings. Hence it is perhaps more accurate to say that *Women in Dark Times*, rather than a throwback to a feminism that has fallen out of fashion, is a distillation of Rose’s long-standing interrogations and insights, particularly in relation to women who, in her view, most compellingly straddle the divide between political and inner life. In line with her previous work, the book is a deft combination of psychoanalytic interpretation, political manifesto, feminist art history, and personal reflection, in an ambitious attempt to connect the conflicts, traumas and struggles that make up the dark times of today with those that shaped the twentieth century, namely the two world wars and the Holocaust.

And yet, it is not easy for the reader to apprehend all these complex connections, as the book seems at first sight more a compendium of engagingly written articles rather than a unified, coherent work. This entails certain losses, but also significant gains. Reading *Women in Dark Times* is an unpredictable journey requiring time and concentration to follow its many twists and turns. Indeed, only gradually tease do we manage to out the subtle threads that weave together the diverse life stories and works of the nine women on which Rose focuses.

The book is organised into three distinct sections. In the first section we are introduced to Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary socialist murdered by right-wing henchmen in the aftermath of the First World War, to Charlotte

Salomon, the German-Jewish painter who died in Auschwitz, rather surprisingly, and to Marilyn Monroe. Rose's purported aim here is to "add their names to the already distinguished ancestry, the foremothers, of modern feminism", not because "they saw themselves as feminists – they did not," – but because of the way "each of them trawls the darkness of their inner life, where their most anguished voices reside, in order to understand what impedes them but also in search of the resources to defy their own predicaments" (p. 2).

In view of this, it becomes difficult, at first, to grasp the purpose of the book's central section, where Rose examines "honour" killings with reference to the case studies of three victims: Shafiea Ahmed, a teenage Bradford resident murdered by her parents in 2003, Heshu Jones, killed in 2002 by her Iraqi-Kurdish father, and Fadime Sahindal, a Kurdish immigrant to Sweden equally murdered by her father in the same year. Here Rose explores the link between the unconscious and the political at the level of the nation state, by showing how the hidden anxieties and fears in which honour killings are steeped do not exclusively originate in non-Western "unenlightened" nations. Such anxieties and fears also betray the delusions of Western nations in their presumed "enlightened" difference and distance from such horror, delusions that have translated into an intensifying anti-immigration rhetoric and racism affecting migrant women with particular intensity.

The final section turns to the work of three contemporary artists: the Lithuanian-born and multimedia artist Esther Shalev-Gerz, the Israeli video artist Yael Bartana, and the English abstract landscape painter Thérèse Oulton. This section weaves together all the previous thematic threads – overlooked, invisible working lives, exile and rootlessness, democracy, war and militarism (also adding, from Oulton, the ravaging of the environment) – to shine an artistic light on the chronic insecurity and darkness of modern life through the eyes of women who faced such insecurity and darkness

head-on, despite their intense personal vulnerability.

The intricate dynamic of darkness and light becomes, indeed, the master trope uniting all the essays. This is an idea that Rose takes, of course, from Hannah Arendt's classic *Men in Dark Times* (1968). It is worth quoting Arendt's key passage in this respect: Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light some men and women in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given to them on earth.

What becomes potentially problematic in the appropriation of Arendt in *Women in Dark Times* is Rose's insistence on women as "custodians of the night" who confront "dark with dark" (p. ix). I find it hard to accept that this follows necessarily from the book's overarching argument that some women remain best positioned to tackle the darkness of modern life due to their ability to immerse themselves in the experience of others, to tolerate negative, vulnerable states, to actively accept the unpredictable and the unruly, to creatively remind us of the limits of enlightenment thinking. Such perfunctory associations of women with darkness and unreason risk relapsing into old-time "angry" essentialisms and binary oppositions of which feminism should remain extremely wary.

Yet, we should also remain wary of throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Thus I shall retain what is to me Rose's most valuable, heartening proposal in *Women in Dark Times*: Let feminism, then, be the place in our culture which asks everyone, women and men, to recognise the failure of the present dispensation – its stiff-backed control, its ruthless belief in its own mastery, its doomed attempt to bring the uncertainty of the world to heel. Let feminism be the place where the most painful aspects of our inner world do not have to hide from the light, but are ushered forth as handmaidens to our protest (p. 268).