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Portrait of a Revolutionary: Naglaa–“The Lion of the Midan”

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Portrait of a Revolutionary: Naglaa–“The Lion of the Midan”

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Abstract

This essay examines the (re)production of the discourses of dispossession that frame women’s issues in the Arab, Middle East and Muslim majority countries. Taking the case of revolutionary women in the Arab Uprisings as an example, the author traces the constructs of dehistoricization, disempowerment and western centric logic that underlies media coverage reports about women’s participation in public protest. The essay produces a counter narrative to the dominant coverage of the western driven media by offering an account by an Egyptian revolutionary woman, Naglaa whose lived experience encourages us to rethink how discourse reproduces the grand narrative of western postcolonialist discourse.

Keywords: women, revolution, Arad-uprising, grand western narratives, discourse, empowerment.

Retrato de una Revolucionaria: Naglaa - "El León de Midan"

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Resumen

Este ensayo examina la (re)producción de los discursos del desposeimiento que enmarcan los temas de mujer en los países árabes, el Oriente próximo y en la mayoría de los países musulmanes. Tomando como ejemplo el caso de las mujeres revolucionarias en las revueltas árabes, la autora explora las construcciones de deshistorización, desempoderamiento y la lógica centrista occidental que subyace en los informes de los medios de comunicación sobre la participación de las mujeres en las protestas públicas. El ensayo produce una narrativa en contra de la cobertura dominante de los medios de comunicación potenciados por occidente, ofreciendo el relato de una mujer revolucionaria egipcia, Naglaa cuya experiencia vivida nos anima a repensar cómo el discurso reproduce la gran narrativa del discurso poscolonialista occidental.

Palabras clave: mujer, revolución, levantamiento árabe; grandes narrativas occidentales, discurso, empoderamiento.



Figure 1. Naglaa (on the far right) protesting in front of Security Police.

Much has been written about the Arab uprisings. With a few notable exceptions¹ however, academic scholarship and the media afforded the role played by women in the revolutions a mere cursory nod.² Although a few media sources increasingly broadcasted the observation that women took to the streets “in droves,” their emphasis was placed on the marvel of a so-called unprecedented phenomenon of women’s political participation in a region described as often beset with a conservative and backward gender ideology that denies women “voice.” As reports of this “feminist” participation of Arab women proliferated, the general public were pulled into the discursive web of an age-old Orientalist pattern—one which paints all women in Muslim majority and Middle Eastern societies with one brush, dehistoricizes them, purports them to be oppressed, and sees only a feminist western trajectory for the liberation of these dispossessed others. While such hegemonic constructs are all too common in the media and often in academia, they continue to unabashedly represent and support western political interests in the region. This multiple appropriation recalls the “double colonization,” scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) describe in



Figure 2. Naglaa protesting against Security Police.

their work where women in heavily politicized areas of the world are cast in the role of the dispossessed by postcolonialist, western discourses while simultaneously labeled as the inauthentic westernized other by local patriarchal discourses resulting in further complicating and undermining women's

efforts in the public sphere (Hoodfar, 2001).

With various contending parties and political trends vying for control, depictions of women's role in the revolutions that swept the Arab region in the years following 2011 often mirror the interests of multiple groups but seldom the aims and goals of these women themselves. The lived experience of millions of women who claimed the squares and streets of their metropolises and stood against the insidious tyranny of their governments, women who unhesitatingly brought along their children and their grand children despite the potential dangers that faced them to sit-ins and sleep-ins because theirs was a fight that, "was bigger than all their lives,"³ as well as the women who left the comfort of their homes, their factory stations and their rural villages to face the barrels of army guns and tanks—these women became a voiceless sea of faces that media cameras and reports failed to recognize as a heterogeneous mass of people, with unique histories, political trajectories and challenging realities that they each sought to transform. Unfailingly, both local and global power discourses frame women's sociopolitical backgrounds, aims and dreams in ways that rationalize dominance and validate injustice. The (re) production of these discourses of dispossession is the focus of the following essay that rethinks various discursive constructs that emerged to frame women's revolutionary activism in the Arab world during the uprising and to this day. By offering a portrait of a revolutionary from Egypt whose story is one among many, but who is

