

Sherine Hafez: Women of the Midan. The Untold Stories of Egypt's Revolutionaries

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Women of the Midan: Untold stories of Egypt's Revolutionaries, by Sherine Hafez, is a much needed contribution to our understanding of the Egyptian Revolution. While this critical event, precursor of the many other conflicts that are still reshaping the region, has been narrated from multiple angles, using gendered corporality as the lens through which to investigate the revolution is an innovative and important approach. The book amply discusses the intersections of gender, sexuality, politics, citizenship and social movements which is a less-explored angle of the Egyptian revolution.

The book starts by laying out the concept of *rememory*, a term the author borrows from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to explain the experiences of ordinary women who joined the protests in Tahrir Square. Rememory is presented as a corporeal act where the body is a "signifying agent of collective action and transformation" (Hafez xxvi). In this context, therefore, rememory is part of the repertoire of acts of contentious politics that revolt against the entrapment of women's voices, bodies, and stories in the nationalist project. As many academics have argued, including Hafez, the state is highly concerned with tailoring the notion of womanhood in accordance with the nation-building project and as such it shapes and oppresses

women while also providing avenues for resistance and contestation. The scholarly work of Abouelnaga; Abu-Lughod; Ahmed; Badran; Baron; and Botman among others, has vastly addressed these issues. The act of remembering is presented as a powerful process to build collective identities and preserve the social memory of a collective action currently under threat; for the present regime, January 25th was a brief anecdote preceding the *real* revolution of June 30th (an idea that is highly contested because many actors saw in that day a coup d'état that counted on the support of a vast majority of the population). The narrative of June 30th portrays El-Sisi as leader of the nation against the *terrorist* threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood and who later instituted the *prosperous* current rule. Hafez explains how ever since then the ordinary women activists spawned in Tahrir Square have been *forced* to forget and are currently living in exile or have been imprisoned, demobilized or their activity otherwise suspended. While combatting precarity and under threat from a repressive security apparatus, these women struggled to redefine their resistance and positionality. Rememory emerges as a complex corporeal act that mediates the past and the present and forces the interlocutors in the

book to revisit painful events. Hafez's book raises and thoroughly analyzes the following questions: What are the practices and processes through which the gendered body in the Middle East and North Africa is constituted, experienced, regulated, and represented? How do bodies intervene within these spaces of regulation? And how can we begin to articulate an analysis of the contours of corporeality in the region?

Hafez's ethnography collects in-depth interviews with women across different social classes for a period of five years starting from the months following the January 25th revolution. Passages from these records are organized around the topics proposed by her chapters, thus providing rich interview data of women with very different backgrounds and drawing connections with such broader discussions as neoliberalism, women's bodies, feminism, citizenship or the politics of representation. While the book unpacks chapter by chapter the different threads of gendered corporeality that emerged in Tahrir Square and demonstrates a clear need to recollect the remnants of the voices of resistance, it also poses a discomforting question. As rememory is a fundamental act of political defiance, how does it interfere with the mediation of a present in the antipodes of the dream that

Tahrir portrayed, where distance from past events seems a necessary act of healing? To better address this question, there is first the need to lay out the scope and boundaries of the book.

Women's voices in this book allow the reader to revisit the experiences of different constituencies during the first days and months of the revolution. The first eighteen days – from January 25th to Mubarak's ouster on February 11th – were those which the *rememory* of Hafez's subjects pointed to as the revolution's inception. These were the days when the "utopia of Tahrir" – as academics such as Sorbera; Telmissany; Wahdan and other interlocutors have named them – emerged to nourish the revolutionary narrative that sustained the uprising until August 2013. In this month the violent dispersal of pro-Morsi supporters from el Rabaa Square marked not only the most harrowing day of the revolution, but also the day that counter-revolutionary tactics succeeded in effectively reinstating the army and perpetuating Mubarak's one-man rule. The book in this sense is a detailed testimony of these days and successfully unpacks the complex social web contained within Tahrir. Hafez used a network approach to access and interview subjects that she had first met in the square, choosing the stories that best represented the

