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# Arab Women: Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Discourse

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Today, over five years since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, the outlook for women across the region is mixed. The optimism and idealism have long since faded, and these movements have revealed themselves not to be a series of discrete events, but rather a long process likely to span decades. The Arab woman's body, moreover, continues to be a contested space upon which Islamists and progressive secularists alike inscribe nationalist and religious identity, potentially denying Arab women the right to self-determination or self-actualisation. Like the nationalisms that preceded them, the post-Arab Spring movements threaten to assign Arab women a fixed role as an historical metaphor, as a reservoir of communal identity out of which the 'nation' can be constructed.

Mervat Hatem (2013) recently urged the need for a critical retrospective assessment of the history of "the feminist projects in the [MENA] region that reflects and privileges the voices of women instead of the dominant views of men, especially 'the grand old men of Arab modernity'." As part of this critique, one must evaluate Arab women's cultural production in the context of nationalist and official state discourses, which produced new forms of governmentalities that emphasised domesticity and mothering as the critical roles of women – limited roles that placed women in service of the nation. The process of modernisation in Arab societies privileged the role of the State in resolving gender disparities; the result was what Hatem describes as a takeover of gender agendas – a takeover that would, ironically, offer legitimacy to the authoritarian State.

Arab feminism became a convenient tool for official state discourse and political opposition movements, both of which see Arab women, particularly the Arab woman's body, as a symbolic marker of Arab selfhood. As Salam Al-Mahadin (2011) has noted, the Arab woman inhabits a contested and discursive space that governs (and is governed by) "various aspects of social, political, religious and economic life." The exigencies of nationalist identification situate Arab women at the intersection of cultural authenticity and political struggle, thus granting them symbolic capital that offers only temporary gains. Recognising that official state narratives, the rhetoric of political opposition, and religious, traditionalist movements mediate their respective messages through women's bodies, Arab women writers rearticulate nationalist discourse and reject the monolithic image of women as a signifier of tradition and nation. They construct and inhabit a rhetorical position that allows them to participate in and engage with the production of knowledge; they stress the need for agency in cultural production. It is as cultural production that writings by Arab women participate in revolutionary and post-revolutionary discourse.

## **Narrative Revision: Arab Women's Literary Resistance**

Having been largely excluded from active participation in the historical and cultural narratives of the Arab world, except in symbolic capacities, Arab women writers and activists have long sought visibility in regional, national and global conversations. Arab women authors are frequently discredited and overlooked both at home and abroad; sometimes branded as agents of Western colonialism and culture, sometimes judged for nationalist discourse that

classical Western feminism defines as incompatible with women's rights. The postcolonial impulse to guard against the perceived encroachment of Western cultural imperialism and the misguided Western disdain for alternate forms of feminist discourse thus manifests in a resistance to Arab women's calls for agency and inclusion and often results in a general disregard for their work.

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Oscillating between these two evaluative positions, critical approaches to women's writing reveal the complex relationship women's cultural production has with Arab tradition – literary, political, and religious. Rather than focusing on what Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1991. p. 3) identifies as “the futile dialogue on gender and women [that has long attracted] the West” and that titillates the Western observer with the “image of women languishing under the yoke of Islam,” contemporary Arab women writers, especially since the 1950s, have engaged in multi-faceted revisions of tradition, subverting existing literary, social, and political authorities. Fadia Suyoufie (2008. p. 217) has recently argued that contemporary Arab women writers have, through these revisionist tactics, circumvented the gendered anxiety that relates to tradition. Indeed, Suyoufie claims, “these writers appear relatively free from the constrictions of tradition since they have perennially stood on its periphery.”

The feminist revision of tradition is not merely an oppositional, anti-patriarchal movement. Rather, the appropriation Suyoufie describes ironically liberates the woman writer from the restraints of tradition. Appearing largely in the novel, a young genre with a short history in the Arab world, women's revisionist discourse is not merely a counterpoint to masculine tradition. These women writers experiment openly

with their narratives, free from formal restrictions. Writers such as Assia Djebar, Sahar Khalifeh, Fadia Faqir, and Leila Abouzeid, for example, have complicated the discussion of national and pan-Arab identity, noting as they do the gaps in historical, literary and linguistic traditions. These writers extend the parameters of feminist categorisation in their novels, expanding women's identities beyond anti-colonial nationalist imperatives. The identity of the women they present is not collective and, as such, is not restricted to postcolonial nationalist identification. As a result, the women in their novels attain a kind of subjectivity culled from both collectivist Islamic tradition and Western secular individualism, an individuality that they are stripped of in both the colonial and postcolonial narrative.

