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Arab Women’s Unfinished Revolutions: Reflections on Mona Eltahawy’s Book

“Headscarves and Hymns: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution”

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Abstract

Arab Spring revolutions have unveiled the social malaise that Arab populations have undergone for ages under autocratic regimes, they have also revealed Arab women’s ongoing fight for their rights and social justice. The broader cultural, social and political context of the revolutions paved the way for revolutionary feminist thinkers to publicly scrutinize women’s exclusion from the public sphere in an attempt to stand up for their rights in the Arab region. Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian feminist activist, writer and journalist who stood up for women’s rights and fought for their equality through her book *Headscarves and Hymns: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. She tried, in her most recent publication, to rally against common misconceptions and prejudices, in an attempt to reopen the debate around women’s exclusion from the public sphere. The author provides later a detailed historical and social account of women’s permeant demand for so-called emancipation. The current article examines how the author, Mona Eltahawy, openly challenges the social, religious, and cultural practices that hinder women from accessing males’ gendered spaces. It further discusses how Eltahawy approaches the status of women in the Arab region within the power relationship gender framework.

Keywords: The 2011 Arab Spring, Arab women writers, cultural practice, gender studies, literary practice.

Eltahawy’s Version of the Arab Spring: Violated Bodies in the Public Sphere

Disregarding the problematic of its labelling as the Arab Spring, 2011 was a crucial year for Arab populations to revolt against their authoritarian regimes. That year, 2011, marked the outbreak of social revolutions which took place in many Arab countries starting from Tunisia, Egypt and other neighbouring



countries in the MENA region. Corruption, lack of basic services, economic deficit, unemployment, political freedom, and social inclusion constituted the basic demands of the Arab youth across all Arab regions. The Arab Population.”¹rebelled against (its) repression on the ground by demonstrating in public squares...through social media calling out for the fall of the ruling elite that maneuvered the countries’. The revolutions promised, back then, a new era for Arabs; an era of free speech. Moreover, Arab intellectuals stood up for freedom of expression and inaugurated intellectual activism to voice people’s concerns; they provided a framework for open critical questioning of unequal power distribution. Arab women writers, namely Egyptian women had also rallied against all injustices, they criticized their denial of free speech rights. In this context, women’s activism witnessed a turn to more audacious acts of free speech; the case of women’s topless manifestations in public squares by the Egyptian Alia Al Mahdy and the Tunisian Amina Tyler are just an example. The acts performed by these female activists were later been accused of blasphemy. They both received death threats as they were forced to seek asylum in Sweden. Their acts were unprecedented and shocking sometimes even to Arab feminists. Thus, the uprisings gave way to the rise of a new generation of feminists who introduced new ways of women’s revolutions that no one anticipated.

Mona Eltahawy, being sexually molested herself while covering the events in the Tahrir Square, enrages to speak up against all forms of sexual harassment vis a vis women. Her book *Headscarves and Hymns: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* is a manifesto against religious practices that suppress women’s sexuality and thoughts. The cover of the book speaks for religious constraints placed on women; the image of the red scarf underlying the title has a connotative meaning. *Headscarves and Hymen* has generated, in fact, controversy in academic circles since it deals with issues related to the veil, women’s sexuality, and political activism in the Islamic context; issues that float to the surface and raise public debates. The title is indeed very catchy and grabs the reader’s attention; revealing untold stories about the status quo of Arab Muslim women during the Arab Uprisings. Eltahawy’s approach to women’s ongoing struggle for social justice and their liberation in the Arab Spring era provides a new vision into women’s lives in the Arab region. Yet, her critical ideas do not articulate the specificity of women’s lives in Arab Muslim countries as will be demonstrated in the course of this paper.

Eltahawy was well aware of the relevance of sexuality issues to the revolutions; she was a victim herself. She asserts: “name me an Arab country, and I’ll recite a litany of abuses against women occurring in that country, abuses fuelled by a toxic mix of culture and religion.”² She

¹ David Lesch and Mark Haas, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Westview Press, 2012), 3.

² Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (Macmillan, 2015), 6.



further provides detailed accounts about Egyptian women's harassment during the manifestations, stating that female protesters were sexually harassed and abused by government officials who forced them to undergo virginity tests as if all that matters at the time was to preserve their virginity instead of sustaining their well-being and their right to have a say in the political affairs of their country. Most of these women invaded the public space and went out to the streets, during the Arab Spring, to call for the fall of the Egyptian authoritarian ruler. Egyptian women's participation in the manifestations had, in fact, no feminist potential or agenda. Yet, there were consequences of their engagements in such public acts as "women were killed, beaten, shot, and sexually assaulted while fighting alongside men."³ Indeed, the revolutions unveiled a stagnated mentality towards women's freedom and their "intact hymen" in Eltahawy's terms. They were condemned for the invasion of the public space which is basically male-dominated.