different social constituencies present in Tahrir. She refers to this method as "the intricate web of relationship" (Hafez xxix), yet I would have appreciated more details about how she met her interlocutors and why they were important to her. The book then is the result of participant observation during her fieldwork and follow-up in social media during her absences as well as a product of the testimonials of those different constituencies historically present in feminist studies of the Middle East. Single women, workers, mothers, widows, state employees, maids, middle-class women all find their place in the chapters, thus helping the reader to understand the discursive narratives and politics of representation surrounding each of these women. At the same time, Hafez historicizes these different narrative threads in a manner that makes relevant the connection of women's struggles – and those of the citizenry at large – with past historical events. Tahrir as a collective experience is also historically situated, demonstrating that there was no *Spring* in terms of *awakening* (Korany and El-Mahdi), but rather a continuation of a long struggle for dignity, freedom and social justice. This method defined the boundaries of the research that Hafez carried out over five years of visits to Egypt from the USA, where she is a professor of Gender & Sexuality Studies

at the University of California. As an Egyptian transnational feminist, she positions herself as what I call an inside-distant observer. The Egyptian revolution was an eventful and emotional journey for all the people that went through it; hence I consider this inside-distant fieldwork a positive aspect that helps to push rich description into deeper analysis. She also explains how doing “cyber-ethnography” (Hafez xxxiii) was essential to the follow-up work during her absences from Egypt and was also a rich source for contextualizing important events. With the use of cyber-ethnography, she “made a choice of remaining in the United States to explain the uprising to a Western audience” (Hafez xxxiv). The purpose of the book is to understand the inner forces and stories of the women who dropped what they were doing to join a revolutionary movement that was highly demanding, dangerous and emotionally taxing, and so as to gain insight into just how these women were reshaped by this event; in this sense the book does not address the fragmentation of Tahrir and the subsequent restoration of the deep state. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to Tahrir and the history of gender corporeality in Egypt. Chapters 3 through 6 rely on women’s testimonies to unpack the many complexities that were first presented in the initial chapters.

For instance in chapter 3 the stories of Zeinab and Naglaa explore middle-class struggles, while Samya’s story thematizes a certain business elite, and Dalia – in chapter 4 – echoes the particularities of a Muslim sister. I particularly appreciated the portrayal of women in all their capacities; the personal and the political merges to show how women entertained their families, took care of their children, elders and friends, maintained an income, and participated in the revolution. These aspects of the ethnography deserve our attention, as they show the gendering of social space and widespread public and academic preconceptions about the public at large – binaries that are often used to undermine women’s political participation. Hafez states that she “*intentionally avoided interviews with those who became celebrities of the media or those whose work was already publicly highlighted, choosing instead to feature those whose activism went unrecognized*” (Hafez xxx – emphasis in the original). Also useful for readers unfamiliar with the day-to-day events that marked the revolution is the gendered timeline that Hafez provides. The book is ethnographically rich and each chapter presents or expands on the stories of its interlocutors. The book presents seven chapters that organize the research as follows.

Chapter 1 examines the politically active presence of women in the square to explain the discursive context within which their participation in the revolution is immersed. To place us inside the revolution, Hafez describes three scenes from the uprising: a woman leading a chant during the protest; the tale of the protest on International Women’s Day (March 8th) which was attacked by thugs; and a woman activist in the first days of the camp. Against this background, she explores two main aspects of the women’s revolutionary narrative. First, there is the double burden of the politics of representation that on the one hand labels revolutionary women in Western media as “dispossessed” and on the other blames them as “inauthentic” (7). Secondly the author addresses the low visibility that women’s issues and writings receives. For example, she notes that only 42 of 888 articles refer to this topic in the bibliographic list on the Arab Spring published in 2015 (POMEDS). Hence the first chapter lays out the relevance and theoretical scope of the book and proposes an understanding of women’s agency through the process of lived experiences as archived in the body and whose narratives she restores reverting to the memory. Chapter 2 presents a well-documented history of gender and corporeality in

Egypt that is triggered by the question to Mervat: How did it all begin for you? (16) This account helps the reader to first approach the tension between remembering and forgetting and is used to unpack the centrality of women's corporeality in recent Egyptian history. While feminist research on the MENA region has frequently dealt with corporeality through topics such as the veil, female circumcision, polygamy or virginity, it has done so without centering the discussion on the body as a fluid subject; it has often treated the body as a modulated object without much agency. Hafez, therefore, reverses the theoretical approach surrounding prevailing understandings of the body to enlarge the discussion around feminist topics such as modernity, nationalism, and citizenship. Her contribution highlights gendered mechanisms affecting necropolitics and sovereignty, a subject that is core to understanding the army's restoration to power with the consent and support of a vast majority of the population, though it implies the normalization of routine violence against ordinary citizens. Chapter 3 sheds light on Tahrir as a place of complex dynamics between important historical constituencies of Egyptian society and their intersection with neoliberal politics. These constituencies are the working class, minorities, and the Muslim

Brotherhood, and all are represented in the stories of the interlocutors.

