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Abstract

This project discusses the role Egyptian women have been playing in shaping the social and political landscape of their country during the last decade, but particularly in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution. It specifically examines the work independent women artists have been creating to keep the dialogue open, and to increase awareness about women’s issues as well as human rights in general. Through examination of design, graffiti, music, and filmmaking created during this revolutionary period, and through field research carried out by the author in Cairo, the project looks at how some women artists have used their art to transform the social and political norms of women’s roles within their society, while confronting the threat of a religious setback compounded with other socio-cultural issues with which women struggle in conservative Egyptian society.

Keywords: Egypt; Revolution; Women; Art; Gender; Graffiti; Filmmaking
Dedication

To the brave women of Egypt
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Chapter 1.

Introduction

My Egyptian friend called me from the middle of Tahrir Squar and simply said “listen to this,” and he left the line open for me to hear the crowd roar: “The people want to topple the regime.” It was a magical moment in the entire Arab world’s recent history, and I was listening to it on the phone. On that cold day of January 2011, the whole world woke up to a scene that nobody expected to witness in the streets of Egypt. News agencies around the world kept their cameras rolling capturing every moment of a revolution taking place in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Protests were not a novelty to Egypt, yet, from the first day the January protests took place everyone knew that this time it was different, especially after the fall of Ben Ali’s dictatorship in Tunisia.

Egypt has always played a very important role in the Arab world. Whether it was politics or pop-culture, Egypt has been always at the forefront. Since late 1950s Cairo played the role of Hollywood in the region. It was where movies, TV, and music were made, and Egyptian cinema had actors and actresses from all Arab countries. Egypt was an important landmark for the evolution of the Pan-Arab movement, and it has been always the place where intellectuals meet. Therefore a revolution in Egypt meant revolutions in the Arab countries. Uprisings did happen in various countries in the region, but they were rapidly hijacked by religious and ideological fanatics who then wreaked havoc and blood baths in the respective countries. One could say that the Arab revolution was a stillborn, but real change had already taken place and only time will tell where that change will lead.
Historical background:

Nasser’s National State (1952-1971)

As soon as Arab countries began to gain their independence from colonial rule, new nationalist movements of various political shades, spanning the Communist to Pan-Arabism, sprang in reaction to the lengthy and arduous reign of colonialism, which typically treated the locals as subjects or second-class citizens. The Pan-Arab movement gained significant popularity with the formation of the Arab republics of the 1950s and 1960s, following a chain of usually military coups glorified as people’s revolutions. The new republics toppled monarchies and replaced them with secular, Pan Arab, national-socialist and, in certain cases, military rule.

The ideological rise of the Pan-Arab movement and the creation of the Arab republics brought with it its own artistic movement. Tensions between the privileged landowners’ class and monarchists sympathetic to the colonizers on the one hand, and the new educated middle class backed by the working masses and the poor on the other, were at a record high. There was therefore an urgent need by the new rulers to connect to ordinary people and to the world at large to show the bright side of the republic. And, what is better than art to serve that agenda? Further, there was a special need for women artists in particular to add an extra edge to that glory by communicating the idea of liberation, equality, and social openness to both local society, where women began to demand their rights and liberation, and to the international community that had previously good relationships with the toppled monarchies. There was an urgent need to present the new republics as tolerant, liberal, and conversant in the same ideas about women’s rights with the developed world.

When Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power after the 1952 coup (also known as the “52 revolution”) one of the many challenges he faced, as a socialist first and as a military man second, was changing women’s status in a conservative patriarchal society and a country where the Muslim Brotherhood was formed 24 years before Nasser’s rule. State feminism was Nasser’s solution to both his military and socialist ideology:
State feminism aimed to make women into modern political subjects by dismantling the traditional patriarchal structure in the family, creating new gender subjectivities, and mobilizing them to the service of national development... Women thus emerged as both symbols and beneficiary of a new and vibrant revolutionary culture.¹

By 1956 and under Nasser’s rule, gender discrimination was banned in hiring, and protection of working mothers and equal access to higher education were granted for Egyptian women, as well as the right to vote and hold public office. Yet two years after the revolution, in 1954, the multiparty system was abolished in Egypt and was replaced by a single-party rule. That same year the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed and many of its leaders and members were jailed or executed. Nasser also waged a ferocious crackdown against Marxist and Communist activists and intellectuals. Prominent feminists were incarcerated, and women’s social and charitable organizations that were hitherto working independently were put under the Ministry of Social Affairs’ control by 1964.²

Just like there was a need for state feminism, there was also a need for state art. In Egypt, like most of the newly formed Arab republics, all art forms were put under the control of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance—that was formed in Egypt by 1958—making art a national, governmental matter and giving birth to state Art. “The nationalist nature of this move was clear: commissions and long-terms grants were distributed to produce art within themes defined by government.”³ Art galleries, academies, and funds were created. Women artists were encouraged and celebrated as a sign of liberation and openness. On the surface, it was true that women artists were given a somewhat equal chance—to men artists—to express themselves “but [Nasser] also banned independent feminist organizations and left patriarchal structure of both law and culture mostly intact.”⁴ So socially, women artists were barely allowed to tell a

female story that complements the male version. For example, if one takes a careful look at the paintings created by women artists during that period, one will notice that they manifest no more than the social stereotypical image of women. In times of peace women were represented as romantic figures either waiting for their lover helplessly or listening to him and sitting at his feet. While in times of war it was a mourning mother that overwhelmed most of the artistic scene; male artists had more freedom expressing the female figure in their art, either as a vulnerable mistress-like figure or an exotic harem scene. At the time of distress, however, it was the grieving mother image that became predominant.

When it comes to glorify their policies and ideologies, however, different forms of art were adopted by Egypt and the Arab republics: “The Nasserist state supported art as a ‘propagandistic extension of the military regime’ that [was] created to ‘the taste and ideology of the new class in power’.” And that is how the legacy of el Sil—the Lady—Umm Kulthum, in particular, helped Nasser’s propaganda. Umm Kulthum, nicknamed among many by Kawkab el-Sharq—The Star of the East—was and still is, almost 40 years after her death, the most influential solo singer in Egypt and the Arab world. One can easily say there is an Umm-Kulthum-culture in the Arab world even more powerful than Fairuz’s, another Arab-female-music-legend, who emerged in the time of the Pan-Arab republic in Lebanon.

