

Investigating Genderless Utopias: Exposing the Sexual Harassment of Female Protestors in the Egyptian Uprisings of 2011

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Political uprisings and 'democratic' mobilisations utilise discourses of freedom and democracy in order to oppose social injustice and threats to equality. Yet within the mobilisations themselves, discourse constructs legitimate and illegitimate subjects through gendered power relations and sexualised violence. During the Tahrir Square uprisings in Egypt in 2011, activists attempted to oppose tyrannical state power by reframing the legitimacy of their protest through expressing themselves as 'The People'. Whilst they successfully brought about the fall of Mubarak's regime, elitism and social divisions that dominated Egyptian society failed to be significantly challenged. Feminist academic theory has previously offered insight into how nation states construct legitimate subjects through hegemonic patriarchal power. Events in Egypt demonstrate that attempts to create 'genderless' spaces free from social divisions can in fact mask prevailing relations of oppressive power. If political activists were to draw upon feminist academic theory, and feminist theory to transcend the academic vacuum, each may be able to address their own limitations and cross the binary in order to attain more lasting social transformation.

Keywords: Gender, Egypt, Uprising, Mubarak, Tahrir, Sexual Violence, Feminism, Activism, Utopia, Harassment, Protestors, Elitism.

Democratic mobilisations and activist movements usually erupt in response to a perceived threat against social justice and human rights. However, critique is needed to reveal when those mobilisations themselves perpetuate inequality

for marginalised groups. The adoption of a feminist theoretical lens has been a useful tool in highlighting inequality in the political arena. Yet relations of power operate to constrain and create individuals at all levels of social life, including in

spaces of supposed equality and democracy. Relations of power – oppressive and resistant – between social movements and tyrannical authorities have been considerably examined by feminist academic theorists through a gendered lens (Van der Molen and Bal 2011; Luibhéid 2002; Lee 2011). However, there has been little academic analysis of the factions and gendered inequalities within social movements that claim to be spaces of equality and ‘genderlessness’.

As part of this special edition focusing on the relationship between academia and activism, this paper will examine how adopting a feminist theoretical understanding of contemporary social movements could enable activists to be more self-reflexive, and to have a greater impact in challenging global inequality and embedded social structures. In order to challenge the binary between the two, it will also be highlighted that activism informs academia by embodying a tangible reality for theories that have been created in isolated academic spaces (Appadurai 2000). In the Egyptian uprisings of 2011, demands for human rights and social equality culminated in nationwide strikes and eighteen days of occupation in Tahrir Square, Cairo. Although the ‘revolution’ brought about the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s reigning dictator of nearly thirty years, the patriarchal and elitist structures that dominate Egyptian society – and many others

around the world – arguably remain unchanged. In this paper, I argue that the failure to shift hegemonic practices and elitist social structures was in part due to the deliberate erasure of the gender and other socio-positionings of the activists themselves, meaning that demands for ‘The Egyptian People’ were in reality beneficial to Egyptians of dominant social status – namely that of older, middle-class men. Through an examination of how gendered discourses have remained stark throughout the Egyptian uprisings, and in turn how this constituted itself in the ‘sexualised terrorisation’ of female protestors (Amar 2011, 300), I hope to highlight how the adoption of a feminist theoretical perspective can be incorporated into the aims and methods of other democratic mobilisations, and eventually lead to a more permanent socio-political transformation. It is worth noting that throughout this paper, the term ‘democratic’ mobilisations is used not to infer a ‘Western’ belief in the concept of democracy, but in order to emphasise that mobilisations that claim to be democratic spaces of freedom and equality – like the concept of democracy itself – can in fact disguise unequal claims to representation.

In the past decade there has been a rise – or renewal – of grassroots political activism in the form of active civil society groups, social movements and uprisings against the perceived global injustices of cor-

ruption, tyranny and neoliberal economic expansion (Grey and Sawyer 2008). Given that activism and occupation are once again becoming popular alternatives to failing democratic processes, it is important to address its limitations through academic analysis. Inequality and violence against women within activist groups is a controversy that is rarely discussed by activists, and has so far received very little academic interest. Mobilisations like the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring claim to represent 'The People' or the '99%' (Van Gelder 2011) and pursue universality as a political ideology in itself: the belief in a world that can exist beyond the social identities that divide us such as gender, age, race, class, sexuality, or religion. Contemporary activism mostly involves the claiming of public spaces, which '[dare] to imagine a new socio-political and economic alternative that offers greater possibility of equality' (NYCGA 2012). However, in both Occupy and the Arab Spring, sexual violence against female protesters ensued. The academic work of key theorists such as Judith Butler (1993) and Michel Foucault (1981) point to how sexual violence is an expression of unequal gendered power relations within a given space or social group. By placing the violence against female protesters within a theoretical context, we can scrutinise how demands of 'equality' can in fact erase notions

of difference and ignore the voices of marginalised groups.