Against this background the author investigates notions of class and marginality from a gendered perspective, which is an addition to the discussion on these matters as proffered by other authors such as Bayat; El-Mahdi; and Beinin.

Chapters 4 and 5 delve into women's particular experience of the days of Tahrir so as to bring forward the multiple factors that fostered and conditioned participation. Chapter 4 provides a micro-lens into women's confrontation with family and friends as well as their compatibility with domestic life through the story of Amal (a cashier in a government office), Yamsin (a young revolutionary) and Dalia (a member of the Muslim Sisters). The chapter explores how women treasured their network of friendships and the solidarities they built as intrinsic to their participation in the collective experience of Tahrir, thus providing a more intimate look into the stories of these women who are also addressed in chapter 3. Chapter 5 analyzes the extreme violence that women activists faced. Hafez examines well-documented cases of violence against women in the square, such as the case of Samira Ibrahim, the Blue Bra Girl, and Alia el Magdy's nudity scandal. Exposure to violence, in particular sexual violence, was

a risk that women protestors assumed when they decided to participate in the revolution. "Bodies That Protest," therefore, is a chapter which explains how "women's bodies are enshrined in nationalist ideology as iconic subjects of the state's protection, [while] inversely legitimate the state as a governing [and disciplinarily] power" (133). The chapter contributes to theoretical understandings of the body that are very relevant to framing not only the Egyptian revolution, but also the multiple uprisings that continue to destabilize the region.

Chapter 6 further explores necropolitics, it focuses the body to understand how disciplinary measures are deployed to restore the presence of the military regime. It does so through ethnographic accounts of activists Shaimaa al Sabbah, Hend Nafea and Sondos Rida Abu Bakr. While the affiliation of Shaimaa with the secular socialist movement helped in the international condemnation of her murder by security forces, it also obscured the death of Sondos, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood killed by the same security forces during protests in Alexandria. Hend, whose story is narrated in the documentary *The Trials of the Spring*, was sentenced to life in prison by a military court for her participation in those protests popularly known as The Cabinet Clashes.

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She escaped to the USA, where she was granted political asylum. These cases explore the toll of violence, the role of gender in political processes, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, thus demonstrating how gendered violence is an essential dimension of the relation between governmentality and the revolution.

Chapter 7 brings us to the present moment, addressing the need to reconstitute Tahrir as a public memory and a political act of resistance. At this point in the book the author has well grounded her argument, which maintains that women's power is infringed when they deviate from the gender and social contract, and she does so by means of a rich ethnography. Hafez's examination of the Egyptian revolution, and particularly into the suffering of *rememorying*, reveals the need to expand the research into other unexplored areas of Egyptian history. If one is to introduce notions of self-care and healing, deemed important for the realities on the ground of many of our interlocutors, how should academics approach notions of remembering (as encapsulated by the notion of *rememory*) and forgetting as lived by the people that endured the revolution? While Hafez does not discuss these issues, they do emerge from her ethnography, and I think it important that they be introduced

into future research on the Egyptian revolution. How did the survivors of the revolution heal from the wounds inflicted by a utopia that became a threat to existence? Hafez concludes her book with a political reading of how people recall the memory of Tahrir; she refers to Connerton's idea of „organized forgetting“ (184) to explain the forces that induce an erasure of the collective memory of Tahrir. Yet a palpable tension in the book is the progressive resistance of her interlocutors to actually *remember*, which has grown exponentially with the El-Sisi regime. Thus, addressing the different understandings of pain and moments of suffering as remembered by our interlocutors during all these years would be important in exploring the relation between political activism, justice, and healing. While this debate is beyond the scope of Hafez's book, it clearly lays the groundwork for future research that will further expand the discussion around women's corporeality.

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