

Arab Awakening: A Feminist Aesthetic Prospective

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Abstract

This study aimed at analyzing the role of Arab women in the revolutions of the Arab Spring, and the extent of their participation along and side by side with men, and it aims also at analyzing the aesthetic perspective of this effective participation as new role of women's movements, where the women's claims of equality had melted in the demands of the cumulative Arab people, as they called for women to stand in the face of dictatorial regimes, and calling for democracy, social justice and freedom of expression, as if they were calling for their rights, which have fought for a long time, the aesthetic reflections of this participation in these revolutions emphasized the ability to prove themselves, and their ability to participate in the political life and decision-making.

Keywords: Feminist, Arab Awakening, Aesthetic Prospective

1.1 Introduction

Years of ignorance and walls of fear from despotic rulers and repressive regimes are broken, however, these Arab uprisings were not religious movements, ideologists and were not feminist movements, but women were at the forefront in these movements, and their active role and effective involvement was visible and vocal as they stood side-by-side with men in the squares of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria (fig. 1), they demanded dignity, freedom, equality, and social justice for all citizens; not only for women.

Women alongside men participating in the protest movements in the Arab world in 2011 had reflected that women's equal participation in public life is an essential condition for democracy and social justice as they are the values of the heart of the Arab spring.



Figure (1): Women's demonstrators' mosaic

After decades of rule characterised by dictatorship, patronage and violence, in 2010 young people in the Arab world began to rise up and demand a new kind of politics, women played their part as leaders and participants, suffering arrests, sexual harassment and even death (Care International Policy Report, 2013).

1.2 Problem of the Study

The problem of the study lies in addressing the role of Arab women in the Arab Spring, by highlighting its role in the participation with men side by side and leading the demonstrations and protests against the oppressive Arab regimes.

This mosaic demonstrations and protests had their own aesthetic prospective reflecting the civilized face of the Arab Women through their presence and their effective participation in the movements of the Arab Spring.

1.3 Importance of the Study

The importance of the study comes from the important role of Arab Women in the renaissance and the progress of the Arab people, Arab woman that as she is half of the society, through her active participation in the movements of the Arab Spring has painted a new picture of her, she is not just a housewife, and not just a wife, or a mother, but partner in the present and the future, she is rebellious, and strongly demanding the rights of everyone, offering sacrifices, facing death in order to liberate the Arab world.



Roses of Egypt: Martyrs of the Arab Spring Revolutions

1.4 literature review and previous studies

The term Arab Spring has been applied to a series of protests launched by the self immolation of a fruit vendor name Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. His act of self immolation has been alternately debated, condemned and valorised as creating the Tunisian Revolt referred to colloquially in the Western press as the 'Jasmine Revolution'. This sparked 29 days of protest which effectively deposed Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali on January 15, 2012. After this initial revolution, actors in neighbouring Egypt who had long been striking to achieve some modicum of political freedom under Hosni Mubarak's rule, escalated their actions on January 25th. Sites like Tahrir Square became focal points for the demonstrations, which reverberated around the country to Port Said and Alexandria. Hosni Mubarak eventually stepped down on February 11, 2011.

The study of Abeer Bashier Dababneh, 2012 entitled "Jordanian Women's Political Participation: Legislative Status and Structural Challenges" had emphasized that Women have played through history an important role in the cultural influence of the social, economic and political improvements, achieving a great success of enhancing women's role in all aspects of life, therefore interacting political and social changes in the perception of women and their roles in various fields, like leadership and decision-making. However, the Arab societies still need to empower women and improve their capabilities and potentials, especially in light of the political openness in the Arab world which pushes it forward towards new horizons in the field of human rights and political contribution and participation of the citizens, as women forming the bright side of the society.

Amal Sabbagh study, 2009, "The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation", which concluded that the women's movement...is the detonator which will explode the neo-patriarchal society from within, and it is often the case that discussions on the political status and representation of Arab women tend to highlight the difficulties and challenges at the expense of presenting the more positive aspects or breakthroughs that have occurred during the past years. And when reading the future, if Arab societies are to benefit from the winds of political reform that are currently sweeping the region, then women have to become an active part of these processes by asserting their full potential as the harbingers of a better future.

Also the study of Rowaida Al Maaitah, Hadeel Al Maaitah, Hmoud Olaimat, and Muntaha Gharaeibeh (2012) entitled “Arab Women and Political Development”, in which they assured that even many measures have been taken by the majority of Arab countries to enhance women’s representation in decision making positions, women’s participation in public life and positions of power have not been achieved the desired level. The Arab region is the lowest in the world in terms of women’s participation in the political life.

The objective of this study is to examine the Political participation of women in the Arab countries and then identifying the different challenges that impede Arab women participation in politics and decision making. Challenges include: cultural factors, the stereotyped image of women, empowerment strategies and their effectiveness women’s low self-confidence, lack of coordination among women’s organizations. Thus, challenges facing women in politics are immense. They require the consolidation of all efforts with great belief in women’s capabilities as human beings who are able to lead and shoulder the responsibility in the building of their nations. Given all this, one might be forgiven for overlooking the fact that it was a woman who played the central role in initiating the Arab revolution. It was the young female blogger, Asma Mahfouz in Egypt, and even more, Tawkel Karman in Yemen, and many others in the Arab world.



Asma Mahfouz of Egypt and Tawkel Karman of Yemen

1.5 Where are the Women?

This section identifies two dominant narratives in answer to the question “where are the women?” in contemporary media and political accounts of the “Arab Spring.” The first is the narrative of the “Arab Spring” as a watershed moment for women’s and gender rights in the Arab world which signifies and is signified by the success of (western) liberal democratic transitions. The second is the narrative of the “Arab Spring” as changing little if anything for Arab women, and potentially being a net negative in terms of women’s rights and women’s quality of life. This narrative associates (lack of) progress on women’s rights with incompleteness of an idealized democratic tradition.