The virginity tests, that the female protesters were subjected to have, sparked heated public debates about women's oppression in Egypt. Hence, the revolution's path towards democracy and social justice was just the right time to end up silence over women's issues in the Egyptian society; and thus, a feminized movement emerged to inaugurate women's social activism led by women themselves and particularly women who were sexually abused and even raped; Mona Eltahawy herself was a case of rape. She states:

It was in the "new Egypt" that I was sexually assaulted by security forces during clashes on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011—beaten so severely that my left arm and right hand were broken—and detained, first by the Ministry of the Interior and then by military intelligence, for some twelve hours, two of which I spent blindfolded. Only by virtue of a borrowed cell phone was I able to send an alert on Twitter about my situation.⁴

Eltahawy provides, in her book, more details about her personal life. She said that she was born in Egypt and moved with her parents to London to further her studies in Medicine; then moved once again to Saudi Arabia early on in her adolescent life. She claims that she fell into the clasp of a discriminating environment where women could not trespass the boundaries of home

³ *Headscarves and Hymens*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.



without a male escort. They could not vote in the elections; they were forbidden to drive and prohibited to unveil in public malls and spaces. Sex segregation marked their daily lives and so was Eltahawy whose potential for academic activism and women's emancipation inspired by her personal life. She states that "to be a female in Saudi Arabia is to be the walking embodiment of sin."⁵ So, women's suppression of mobility and segregation in the public sphere was basically meant to prevent women from being sexually harassed in the streets, preserve their "sacred" hymens and save their honour, that of the family and the community as well. Women were and are still expected to respect traditional values and pass them on to the younger generations. All of that enraged Eltahawy and pushed her to settle down in the USA seeking a tolerant environment for freedom of speech as a journalist. She, like most Arab feminist intellectuals who reside in the West, sought an environment that would tolerate her rebellious character.

In *Headscarves and Hymens*, Eltahawy strikes up all subjects that are related to a woman's education, social, cultural upbringing, sexuality, the veil and even politics. Religion, culture, and politics constitute the triangle pillar on which Eltahawy builds her argument. While debating around issues that women in Egypt live on a daily basis, Eltahawy devotes each part of her book to quoting Arab feminists who fought for women's rights, including Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Huda Shaarawi. These authors seem to impact her struggling character with wearing the veil; she claims that "reading Mernissi and Ahmed emboldened me in my struggles with the hijab, and to this day, I often recommend them to younger women undergoing their own struggles."⁶ Eltahawy dedicates a whole chapter to discuss the veil and its religious/ cultural symbolism. She draws on her own experience wearing the hijab for nine years to debate around the issue. Laying so much focus on the veil, Eltahawy concludes that the Arab Spring pushed women to unveil and call out for women's individual freedoms and liberation. Indeed, Eltahawy's personal struggle with the veil drives her to over-generalize women's experiences with the veil across Arab Muslim countries. Eltahawy seems to echo Western feminists' Universalist discourse on women's life experiences that crosses the frontiers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 19.



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A Woman's Delusional Personal Evolution in a Post-Arab Spring Democratic Society

Eltahawy identifies with women's stories about sexual assault, harassment, and oppression because she experienced the same while growing up between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In an attempt to understand reasons for her oppression she says:

They hate us because they need us, they fear us, they understand how much control it takes to keep us in line, to keep us good girls with our hymens intact until it's time for them to fuck us into mothers who raise future generations of misogynists to forever fuel their patriarchy. They hate us because we are at once their temptation and their salvation from that patriarchy, which they must sooner or later realize, hurts them, too. They hate us because they know that once we rid ourselves of the alliance of State and Street that works in tandem to control us, we will demand a reckoning.⁷

The book sounds more like an autobiography that announces the birth of a feminist activist. Eltahaway mostly uses the pronoun "I" referring to her life experiences with sexual harassment and the veil. She elaborates more on her sexual awareness/evolution and her decision not to get married. She uses the pronoun "we" to refer to all women who may share the same choices as her; she calls for collective activism against all forms of subjugation.

