

Shame as a Litmus Test for Revolutionary Affects: The Female Protestor and the Reconfiguration of Gender Normativity

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Tahrir Square was the critical event that prompted a new generation of Egyptian feminist and human rights activists to join citizens in the streets to claim a new social and gender contract. While female protestors were an essential part of the revolution, their bodies powerfully triggered the economy of shame to ostracize some activists and to underpin, as Williams explains *structures of feeling* that sidelined the need to address rape in the square. This paper argues that the female

protestor is a focus of political violence whose experiences illuminate the matrix that sustains and normalizes sexual violence in a society. This allows us to connect female body politics with broader socio-economic and political conflicts and with processes of state reconfiguration in marginal/liminal spaces.

Keywords: Egypt, Sexual violence, Rape, Gender, Affects, Social movements

Introduction

As 2020 begins, the protests that started in 2010 in Tunisia are far from being extinguished. From December 2018 on, the Middle East and North Africa have witnessed a new wave of uprisings that has taken the citizens of Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran to the streets to demand social change. Yet, these countries are not isolated cases; Palestine and Morocco are also witnessing important civic manifestations. In the midst of these new revolutions, episodes dating back to 2011 become highly relevant once again. A dramatic feature that marked the January 25 revolution in Egypt was the widespread epidemic of sexual violence. In just a short period - from late 2011 to the end of 2012 - independent organizations documented more than 500 cases of sexual harassment, abuse, rape, and gang rape during protests (Nazra et al. 7). In such proportions, sexual violence soon gained the epithet of *epidemic*. If anything, this epidemic was yet another proof of the central role of gender and body politics in the political process. Hafez, in this line, has made women's corporeality central to the study of the Egyptian revolution, thus expanding on a body of literature that includes the scholarly work of Al-Ali and Pratt and of El Said that reclaims the key role of gender in the analysis of

broader socio-economic and political crises. Media outlets have also reversed their first analysis of the essential role of women and gender in these protests; while in 2011, academics like Abouelnaga and Al-Ali questioned international media when they asked *Where are the women?*, in 2019, the media clearly recognize the invaluable contribution of women and feminism to protests, as journalists like Hall, Nicholas Nassar, Mustafa, Marshood and others have noticed.

A less-explored aspect of the social and political unrest, however, is how affects are involved in the reconfiguration of the pre-established gender normativity, hence being part and parcel of the bio-power that reframes protestors in the matrix that responds to the status quo that protestors themselves try to overthrow. This text, therefore, addresses the question of affects as Ahmed reframed it. Rather than asking what emotions are, it analyses what emotions *do* (Ahmed 4, emphasis added) and how they “operate to ‘make’ and ‘shape’ bodies as forms of action, which also involves orientations towards others” (Ahmed 4). Bodies, however, cannot be detached from identification with sex and gender in ways that articulate power relations. Affects, therefore, are a highly gendered enterprise that weaves the formation of masculine and

feminine identities in a relation of power. They are involved in the organization of the social space, sustaining a given structure of governance that is able to effectively determine who is *in* and who is *out*. Yet, revolutionaries in Egypt did not consider that affects should be part of their political contestation. In this regard, I made the link between affects and Williams’ use of the concept *structures of feeling* emerging from Tahrir. If Tahrir represented the making of new articulations of thought that challenged popularly accepted political and social conventions, the female body drew one of the boundaries to this emerging structure of feeling. This partially explains why independent feminist groups emerging from the square, like Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntiSH), first had to conquer a space among their peers to claim the need to combat sexual violence in protests as an important part of the revolution. Narratives that argued that women’s presence in the square – together with the acknowledgment that episodes of sexual abuse would tarnish the reputation of the revolution – came not only from its opponents, but also from peer revolutionaries who in the beginning fiercely opposed the work of these anti-sexual harassment interventions. This article argues that the failure to inscribe female protestors’ expe-