also one who is unique in her tenacity and determination—Naglaa who is often described by her peers as, *asad al midan*, translated as the Lion of (Tahrir) square—this article traces the various discursive tropes in knowledge production about “the other woman,” (here understood as the Third World, Arab, Middle Eastern woman). It must be noted that there are thousands of women who participated in the Arab Spring whose stories are certainly of importance and value but my choice to focus on this one case has to do with the need to provide one woman’s lived experience which reports of revolutionary women tend to overlook. The essay aims at producing a counter narrative to the dominant coverage of the western driven media as well as local official discourses about the revolution, its participants and its spectators. By offering this narrative of an ordinary yet extraordinary woman’s life one can remain open to how discourse reproduces the grand narrative of western postcolonialist discourse. In linking feminist theory to the production of ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran describes her task as, “to expose both the processes of disaffection and rupture as well as the construction of community and identity,” (1994). She highlights the complexity of ethnographers she calls “hyphenated,” who are of bi-national origins and face the challenge of writing “through” notions of identity and community but who also struggle to write “against” the hegemonic constructs of social science. This research agenda, I believe is closely intertwined with what the ethnographic process in this contemporary, global and neoliberal world contends with—an awareness that field research is ultimately intertwined with power dynamics embedded in issues of cultural representation. As such, I choose to recognize that local narratives nonetheless remain embedded in the western political project. In Dipesh Chakravarty’s often-quoted statement (1992), he calls for a narrative that, “deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices,” (p.344). My account of Naglaa, a revolutionary from Egypt yields to these parameters of research and the ethnographic method. This account seeks to provide through Naglaa’s story, a glimpse into the lived experience of revolutionary women in Cairo, Egypt.

The events that began with the uprising in Tunisia in December of 2010 have succumbed—as has much of Middle East and North African (MENA) historiography to the hegemonic discursive western lens. While scholars led

by Edward Said have laid out the genealogical processes of Orientalizing European knowledge production that shaped how the MENA and Muslim majority countries are viewed, a more contemporaneous analysis of these processes is still needed. This is exemplified by the disconnect that emerged between the events unfolding on the Arab ground during the uprising and their representation in news and media coverage which prompts a more serious look at the constructs of knowledge production that occur as a result of cultural translation (Hawas, 2012) and those that are nurtured by embedded discourses of Orientalism (El Mahdi, 2011).

Analysis that foreground the Orientalist history of institutional framing of the region but also more recently Euro American military interventions in the Middle East as well as neoliberal forces that sustain a rhetoric that rationalizes specific social and economic transformations, are sorely needed. Lila Abu Lughod's recent book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) deals with the misappropriation of women's issues in the MENA and in particular, Afghanistan to validate calls for military intervention to "rescue" the Muslim female victims from Taliban rule. In her book, she develops an in-depth critique of dominant discourses that reshape the region and in particular women and gender issues. These pervasive western discourses she argues, are directly linked to particular historicities such as the, "War on Terror" as well as transformations in geopolitical agendas and economic demands. Describing these western attitudes as, "moral crusades," Abu Lughod points to the moralistic element in liberal feminist attempts to "save" the Muslim woman from Islam. This, she points out is born out of the reductionist lens that continues to examine the issues of a diverse and global population of Muslim women whose challenges and circumstances reflect various cultural as well as historical contexts. The victimization of these women under the guise of a human rights discourse that seeks their liberation and freedom is directly linked, Abu Lughod intimates to imperial power and its machinations (Abu Lughod, 2013). Both Mohanty (2003) and Abu-Lughod (2013) task the scholar of gender in postcolonialist and Muslim majority countries in particular with the difficult job of undoing the dichotomous positioning of Muslim women vis a vis western women, of contextualizing the struggle of women everywhere but particularly in the global south, and eliding the specificity of these women to debunk homogenizing efforts that seek to lump all women of the developing world

into one large, oppressed collective. Issues of subjectivity and subject formation that are embedded within meta narratives of modernity, postcoloniality, nationalism and now, neoliberal economic shifts, are also necessary for a feminist trajectory that seeks to grapple not only with contexts and histories but also with the fluid issues of power and the impressions these leave on the subjectivities of gendered bodies. By taking the processes that shape human subjectivity and desire into consideration, the literature can be at once focused on context, cultural relativity and knowledge production as well as the formation of selves and persons whose desires and motivations lie at the nexus of these larger discourses of modern history. To begin examining these issues the next section will analyze the framing of the Arab uprisings from within a western media lens that shapes events and complex realities according to grand narratives that govern global conceptions of center and periphery. What news and events find their way into the international media and why? Who gets to be the players, the heroes and the villains? And how are women's voices heard and silenced?

Whose Revolution is it anyway?

