
Book Review

Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories: Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide and Political Violence

Demet Gülçiçek ^{1*}

Published: March 5, 2021

Book's Editors: Ayşegül Altınay and Andrea Pető

Publication Date: 2016

Place of Publication: Oxon & New York

Publisher: Routledge

Price: £31.19 (paperback), £100 (hardback), £31.19 (ebook)

Number of Pages: 299 pp.

ISBN: 9781472442857 (hardback), 9781315584225 (ebook)

Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories: Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide and Political Violence is an uncomfortable book to read, and I mean this in a very positive way. Questioning the 'given' is sometimes exciting, but it is unsettling; one needs to be open to the discomfort of critical thinking. This edited book invites the audience to question what is taken for granted in several fields including war studies, memory research and gender studies. In my view, affect studies can be added to the list as well. For me, the book shows the complexities and contradictions of silencing, it discusses the links between subjectivities and silence, unpacks several layers of silencing (and unsilencing), provides feminist self-reflections on silence, and questions the ways in which remembering, reminding and retheorising silences manifests.

Currently, much of non-feminist research produced in social sciences can recognise that 'gender is significant', but they generally cannot go further and provide a complex feminist analysis. Feminist perspectives have been intervening in such understandings and *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories* is a great example of such an intervention. To illustrate, war studies does recognise that women are affected by war conditions, genocide studies does cover what happens to girls and women during genocide, and research on political violence does include some gendered forms of violence. However, this book does not only bring war, genocide and political violence studies together, but it does so by providing a complex feminist analysis from the intersections of these fields. In addition to presenting a set of nuanced feminist analyses to the analysis of war, genocide and political violence; the book includes a wide range of geo-political cases written through deploying feminist curiosity. Thus, it fits very well with 'The Feminist Imagination: Europe and Beyond' series and expands horizons for imagining a feminist past, present and future. In this sense, this book goes beyond recognising that gender (or commonly only 'women') is significant in analysing war, genocide and political violence, rather it shows how gender should be central from intersectional perspectives.

The book is about war, genocide and political violence; however, it is fair to claim that it is not simply a collection of book chapters on these topics, only focusing on different contexts and cases – a common trap for edited books. The chapters feel as if they talk to each other, especially through the theme of a 'politics of silence', a central problematisation of the book, investigated from feminist perspectives. The contributors of the book are well aware that the politics of silence is not limited to 'uncovering' the silence or only 'giving voice to those who

¹ Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Warwick, UK

*Corresponding Author: demet.gulcicek.1@warwick.ac.uk

are forgotten'. Overall, the book shows the complexities and contradictions of silencing, discusses the links between subjectivities and silence, unpacks several layers of silencing (and unsilencing), provides feminist self-reflections on silence, and questions the ways how remembering, reminding and retheorising silences lie manifest. In her foreword, Cynthia Enloe points out that telling and silences should not be considered dichotomously, but should be analysed by investigating 'selective tellings, accurate and inaccurate interpretations of those tellings, forgettings, misrememberings, and exploitations of stories told and stories buried' (p. xix).

The book has four main parts and four impressive commentaries before each part. In my opinion, the introduction chapter and first four commentaries are worth mentioning for their underlining of the problematisations of silence, and for guiding the reader on the upcoming chapters. The following questions are based on my way of reading the commentaries: How can the process of unsilencing be imagined through feminist research beyond binary categories of silence and voice, victim and perpetrator? Who is aiming to break what kind of silences, and with which motivations in feminist research (Andrea Petó, Commentary Part 1)? How can one think about multiple categories of women by analysing militarised subjectivities and silence from intersectional perspectives (Orna Sasson-Levy, Part II)? How is it possible to analyse not only what is said, written and shown, but also what is left out in significations of the category 'women' (Banu Karaca, Part III)? What are the ways to link memory, evidence and gender as a part of an 'unsilencing' project (Arlene Avakian, Part IV)? These are thought-provoking questions, significant for feminist research within and beyond the issues of war, genocide and political violence.