riences of violence into the overarching narrative of the revolution’s contestation of the state’s nationalist project was key to rearticulating the private-public segregation, itself the cornerstone of that same nationalist project that protestors sought to change. By denying the political aspect of the affects involved in shame, honor, and disgust that surrounded violence against women, protestors were undermining their own potential for change. In this regard, the female body was not only the battleground of contesting hegemonic narratives, but also the limit of the revolution itself, which few dared to trespass. Shame and disgust operated to effectively disable solidarity and empathy, which would have prompted an economy of affects more in line with the social justice principles emerging from Tahrir. The plight and tribulations of women’s bodily emancipation hence exposes the tension between the unity and the fragmentation of Tahrir and the revolutionary narrative, and affective economies are crucial to understanding how this is so.

Drawing on ethnography collected during fieldwork from 2011 and 2012 and from 2014 to 2016, this article explores the role of the affects’ economy of *shame* as a pillar that reconfigured the division of social space as needed for the state to deal with social unrest. The article thereby also con-

tributes to the literature of *Anthropology in the margins of the State* (Das and Poole), which has paid attention to processes of state reconfiguration in liminal/marginal spaces. Das and Poole point out that key to the discussion of margins is the relationship they have with violence and the ordering functions of the state. This relationship highlights three aspects: margins as natural containers for people insufficiently localized within the law (such as activists and protestors); legibility and illegibility (which refers to the illegibility of females' bodies present in protests); and the space between bodies, law, and discipline (which refers to the state's tactics to regain order) (Das and Poole). Because of these features, the state's margin reverts to its necessary role of sustaining a liminal space, where the state is able to maneuver to maintain itself. Navaro-Yashin also explores the idea of the complicity of those on the margins "in the activity of reifying the state" (132), arguing that it is on these margins that the state is reproduced through everyday life practices, which also include social constructions of emotions. With this, she builds on Taussig's contention that situates the art of state building in the margins (Taussig). Thus, the liminal space that emerged during protests was a space of resistance and creativity, yet also a space for statecraft. The denial of the

gendered role of affects in this liminal space therefore contributed to tip the scales toward the state's reconfiguration of power, rather than enabling creative radical change. In what follows, I elaborate on the nuances of this reconfiguration.

The dystopian body

Female bodies are certainly objects that take different forms in Middle Eastern societies. Their images, often voided of voice and agency, circulate in the media and popular culture to nourish a certain utopia of power and sexuality or the opposite: pity, authenticity, and tradition. In both senses, the female body is codified to contribute to a utopian idea of womanhood and its opposite. Yet, the revolution provided images of bodies that escaped this binary, thus to become bodies out of place, as Ahmed would say or, so to speak, dystopian because they interrupted consolidated ideals of the female body. Moreover, as a space of contestation, Tahrir was able to produce its own narrative; thus, women's images and voices escaped pre-established convention and gained their own place and voice. In November 2011, months after the famous uprising of January 25 and in the midst of the revolutionary battle, the blogger and activist Alia ElMahdy posted a picture of herself nude in her blog to denounce a

society of "violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy" (ElMahdy, "Nude Art"). The picture got 1.5 million hits in its first week and the blogger was seriously attacked in the Internet, criminalized, and even pathologized. She was called a prostitute and mentally ill, and many demanded her arrest. Even among supposedly open-minded liberal secular activists, her nudity provoked feelings of aversion, discomfort, disgust, and shame. In the context of the parliamentary elections of November 28, 2011, in which the liberal front was trying to defeat the Islamists, ElMahdy was under the fire of Islamists, pro-regime supporters, and revolutionaries alike. Her nudity posed a fundamental question: when, where, how, and why is the female body accepted? Referring to the economic industry surrounding the female body predominant in many societies of the Middle East and North Africa, Mikdashi rightly pointed that

it is quite easy to see a woman naked. In fact, naked women are always only an Internet search, an art gallery, a television show or a film away. These images stare at us from billboards, music videos and TV advertisement[s] asking us with their flesh and their "fuck me" expressions to buy more and more things ("Waiting for Alia").