After the ousting of King Farouk of Egypt by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers military coup, Nasser, a big fan of Umm Kulthum at the time, did everything possible to keep the royal-celebrated star on his side. So when the Egyptian musician guild rejected her membership and banned her songs from the radio because of her strong connection to the ousted king and his family, Nasser’s reaction was the perfect example of the influence of art, especially music, on society. “What are they, crazy? Do you want Egypt to turn against us?” Nasser said, declaring his disapproval of the act of the musicians’ guild before he, himself, made sure that the guild revoked its decision.  

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6 Um Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt, Virginia Danielson and Michael Goldman, documentary, Egypt, USA: Arab Film, 1996. DVD
Nasser was right; by the time Umm Kulthum died in 1975 at the age of 76, she had sung through six decades, hundreds of songs and many movies and TV series, she received the highest prestigious awards from presidents and kings around the world and, most importantly, her voice emptied the streets of most cities around the Middle East and North Africa as people went to their homes to listen to her monthly ten p.m. concert. When she died, her funeral was a public mourning event that attracted more than four million people to the streets of Cairo. Nasser understood her power and he invested in it. He gained her trust and admiration and she sang several songs for him and for the 1952 revolution. Anti-Nasserites go as far as accusing him of using Umm Kulthum music and songs to lull the nation into a fake sense of national glory and distract people from his shortcomings and failures. When the Egyptian army was defeated in 1967, Umm Kulthum used her prominent influence in the Arab world to raise funds for the defeated army. There was increased militarization in the Egyptian society that disappointed many artists and resulted in them either quitting the profession or leaving the country. On the other hand, the military controlled policy gave birth to a new kind of state artist, the proud military artist: “Even though these younger artists were not yet participating during the heyday of Nasserist art support, they became attached to state nationalist ideology partly through compulsory military service in the Egyptian army in the 1973 war with Israel over the Sinai-service that they proudly mention in their biographies.”


When Anwar Sadat came to power after Gamal Abdel Nasser’s death in 1971, he ushered in Aser el Infith— the open-door era. Although Sadat was one of the Free

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7 Also known as the Setback, an Arab Israeli short yet intense military conflict that lasted for six days. In the days leading to the conflict Israel had already started raiding the West Bank that was under the control of Jordan after and had aerial clashes over Syria accusing the two countries of supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organization against Israel. When the latter threatened to invade Syria, Egypt mobilized its troops along the Sinai Peninsula and that’s when Israel launched sudden air strikes against the Egyptian airfields on June 5, 1967. The Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria where defeated and as a result Israel took control over the West Bank, East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria as well as the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. It was a major setback for the Arab world and the Arab national psyche.

Officers who led the coup with Nasser against King Farouk, he had a different vision of how Egypt should be. He re-introduced the multiparty system, and had plans to decentralize political and economical decision-making. He believed in a capitalist economy and encouraged private investment; he opened up the country to consumerism and trade with the West. Yet, the arts were not a priority for Sadat. Two major art exhibition halls were turned into Islamic Banks—the normal result of Sadat's courting Islamists and capitalists to counter leftists. Like galleries, many movie theatres were demolished in favour of new businesses and investment banks; and with the Islamist-capitalist hold on power, several books were banned deemed un-Islamic.

Sadat had the opposite opinion of Nasser when it came to the arts. He wanted to decentralize it completely, cancel the Ministry of Culture, and leave the arts to its people under the slogan “Intellect to the intellectuals,” He cracked down on leftist intellectuals—since he found them disruptive to his neo-liberal vision—and also conducted huge cuts in the budgets for arts and culture. This left artists, who were taken care of and paid well by the government in Nasser’s era, struggling to find ways to work in an increasingly profit-driven, conservative, Islamic-capitalist society. The only option artists had was to work for the wishes and demands of the nouveaux riches, who themselves were a result of the Sadat open-door policy.

Women’s rights also suffered under Sadat’s free economic policies. Although his aims were to open up to and even mirror the West at times, those policies resulted in greater dependence on the West, increased unemployment and economic inequality—thus reversing many of the gains women had under Nasser’s state-controlled, feminist policies. According to a study of the women’s movement in Egypt conducted by Nadje S. al-Ali, professor of Gender Studies at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), it was under Sadat’s reign—and purportedly owing to pressure from his wife, Jehan Sadat—that the Personal Status Law was reformed to uphold women’s rights including civil marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Al-Ali also

9 Winger, Jessica, op. cit., p.150.
10 Ibid.
found that because of the open-door policy and the migration of men, traditionally the household providers and heads, to work abroad, a number of women gained autonomy. At the same time, the fact that most of these migrations were to the Gulf socially and religiously conservative countries (primarily Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) resulted in men promoting the return of women to domesticity.\textsuperscript{12} The paradoxical era of Sadat led to his assassination in 1981 by Muslim fundamentalists, the same people he courted and gave power to, yet they grew more and more frustrated with him over his West-friendly approach.

**Mubarak’s Stabilization (1981-2011)**

Contrary to his two predecessors, when Hosni Mubarak came to power after Sadat’s assassination he did not seem to have a vision for Egypt other than to establish a system of governance based on cronyism and nepotism, and ensure that his family and friends became super-rich and powerful. Evidently, this worked for him for 30 years before he was ousted in early 2011. “The early years of the Mubarak regime were characterized by a search for stabilization and consolidation.”\textsuperscript{13} After much debate over Sadat’s Personal Status Law, instigated by claims—raised by religious organizations—that it was anti-Islamic, the law was revised in 1985 in favour of religious and social patriarchy. Mubarak found himself trapped between powerful Islamists’ pressure towards implementing Shari’a law and Western pressures—especially from aid donors, namely, the U.S. and World Bank—to adhere to UN conventions concerning women’s and human rights. In the midst of this complex situation, a new wave of women’s activism was formed on the ground that began a battle over the Personal Status Law, as well as women’s struggle against religious conservatism. This resulted in the formation of independent organizations and NGOs—albeit with fairly limited powers—primarily focused on women’s issues.

