

The Dissenters

Youssef Rakha

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In Youssef Rakha's bold novel *The Dissenters*, a son pieces together his mother's Egyptian story.

Following his mother's death, Nour experiences visions of her in their attic. Piecemeal, he writes to his estranged sister, Shimo, about their mother: She first went by the name "Amna" during an unhappy arranged marriage, then by "Nimo" during her university years and subsequent marriage to an eventual political prisoner, and by "Mouna" as a strict religious mother charting a convoluted pathway toward feminist political dissent. When her brother saw the mutilation of her genitalia during her first marriage, she refused to let him look away from this violation, even wiping the resulting blood across his mouth. And near the end of her life, she became fixated on the Jumpers, women who threw themselves to their deaths and whose disparate, individual stories coalesce into symbolic resistance against brutality against women, political corruption and injustice, and violence motivated by religious conflict.

In his letters to Shimo, Nour blends mourning with duty, proclaiming, "It feels like a debt to myself to convince you of how like the mother you resented you really are. How your revolution against her was a version of her revolution." Jumbling time and experiences by mixing Nour's consciousness with his mother's, *The Dissenters* bustles with candid, sometimes graphic descriptions of women's desire and sexuality in a social climate where the boundary between religious mores and politics is porous. A sense of urgent political responsibility expands with the repeated insistence that understanding Mouna is significant beyond personal and family concerns; her life also maps the revolutionary history of Egypt's nationhood from the 1950s to the 2010s.

Unflinching in the portrayal of women's bodies mobilized in protest, *The Dissenters* is a complex novel about womanhood, political resistance, and personal history.

ISABELLA ZHOU (January / February 2025)

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