The first part of the book is named 'Sexual Violence: Silence, Narration, Resistance' and includes four impressive chapters in addition to the commentary. This part contains chapters from a range of geo-political contexts and historical periods during wars and military regimes. These include Germany (1941–1945), the Japanese occupation of British Asia (Second World War), Greece (1967–1974) and Turkey (1980–1983) along with all the specificities, articulations and complexities of sexual violence. The first chapter, written by Regina Mühlhäuser, starts with the issue of denial of sexual violence at the state level. Questioning the assumption that Nazi soldiers avoided rape due to the law on 'race defilement', the chapter does not only show that sexual violence was perpetrated by German soldiers against Jewish women, but also shows the complexities of rape and sexual violence through unpacking their practices of rape, and linking such forms of sexual violence to militarised masculinity and ethnic supremacy. Thus, it resists the denial and unsilencing of official and national memory. Felicia Yap, the author of the second chapter focuses on the narration of sexual violence in relation to silence and questions 'positionality' through analysing the similarities and differences of European and Asian women's narratives of rape and sexual violence in the Japanese occupied lands during Second World War. The chapter questions the relevance of the colonial setting upon silencing and narration.

In between silence and narration, sexual violence was perpetrated by the militarised state, and officially tolerated by it; the following two chapters, written by Katerina Stefatos and Bürge Abiral, show this using two case studies by investigating the gendered memories of politically active women during the Greek Military Dictatorship (chapter three) and Military Junta in Turkey (chapter four). These chapters evaluate the constructions of patriarchal, nationalist and militaristic states through following women within the leftist opposition. They unpack the hegemonic discourses on normative femininities within nationalist and militaristic settings against the narratives of marginalisation of leftist women's experiences through selective silencing. Both chapters ask significant questions about not only about practices of 'national remembering', but also they frame the critique with gendered leftist narratives and some non-intersectionalist feminist perspectives. Overall, the first part of the book reveals different forms of sexual violence, not only by breaking the silence of national, colonial and militaristic narratives, but also by showing the possibilities of feminist narrations in relation to the potential of resistance.

'Gendering Memories of War, Soldiering and Resistance' is the second part of the book, and it is also very strong in not only questioning the given, but also pushing the limits of feminist imagination in relation to women's militarised subjectivities and women in armed forces. Feminist historiography tended to look back to 'women' from the past that can evoke 'sympathy' to contemporary feminist eyes. This tendency is not unimportant, especially in relation to the criticism of the 'erasure' of women from the history; it allowed the challenging of gendered narratives and nationalistic claims. However, going beyond these cases that easily seem sympathetic, it is significant to enquire further: Whose silence is 'worth' criticising? How can feminist research engage with a politics of silence within the fields of operation of the armed forces? This part manages to ask these questions and to analyse women's subjectivities produced within the armed forces—a rather neglected topic. The first chapter authored by Weronika Grzebalska in this part focuses on women insurgents' experiences during Warsaw Uprising against the German occupation in 1944 and brings a feminist analysis of how their experiences were marginalised. In the following chapter, Gianluca Schiavo also focuses on armed forces, but with a specific interest in the female fascist soldiers who supported Mussolini's government and had an active part in the Italian Civil War. The chapter analyses veteran women's justification of their actions during the wartime with the claim of aiming to serve their country, not to support the fascist ideology.

The following chapter written by Setenay Nil Doğan also engages with militant women who were willing to join to the war, specifically seven Abkhazian women who lived through the diaspora in Turkey and later joined the war in Abkhazia. This chapter has a specific focus on the analysis of patriotism, motherhood and gendered military experience, with the emphasis on the different layers of lives of these women, their experience during the war, and reactions to them in the diaspora. In final chapter, Stephanie E. Yuhl focuses on the armed forces again, but with a focus on what happened to women after the war, through veteran women who joined the wars in Iraq and/or Afghanistan from the USA. Female soldiering and homecoming narratives are used in this chapter to analyse the multiple subjectivities of ‘American women veterans’. All four chapters in this part of the book are significant for showing the multiplicity of the insurgent, veteran and militant women from intersectional feminist perspectives. This effort is especially significant and timely because right-wing conservative ideologies are currently taking an interest in highlighting women in these contexts in order to reinstitutionalise gendered normativities.