Mubarak, a military man himself, brought back Nasser’s mode of centralization in every aspect of governmental administration and bureaucracy within Egypt. However, he


\textsuperscript{13} al-Ali, Nadje S., *op. cit*, p.10.
kept the door wide open for private capital and *laissez faire* capitalism. In his era, corruption became rampant in every aspect of governance, and unemployment reached a high level and continued to rise.\(^{14}\) The economic gap between the classes, which began with Sadat’s open-door policy, drastically increased since now both the economy and politics became intertwined in the hands of tycoons and powerful businessmen, who had the power to manipulate and influence the legal system to ensure unceasing profits for their businesses “Egyptian governments, under both the current regime [Mubarak’s] and its historical predecessors, are notorious for excessive bureaucratic regulations, registration requirements and other controls to feed corruption. (...) Compounding the normal bureaucratic culture is the state ownership of many or most of the primary economic levers—banking an financial institutions, tourism, oil, the Suez Canal, manufacturing, the media and so on. Furthermore, government employees receive insufficient pay, while a decreasing minority of Egyptians achieve increasingly vast wealth, thus creating a growing income gap between classes (...). Corruption has remained a significant problem under Sadat and Mubarak.” \(^{15}\) At the same time, and in response to serious and dramatic societal changes, there was a growing independent arts movement on the ground. Nonetheless, this new independent arts movement had to struggle with, and combat, both state-controlled art institutions and capital business-financed commercial art. On the ground, different social and political factions were struggling against each other, as well as against the government and its imposed Emergency Law that has been continuously extended every 3 years since 1967. With the emergence of Arab satellite media channels, which was mostly owned by the wealthy businessmen and royals from the Gulf countries, commercial movies, TV sitcoms and music became predominant. Competition between artists increased as huge production and recording companies emerged. TV became increasingly a platform for

\(^{14}\) According to Transparency International *Corruption Perception Index*, by 2010 Egypt ranked 98 out of 178 countries included in the report—the highest being the most corrupt. www.transparency.org/cpi2010/results *Corruption Perception Index.* Transparency International. 2010

different propagandas, ironically mostly either religious or overly sexualized production. The ideology gap grew wider and bigger with the government loosening the grip sometimes over the Islamists and cracking down on them at other times. Rather than political openness and economic prosperity, political repression, dictatorship, emergency laws, never-ending unemployment and poverty became a palpable everyday fact. Sexual harassment increased whether it was politically or socially-driven. With poverty and unemployment growing—according to tradingeconomic.com, the average unemployment rate in Egypt was 10.55% between 1993-2014—in a country where the youth is the largest demographic, frustration increased and touched many aspects of Egyptian lives. The youth lived in a conservative and relatively religious society where sexual relationships were meant to happen after marriage, even though most were unemployed and had no financial independence to get married and start a family.

By the mid 1990s, the sexual revolution became a reality in Egypt. Widely-used social media helped the young generation to connect with the rest of the world and amongst themselves, in new and different manners—away from the watchful eyes of parental and social institutions, and away from political and religious oversight. There was a strong feeling of defiance towards those traditions and institutions, which helped transcend the muted, secretive objections of the 1980s to fully-matured, rational uprisings during the last two decades leading to the 2011 revolution. Acts of civil disobedience and strikes in public sectors were organized and promoted as the correct approach to collective, lasting social change.

Two very important intertwining sets of changes affecting both fundamental social and political premises within society began to take place. They can essentially be summarized by the ever-growing generational gap between the young and their parents, which brought the conflict head-on inside the nuclear family in parallel with the strong sexual revolution espoused particularly by young women. That did not, of course, solely mean the mere freedom to have sexual relationships in a conservative society outside the traditional institution of marriage; it meant more than that. Amongst other confounding ramifications, it significantly meant defying strict religious doctrines and
traditions—particularly those relevant to the treatment of adultery as a grave sin that deserved severe punishment whether in Islam or Christianity.\textsuperscript{16}

Religious laws, whether in Islam or Christianity—the two dominant Abrahamic religions in the Arab world did not emerge in a vacuum, but rely on longstanding, powerful traditional societal norms that subjugate women. For instance, women carry the burden of upholding the family honour and reputation simply because they are female, and, as such, adultery—when ascribed to women—is not only looked at as a sin but an act of dishonour to the family or tribe or community. Hence, honour-kilings infested society and were practiced by the male in the family, who was deemed responsible for protecting the family’s honour. This is a grave matter where civil law, in almost all Arab countries, is still very weak and seems hesitant to address. The same weakness can be noticed when dealing with rape cases—of women, of course. One of the most important aspects of the recent on-going social revolution is the increasing awareness of the ownership of one’s body and existence. Not until this is completely realized and fully comprehended, women’s bodies will always be a(n) (un)fair game for men in Arab societies—or any other society for that matter. If a woman remains under his dominance, especially in public spaces, she will remain an easy prey for his sexual desires and harassment.

One of the most important results of the sexual revolution is that it changed the way women viewed their bodies. Women’s frustration with sexual harassment in public spaces grew, particularly when it became epidemically violent, having been practiced by the government as a tactic against women opposition protestors (see more details in Chapter II). A limited number of media and art outlets discussed this matter, but it was still a societal taboo and the victim was usually blamed for being at the wrong place or for the way she dressed or the way she moved—and anything and everything else that puts the blame squarely on the victim and absolutely absolves the harasser of any wrongdoing. A few brave women did attempt to report the sexual harassment incidents

\textsuperscript{16} “Those men and women who commit adultery, hit them with one hundred lashes and don’t have mercy on them if you were real believers in God and the lashing has to be witnessed by a group of believers.” (Quran, al-Noor, verse 2) “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” (Old Testament, Leviticus 20:10)
they endured, but they suffered terribly at the hand of the government (and society), with usual intimidation by the police, the harasser’s family, or even their own families.

A mere month before the eruption of the January 2011 revolution, a movie about sexual harassment was released in Egyptian theatres. It was not the first, but it was the most controversial. 678 is a movie about three women who have experienced physically violent or violating sexual harassment incidents. One of the women takes the 678 bus every day, and she gets sexually harassed every day. The woman, whose character represents the majority of working class women in Egypt who obediently follow societal traditions and norms, grows very frustrated and disgusted with the situation and she begins stabbing harassers in their genitals with a knife. The woman does not get caught in the movie, as the two other women protect her. The movie stirred a storm of confusion and anger, and attempts were made to block the nomination of the movie from Dubai’s International Film Festival where the movie gained an award later. The head of complaints department of the Egyptian Association for Human Rights and Social Justice accused the movie of inciting women to inflict injuries on men. On the ground however, the movie was a hit with women. One woman in Cairo told me that when she watched the movie she felt very excited that finally a movie was made that showed the real feelings and disgust experienced by harassed women, and how one of them decided to challenge her harasser, albeit violently.