The book is made up of seven essays each stressing women's issues in a particular context, whether in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, or Sudan. The author's life experiences are all scattered in a way that connects strongly with the issues discussed. The essays demonstrate, in a way, the author's evolution to an educated adult woman and feminist. The cases, she presents in her book, were drawn from various Arab countries that have different historical, political and cultural affiliations as "each uprising was different, focused on domestic, national issues and comprehensible in its own light."⁸ The author exposes to the reader the breadth of women's multiple and individual experiences in different settings and the depth of their daily struggles trying to validate her arguments by citing news media reports, academic research, and interviews with violated women and women's local and international organizations. Eltahawy's book

⁷ Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*, 15.

⁸ Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East," 63.



revolves around the times of the Arab Spring but it does also refer back to past cultural and religious practices that deny women political engagement and individual freedoms. Mona Eltahawy provides a myriad of examples that testify to the shrinking of women's position in their countries; the examples are mostly drawn from Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. She extensively demonstrates how women are excluded from the legal/political sphere. Indeed, she puts much stress on the systematic gender discrimination engrained in Arab legal systems and in the populations' mindset, and "once again, women's choices, rights and lives tend to become circumscribed by tradition, religion and male prerogatives."⁹

The Power of Women's Personal Narratives versus Women's Limited Access to Knowledge

Eltahawy's story with the veil and sexual harassment at the time of pilgrimage fall within a confessional discourse through which she reflects on her personal experiences as related to a social and cultural paradigm. These discursive public confessions empower her rather than suppress her freedom of speech, enforce her submission to a social code and appropriate decorum that would judge the author's sexual act as fornication. She might be criticized for openly talking about intimate sexual experiences as if she was parodying her rebellion against a social and a religious code that forbids such acts; or even for setting herself as a bad example for other women to follow. But it would be significant to assume that her confessions unveil the malaise women undergo on a daily basis just because they happen to be born in such traditional bound societies. Women, under such circumstances, cannot speak up for harassing their bodies in public spaces because they "are blamed for it because we were in the wrong place at the wrong time, wearing the wrong thing."¹⁰ This consequently assumes that women are expected to be ashamed of wearing inappropriate clothes and so they are responsible for their harassment. Thus, Eltahawy tries to "reinscribe the 'political' into the private sphere and attempts to map out possible strategies for bringing about change within an increasingly complex system of power."¹¹ Therefore, such feminist discourses would impose a critical questioning of such practices that have no religious justification. Eltahawy's open discussion

⁹ Aboueldahab, "Transitional Justice and the Arab Spring," 153.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹¹ Mills, *Discourse*, 71.



of her personal evolution as an adult and as an autonomous intellectual woman is an evidence of the great load of the patriarchal structures that limit women's life to the domestic sphere. Sadly, Eltahawy's public appearances on media platforms to advertise her book have generated harsh criticism from Muslim Arab women in particular.

Eltahawy's approach to women's status expands to a pre-Arab spring era. She tends to consider women's status in the Arab Muslim world as homogeneous; her approach seems to assume that the social movements had the same impact on women's lives in the Middle East and North Africa in the same way when it is not. Countries, where the Arab Spring led to the fall of the ruling regime seem to grant women limited access to the public sphere or to get them involved in the political space. However, in other countries like Morocco, women, through feminists' activism, succeeded to push for constitutional amendments in the penal and family code after the suicide of Amina El Filali on March 13, 2012. Women who experience rape no longer suffer the consequences of marrying the rapist according to the Moroccan law. Now, in this context, it is possible to claim that the practices which oppress women are not uniform. In Saudi Arabia, women were campaigning for the right to drive and travel without a male companion until recently. In Egypt, women's harassment is thought of as an epidemic issue. In Tunisia, however, mostly referred to as a model in Arab countries, few are those who succeed to get access to decision-making positions. Yet, despite all the historical, geographical, and political disparities between Arab Muslim countries, it is believed that "women in official politics seldom signify advances in women's rights" and that "a quick survey of Arab Spring countries reveals how little has changed on the official front."¹²

Conclusion

Women's participation in the 2011 Arab Spring led to brutal outbreaks of aggression and rape of female protesters and activists, particularly in Egypt as according to Eltahaway. Women, whether they were veiled or non-veiled, educated or illiterate, activists or non-activists, ventured out of a national belonging, into a defenceless insecure space "the public squares" to denounce social injustice, inequality and corruption. However, this act of transgressing the boundaries of home was confronted with denial and systematic oppression.

¹² Fatima Sadiqi, *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa*, 36.



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Women “have fought alongside men in political revolutions that have toppled dictators. But once these regimes fell, women have looked around to find the same oppression, sometimes inflicted by the men they stood shoulder to shoulder with, by men who claimed to be protecting them.”¹³ Despite all of that we can say that women have at least succeeded in inaugurating the counter-discourses that question the so-called hegemonic religious practices that subjugate women.

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¹³ Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*, 42.



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