The women in these novels, of different backgrounds and with different approaches to identity and resistance, reveal the interconnectedness of what is both traditional and revisionist. These women's lives, far from irrelevant stories of women's affairs, present a revised nationalism that is in a constant state of redefinition. The novels themselves are acts of defiance; recording the stories of women who many presume should neither be seen nor heard is the Arab woman author's most effective cultural and political resistance.

### **Narrating the Arab Spring: Rewriting Collectivity, Creativity and Defiance**

While the novel had allowed the Arab woman writer a freer space within which to appropriate and revise traditional discourse, the recent wave of popular revolutions across the Arab world has ushered in what Courtney Radsch and Sahar Khamis (2013. p. 881) have termed a “communicative revolution,” wherein Arab women writers and activists have begun to leverage social media and online platforms to “enact new forms of leadership, agency and empowerment.” These uprisings highlighted the notable roles of Arab women and youth, groups traditionally invisible or excluded from the public sphere. And while analyses of these groups' roles have rightly moved away from the misdirected discussion of whether or not social media caused the Arab uprisings, the fact remains that women cyberactivists are redefining both the virtual and physical private and

public spheres. Much like the redefinitions of literary tradition, these new media of expression have presented women activists and writers with opportunities for innovative forms of cultural production and for a transnational expansion of the discussion of Arab women's lives.

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There has been a widespread tendency to overstate the prevalence or significance of social media in the Arab uprisings as well as the levels of women's participation in these media; however, the fact that Arab women, numerically underrepresented in the virtual public sphere, constituting only about a third of users is, as Radsch and Khamis (2013. p. 882) contend, “even more remarkable.” Much like women writers and activists in the formative nation-building years between the 1920s and 1960s who, while not necessarily representative of all women in the region, founded women's associations, educational and cultural organisations, and independent presses that advocated for women's right to work, to vote and to participate in the political sphere, today's cyberactivists are shifting the boundaries of the private and public, redefining women's potential and actual roles.

Arab women's activism has never been an exclusively public and explicit phenomenon, nor have the seemingly missing women's voices from public discourse indicated women's lack of cultural production or suggested their limited social and political awareness. Rather, their missing voices indicate social realities as disparate as authoritarian govern-

ments that actively suppress public women's movements to individual families that enforce compliance or silence. The online performance of the past decade or so – blogs, social media, etc. – has allowed these seemingly invisible women activists to circumvent the authoritarian realities of their lives. Even before the most recent rise in cyberactivism, Arab women had begun to subvert structural and cultural constraints by creating a virtual public sphere that, due to the option of anonymity, seemingly protected these women from censure or punishment. Arab women cyberactivists today, though, working as they are within popular revolutionary movements that challenge and, in some cases, have already toppled authoritarian regimes, recognise the tension between anonymity and publicity. Indeed, according to Radsch and Khamis (2013. p. 884), the “emancipatory, expressive potentials of social media platforms were only partially experienced by those who chose anonymity over publicity.” Today's women cyberactivists rarely choose anonymity, as that puts them at a disadvantage with a global media searching for reliable citizen journalists.

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The significance of the Arab woman as citizen journalist is hard to overstate. Writing within countries lacking independent media outlets, these women cyberactivists participate in regional and transnational conversations about human rights, government corruption and women's lived experiences. Indeed, women's ability to establish virtual public relationships with global media shapes not only the international narratives about the region and the popular uprisings, but also actively guides public opinion and public agendas both at home and abroad. Rather than simply expressing women's stories, this cyberactivism is transnational and subver-

sive. It simultaneously criticises and challenges the authoritarian regimes at home while revising and recasting the Arab woman's narrative in a transnational context. The Arab woman cyberactivist is more than an active participant in this national and global conversation; she is, rather, shaping and revising that conversation. Unlike forms of cultural production that are too narrowly construed, the work of Arab women cyberactivists merges the individual and the political and blurs the boundaries between public and private.

Innovative cultural production remains the most effective means of bringing women out of their perceived seclusion and into wider circles. Arab women, as Miriam Cooke (2000. p.181) argues, "are not victims, but rather strong individuals who are balancing national, transnational, religious and feminist agendas in an attempt to construct a society hospitable to them." Their work sometimes reinforces, sometimes questions discourses of modernity, nationalism, and feminism. This work derives legitimacy from women's experiences, affirming them as subjects of their own histories, producing their own body of knowledge and identity and challenging simplistic discussions of Arab women's lives. There remains, of course, the significant challenge of translating women's "personal empowerment and agency into institutional change."(RADSCH

and KHAMIS, 2013. p. 887) It is a challenge, though, that these women are facing publicly – both in the virtual and the real world.

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