Cairo Commune

What happened a month later on January 25, 2011 was a result of all the frustration that had been accumulating, not just with the Mubarak regime but also with all the previous ideas and ideologies that had been shoved down people’s throats

17 678. Mohammed Diab. Dollar Film, 2010. DVD
throughout the history of the republic. Women in particular always found themselves at
the front line of a long battle between secular dictatorships, who used women merely as
a façade for liberation, and the conservative and religious fanatics who viewed women’s
issues as giving in to the west. A new reality was confirmed in January 2011 and after,
and this is that women are going to play a big role in the movement and that no
liberation is going to happen without addressing and solving women’s issues. Whether it
was during the 18 days of January in Tahrir Square, or in the protests against the
Military Junta, the Muslim Brotherhood or Abdel Fattah el Sisi, there was a strong
presence of women. Overnight sit ins were the first taboo that these women broke in
society. It was probably the most talked about subject in the national media. What is
really interesting is the fact that secular and religious authorities both used the same
accusation towards women in their opposition, namely they accused them of having
sexual relationships in the sit ins tents. It was the way male chauvinist society normally
dealt with women, by objectifying and shaming them. Yet it was too late. This time the
taboo was broken and women were defying the social and political rule; they were not
only staying in the sit ins but were also at the front lines in protests, chants and clashes
with riot police. They were in morgues retaining the killed bodies, in courtrooms
defending the arrested, and in makeshift hospitals treating the injured. Many female
activists were at the front of all fights, many of them got jailed and sometimes sexually
harassed. But for the first time in Egypt they reached out to the media and told their

20 These accusations were widely debated in many Egyptian media outlets. It started with the
January 25, 2011 Tahrir Square sit in. On Modern Kora a sport program that has a huge fan
base, the presenter and his guest discussed the rumors of sexual relationships in Tahrir Square
sit in. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZVnHsUJqW8&sns=em. The same accusations were
used again by a prominent member of Muslim Brotherhood and an Egyptian parliament
member at the time, Azza el Garf. in an interview on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood
Channel Masr 25, that was closed after the military sized power in July 4, 2013, el Garf declared
that she witnessed sexual relationships in the protestors sit in that was taking place in front of
Ithadaya presidential palace, claiming that she saw them “while looking at the sit in from the
palace’s window” in http://www.vetogate.com/98145. While many news and media outlets
accused the Muslim Brotherhood protestors of practicing Jihad al Nekah: a concept that was
found by the Islamic militants in Syria and it meant women presenting sexual services for
Jihadis as a way to encourage them and lift their morals, in their Rabaa Square sit in after the
military ousted Mohammed Morsi who was the Egyptian president at the time.
www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/egypt/2013/08/13/
p.163,169,170.
sexual harassment stories, turning the guilt and shame back to the harasser and actively educating the public about the issue. With the new sense of empowerment came artistic expression. This time it was neither state feminism nor state art, it was an independent grassroots feminist art.

Creativity is pure human self-expression and there is no better way to understand human history, thought, development or decline, than in art as reflecting the human endeavour. “Art may be more than a form of communication, but it is certainly that, and it is the business of art history, therefore, to learn the languages of art of many different periods as they are embodied in the monuments from their respective times.” Art is created in context. Whether it is created in the visual, performing or written form, art is a powerful tool for humans. It is a tool of political resistance, a faithful reflection of social evolution and a way to recount human legacies and carry on and empower change. Almost every social and political movement in the world expressed its victories and failures through art, including the grassroots women’s movement in the Arab world.

This project focuses on unraveling the dimensions and manifestations of independent political art created by women artists in Egypt in the last decade, particularly around the time and after the January 25, 2011 revolution. Whether in handcrafts, graffiti, music or filmmaking, it is largely based on field research conducted by the author in Cairo during the spring of 2014, this project explores how women’s art is a mean of conveying resistance and advocating change.


Chapter 2.

Art is My Weapon

Shama, Egypt’s First Black Lady

She sits surrounded by her jewelry pieces, other artists’ work, and a few friends squeezed into her tiny studio/gallery in downtown Cairo. They sit there wrapped by the smoke of their cigarettes, good old Egyptian sharp humour and laughs, lots of laughs. After all, that’s what Egyptians do best, creating laughter out of any situation. This is a daily scene in Shama’s studio, which is a small room inside an ordinary cafe where lots of young people gather and meet. Shama is not an ordinary person, however. She has been called many names by friends and journalists, including “Revolutionary,” “the brave woman,” and “a women equals to 100 men.” Yet her favourite is what she calls herself jokingly, “Egypt’s first black lady.” She is not only an Egyptian woman artist, she is a black liberal revolutionary and independent woman artist. This means she’s battling sexism on many fronts; by her mere existence as a woman in a society where women usually take the backseat.

Women in the Arab region have been fighting for their rights for a very long time and they have made some gains, but many of these gains got compromised when the wealth of the new conservative Arab gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, started rising, controlling the media, the flow of finance, and the Arab work market. A new set of conservative social and religious rule started controlling an already unjust society.

This is where women like Shama battle conservatism that judges a liberal single woman, in her 40s and never married, very harshly or treats her as an easy prey. Also as a black woman, she battles racism. Skin colour racism is still an unacknowledged issue in the Arab world and it is mixed with lots of social prejudices and political issues too, especially when African cheap labour is filling the place of a more expensive local
one. Yet, if I may say, although Shama is faced with all of these issues every day, she is winning them all.

Born in a middle class Egyptian family, she is the youngest of four sisters all of whom are involved in one way or another in social work in Cairo. Shama herself has a day job as an executive in the Egyptian Workers’ Union. Her parents were educators, and they were avid Nasserists.24 Her father’s family comes from the Nubian region of Northern Egypt. Nuba is where Egypt and Sudan meet creating a very unique African culture with its own specific language, music, dance and traditions, and Shama carries around the culture with her everywhere. Shama’s relationship with revolution began when she sat one January day in 2011 in her office in the Workers’ Union cutting paper confetti, writing revolutionary slogans, and throwing them out of her window to the street below for passersby. From that moment on, revolution and Shama became inseparable. She was there during the 18 days of Tahrir Square in January 2011 and after. She received an injury to her head when she was trying to help the wounded in Mohammad Mahmoud Street clashes.25 She then moved her studio to downtown Cairo to stay near the action and be part of it all.