Universalism and Genderless Utopia

Over the past decade there have been signs of unrest and protest across the Egyptian region (Shehata 2011), but none as significant as the Tahrir Square uprisings in 2011. Social inequality and lack of economic access were at the heart of the protests, but the myriad of issues became reduced to one clear aim – to end Mubarak's regime. All over Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) states, uprisings were to start and end with the phrase 'The People Want the Fall of the Regime' (Amar 2012): a slogan that reflects how diverse factions and identity groups in civil society united to achieve democratic and social justice. The activist revolution that came to be known as the 'Arab Spring' consisted of multiple small-scale demonstrations, mass protests, revolutionary processes, the ousting of dictators, and the brutal crackdown and killing of protesters across the MENA region (Al-Ali 2012, 26). On the 25 January 2011, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, the country enacted a civil disobedience policy, and after eighteen 'days of rage' the thirty year-long regime of Hosni Mubarak was brought to an end (Gardner 2011).

Egyptian society has a great diversity of religions, class and ages

but is (like many societies) extremely hierarchical and dominated by upper-class elites (Islah 2009). During the eighteen days of Tahrir Square occupation, different identities or groups put aside sectarian differences and united under the nationalist discourse of 'The Egyptian People'. The 'Movement for Change', or *Kifaya*, had been in existence for the previous decade and consisted of a collaboration between a vast range of different groups (El-Mahdi 2009, 88). A similar tactic was used to overcome sectarianism in other Arab Spring uprisings. For instance, in Bahrain, female activist Munira Fakhro played a crucial role as leader and spokesperson for building a movement that was 'not Sunni, not Shia, but Bahraini' (Al-Ali 2012, 26). Nationalist discourses were used to create legitimacy behind the movement: the belief that they acted for the benefit of the entire country, rather than for one sectarian group. By utilising a discourse of 'The People', protestors legitimised their presence in the square through the entitlements of citizenship – 'not Islam. Not identity politics. Not East versus West' (Amar 2012).

For the Tahririst revolutionaries, the highly visible presence of women in Tahrir Square helped enhance this legitimacy. Since women are often framed in the West as symbols of Islamic oppression, the visible resistance and anger of women emphasised a rhetoric of 'democracy' and freedom that is pursued by the

US (Eschele 2001). Women made up 20–50% of the protestors in Tahrir Square, and it was women who started the revolution (Hafez 2012). There had been multiple strikes and small protests over the past decade, including that of textile workers in the Mahalla al-Kubra province in 2006, most of whom being female and working class (Beinin 2009, 79). The labour movement transformed itself into a popular uprising on 25 January 2011 after 26-year old activist Asmaa Mahfouz released a YouTube video describing herself as an 'Egyptian on fire' and calling 'The People' to gather at Tahrir Square. She challenged Egyptians to reclaim their rights through rhetoric of nationalist pride: 'If we still have honour, and want to live in dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25' (Mahfouz 2011). She demanded 'if you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25. Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honour and manhood and come with me on January 25' (Mahfouz 2011). By calling upon Egyptian men specifically, Mahfouz offered them an alternative understanding of masculinity that is framed within a nationalist discourse, and a method for marginalised and excluded men to reclaim their lost dignity – and thus challenge the attempt of the state to control gendered identity scripts.

The discourse of 'alternative' masculinities has emerged in the

work of NGOs that work with men in the MENA and wider African region in order to engage them in gender equality issues (Esplen 2006; Barker 2005). These discourses challenge men to be 'gender transformative' and to address harmful masculinity constructs that encourage violence against women, neglectful fatherhood, and risky sexual behaviour that is linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS (Harrison et al. 2006). The comments of Mahfouz and other female protestors in Tahrir Square for men to be 'real' men and to protect women and girls from violence is arguably gender transformative – challenging male protestors to play a key role in combating violence against women – whilst reinforcing a gendered division of labour, and encouraging the rhetoric of male protectors and female victims (Kaplan 1994). The complexities surrounding apparently alternative or new gender norms, and the inability for female protestors to separate harmful and positive male gender norms, highlights how spaces of 'democracy' and equality remain deeply gendered.