This section discusses the contents and prevalence of both narratives before analyzing them to look for answers to the questions of where the women are.

The Arab Spring as Gender - Emancipators One group of accounts of where women were in the Arab Spring saw both women’s visibility in the Arab Spring movements and the multiple roles that women played in those protests as a success story, and often presented women’s participation as not only evidence of the improvements which the Arab Spring was to usher in for women but also of a general democratization and liberalization that the movement was to bring about. For example, one account says that women’s presence more than doubled in the Egyptian protests in 2011 compared to past protests: An unprecedented number of Egyptian women participated in Tuesday’s anti-government protests. Ghada Shahbandar, an activist with the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, estimated the crowd downtown to be 20 percent female. Other estimates were as high as 50 percent. In past protests female presence would rarely rise to 10 percent (Jenna Krajeski, 2001).

1.5.1 A history of women's protest

Arab women have not been slow to take to the streets in recent history, particularly when the national interest has been at stake. In Tunisia in the 1940s, women's organizations demonstrated against French colonial power. And in Egypt, as early as 1923, Hoda Shaarawi demonstratively discarded her veil in public in Cairo in a gesture inspired as much by her patriotic objections to British occupation as by a desire for female emancipation.

From an Arab perspective, therefore, there was nothing new or particularly surprising in the public participation of women in last year's riots. The strong degree of involvement of Arab girls and women via the Internet is also fairly easily explained. With the social spheres available to men and women strongly dictated by societal values, "decent" girls are expected to spend their free time at home with the family.

Twitter, social networks and blogging give them the means to overcome such limitations and the chance to communicate with the outside world. It is an opportunity that is being eagerly seized upon by ever more educated young women throughout the Arab world. So, although this may be new, it is not really a surprise.

1.5.2 Activists against the dictatorship

What did come as a surprise, however, was the very visible commitment and efficiency with which the large number of women involved set about organizing the uprising – no mere matter of Facebooking and Twittering, it demonstrated a willingness and determination to get out on the streets and physically go from door to door drumming up support. In Cairo and in Tunis, women took to the streets, their handbags clamped under their arms, shouting slogans against the government. And they went on doing so until the message got across and people left their homes to join them.

Women were not just there in the background helping with the logistics, they were right up at the sharp end – marching, cheering and firing up the crowds. Among their number were performance artists who organized "happenings", and musicians such as Nawel Ben Kraiem or Emel Mathlouthi from Tunisia, who gave public performances of songs that would become anthems of the revolution.



Men and Women painting together

It was also striking to see how unselfconscious and respectful the men and women of the revolution were to one another. From Cairo's Tahrir Square to the Kasbah in Tunis, the inhibitions and prohibitions of Arab culture were reduced to irrelevancies as men and women worked together, painting banners and tending to the injured.

1.5.3 Not ashamed to stand up and be counted

Another surprising aspect was the tenacity with which the women, individually and collectively, defended themselves against the sexual violence that was perpetrated against them. In Tunisia and Egypt, the "security forces" resorted to humiliation tactics, grabbing protesting women between their legs or by their breasts in order to force them to turn back.

In Egypt, arrested demonstrators were also made to endure so-called "virginity tests" – forced gynaecological examinations, some of which were performed in the presence of groups of police officers – an experience that left victims feeling violated.

Many of the victims were too ashamed and afraid of the reactions of their own families to try to do anything about the situation. One of them did dare, however. In December 2011, 25-year-old Samira Ibrahim took her

case to court and won. It was a victory that would put paid to the practice of virginity tests, and a result that opened the floodgates. Thousands of women took to the streets to protest against the military: "Enough, the women of Egypt are the red line!" they chanted.

This new self-confidence of young Arab women is an indication of the kind of profound social changes that are taking place in the MENA countries. It is a change that is most evident in the field of education. Even if the Arab world is still trailing behind the rest of the world, and half the women in countries such as Morocco and Egypt are still unable to read or write, the number of educated Arab women has, nevertheless, multiplied within two generations.

At no time in the past have so many girls and women in the MENA countries had access to formal education, and never have there been so many female academics as there are right now. It is a change that has been particularly strongly reflected in the media.

1.5.4 Profound change

The change is also affecting family structures. In the Maghreb countries, the number of children born per woman has halved in two decades. In the Middle East, the decline is a little slower, but there too, birth rates are falling. The nuclear family with two children has become the norm in many Arab cities.

This shift in behaviour is also having an effect on traditional Arab-Islamic social structures. The traditional correlations between "female/private" and "male/public" no longer go unquestioned. Women are now demanding their share of the public sphere.

1.6 Conclusion

Asking where are the women? in the "Arab Spring" leads to two complicated stories of women's emancipation and women's subjugation that have odd tensions and odd commonalities. These can be analyzed in terms of women's bodies, their presences, and their experiences (as well as men's gendered experiences) through a gendered organizations analytical framework. In terms of narrative significations, however, the stories get more complicated, drawing lines between those who see the "Arab Spring" as being (perhaps in Fukuyama's terms) nearer to the ideal typical Western liberal democratic model (and thereby the "end of history") and those who see it as a fundamentally politically regressive movement. What both "sides" have in common implicit endorsement of the privileging of Western, liberal models of democracy and (in Edward Said's terms) an Orientalise gaze towards the Arab "other." All of these different political outlooks on, and politics of, the Arab Spring vary significantly but each is inscribed on the images, discourses, and bodies of the women that feminist discourses look for in the "Arab Spring" but find blurred in its many gender appropriating significations.

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