Watching her work with her tools, hooking tiny loops into each other, making another necklace, earrings or bracelet is enjoyable enough. But it is quite inspirational watching what she does with young artists who always come to her asking for advice or help. Her little studio is filled with their work. I asked if she charges them for exhibiting their work since she pays rent for the space. Her response was, “I work based on love and good deeds. I’m making friends for life who would be there for me when I need them.” Shama is what we call a natural artist. She never studied art, but using her

24 Nasserists are Pan-Arab nationalists who regarded the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdul-Nasser as their leader and role model. Nasser was one of the founders of the Non-aligned movement of the 1960s claiming to neither be in the Western capitalist camp nor the Eastern block communist one. Nasser mixed socialism, popularism and pan-Arabism in an eclectic way, and attempted to improve the living standards of millions of Egypt's poor. However, Nasser was anti-communist and imprisoned scores of Egypt's communist members.

25 Six days of violent clashes took place in Mouhammad Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo on November 2011 during the rule of a military Junta transfer government. The military Junta killed and injured—with live ammunition especially aimed at the eyes—young revolutionaries who were protesting the brutal rule of the military which took over after the fall of Mubarak regime.
method of good deeds she learned from professional craftsmen. They taught her the secrets of their craft and she made her own revolution out of it. She knows every inch of downtown Cairo and she has a story to tell about every corner and each spot.

I was lucky enough to accompany her on a tour of craftsmen shops in Old Cairo to get her supplies. We had Shai—tea—with them, and I watched her listening to their stories and comforting them as she did business and talked about designs. What makes her work special is that she takes the slogans and chants of the January revolution written in Arabic calligraphy and turns them into pieces of jewelry that can be worn. Her work can be very local sometimes because it is associated with a certain event, a story that only Egyptians will understand. I saw young and old women as well as men wearing her jewelry with such as slogans like the famous protestors’ chant, “The People Want to Topple the Regime,” or the popular revolutionary poems by the Egyptian poet Zain el Abdeen Fouad, “who can imprison Egypt? No one! Not even for an hour,” and “Good Morning to the young flowers blooming in Egypt’s Gardens” by the Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Najim. I noticed many women in downtown Cairo wearing a necklace, handmade by Shama, in a shape of a women with the phrase “I’m Free” written on it.
Figure 1. *el Sha’ab Youreed Isqat el Nizam* – The People Want to Topple the Regime—The famous chant of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolution. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

The symbol of this design is in the words and what they meant to the revolution, which makes it one of the more local and event specific of Shama’s designes.
This piece has an Arabic calligraphy on it, *Ana Hurra- I'm Free*, by Shama. The designer of this shape is unknown. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

This piece depends mostly on the female shape to convey the message of a free woman. The flying hair and dress with the thrown-back arms gives the idea of dancing, freedom, and carelessness emphasized by the text. It is very popular among Egyptian young women.
With a few young independent artists, Shama created el Shughl Khana—The Workshop art group. They gather together their work of jewelry, woodwork, photography, and other handcrafts and exhibit them in el Fan Midan—Art is a Place Festival. The festival is organized by the independent artists initiative, which depends totally on volunteers’ work. The festival takes place every first Saturday of each month in Abdeen Square in downtown Cairo. A stage is set for independent musicians, bands, and poets to present their work. Tables are set all around the square for independent artists to exhibit their handmade crafts. Choosing Abdeen, which is in walking distance from Tahrir Square, as the festival spot was not a coincidence. Since the revolution, Tahrir Square became a sensitive spot for whomever was or is governing the country. Tahrir became a symbol of disobedience and disturbance not only for its recent history but also because of its location in the middle of downtown. Tahrir is the heart of downtown Cairo where roads and two bridges connect and it’s always jammed with traffic. Once you enter the circle of Tahrir Square the whole downtown is open in front of you. It is where the Nile meets bookstores and publishing houses meet restaurants and cafes meet street vendors, and everything meets traffic jams and pedestrians. All of this activity made it difficult to hold the festival in Tahrir Square.

Another important reason for choosing Abdeen Square for the art festival other than that it is much quieter than Tahrir Square and is also close to the artistic scene in Cairo is the historical importance of this place where Orabi Pasha delivered his speech “We are not slaves, and shall never from this day forth be inheritid” in 1881 revolt against Khedive Tawfiq. Revolution needed to be brought there. To this working class neighbourhood, Art is a Place Festival became a business opportunity. Street vendors, especially those who reside around the Abdeen area scatter their carts in the square and sell popcorn, sweets, cotton candy, balloons, and tea to the festival goers while art-in-the-making is brought to them. Their children roam the square and watch the artists, who are only a little bit older than they are, presenting and selling their work and listening to

26 el Fan Midan Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/FanMidanEg
27 http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al-nakhlah/~media/d0f0858344e3458998f482838a0bb4d9.pdf
28 http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/619001/Urabi-Pasha
the independent and underground musicians play on the stage. They are getting education through visual and musical art.

Figure 3.  

el Fan Midan—Art is a Place Festival—Abdeen Square – Downtown Cairo. (Photograph by Sherif Mounir)

The festival had been also a place where the youth could express their political criticisms and grievances in different ways, like the two big banners in this picture. The banner on the right is of Mina Danial, a well know face in Tahrir Square. Danial who is also known as The Egyptian Guevara was a Coptic Egyptian who was killed by the riot police on October 9, 2014 in the media headquarters in Cairo. A large protest started as peaceful and was led by the Coptic community in Cairo against the demolition of a church in the southern province of Aswan under the claim that the building did not have proper legal papers. Anger escalated when some of the official media outlets started accusing the Coptic community of being troublemakers. The protest turned into clashes when a couple of riot police vehicles, purposely, drove into the crowd killing a number of them and injuring others. The Banner on the left is of Hisham Rizq, a young graffiti artist whose corpse was found in a morgue in Cairo, a week after his disappearance. It
was claimed by officials that Rizq had drowned in the Nile River, while his family and friends accused the Egyptian secret intelligence of killing him. Rizq was a member of the April 6th youth movement group that is known for its criticism of the political situation in Egypt and had had a big role in organizing the anti-Mubarak protests.