Taher describes her interviews with activists who depicted Tahrir Square as a utopia of genderless commonality: 'No one sees you as a woman here; no one sees you as a man. We are all united in our desire for democracy and freedom' (Taher 2012, 369). Activists believed that this collaboration of age, class, gender and religion created a 'utopian

space that forged a new gendered social contract' (El-Saadawi in Amar 2011, 301) and an expression of global activist solidarity with other uprisings. It was this legitimacy that secured their primary aim of Mubarak's removal from government. The broad-based support behind the revolution and legitimacy of The People's demands encouraged the entire country to enact civil disobedience and strikes, driving the military to remove their support from Mubarak (Hafez 2012, 40), thus forcing his resignation and legitimising a revitalised grassroots political consciousness.

Engendering Tahrir

Despite the belief of the Tahrir Square occupiers that they had created a space of social equality, events that occurred after Mubarak's resignation revealed how fragile that conception truly was. On closer examination, gendered scripts were stark throughout the eighteen days of occupation, and the patriarchal hegemony of Egyptian society was not so easily overturned.

In Egypt, state power was situated under the tyranny of Hosni Mubarak whilst being framed as a regime of 'benign paternalism' (Hafez 2012). Mubarak depicted himself as the father of Egypt, constructing a form of patriarchal power that allowed him to infantilise his citizens, rendering them inactive and 'docile' (Foucault 1981, 85). Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities points to

how forms of male power are consolidated, not 'at the point of a gun' but through hegemonic power relations that become internalised and embedded within social practices (Connell 1987, 184). When the emergency law that had been in place since 1981 was extended again in 2006, Prime Minister Nazif claimed that 'We will never use the emergency law other than to protect the citizen and the security of the nation and combat terrorism' (Williams 2006), reflecting how mantras of protection against terrorism were constantly used to justify authoritarianism. Hafez argues that a patriarchal state was maintained through 'shaping the day-to-day operations of individuals and reconfiguring individual subjectivity' (2012, 39). Mubarak entrenched his power over the Egyptian people not simply through violence, open repression and media control, but through the construction of his people as docile and with strict gender roles (Foucault 1981). Resistance to his regime thus attempted to break down conventional notions of male and female behaviour.

At the start of the uprisings, Western media analysis was framed within what Amar has named the 'Arab Street' discourse whereby Arab men are fetishised, racialised, and portrayed as hypermasculine 'thugs' (Replogle 2011, 799) who are drawn to terrorism and violence due to their social and economic poverty (UNDP 2011). A United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report (2011) claimed that 'exclusion and frustration can lead to crime and violence', pushing young men towards extremist Islamism and terrorism. Amar argues that this discourse shifted suddenly with what he describes as the 'Anderson Cooper' effect that occurred when a CNN foreign affairs journalist was attacked by pro-Mubarak supporters in Tahrir Square (Amar 2012). The nonviolent and secular nature of the Tahrir Square occupation questions the 'masculinity crisis' theory and reverses the discourse of the emotional, eroticised terrorist. However, the depiction of male protestors in this way suggests that gendered scripts were not in place only to constrain female Egyptians.

In the days following Mubarak's resignation, the nature of the protests shifted dramatically. Security forces and groups of men from the Muslim Brotherhood came to Tahrir Square to protest directly against female protestors, in order to sexually humiliate and harass them. A rhetoric of 'good Muslim woman' emerged again, as 'a group of men gathered around the women, heckled them shouting abuse, verbally and sexually attacking them' they were told 'go back home and to the kitchen' (Taheer 2012, 370.) Many female protestors were also arrested. Those that were detained by security forces reported psychological torture, electric shocks, and the infliction of 'virginity tests'

by unsupervised male doctors (Al-Ali 2012, 29). When questioned, a Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) general claimed that 'the girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine' (Eltahawy 2011), reinforcing notions of legitimate gendered and classed behaviour for women. Protests continued throughout the year, and on the 19 December 2011 a small number of protestors occupied outside the Cabinet building and were met with a violent backlash from military forces. This led to the iconic image of the 'woman with the blue bra' being stamped on by a security agent (Taher 2012, 372), giving rise to increased media attention around the world for the plight of Egyptian women. Amar argues that this was part of a deliberate strategy by the security state to 'delegitimise, intimidate and blur both the image and the message of these movements by infiltrating and surrounding them with plain-clothes thugs, deputised by police' (Amar 2011, 308). The role of men – as protestors, 'thugs', or security forces – therefore became blurred between 'real men' who protect female protestors, or 'bad men' who sexually brutalise female protestors, and ultimately reproduced gendered norms and inequalities within the space claimed by Tahrirists to be genderless.