The so-called, “Arab Spring”⁴ hot off the presses was, and continues to be represented as a predominantly young revolution. Young people dominate the visual drama of color and movement recorded by photographers and filmmakers. Despite evidence to the contrary where the participation of older generations, women and religious groups testified to an organic uprising against intolerable living conditions that affected all people, young people were often viewed as the only proponents of the uprisings (Winegar, 2012; Singerman, 2013). In Egypt, the young men and women of the April 6th movement such as Ahmed Maher and Asmaa Mahfouz occupied the imagination of millions of spectators through video clips that went viral. The media frenzy that followed the first few months of the uprisings were less a testimony to the actual events and more of a reflection of reactionary local government press releases that dismissed the revolutionaries as, “a bunch of disgruntled youth.” Observers of the uprisings soon saw the inaccuracy of these depictions, noting the diversity in population make up of the revolutions across Arab countries which the participants themselves insisted on highlighting to the world. They recognized that public social unity in

displays of religious, gender and class solidarity, was central to the ideology of the revolutions but more so, pivotal to the credibility that they sought to establish to counter dismissive official accounts of their massive efforts.

Media representations as well as scholarly accounts of the early years of the revolutions also emphasized the role played by young people for various other reasons. On one hand, the idea of revolution itself as transformation and new beginning in the Arab region relied heavily on stereotypical understanding of the region as a politically stagnant and traditionally backward conservative culture. A remnant of enduring discourses of Orientalism with reasoning that fails to take account of the impact of colonialism, western intervention and global neoliberal forces. An uprising of youth against age demonstrated as well the demise of Arab patriarchal norms where age as well as masculinity remained a defining factor distinguishing this particular brand of inequality from its western counterpart. In depicting the revolutions as “youthful,” complex political and economic demands and problems need not be addressed, neither was an understanding of the role western powers played in exacerbating these conditions. On the other hand, the idea of “rebels without a cause” was more readily palatable to a western audience where various cultural and social values embraced the notion of change as youthful and progress as the prerogative of the young.

Young people did indeed begin a mobilizing effort that not only galvanized millions of people across the Arab world but theirs were also the highest numbers in the streets and squares of Arab metropolises, jails and morgues. Yet although these may be accurate facts, the discounting of all other constituents of the revolution is not only historically distortive but reflects political and culturally centric trends in representation that undoubtedly fall back on Orientalist formulations that continue to remain lucrative as a rationale for global inequities and imperialist agendas.

Shaping Revolutionaries and Revolutions

Initially, media outlets were not heavily concerned with the women who stormed the streets of Arab countries side by side with men to call for the end of oppressive rule. The phenomenon of revolution itself as an unexpected occurrence is what the news reported about. When it became

obvious that women were indeed an essential and observable constituent in these uprisings, some media coverage was afforded them. The bulk of reporting about women in the Arab revolutions however, took place through individual postings of video clippings of women in Tahrir, Yemen, Tunisia and Syria. Eventually, the media took notice of this, though their reporting was framed by two important themes: one, that it is unexpected to see women in public squares chanting revolutionary slogans because the assumption women have engaged in no political action or participated in protests before. And, two that these women like their revolutions have awakened to western notions of liberation, i.e. feminism. “Women, long considered *second-class citizens*, say they have found an unexpected equality on the front lines of the demonstrations against President Hosni Mubarak,” writes Laura King (2011), reporter from the Los Angeles Times, assuming that class, race and education plays no role in Egyptian society. She goes on to say, “women *have proved themselves to be adept grassroots organizers*, taking up visible tasks such as carrying out identity checks and searching bags of women entering the square,” (italics my own) uninformed about the history of women’s organizing in the Arab world in their resistance against colonialists and later establishing feminist and nationalist organizations to ensure equality in society.

Protests Raise Hope for Women's Rights in Egypt

While there were attempts at reaching out to women activists and protesters, and some journals such as Ms. magazine carried out excellent reporting that problematized the meanings and specificities of political participation for women, unfortunately many reports expounded on how the revolutions were a split for Arabs from their conservative past. In an article titled, “Egypt: Why the Kiss Picture Is So Radical,” Garance Franke-Ruta (2011), who was at the time politics editor of The Atlantic online, focused on a scene captured on camera where an older woman planted a big kiss on the face of a soldier in Tahrir square. Franke-Ruta (2011) explained this by saying, “Women in Egypt don't normally hold hands in public, let alone kiss strange men. As a picture of compassion between combatants, the image of a plump Egyptian woman kissing a green-eyed soldier on the cheek during protests last week was a *powerful statement of national unity*,” (ibid, italics