Figure 4. Two young women in el Fan Midan—Art is a Place Festival—Abdeen Square – Downtown Cairo (Photograph is courtesy of el Fan Midan Facebook page).

The women in the photograph are protesting sexual harassment against women by covering their bodies with what looks like cactus to challenge and intimidate potential harassers. According to UN Women, 99.3% of Egyptian women reported being sexually harassed and 91% said they do not feel safe walking in the streets.29

Figure 5. Some of Shama’s work exhibited *el Fan Midan*—Art is a Place Festival—Abdeen Square – Downtown Cairo. Many of her works carry symbols that are known specifically to Egyptians. (Photograph used with permission of the photographer Sherif Mounir)
Figure 6. A street vendor from Abdeen selling Cactus Pear fruit on his cart. (Photograph used with permission of the photographer Sherif Mounir)

Graffiti/ Street Art

The Wall has become an enormous visual petition, an ephemeral forum, a pictorial rant and reprimand, calling for resistance, justice, freedom and solidarity, and a plea for understanding and humanity.  

To understand the importance of street art and graffiti in Egypt one needs to first look at its canvas, also known as walls, and what they meant to the young Arab psyche in general. In 2002 Israel began building the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank. Giving the living conditions the Palestinians have been enduring as well as the Arab/Israeli long lived conflict, the wall meant to the Arab collective mind the

imprisonment of Palestinians and the loss of more land to build that wall. A year after came the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and new walls and barricades were erected to surround the Green Zone in Baghdad and the U.S. army bases. Three years later, new walls and barricades littered Baghdad as the sectarian civil war separated areas of different sects and different political and ideological beliefs; they transformed the Iraqi capital into a “concrete city,” as its inhabitants dubbed it. People in those two countries found themselves facing empty concrete walls blocking their familiar open space and transforming it into a prison of some sort. Those walls, however, were used by artists as canvases to express disapproval and disappointment and, in lots of cases, a form of resistance against a grim reality.

So when the Arab Spring movements hit the streets, graffiti became one of the most important tools of revolution, especially in the Egyptian streets. It was an act of reclaiming the public space, the streets and eventually the country where people always felt oppressed and neglected. When walking in Cairo or Alexandria, for example, one would know where the protests were taking place from the amount of graffiti covering the walls. The revolution graffiti took many forms, from stenciling the faces of people killed in clashes with police to slogans, political prisoners names to full-scale murals. At the clashes of Mohammed Mahmoud Street the military built a concrete barricade to block the road leading to the Ministry of Interiors, which prohibited the protestors from reaching it. A whole road with its details, people walking and children playing was painted on that wall within less than 24 hours. Graffiti of the Egyptian revolution was so impressive that as much as it was erased by whoever had the authority at the time it was created, it was also plentifully documented and photographed by Egyptian and international journalists and photographers.

WOW

Of course, some onlookers make fun of us and even insult us, which is quite commonplace in Egypt when women try to do anything in a public space. It is in fact to counter this sort of behaviour that we launched our project. Our graffiti often touches on sexual harassment, which is a huge problem here.

Fajer Soliman, Egyptian female graffiti artist and a member of WOW.
It was my second day in Cairo. My friend was looking for a place to park the car, which is like a mission impossible in this crowded chaotic city. My friend, however, is a real Cairene. He drove us through alleyways where it was hard for people to move let alone a car. Surrounded by loud honking Vespas, street vendors and pedestrians of all walks of life, we got the car to a covered parking area that was more like a small garage; logically and safely, it might take no more than 20 cars but it was definitely holding more. But that wasn’t what got my attention at that particular moment. Entering that old car exhaust smelling building was, to me, like entering a secret garden. The man at the entrance was trying to convince my friend that there was still space for our car in the already filled up parking area. Even with his nagging and manipulative way he looked like the guardian of a secret garden. By sheer coincidence, at that moment I was standing in Sitt Naguiba Garage, one of the places where the Women on Wall (WOW) initiative held its first graffiti workshops.

Figure 7. One side of Sitt Naguiba Garage, downtown Cairo. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

In March 2013 as her book Revolution Graffiti, a book documenting the graffiti of the Egyptian revolution, got published, Mia Grondahl, a Dutch author who by that time had been living in Cairo for several years, organized the book launch along with her friend, the Egyptian artist Angie Balata. They choose Sitt Naguiba Garage, the 80-year
old, high ceiling building in downtown Cairo which was used for public parking. It was the perfect place. They gathered some artist friends who painted the garage walls and created murals transferring the old building into a gallery of graffiti celebrating the idea of the book. Grondahl’s book launch was a big success and was one of the most talked about events in the community. The positive reception of the launch gave the two friends a bigger idea. A few weeks later they founded WOW, a month long initiative of Egyptian women street artists. They managed to get the support of CKU (The Centre of Culture and Development) in Denmark to fund the work of about 20 women graffiti and visual artists in several Egyptian cities, who used the streets and public spaces as their canvas to open a dialogue about women’s social, political, economic and cultural issues.

WOW held its first two-day workshop in Anafora, a rest area managed by The Coptic Church on the highway between Cairo and Alexandria, using story telling and mini theater as a way to discuss the issues the artists would like to express with their work. More and more workshops and discussion circles followed in public spaces for the artists to share their ideas and art styles, and create murals expressing their worries and thoughts as women in a society where public space is still mostly dominated by men. From sexual harassment to gender equality to politics and more, WOW graffiti is a tool to express these issues and open a direct dialogue with regular everyday passers-by, to whom the mere idea of women street artists might have been a novelty. As the public positive and negative reaction to the artwork started growing—and realizing the importance and the effect the campaign had on the artists and the public—WOW members decided to add an extra level to the campaign by filming the process of creating the art. With no budget to finance filmmaking, they completely depended on community donations for cameras and equipment. What started as a small, only a month-long initiative to create street art, grew to be a campaign of 60 street artists with a large filmmaking crew and an increasing number of musicians who donated their work to the campaign.

Now after less than two years, WOW has attracted national and international media attention and has had a number of exhibitions in the Czech Republic, Denmark and Germany. WOW also started a new initiative under the name of WOW, Baladak—
WOW, your country—intended to empower graffiti women artists in the rest of the Arab countries, beginning with Jordan\textsuperscript{31}.