This is to say that the naked young female body was not a strange or unknown thing in Egyptian society. But in the context of the revolution, the political expression of nudity stood out as a completely intolerable and unpalatable image. ElMahdy's reverse and defiant gaze in red shoes and hair adornment in a black and white format and, I would add, a puerile gaze, could not be codified within the paradigms of virtue, honor, and purity that swung between liberal and Islamist forces. While the [self-defined] people (*al-sha'b*) in the protests were claiming a new paradigm of rights against the old paradigm of paternalistic protection typical of Mubarak (and the many former regimes), the picture of ElMahdy clearly identified the litmus test for the radical change that they were demanding in the streets. Far from wanting to delve into the ethics or morality of ElMahdy's action, my interest here is to explore how this reaction helped recodify the state's presence in the street, thus damaging the claims that revolutionaries themselves were making against the system (*al-nizām*). Thus, the article adds to the discussion already triggered by Al-Najjar and Abusalim (135) and by El Said (109), who have also written interesting pieces on this episode. To delve into this question, one has to ask what the affective economy that the picture of ElMahdy trig-



Fig. 1: Samira Ibrahim, also called “daughter of the Nile” is praised for her bravery in defending her dignity. Alia ElMahdy is accused of exposing her body of her own free will (see the full translation of the text: Jsuzdak, “This is not Grafitti”). Source: suzeeinthe city.wordpress.co. Accessed 26 April 2020.

gered was and what role it played in the revolutionary narrative.

Battles that put the female body at the center of the revolution were not new to the Egyptian revolution. Particularly the echoes of the virginity tests carried out on

18 women protestors only a few weeks after the ousting of Mubarak had triggered memories of the horrors and were denounced by many parts of civil society, including the activists who now rejected ElMahdy's picture. Samira Ibrahim had

stood up back then as the figure that made the Army apologize for humiliating women. In this context, the revolutionaries acclaimed Samira Ibrahim for her bravery, while ElMahdy provoked shame and disgust in a manner that effectively justified her being an outcast (she later went into exile in France and joined the controversial group *Femen*).

November 2011, however, was also when many cases of mob assaults happening in the square in the middle of protests were going unheard or ignored by these same revolutionaries who praised Samira, because they thought discussing the attacks would undermine the revolution. Comparing the stories of Samira Ibrahim and Alia ElMahdy, I noted in many of my interlocutors that a main affect that ElMahdy's picture had triggered was disgust and shame. Body language expressing these feelings was very noticeable; the expression on their faces when talking about ElMahdy's political act was followed by an often rationalizing argument that justified her being an outcast. At this point, I linked the episodes of sexual violence that were occurring in the square with the reactions of shame and disgust triggered by ElMahdy's defiant act. During fieldwork, I focused on how the economy of shame operated in survivors, including how they

received their male peers' reactions; I paid attention to "how it [shame] works on and through bodies (...) deforming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from others who witness the shame" (Ahmed 109). My observations, localized in Egyptian culture, expanded Ahmed's reflections on shame. Embedded in a revolutionary context that was supposed to challenge the origins of social injustice, activists' reactions of shame revealed the emotions that rearticulated the gender normativity necessary to re-establish the status quo that preceded the revolution. This article does not cover interviews with male activists.

