

# Review of Rubya Mehdi: Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe: Experience of Migrant Single Mothers in Denmark

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*Rubya Mehdi, Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe: Experiences of Migrant Single Mothers in Denmark, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023, ISBN 978-3-031-40892-2, ISBN 978-3-031-40893-9 (eBook), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40893-9>, xv+395 pp., \$140.*

In November 2024 I was asked with very short notice to be a commentator at a seminar which would present and comment on Rubya Mehdi's book. As I had a 27 hour train ride ahead of me for a meeting in Munich I accepted the task, expecting that I would have ample reading time. I was going to a meeting by European members of WILPF (Women's international League of Peace and Freedom – established in 1915), which does work, the importance of which has unfortunately become revitalized recently.

In the invitation for the seminar Mehdi's book was described as fascinating, which puzzled me a bit. However, after the first 12-hour train ride, I realized that I completely agreed with this description. After having read 2/3 of the book, I started asking myself, why it came across as such a fascinating read. These are some of my thoughts and associations.

My first reflections about the text made me think of the concept of "wilding". I had come across this concept as part of the name of an exhibition in 2021 called "*PRIVACY (wilding)*" by a Danish artist, Asmund Havsteen Mikkelsen. AHM is very interested in architecture and this exhibition centred on detached (family) houses – very prominent in Danish urban landscapes. In the exhibition, he wanted to give a potential interpretation of the status and potential of the concept of 'privacy' with a particular purpose of 're-wilding' private space –

both houses, gardens and digital space. The exhibition was part of a grand research project at the *Centre for Privacy Studies* at University of Copenhagen.<sup>1</sup>

Looking for English explanations and synonyms in relation to this review, I found the following: “not domesticated or cultivated”; feral, savage, unbroken, undomesticated untamed, wild.<sup>2</sup>

The practical goal of wilding is described on another website:

“Although we use different terminology, the end goal of wilding is the same – to restore natural processes and healthy ecological functions so that nature can take care of itself without the need for human intervention. In the Wilder Landscapes team, our approach to wilding is to bring about positive changes for nature by working with our communities and landowners to ensure both wildlife and people are benefitting from the land.”<sup>3</sup>

This ambition is also found in a recent change in treatment of urban (private) gardens for the sake of diversity. A Danish expression or perhaps even a motto is “Vild med vilje”. In English something like “willingly/ purposely wild”. The motto relates to a change in contemporary gardening practice and customs. A tradition of “proper gardening” according to earlier times (and perhaps class) specific expectations about what a garden should look like – with a controlled and well-trimmed grass lawn and flowerbeds etc. is gradually given up. Instead this emerging practice on purpose allows the garden or parts of it to remain in or return to a state of (relative) wildness to increase biodiversity.

Mehdi’s text is interdisciplinary, inspiring, engaged and energetic – something which is surely not always the case of academic texts. I wondered if it could perhaps be called a „re/wilding” text. Was its fascination not only due to dealing with diversity and change of tra-

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1 The Danish National Research Foundation Centre for Privacy Studies (PRIVACY) was established in September 2017 through a generous grant of 50 Mio. DKK (approx. 6.7 Mio. Euro) from the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF). In 2023, PRIVACY received a 33-million DKK ( approx. 4.4 Mio. Euro) grant and a four-year extension from the DNRF. <https://teol.ku.dk/privacy/about-privacy/>

2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wilding>

3 <https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/natures-recovery/on-land/wilder-landscapes/wilding-and-natural-processes>

dition as a subject of research, but also a result of practicing a type of diversity in its presentation of a research, which had been very time consuming as well as broad?

It is, I think, in a way (also) a text about heroines (a word, which my computerized language correction does not recognize, although the synonym dictionary does). Dealing with heroines is something which one would expect of a text of fiction but not really (yet) of research – perhaps especially not of legal research. I tend to think that the women, the ‘migrant single mothers’, who have been at the centre of the author’s attention and research for perhaps a decade, are the ‘true life’ heroines - the agents of change for the better - better, more inclusive, equal, non-conformist, undomesticated, open and open minded lives. There has been a struggle for a change and expansion of not least NORMS regarding (single) mothers and their offspring. As Mehdi write, they are the avant-garde in a struggle against „patriarchal parenting norms“, which have a global nature. South East Asian women seem to be entering into both de facto marriage and birth strikes in this era. Afghan and Iranian women are struggling for freedom. These are struggles also about life and death - at great costs, but also for major expansions of freedom. It is not a new struggle, and it is not an isolated struggle.

It has been going on for centuries, perhaps millennia. At the WILPF meeting I attended in Munich I met and heard young Afghan women, who had left their country, which is now trying to domesticate and lock up women in their homes without any possibilities of using their educations and qualifications.

The single mothers described in Mehdi’s book want and struggle for freedom, as do the young Afghan women, the Iranian women with their claim for “Woman, Life, Freedom” and many other women around the world, who are fighting to achieve these goals.

Maybe these are the reasons why this book is such a pertinent and fascinating read. It deals with everyday struggles and ambitions relating to change and for more real life and freedom.

The day before the seminar on Rubya Mehdi’s book, I went to listen to a talk with South African-British author, Deborah Levy at “Republique” a Copenhagen Venue for theatre. The room was packed with an audience of hundreds of women in many age groups, young and old, mostly white, but also brown women – very few men.

Deborah Levy talked especially about her very popular books “Things I Don’t Want to Know”, “The Cost of Living” and “Real Estate”. She calls them ‘living biography’ – a genre she invented – as it seems to me that Rubya Mehdi has also invented a genre with her book, which does not yet have a name – perhaps it could be called ‘gender/women and legal transformations’? In her existential books, Levy describes the challenges of the life of a newly divorced single mother with two daughters (molded on herself), and her struggle to become a main character in her life and writing. Levy has become a famous author at a late stage in life. Maybe because she describes reflections, fights and experiences of the single mother, who has become such an important figure in today’s changing societal and social life (and to a lesser extent in law) even global society. Levy struggles to find a new language and way of representation, as also Mehdi does.

Levy said at this event that she wanted to write a text that was not transmitting fear, and that was combining *thinking* (mostly associated with men) AND *feeling* (mostly associated with women). Doing both! – I think this is also, what Mehdi’s book does – in its interesting emphasis on theory and its empathic and optimistic presentation of the thoughts and feelings of single migrant mothers and other interviewees.