\textbf{Figure 8.} Graffiti by WOW in Sitt Naguiba Garage, downtown Cairo. It reads \textit{Shilny min dimaghak}—get me out of your mind—a sentence directed to the male dominate society to stop obsessing about what a woman should or should not do. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

\textsuperscript{31}`Jordan project' WOW Baladak, http://womenonwalls.com/jordan/
Figure 9. Two women in police uniform. Graffiti by WOW in Sitt Naguib\nGarage, downtown Cairo. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

From the look on the women’s faces and the powerful pose they portray, one can understand the uniform means that women have the power and authority over their own choices.
Figure 10. Two women experiencing the freedom of riding a bike. Graffiti by WOW in Sitt Naguibaba Garage, downtown Cairo. (Photo by Dima Munaff)

Riding a bike is not very common for women in Egypt and most of the Arab world countries. It is considered a male only activity. There is an old common belief that riding a bike might affect women’s virginity. Although that belief is maybe laughable in the educated circles, it created a kind of tradition of male dominance over the activity of bike riding.
Eye

As soon as I walked into the crowded, walking-only area, I felt the young vibe wrapping the place with its energy. In between Shisha smoke and our helpless aims to avoid cafe’s waiters trying to convince my friend and me to “get a table” and “enjoy coffee, tea, food or Shisha,” the colours and shapes I knew too well from pictures I had collected throughout my research were calling me to touch them. They looked so vivid, although overwhelmed by the crowd, their smoke, and of course, the loud Arabic songs blaring out of huge speakers. The walls lining the Boursa area were filled with WOW graffiti. Bold shades of red, pink, orange, and yellow colors mixed with black details took the shape of huge women’s faces on the long wall. They complemented the faces of the young women smoking Shisha in front of the mural. As in many of WOW’s murals, eyes were so powerful. Yet those eyes could be found anywhere in the mural, in a palm or a face or in mere round shapes that an onlooker will feel gazing at him or her.

The concept of “The Eye” runs deep in the Middle Eastern and North African psyche. An eye is not just the gazing eye of God, as in Western Christian culture, it is much more than that. It is the evil envious eye, yet it is also the protective one. In most Arab countries a *Kef*—palm—with an eye in the middle is a symbol of protection and blessing. The shape is worn, hung and drawn, and is believed to be protective against the evil eye and for blessing. It is named differently in different countries, but it is usually associated with saints and Imams. In Egypt it is *Kef Fatma* for Muslims or *Kef Mariem* for Christians. The first one is *Sitina Fatima*—Our Lady Fatima—the daughter of Mohammed and the wife of the most celebrated Imam Ali, who’s also the cousin of Mohammed, while the second is *Sitina Mariem el Adra*—Our Lady Virgin Mary—Both are women saints. Using the protective palm eye is very fitting in street murals about women, since streets are where women usually need protection from the “Evil Eye,” the harasser’s eye, and it also speaks to the beliefs and psyche of everyday men and women.

An eye is also where everything starts, the gaze, the visualization of the other and what he or she represents. In Arabic the verb *Yshoof*, which means to see, is used to describe the act of looking at the other or at things but at the same time it’s used to
describe looking at one’s self, whether in a mirror or in a deeper level of viewing one’s self or even viewing the other. In a mostly conservative, male dominant culture, a “good woman” should keep her gaze down and avoid eye contact when walking in the streets, something that is not necessarily asked of men. Men usually hold the power of the gaze; they can look, make eye contact, and feel the power of holding their head high while a woman has to put her head down in order not to look. The timid downward gaze of a woman is also celebrated as a symbol of her “innocence” and considered very feminine. This is why painting a woman’s eye directly gazing at the onlooker is meant to convey and break the rules, be non-confirming, and simultaneously reflective of women’s power. The following photo examples, courtesy of the WOW webpage, illustrate this symbol.

Figure 11. WOW graffiti, downtown Cairo. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)
Figure 12. WOW grafitti, downtown Cairo. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)

Figure 13. WOW grafitti, downtown Cairo. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)
Tongue

“He or she has a long tongue,” is an expression used in most Arabic slangs to mean that person is being rude or is crossing the “lines” with what he or she is saying. “His or her tongue needs to be cut” is another way to express the same idea. Yet the human collective mind knows that the tongue also could be used to mock someone, such as sticking his or her tongue out; it could also represent a sexual act. In order to be feminine in the Arab World, and to complement the timid down ward gaze, women are always asked to hold their tongues, think very carefully about what they say and, most importantly, not to make any sexual gestures. That is where feminist graffiti breaks all these rules by representing three women sticking their tongues out, mocking a male chauvinist society, and defying the image of how femininity should look and demolishing sexual taboos. The exaggerated long tongues not only confront social norms, but political ones too, where people’s opinions and ideas are not tolerated, hence, their tongues “need to be cut.”

Figure 14. WOW graffiti, el Mansoura city, Egypt. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)
Yet, it is even more defying and confrontational when a tongue-sticking woman wearing a headscarf is drawn under the word Toz, an acerbic expression, which means, “I don’t care”.

Figure 15. WOW graffiti, el Mansoura city, Egypt. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)

A headscarf comes with its own set of rules and expectations. A woman who wears a headscarf is judged harshly by society because she is expected to follow these rules obediently. She’s usually judged by liberals as much as conservatives, either for her choice to wear the headscarf and not “liberating herself” or for not dressing modestly which makes her headscarf unnecessary. Women wearing headscarfs, or Hijab, are usually not allowed in such venues as nightclubs or anywhere where alcohol is served, and if she manages to get in, she will be brutally criticized by society. So as if to say, once a woman dresses in a certain way, everyone has the right to have an opinion about
her personal life. And that is where the expression Toz becomes an appropriate answer to society.

Body

![WOW graffiti, Sit Naguib Garage, downtown Cairo (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)](image)

A shadowy man figure is sitting in a very comfortable position smoking Shisha, which represents the traditional image of the relaxing male waiting to be served. The hose of his Shisha is wrapped like a snake around one female body with a deformed head, perhaps reflecting the patriarchal society’s view of women as sexual objects. The same hose extends to wrap around the neck of a woman’s head, symbolizing oppression as well as how a woman might view herself as an intellectual person first and foremost. One can clearly notice the expression of discontent on her face. The end of the hose wraps the legs of another female (chains?) while the woman sits in a tub looking displeased. This image represents par excellence how a male dominated society views women as objects of pleasure, just like Shisha.