The third part of the book, ‘Fictionalizing and Visualizing Gendered Memories’, turns to ‘unsettling accounts’ by thinking about collective memories and by complicating the category of ‘women as victims’. It starts with a chapter written by Sophie Milquet on representations of women’s experiences and specificities of women’s memories during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Looking to the layers of gendered silencing, it provides a nuanced analysis of the collective memory through the tension between silence and speech within resistance but not as a dichotomous tension, rather a dialectic one. The following chapter, with the authorship of Andrea Pető, focuses on Hungarian women who were complicit with the right-wing extremist politics and war during the post-World War II era, through visual representations. Unpacking the portrayal of female perpetrators and questioning what visual representations do to counter memories, the chapter contributes to a feminist questioning of fascist movements.

In the following chapter, Kornelia Slavova analyses the inter-ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia through the imaginary apparatus of films as successful feminist interventions that refuse silencing and go beyond the victimisation of women. Criticising Western-centric approaches to victimised representations of women, it looks for new possibilities of analysis that can reach beyond essentialist and ahistorical understandings of womanhood. The final chapter in this part, written by Marjaana Jauhola, discusses the political violence and governmentality evident in Aceh. Beyond linear and developmentalist discourses, it discusses silence as a strategy of resistance and a form of agency, that reflects the complexity of the politics of silence. I consider this part to be a strong contribution, due to its questioning of dichotomies, thinking beyond a ‘feminist common sense’, unpacking representations, and reimagining subjectivities through a set of methodologically interesting questionings with fiction and vision.

The final part of the book, entitled ‘Feminist Reimaginings’, has fewer chapters, yet is just as important. The first chapter is a very creative self-reflexive piece, focusing on the Armenian women who were directly affected by the 1915 genocide against Armenians, and questioning the relationship between text and context. In this chapter, the author Hourig Attarian claims that the ‘(re)imagining necessitates a listening to *silence*’ (p. 265) and raises impressive questions regarding how to listen to silence through looking to women’s narratives. The final chapter of the book, authored by Cynthia Cockburn, is also a piece of excellent self-reflexive work, based on the author’s ‘revisit’ of a project that was held in 1996 with three women’s organisations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel/Palestine, each were founded due to the wars in the regions at that time. The chapter is not reporting upon what has changed since 1996, but asks instead powerful questions regarding common problems of research strategies when exploring memory work. This final part is a great end to the book, as it concerns the contributions and challenges of the research on war, genocide and political violence. In my view, it also answers some methodological questions and provides new ones that trigger feminist curiosity.

Overall, I consider this book a very good contribution in the fields of war/military studies, memory research and gender studies, as the editors intended. As the richness of the book’s parts shows, the geopolitical contexts are not simply taken as different case-studies, but there is a special emphasis on contextualisation, in relation to positionality. Moreover, throughout the book, there is a very wide range of materials used: oral testimonies, official documents, personal writings, court testimonies, novels, photographs, films, autobiography, family stories and previous research. Through this wide range of materials, the contributors are interested in criticising binaries, unpacking ahistorical and essentialist analysis, analysing constructions of femininities and drawing research strategies for the future research on these fields.

I can conclude by suggesting that in addition to war/military studies, memory research and gender studies, this book also might be of strong interest to the researchers working in affect studies, in relation to the book’s central problematisation of silence. Similar to silence (and in relation with it), there are some affective emphases that return as themes in nearly all of the chapters: shame, guilt, self-sacrificing, belonging, bravery, honour. The ways these are discussed shows that emotions are not simply a side effect of social and political events (a view affect studies would be critical of), but quite in the centre for forming a critical understanding of social and political constitutions, in war, genocide, political violence and beyond.

Citation: Gülçiçek, D. (2021). [Review of the book *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories: Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide and Political Violence*, by Ayşegül Altınay and Andrea Pető]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/9751>

Copyright © 2021 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.