added). She goes on to elaborate on the conservative nature of Egyptian women by alluding to veiling practices. Taking veiling as a marker of conservative behavior among women she elaborates, “Young Egyptian men may dress in the international style of jeans and soccer T-shirts, but they go home to families where women wear headscarves. *An estimated 90 percent of Egyptian women wear the hijab, and more deeply religious women cover not just their heads and ankles, but even their hands, wearing black gloves along with their black face veils, headscarves and abayas year round.*” The italics on statistics is added but the emphasis on veiling is the author’s alone, who deals the final concluding statement, “*In short, when it comes to women in public life, Egypt can be pretty conservative. It's not Saudi Arabia or Iran, but it's also not Lebanon,*” (ibid, italics added). Such sweeping generalizations about entire populations framed many-an-analysis about the revolutions, in this particular case, taking a kiss as a demonstration of an “unprecedented” social expression of affection never before witnessed in a conservative society where revolution has relaxed public displays of affection and removed barriers between the genders. The underlying binary construct between conservative and progressive modes of behavior (or traditional versus modern) where a public kiss by an older woman to a younger man obviously intended as a maternal and somewhat patriarchal show of affection (older woman enjoy status over younger men in Arab societies) is misread as an indicator of national unity.

Just as liberation from conservative social mores is defined in western terms so is women’s political participation. Feminism, understood as the natural progression of democracy - only because this is how it transpired in western history is another example of the kind of western centric thinking and analysis that deals with women’s issues in non western societies and cultures. In an article that foresees a Middle Eastern *feminist* revolution, Naomi Wolf (2011) claims, “*feminism is simply a logical extension of democracy*, the Middle East’s despots are facing a situation in which it will be almost impossible to force these *awakened* women to stop their fight for freedom - their own and that of their communities,” (italics added). While her reasoning that women will not stop at this revolutionary participation but will continue to participate politically since they have now experienced the power of mass protest, i.e. they have “awakened,” (though women have been protesting for centuries in the Arab world), is not without some merit the fact

that Wolf sees feminism as a logical development of democracy, however, is. Third world women have been debunking these claims since the 1970s by asserting their own culturally specific pro women discourses that do not necessarily reproduce western hegemonic forms of thought. Moreover, feminism is not a “logical” extension of democracy. The logic spoken of here is simply, a western one.

What images does this brief selection of reports conjure up? Once again, these are the stereotypical images of Arab and Muslim women that have for the last two centuries been employed to produce knowledge about their area of the world as misogynist, backward and anti progressive. Fraught with generalities and lack of attention to special and temporal contextual analysis, the assumptions that drive these reporters to write what they write are based on embedded Orientalist structures that posit the Orient as the backward antithesis of western civilization. In this binary construct the implicit hierarchy, which posits western civilization as the single most human trajectory to progress dictates how these reports, imagine the future for a democratic Arab region. Hence, women in the Arab world have “awakened” to feminist consciousness, a feminist transformation is Arab women’s “logical next stage after the revolution”. Loosened social formalities and public expressions of affection are indicators of positive change and the revolutions demonstrated that Arab women could actually succeed at political organization because they checked identities and searched purses in Tahrir. Though these are by no means the only ways women protestors in the Arab world were appropriated by international media outlets they do represent a general, almost formulaic logical structure that dominates knowledge production about this region and women’s issues in particular. They are part and parcel of a historically rooted but also very current, systematic body of knowledge that aims at producing an Arab, Muslim Middle Eastern “other” that renders these societies as pliable subject matter that can rationalize political and economic policies when needed. Homogenization, dehistoricization and essentialism as well as the unproblematic application of a western centric lens facilitates and justifies a range of actions, from appropriation of resources, geopolitical restructuring as well as the redrawing of boundaries and power alliances.