The female body and the affects of shame

Multiple accounts from the first eighteen days of the revolution describe Tahrir Square as the site of a cathartic experience. Years down the line, activists like Toma continue to reflect on the memory and value of the shared identity that the cathartic process of Tahrir enabled (Toma, "The Shared Identity of Tahrir"). People entering Tahrir as one thing and then transformed into a better version of themselves; thus, Tahrir - in the absence of the state - was often referred to as pure, harmonious, and full of joy and hope. Yet, the utopia of Tahrir was difficult to maintain after President Mubarak stepped

down and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) led the transitional process. As protests in Tahrir continued month after month, independent feminist human rights groups increasingly paid attention to two emerging concerns: one was the representation and political participation of women in the revolution; the other was the sexual violence that was reaching *epidemic* levels. This violence was defined as a pathology that did not distinguish much between who was in power: the SCAF or the Muslim Brotherhood. Episodes of sexual violence increased from the very first day President Mubarak was ousted.¹² While Tahrir had been free of harassment during the eighteen days, this ended when CBS correspondent Lara Logan was brutally assaulted and gang raped (Adams, "CBS News's Lara Logan Suffered 'brutal' Attack"). The public sexual violence that emerged from then on reflects the challenge that female protestors posed to the nationalist project and revolutionaries alike, and episodes multiplied exponentially in the following months. The activist Yasmine El Baramawy went to Tahrir on November 22, 2012 to protest against President Morsi's constitutional decree.¹³ In her words, the "constitutional declaration made all kinds of Egyptians people again together against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists" (El

Baramawy, “I Felt Betrayed by the Revolution Itself”). That day, El Baramawy was brutally assaulted and raped with knives for more than an hour, amid violent clashes and in the presence of security forces. At one point, her assailants drove her away on top of a car, trying to take her to an isolated place, saying that she had a bomb attached to her stomach (Langohr 19). After the assault, El Baramawy spent two months trying to make her voice heard by her comrades, who dissuaded her from publicly denouncing her assault and rape. The revolution was more important. She was told, “You are not injured, you are not dead, so it is OK” (El Baramawy, “I Felt Betrayed by the Revolution Itself”). El Baramawy recovered from her physical injuries, but felt betrayed by the revolution. In our conversations, she made clear that hired thugs were behind the assault, which relates directly to the security apparatus because, in her words, “They had to be thugs paid by the army or by the Muslim Brotherhood, it is all the same” (El Baramawy, Personal interview). But there is another fact she cannot forget: how men present in the square joined in the attack on her. She still remembers how some people climbed to elevated positions so they could better *enjoy* the scene, and the mass of men surrounding her clearly exceeded the possible number of thugs

paid to commit the sexual assault. To explain this duality, we need to frame her assault as the consequence of the use of gender and female sexuality as part of the disciplinary techniques of the state. The female body, as an out-of-place object, was disrupting the regulation of life as prescribed by the authority; thus, the male presence in the square was allowed to extend the arm of the state to discipline, defame, denigrate, and abuse women. Therefore, while men violently disciplining women is often explained as a cultural norm, here it was clearly a tool of political repression. Female bodies in public political spaces were revolutionary, because their active presence in the public sphere was tearing down the division of the social space necessary to sustain the power of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the army. That explains why most of the sexual abuse and gang rapes occurring during protests happened under the eyes of security forces that did nothing to stop them. Yet, one needs to delve deeper to understand why other male protestors present in the Square joined the assault or why other revolutionaries told El Baramawy to be quiet when she tried to raise her case. She expressed how her peers’ response profoundly changed her relationship with the revolution. Her story shows the disruption that the female body

brought to the revolutionary narrative. After months of trying to gain support to denounce sexual violence during the protests, El Baramawy publicly narrated her attack on national TV in February 2013 (MediaMasrTv14, „A Courageous Girl Explains the Details of her Rape in Tahrir Square“), gaining wide public endorsement. Since then, women in the Square, when they saw her, would come up to hug her and thank her, saying that with her act she was protecting other women’s dignity. This was an aspect she had not foreseen. In parallel to these signs of affection, however, she received specific threats on several occasions, precisely because she was a woman who had been raped. During our interviews El Baramawy explained that, since the assault, she felt more vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment because she was no longer considered a repository of male honor. She has indeed endured additional attempts at rape and abuse since then that she relates to public knowledge of her first attack. In her narration, after explaining how she was received in the Square after the public testimony, El Baramawy remarked, “But we all know that a raped woman is *shame* [first mentioned in English with subsequent mentions in Arabic as ‘Ār], so how come you say this is dignity?”

