

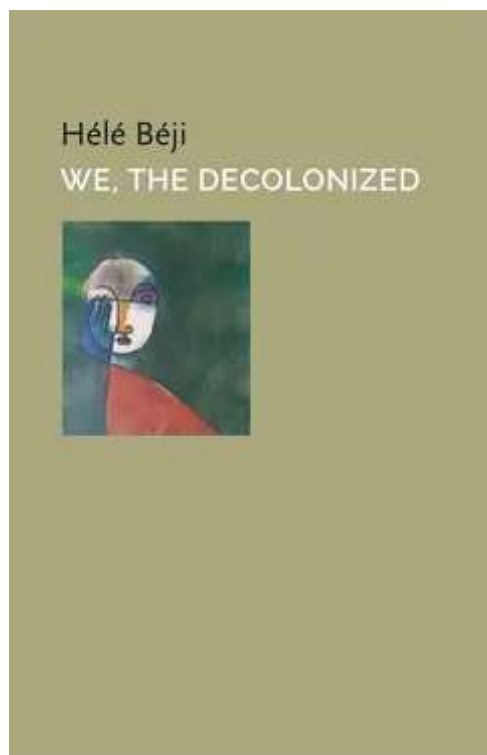
REVIEWS

We, the Decolonized by Hélé Béji

Reviewed by Madhuri Kamtam

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Hélé Béji

We, the Decolonized

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We, the Decolonized is a powerful and unflinching exploration of the human condition in the aftermath of colonialism. Writing from the context of North Africa and the broader postcolonial world, Hélé Béji lays bare the painful complexity of what it means to be one of the decolonised.

From the first page, the reader is drawn into the lived reality of those who have emerged from colonised societies and into a world that promises liberty yet imposes new forms of constraint. Béji navigates the turbulent landscape of identity, freedom and democracy, weaving together personal reflection, historical insight and philosophical inquiry.

Béji begins by examining the collective psyche of the decolonised, exposing the paradox of independence. Even when colonial rule has formally ended, the decolonised grapple with new struggles: the freedom they have won externally has not yet translated into true self-determination. In the chapter “Here, There”, Béji explores barriers to travel, owing to the limitations imposed on the decolonised by so-called democratic societies in the global North. The irony is poignant: those who once fought for liberation remain restricted, unable to traverse the world with the ease granted to citizens of former imperial powers. Béji captures the deep yearning of the decolonised to explore, learn and experience the fullness of life – longings often thwarted by seemingly arbitrary borders, visa regimes and cultural prejudice. These passages underscore



how history's shadows persist, reminding readers that political independence without social and human freedoms is never sufficient.

As the narrative progresses, Béji turns a critical and often uncomfortable gaze inward, towards the failings of postcolonial societies themselves. In chapters such as "A Troubled Democracy", she illustrates how, once freed from colonial rule, many newly independent nations and their citizens replicate the very hierarchies they sought to dismantle. Through sharp, unsparing analysis, she argues that without the cultivation of civic ethics and democratic consciousness, political sovereignty risks devolving into moral complacency, censorship and despotism. The revolutionary tactics once necessary for liberation, including ideological zeal, strategic cunning and guerrilla warfare, often prove ill-suited to the demands of governance. The freedom fighter, once a symbol of resistance, may unwittingly become an agent of repression.

A striking strength of *We, the Decolonized* lies in its meditation on the nature of humanity itself, with Béji contrasting decolonised societies' warmth, expressiveness and emotional sensibility with the West's restrained, pragmatic ethos. Yet she refuses to romanticise either perspective. Empathy, when detached from resolve, risks becoming performative, she argues; it is a comfort that soothes conscience but rarely provokes change. True compassion demands endurance, discipline and a steadfast sense of duty toward others. Conversely, western societies often conceal a quiet indifference beneath procedural virtue. Béji contends that neither unrestrained emotion nor rigid rationalism alone can sustain a humane society; the challenge lies in achieving a balance between feeling and responsibility, between the pulse of emotion and the steadiness of ethical action.

The prose of *We, the Decolonized* is lyrical and urgent, at once intellectual and hauntingly poetic. Béji moves fluidly between the personal and the political: the longing for travel becomes a metaphor for human aspiration; debates over democracy mirror struggles for moral growth; and her critique of culture, religion and inherited tradition unfolds with nuance rather than condemnation. Her voice is fearless, questioning not only colonial legacies but also the inner contradictions of postcolonial existence, asking whether the newly independent have fulfilled the moral promise of freedom or allowed it to stagnate through complacency and imitation.

In its closing chapters, the book distils these questions into a profound reflection on the meaning of liberation. Freedom, Béji suggests, is not merely the absence of constraint but the active pursuit of self-awareness and ethical responsibility. The decolonised are portrayed not only as heirs of oppression but as participants in shaping their own limitations and possibilities. Yet this is not a pessimistic vision: Béji allows a quiet optimism to surface, a belief that the capacity for renewal endures. Freedom, although it is often misused or misunderstood, remains a living force waiting to be reimagined through courage, discipline and moral clarity.

We, the Decolonized is not an easy read, nor is it meant to be. It demands reflection, self-interrogation and moral engagement. It challenges us to reconsider what we mean by liberty, democracy and humanity, and to confront the uncomfortable reality that freedom is both a gift and a responsibility. This is a book that lingers long after the final page, compelling us to reckon with history, identity and the arduous work of self-liberation. In sum, Hélé Béji's work is a masterful interrogation of postcolonial life – a philosophical and historical reflection of rare depth, and a literary achievement that unites intellect, emotion and ethical urgency. It is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand not only the legacies of colonialism but also the ongoing moral and political responsibilities of freedom, both personal and collective.

About the author

Hélé Béji

Hélé Béji is a Tunisian novelist, essayist and scholar. She is founder and president of the International College of Tunis, a cultural centre devoted to intellectual exchange between the southern Mediterranean region and Europe, the USA and Latin America. She has been honoured with the Prix de l'Afrique méditerranéenne, the Prix de la création littéraire and the Grand Prix de l'Association d'amitié France-Tunisie.

About the reviewer

Madhuri Kamtam

Madhuri Kamtam is a final-year PhD researcher in the School of Global Development at the University of East Anglia and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA). Her research explores labour, gender, caste and welfare through an intersectional feminist lens. Her doctoral work, which examines the impact of beedi labour legislation on workers' welfare, uses the capabilities approach, theory-based evaluation and mixed methods, grounded in extensive fieldwork in India. She is a Yale University Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP) fellow, committed to advancing justice through research and advocacy.

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