The hegemony of the images that has monopolized the pages and imaginations of the public is countered in this essay with an alternative

image —that of Naglaa, a 40 year old public worker, revolutionary, mother and daughter from Egypt’s sprawling new metropolis in the 6th of October City. As a migrant to the Caireen metropolis from the coastal city of Alexandria, Naglaa was and continues to be instrumental in her boundless activism to support the revolution and to ensure that, “the blood of those who died will never be for nothing.” Forty-year-old Naglaa joined the revolutionary April 6th group that were credited with the initial organizational work that mobilized the masses in Egypt’s Tahrir square, on the 25th of January. She was imprisoned three times by the authorities. Her friends tease her about how often she was found in the midst of struggles with the police either trying to free one of the younger activists or objecting to the violent treatment of protesters. Naglaa took two bullets to her shoulder and her leg during the protests. Though the anti protest laws in Egypt are viciously enforced, to this day, she continues to protest, from commemorating the revolution, to mourning the deaths of the young and old, to demanding the release of imprisoned revolutionaries, her list is endless.⁵

Encountering a “Lion”



Figure 3. Naglaa’s picture.

The directions she gave me were very detailed. Keep driving towards *al hay al sadis* in the 6th of October City, you will find a mall on the right then a

mosque in a square, called *al nagda* with statues of a girl and a boy, the boy is carrying a key and the girl, a rose in her hand, then turn left. I followed her instructions to the letter and found myself in front of government-subsidized housing. I parked on the side of the road. Across the street behind a brown hedge was her office. It was a prefab structure with metal roofing and makeshift walls.

I asked an older man at the public service window where I could find Om Jennat (translated as the mother of “gardens of eden,” presumably her first born, a girl was called Jennat or the plural of garden of Eden), as she told me she was known at work. His face relaxed into a smile and he pointed to his left. I turned the corner into a gray office, with gray walls, gray desks and gray chairs and gray floors. Naglaa sat behind her gray desk, dressed in bright and elegantly put together clothing with a matching headscarf—the only figure of cheer among the drab government décor. “Please come in,” she said gesturing to the chair in front of her. As I sat down, her colleague across the room stood up and left. But, just as I was about to introduce myself, a heavily set man with an overpowering mustache popped his head in the doorway, “ya Om Jennat, and what about my issue? Can I just pay you now and get this over with?” “No I cannot handle money, the cashier is out to lunch, you need to wait,” was her firm response. I watched as the big man continued to try and cajole her, “but I came a long way,” he said, “as much as I like seeing you Om Jennat I really can’t come up any time soon and you know how awful those officers are. They just want any excuse to give us a hard time,” he turned to me with a smile and in a mild manner he said, “I am sorry to interrupt your meeting.” Om Jennat advised him to be patient and he nodded respectfully taking a step back from the room. It was my turn to apologize for taking her work time too, “no,” she shook her head, “I am done with my work for the day.” I sat back in my chair feeling a bit more relaxed and took out my notepad talking to her as I did so and we soon were engrossed in our own conversation about Naglaa’s memories of the first days of the revolution. People came and went, the sounds of doors opening and closing, several interruptions, her colleague returned from lunch, the conversation continued—mesmerizing. I was totally captivated by what she told me, nothing else distracted us. As she spoke, the contours of the person whose friends described as the “Lion of the Midan,” slowly came into focus, but it was nothing I expected.

“I am originally from Alexandria ... but moved to Cairo 19 years ago because of some ... problems.” That’s how Naglaa began her story. Not wanting to pry, I listened to what she chose to share with me and was grateful at that moment that she agreed to meet me at all. It was only after several persistent phone calls from me and a long exchange of text messages that I half-convincing her to finally talk to me (I say “half-convincing” because she was not completely sure that her story is exceptional in any way and that there are others who are far more important to the revolution than she is). I have been interviewing activists in Egypt since 2011 but in this summer of 2014, few activists who took part in the revolution three years ago wanted to reopen the subject. Egypt had slowly fallen into an uncomfortable numbness once more and the dust had settled for now in Tahrir Square where it all began.

A Revolutionary is Born

A few months after our first meeting in her office Naglaa told me the whole story. She began by saying, “I had nothing to do with politics prior to the revolution. I am a poet, a romantic who likes pictures of roses, blue skies and rolling waves. How did I end up in squares and street protests?” She shook her head in puzzlement at her own life.

Naglaa grew up in what she described as a “good home” and attended a local language school (semi public schools where a second language, often English is taught). Her father was a businessman who often travelled to Arab countries looking for work opportunities while her mother worked as an accountant for the *ghazl we’l nassig* (Textile) industry. She grew up learning from her mother that a woman has to perform her traditional duties in the household, that she had to be dainty, feminine. Naglaa was an avid reader and wrote romantic poetry. She dreamed of romance and finding her one true love one day. When she was 18 years old, she married a man with whom she was madly in love. He was everything she wanted in a man, tall and with a “hiba,” meaning an aura of authority, she saw in him the future she once dreamed about. Two children later and a few years into the marriage her husband announced he was leaving for Qatar to pursue work. After he left, Naglaa never heard from him again. Soon after that, Naglaa and her mother received terrible news. Her father, who was working in

Jordan at the time, had passed away. Though he often sent money home, it had dwindled down to a few hundred pounds per month and then stopped. To their chagrin, they learned he had a family in Jordan. It was they who inherited everything while Naglaa and her mother were left with more bills to pay.