Survivors' endurance of shame ('ār) in relation to their capacity to remain pure and worthy of honor in the eyes of a society whose norms are dictated by patriarchy was a very important aspect of their strategies to deal with the memory of the attack. Reference to shame over sexual violence is often mentioned by survivors, public opinion, or state politicians; indeed, 'ār (shame) was an expression that pointed to the moral degradation that victims of sexual violence are subjected to. Yet, that was not the only *kind* of shame at play, particularly if we pay attention to activists/comrades that El Baramawy turned to for support or ElMahdy's community, also secular activists.

While the word 'ār in Arabic or shame in English was used very frequently, other kinds of affects were less often or never mentioned; thus, body language was essential to articulate other people's reactions to accounts of rape or to the nudity of ElMahdy. The picture of ElMahdy provoked expressions of aversion, embarrassment, and discomfort. While conducting fieldwork, as well as while living my ordinary life among secular leftist friends (activists and non-activists), the mere allusion to this episode often provoked physical signs of disgust in my interlocutors' faces. Thus, terms other than ār need to be considered to expand the economy of

shame that circulated among female bodies, survivors of sexual violence, and secular leftist activists. *Khajal* (also translated as shame, but closer in meaning to *cringe*) could be a useful term in Arabic that, in my opinion, operated to disable the necessary empathy that would have brought revolutionaries to sustain El Baramawy's claims. *Nufūr* (usually translated as aversion) would be another term to consider. What is important, however, is to retain the individual relational aspect that *khajal* does. 'Ār, 'ayb, and *khajal* are all commonly translated as *shame*, yet with nuances that deserve deeper analysis. Whereas *khajal* commonly translates as shame in the sense of embarrassment (or *maksūfa* in the Egyptian dialect), it differs from 'ayb or 'ār in that it refers to the individual feeling of embarrassment towards something external. In contrast, 'ayb and 'ār are different levels of a moral sentiment rooted in a collective. While 'ār is clearly linked to male honor, *khajal* pertains more closely to the capacity to feel ashamed or embarrassed by other people's actions, manners, or aesthetics; and in this sense the body reactions could be similar to those triggered by affects of disgust. It is in this conundrum that the stories of ElMahdy and el Baramawy interlinked. Tahrir Square, as a movement, was a collective enterprise that, while assembling all the

others disenfranchised by state/neoliberal processes of marginalization, also challenged the practices by which the nation-state built unity. Yet, emotions became "attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is 'lower' or 'higher' into bodily traits" (Ahmed 4), thus creating the ground to absorb or reject what would be part of the revolutionary narrative and what would not. Ahmed treats shame as an emotion that arises in oneself and resides in one's body, to which others are witnesses. In El Baramawy's story, though, and within in the particularities of the Egyptian context, shame is collective and circulates in different forms in dissonances with each other. While women protestors praised her because she had transformed their shame into dignity, male colleagues suffered that same shame and used it to denigrate her.

The female body as the battleground of politics

The link between the emotions that were provoked by ElMahdy's picture and the reactions that underpinned the discourse of her marginalization may seem clearer than the same logic when applied in the case of El Baramawy, yet they are very similar. ElMahdy produced an image that in a different context – e.g. art – could have been absorbed and defended, but that

generated repulsion in the political context of the revolution. Livingston explains that

(...) disgust helps us to think about how individuals work out tensions between different registers of sociality, and the role of space in mediating emotional life (...) disgust can be embodied in a relational sense as well. It often emerges in one person in response to the bodily aesthetics of another (290).