After the violent backlash on International Women's Day in March 2011 when many women were arrested and sexually violated, at the

other protests that followed later in the year women protestors started to shout slogans such as 'the daughters of Egypt do not get stripped' (Taher 2012, 373). In December 2011, reports state that 10,000 women were present, that there was no violent backlash against the protestors, and that large numbers of men were present in solidarity 'initially forming human chains to "protect" the women' (Taher 2012, 373). Therefore, despite claims to genderlessness and universal human rights, normative gender scripts and a logic of 'acceptable behaviour' continued to dominate throughout the Egyptian revolution. The failure to recognise this ultimately undermined the fundamental cohesion of the movement and its potential for change.

Academic theories provide insight into how these conceptions shape discursive reality for activists in democratic mobilisations. A primary way in which patriarchal power manifests itself is through sexualised violence as a tool to construct legitimate and docile bodies (Butler 1993). The presence of sexual violence across many different regions during periods of political unrest suggests a pattern in the actions of nation states to demonise and punish resistance. Recent research has primarily been undertaken into state-led sexual violence and control of sexualities (Luibhéid 2004; Lee 2011; Puri 2006), but there has been considerably less examination

of sexual violence between protestors. There is also little analysis of the role of women in gender-neutral movements – the majority of analysis focusing instead on women's or overtly feminist movements. Female protestors embody a 'double deviance' – in their capacity as anti-state actors, and also as women who challenge conventional gender norms, which can pose a threat to the interests of their male counterparts.

Sexual violence is expressed in order to further entrench authoritarian power (Butler 1993). Butler argues that power is exerted through sexual violence and the construction of legitimate identities (Butler 1992, 351). Power relations thus create notions of the self through discourse and normative violence that are performed according to a culturally-defined script that constructs the 'powerful' (Norm) versus the 'powerless' (Other) through injurious speech (Butler 1997, 49). In the construction of acceptable or legitimate identities, the intersection of class, nationality, gender, age and race become additional factors that seek to exclude the Other and thus render the body docile and obedient.

Mahmood's discussion of the subtleties of agency in Egypt points to how legitimacy can be reclaimed (Mahmood 2001: 204). She cautions against the logic of either subordination or subversion with no middle ground, arguing that oppressed

groups exert a form of agency that is 'not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (Mahmood 2001, 203). Women's involvement in the Tahrir Square uprising brought that capacity into the public space, but in doing so highlighted the threat that women posed to the regime. Women's groups organised and mobilised against the state, posing a threat to cultural norms and hierarchical Egyptian society, threatening to subvert the docile subject that had been created. After the revolution, male elites tried to cling on to power whilst giving the impression that the revolution was a success in order to minimise opposition. In Amar's examination of hypervisibility, he talks of how women who were largely middle class, highly educated and organised members of women's rights groups and who had been integral in leading the revolution, were undermined through a combination of their identity construction as the 'Other', and force in order to instil fear and prevent other women from joining the protest. Sexual violence was used as a humiliation tactic and method to delegitimise the protestors, emphasising that gendered identities cannot be dismantled or separated from people's identity and experience. Feminist academic theory therefore needs to find a different route to dismantling the violence of patriarchy

other than framing gender as something separate, social, and removable from experience and identity.

Conclusion

The intention of this analysis is to point out how other social justice movements can subvert imposed notions of the legitimate subject, without neglecting the needs of marginalised groups, namely women, within that movement, thus contributing to the left-wing activist agenda. Egyptian women's rights activist Mozn Hassan demands that 'it is time for this class of feminists to finally get out of its hotel conference rooms and well-guarded foundation offices and try to take back the streets' (Hassan in Amar 2011, 322). Feminist scholarship has revealed gendered power structures within formal political processes, and the rise of informal politics in the form of grassroots activism – in which both men and women participate – should not be neglected from the feminist gaze.

It is problematic to assume that claims to equality automatically lead to equal representation of marginalised identity groups, and specific attention should be paid to subgroups' needs and concerns. Feminist methodology allows for a more nuanced understanding of political structures of power, allowing navigation of hidden authorities and challenging dominant beliefs (Conti and O'Neill 2007). Butler (1993) argues that political theory must have normative

ambitions and transformative influence. By mapping the links between sexualised terror against female protestors and the erasure of a gendered viewpoint within democratic mobilisations, I hope to have highlighted key potential learning points for future democratic mobilisations in Egypt and beyond. The inability of the Egyptian uprisings in 2011 to translate into a complete social revolution suggests that grassroots activism is still a flawed technique in need of improvement. In order to improve life for marginalised people in oppressive and elitist societies, grassroots activism remains a valuable expression of political power that has great potential for achieving change.

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