Finding herself with no source of income and two children to support, Naglaa decided to head to Cairo where nobody knew her and conversations with friends and neighbors would not hint at blame for the disappearance of her husband. No significant work prospects were available for a woman with a *diblom mutawasit* (intermediate diploma) so Naglaa had to be resourceful. She sets up a stand to sell tea to micro bus drivers next to their parking lot in the 6th of October City. For a while she was able to barely make ends meet but things got complicated when her mother Nadia joined them from Alexandria. Nadia however overshot her unpaid leave from work and was eventually fired, leaving them with even less income. Determined to take care of her mother and children, Naglaa devised a new plan. With a loan from a relative, she bought various kinds of calculators and small gadgets at wholesale prices and began selling them in Ataba square where many students shop for school supplies. There, she staked her spot and set up a wooden makeshift stand with the help of her mother and daughter. The three of them took the bus every day at 4:30 am from the 6th of October City to Ataba carrying the stand and the merchandise. A few years later they had enough money to rent a storage space for their merchandize so they did not have to carry much on the bus. This new arrangement came at a good time as Naglaa's mother Nadia fell ill and lost the ability to walk, eventually becoming completely paralyzed from the waist down. Naglaa was shaken and distraught for her mother but she was undeterred. She took care of her sick mother and her two children while working at her stand in Ataba from dawn to dusk. Nadia, Naglaa's mother described those days as, "dark." In a conversation with Nadia, she confided in me that Naglaa cannot even think about these days without her eyes welling up with tears.

When this job came up she applied for it and was hired. With a computer and Internet at her fingertips she started surfing the net, joined Facebook and began reading. Naglaa states that she was never political. In fact, she described herself more as a romantic and a poet. In 2011, Naglaa came across a young woman who, on Facebook gently chided her about her poetry

as if that was a frivolous pastime. Naglaa's friend was "more involved in real things." When she was brutally beaten by local police while demonstrating outside *maglis al shaab*, (parliament), Naglaa recounts that she began to realize that there is a real fight going on. Naglaa was quite affected when she saw her friend's injuries. "How could they do this to a young woman who was only protesting? Her head was still bleeding when I saw her, her eyes swollen and caked with blood. It had just happened. I said to myself, these young people have a right to protest. They want change *al tagheer*, so I began to write against Mubarak on Facebook. I started to amass quite a following of people who read my posts and commented on them. I also read other people's posts and my circle widened. Then I received an invitation to show up in Tahrir on the 25th. My mother also shared that she heard about the 25th she was very worried that I would go to Tahrir so she took me to Alexandria under the pretense that there was a family emergency. When I discovered that she had tricked me I insisted we go down to Cairo but promised not to participate in the protests. Of course I broke my promise."

It was a struggle at first for Naglaa to be part of the movement to occupy Tahrir. Her work, her duties as a mother and a daughter stood between her and her revolutionary desire. "On the 29th of January my mother announced she was going to accompany me to work to make sure I would not go anywhere. Her mother implored her to stay home with her since she had children to take care of. But the moment work was over Naglaa took her mother home and organized a protest that marched from Mohandisseen to the 6th of October mosque. She recounts how some people wanted to burn the 6th October city police stations. She watched them set fire to the jails unable to stop them. That night she took the bus to Tahrir.

"I was totally unprepared for Tahrir. All alone and in high heels, no food or shelter I was walking around in a daze. Staring at people, talking to strangers who did not seem to be strangers at all. I completely embraced it all. I spent that night on the floor in the square."

"On the 30th of January, 2011 the Muslim Brothers began to show up among the protestors in Tahrir, there were women from the Muslim Brotherhood there too. When the police force withdrew from the streets, many people started to go down (to Tahrir). Anger at Mubarak's speeches made many people join us, but we were all afraid, because we had heard that

they were kidnapping protestors. Then the day of *mawq3at al gamal* (the day of the Camel)⁶ happened. Monday and Tuesday there was lots of violence. well. But, despite the horrific deaths, the army standing towards the museum at the end of the square were in *samn we 3asal ma3a al baltagiyaa* (lit. they were in a honeymoon with the thugs). Right in front of me and I am a witness, we would capture the thugs responsible for the mayhem and killings and deliver them to the army officers. A few minutes later, we would watch as they were released from the back entrance only to come back to Tahrir again. The “day of camel,” I saw with my own two eyes as the army opened the gates and let those goons on camelback in. It was 2pm in the afternoon.”