This relational aspect brings together disgust and shame (*‘ār and khajal*), which explains how affective economies played a key role in the isolation of the cases of sexual violence that were happening in the square at the same time that ElMahdy decided to post her picture. It is in this specific kind of shame, which combines the reaction to and the mediation of others' perceptions of shame with dark objects of desire, where I find the link with disgust, because it is precisely the sexual connotations of ElMahdy's picture that the revolutionary audience found repulsive. In the case of El Baramawy, we can now see how *‘ār* played a key role in legitimizing her sexual assault to effectively turn female protestors into outcasts; *khajal*, moreover, blocked her comrades' empathy behind a

wall of disgust or aversion. The combination of shame and disgust, hence, refer to

a moral sentiment of extraordinary inclusiveness and does more than register a simple aversion towards the object of its focus. It degrades them in a moral way (...) when it wars against the intrusively annoying, or the deformed and the ugly it may clash with other moral sentiments, like guilt and benevolence [and I may add desire], that push us in another direction (qtd. in Livingston 21).

Thus, Livingston's reflections on disgust are also applicable to shame. El Baramawy's account shows that - to build on Ahmed's terminology - shame and dignity do not coexist in the affective economy, and that both these affects can nonetheless legitimate actions of abuse and rejection. Hence, mobilizing the "affective economy" behind shame and disgust, "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities - or bodily space with social space - through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 119), which creates inclusion and belonging, or in the case of ElMahdy and el Baramawy, exclusion and disaffection.

I believe that it was the complexity of the industry of shame that was at work behind

the *structures of feeling* of some of El Baramawy's peers when they did not support her in asserting her rights or acknowledging her pain when she was raped in Tahrir. The affective economy behind the industry of dignity linked to honor was still stronger in the revolutionaries than the affective economy of dignity linked to social justice that had started to take root in the imagined and utopian space of Tahrir.

I argue that the inability to debunk the affective economies behind the gendered experiences of shame and disgust was linked to fear of losing one's identity as crafted by and for the nation. Butler suggests that one is a woman (or a man) in response to a normative framework, "to the extent that it functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender" (Butler xi). This reveals the difficult task that ending the dominance of masculinity, thereby opening the path for new forms of gender normativities, entailed among the male protestors in Tahrir.

Honor and nation become subjects intimately woven together to secure the subsistence of the gender-normative framework needed to secure the nation. The nation is able to provoke fear that questioning its affective economies could lead

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to losing one's place in society. Thus, El Baramawy's peers treated gender norms as if they were a private matter to deal with, out of the revolution's reach, as if no revolution was needed in that field. ElMahdy's body presented as naked, under her control, and complete was a direct contestation of the fragmentation that the state wanted for revolutionaries who were united in the utopia of Tahrir. Revolutionaries were fighting nationalism outside their skins; they were working themselves into the ground, while it was taking root again inside their bodies. In this maneuver, one can see clearly how the state uses individuals in the margins to reproduce its own preconditions for survival. In this sense, my contribution to other analyses that delve into the relationship between nation building and the margins is the particular role that affective economies play in maintaining substantial divisions that guarantee the continuation of the existing order. Protestors' failure to see affective economies' links with the nationalistic project that they were trying to tear down was the weak point that allowed the state to penetrate the Square. Even during revolutionary times, women's rights provided "a conduit for (...) government involvement in ordering the daily lives of both the middle classes and those at the margins" (Abu-Lughod 33).

While protestors contested the state on the frontlines of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, the state, by allowing and inducing men to molest women's bodies, was able to fragment Tahrir's wholeness and reproduce the state's preconditions for survival inside the Square.

Notes

¹ Social media were particularly important in documenting this increase: survivors' testimonies grew in number and frequency, and sexual violence soon became a daily topic on the Internet.

² President Morsi had issued a decree granting himself powers to override any court decision, among other measures, provoking the reaction of the constituent assembly and protesters alike (for details see Kirkpatrick and Sheikh 2012).

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