Naglaa pauses letting this little fact sink in, the army let the goons in? Why? I asked. “You will see,” she said. “That day, I was beaten viciously, repeatedly. I could not move from the pain. I was taken to the Omar Makram mosque to rest, but there was no rest for me. After I went back to the square I felt too weak to do anything so I went home.” The next day, Naglaa tells me she went to the radio and television building with a group of protestors; they were trying to figure out where the trend was going. Sure enough, she tells, me the army soldiers had a completely different attitude towards them. They were smiling, giving out cold water bottles to the thirsty throngs. “I said to my friends, Mubarak will step down. And we rushed back to Tahrir in time to hear his resignation speech.” Naglaa’s face lit up as she remembered those moments, “I was jumping from joy, tears were running down my face. We succeeded! We got rid of the ogre. But to be honest, as much as there was joy there was also fear. The position of the army was unclear. Some people said don’t anybody move from the *Midan*, although I had to go home myself. How could I not when I had to check on my children and my mother?”

Her whole mood changed and she slowed down. The flush was now gone from her face and her voice became very low, “I had a beautiful dream. I felt we could be better than Europe. I dreamed of people in Egypt looking beautiful, healthy... We could rebuild our country together. But, we got divided into political parties. How did this happen? That’s not how we started this.”

Naglaa thinks that the events at Mohamed Mahmood Street in front of the *dakhliyya* (Ministry of Interior)—often called the, “second revolution” were the beginning of fragmentation, “this was a great battle. We all went to

Tahrir on Friday the 18th of November 2011. Then on Saturday, I read online that they were dismantling the camps so I went running down to the square. I was not aware of it but my blood was boiling and I started shouting at the officers, “how could you remove these people?!” Ahmed Hassan a reporting photographer took a picture of me with my index finger raised in one of their faces. People still tease me about that. But, I was only aware of the right of people for peaceful protest.

In the middle of all this violence, which erupted between the protesters and the army, people were falling in the square. The tear gas was blinding. I heard voices shouting that they were shooting protesters up the street. I covered my face with a mask someone gave me and started walking fast towards where they pointed. One young man pulled me back from my clothes. “No, no stay back. I will go instead. You are an older woman. I will go!” I shook him off but he insisted, shaking his head. Another younger man, almost a teenager came up to him and said, “Let her go! She won’t find peace till she goes.” So he did. I slipped away and found myself in the middle of an inferno. I pulled a young boy who had fallen on the ground and was to be trampled under foot to safety. A man on a motorcycle came and took him to the Midan clinic. I turned around and saw from the corner of my eye a soldier raising the bottom of his shoe in the face of a group of protestors and I just lost it. I started chanting, *yasqut yasqut hukm al 3askar!* (Down with army rule). This is when I got shot in my leg and my shoulder. I didn’t care I kept going. I ended up standing with the blood oozing out of my wounds right in front of an army tank and it stopped. After that they arrested me, seized my cell phone, ID and paying no attention to my wounds the officer warned me that if I did not stop this “thuggery” they would rape me. I was taken away from the Midan with 13 other women in an army truck towards the road leading to Upper Egypt. We were let go right there in the middle of nowhere with no cell phones or any form of identification. The minister of interior was saying on television, “We delivered every lady we arrested right to her doorstep!” The next day, after treating her gun shout wounds, Naglaa and a number of the women who were arrested filed a complaint with the attorney general. The officer taking their testimony, asked them why they were there in Tahrir and what were they doing “there?” “Don’t you know? He asked me, people there do bad things?” “Which people? I asked him. “You know and I know,” he flashed back at Naglaa

with a warning look in his eyes. Then the officer said to her, “if I put my finger in the eye of the person who put his finger in *my* eye we will both be blind.” And that was his wise advice to her. She looked at me while she recounted this meeting and then said, “This world is just off kilter (*il donya haysa*). If you ask for your rights you get killed or maimed or ridiculed. We have to remain one people. Continue to surrender? No! We will get trampled if we do.”

“The Lion of the Midan”



Figure 4. Naglaa’s picture.

For some, Naglaa’s story may come as a common tale of activism and struggle—one that was forged many, many times since 2011 among those who struggle for “bread, freedom and social justice” elsewhere and in the Arab region. Yet, Naglaa brings the lived dimension of struggle as part of her daily life which even up to the moment of revolution was one of struggle for the same principles as the ones chanted over and over again by the masses in Tahrir square, “bread, freedom and social justice.” That the call for revolution resonated very deeply and quickly with Naglaa is therefore no surprise, for she was born into that struggle.

Why was Naglaa called by her friends and family, her mother and children, “the Lion of the Midan?” Because she epitomized the

quintessential fighter for justice. Her ideals, her thoughts, her reflective nature as a poet and “a dreamer” as she calls herself, helped shape a path to a revolution that perhaps engaging in direct politics may not offered many other women. In this regard, we can understand how the contours of revolutionary subjectivity get to be drawn. Naglaa describes all this of course, in a matter of fact tone. There were no real epiphanies, no aha moment for her. Hers is a life that provided the perfect storm and all it took was a friend to chide her gently about her dreaminess. Nevertheless, there was a galvanizing moment when that friend was brutally beaten by the authorities. That moment was all it took to push Naglaa to recognize what was already there. A vested interest in change and transformation but more importantly a contemplative ability to envision it, to see Egypt with its approximately 85 million people, its urban metropolises and towns living precariously on a narrow strip of green valley become, “as beautiful as Europe.”

The “Lion of the Midan” is a term that references the male gender, the king of the jungle, the lion. A large and powerful animal that does not compromise, yet the metaphor carries much more than that when it refers to Naglaa. In that regard, Naglaa’s friends and fellow protesters refer to Naglaa’s gender transformation as well. They see her as a powerful figure, who is relentless in her pursuit of justice, in her inability to remain silent in the face of state violence and army complacency. In those instances in which Naglaa pushes through the masses in Tahrir despite the tear gas and flying gunshots she exemplifies the physical as well as the unleashed power of the lion. As the Lion of the Midan, Naglaa is not simply male, she is degendered, she transcends the boundaries of heteronormativity. Her mother, Nadia, speaks of Naglaa, as “a woman worth a hundred men.” She refers to Naglaa’s transformational ability. In the mother’s eyes, her daughter is a warrior—one who defies gender boundaries and norms. And, that is what the woman whose story captured here achieves. She breaks problematic and confining molds imposed both by local patriarchal political constructs as well as historically Orientalist narratives that impose silence, submissiveness and disempowerment on women like her. Naglaa’s narrative is a counter narrative on multiple levels.

Notes

¹ Articles include: Al Ali, 2012; El Sadda, 2011; Hatem, 2011; Hafez, 2012; Singerman, 2013 and others, as well as a special issue edited by Andrea Khalil 2014 in the Journal of North African Studies also published as a volume. Books on the other hand are only a handful, including El Said, Meari and Pratt 2015.

² As an example, in an extensive bibliographic list published by: *Project on Middle East Political Science*, only 16 articles referred to gender in their titles and 26 referred to women with a total of 42 entries out of 888 articles thus equaling approximately 0.2114 percent. <http://pomeps.org/category/academic-works/arabuprisings/>. I take this one example as a relative indicator of scholarly articles that deal with women and gender related issues to reflect on the marginal importance given to these topics in the Arab uprisings.

³ From an interview with an activist in Tahrir during the first few days of the Egyptian revolution of January 25th.

⁴ The term “Arab Spring” is itself a reflection of the temporal awakening of Arabs as if their past was lived in a slumber only to be reawakened through revolution to the delightful desires of democracy. This of course is a fallacy since the Arab world shares a long history of revolution and revolt against colonialism and oppression. In Egypt alone, the history of revolution spans centuries, the 1919 revolution against the British, followed by the 1952 revolution are just two examples. Other examples include: Algeria in 1954, Lebanon in 2005, Palestine 1936-’39 then 1987 followed by 2008.

⁵ My interviews with Naglaa are part of a larger more extensive study that seeks to situate women’s struggles as political actors in the events following the January 25th revolution in Egypt.

⁶ This pivotal day during the first days of the revolution was named as such because armed thugs on camel back entered the square and began attacking the protestors. The protestors assumed this was the regime retaliating against them for occupying Tahrir. To this day, the data is inconclusive about who the real perpetrators behind this incident were.

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