Whether it was conservatives verses liberals, religious verses secular or West verses East, the female body has been always the ground of social and political battles.
It is the first thing that gets covered and surrounded by limitations when religion takes the helm, or uncovered and “liberated” when secularism is in control. Those bodies are always where wars get the ugliest—such as seen in wartime rapes—and is the first thing big powers often mention when criticizing their enemies. And because of patriarchy, the female body is still viewed as a property of some sort, albeit different societies express possessions in different ways. Women’s bodies are the only source of future farmers, workers, kings, leaders, physicians, accountants, engineers, and, most importantly, followers. In a male chauvinist society like in Egypt, women’s bodies are still viewed as the property of the family, the tribe, and the country. They are where honor and shame reside, where one can “break a man,” a family or even society. Man views himself as the protector of the woman or women associated with his “name” or “care.” And where public space is primarily man’s dominion, kingdom, and playground, women belong to privacy and closed, limited-access places. Saying this does not mean that Egyptian or Arab women in general cannot be in public spaces. It does mean however, that these thoughts and concepts are in the back of everyone’s mind and that a female feels a little bit—or a lot—more vulnerable in public spaces while a male would feel more dominant.

Sexual harassment is still very common not only in the Arab world but across the globe. However, even though women have made strident improvements in their wellbeing in North America, Europe, and elsewhere, owing to persistent demands for equal rights, the root causes of sexual discrimination persist. Conservatism essentially views women as objects, and as such they are endowed with a certain image. When this image is perturbed, society, or segments thereof, protests. Social and economic ills are often camouflaged with apparent notions of sexual abuse and discrimination. Yet, what makes Egypt in particular different is the group sexual harassment. How did it start? The complexities of women’s issues and affairs cannot be seen in isolation from the dominant social and political climates of the Arab region. What happened in Egypt serves to accentuate this connection, where “possession” of women’s bodies has

32 According to “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against” UN Women report 2013, 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. According to violence studies 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner.
become the mantra of supposedly secular ranks, of the movement for political and social change in opposition to the corrupt and dictatorial rule of Hosni Mubarak that erupted in the early 2000s. *Kifaya*—meaning “enough” in Arabic—began as a movement for political and social change, and included a number of Egyptian (female and male) intellectuals, journalists and artists, who took to the streets of Cairo demanding fair elections and opposing “hereditary rule,” in reference to Mubarak’s grooming his son, Gamal, for leadership of the ruling party and subsequent presidency.³³ *Kifaya* was a relatively small group, but it had resilient voices and respected names attached to it. The group’s persistence, and their gaining notice in the Western media around 2005, irritated Mubarak and his henchmen—especially when *Kifaya* got the attention of Mubarak’s most powerful supporter, the United States of America. Public and private meetings were held between the Mubarak regime and the U.S. administration, with the latter “suggesting” the necessity of reform to retain status quo in Egypt. Egypt was an important U.S. ally and recipient of significant annual U.S. military aid, particularly in the aftermath of the disastrous U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and ensuing turmoil in the region. While negotiations were underway with U.S. officials, Mubarak’s security intelligence had already begun sweeping arrests and imprisonment of *Kifaya* activists using the 50-year old Emergency Law, while also promising, tongue-in-cheek, their American friend some serious reforms. ³⁴The reform came as superficial as the elections that were held. To show political pluralism, elections selectively included, for the first time, the hither-to banned Muslim Brotherhood but no other opposition group.

*Kifaya* activists, however, neither stopped protesting nor demanding legitimate rights for Egyptians. Their activists led disruptive workers’ strikes in Alexandria and Cairo; and thugs were hired by the government to harass and intimidate protesters, especially the women, so as to scare them off the streets. At first the government employed “women thugs,” who harassed and beat women protestors, calling them derogatory names in public. When the protestors did not give in to this intimidation, the

³³ Gamal Mubarak was promoted as the new ruler of Egypt subsequent to his father’s retirement, a concept that had been adopted not only in Arab monarchies, but in republics as well.

government employed a new tactic, namely, the sexual harassment of women protestors. A large group of hired male thugs would attempt to drag an individual woman from the group of protestors, circle her, and strip off her clothes and then, sexually assault her in public. The message was loud and clear: Publicly humiliate the most vulnerable members particularly women, in a relatively traditional society.  

Such incidents alarmingly soared and created a wave of shock and fear within a traditionally conservative society where a woman’s honour was associated with a woman’s untouched body, her virginity and celibacy—till marriage if she happens to be single, or monogamy to her husband if she is a married woman.

The Egyptian government understood well sensitivities in a relatively conservative society and masterminded its attacks on women protestors. Ordinary people were uncomfortable that sexual harassment had evolved to public group activity that could not be ignored. Societal guilt of not being able to protect the vulnerable in society, i.e., women, from thuggish attacks became a source of alienation: The women victims are to blame for “putting themselves in such a vulnerable situation.” The fight for equality and justice went back to being a secondary issue. 

35 “On 25 May 2005, which became known as “Black Wednesday”, protestors gathered in front of Saad Zaghlul memorial and the Press Syndicate in Cairo to call for a boycott of the referendum on constitutional reform. Security forces cleared the way for groups of men to assault women journalist taking part in the demonstration. One policeman told a woman protester that such attacks were intended to "stop you taking part in demonstration again “Egypt, Keeping Women Out, Sexual Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere, FIDH, Nazra for Feminist Studies, New Women Foundation and Uprising of Women in The Arab World, Report no. 630a (2014). p.12

36 Nawal Ali was one the Kifaya women journalists who was stripped and sexually assaulted by police and thugs in May 2005. Due to her formal complaint against her harassers, she was the subject of threats and intimidation to pressure her to drop the complaint. Later on, Ali’s husband divorced her under the stress of those intimidations and after she was accused by the formal media of purposely taking off her clothes to accuse officers of sexually harassing her. http://eipr.org/blog/post/2013/05/24/1710. Eight years after the attack and following formal complaints filed in 2006-2007-2008 by four women journalist to the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, the commission released a report in 2011 condemning the violent actions of the Egyptian government, represented by the police personnel, against protestors in May 2005, demanding reopening the case in front of the Egyptian legal system as well as financial compensation to the plaintiffs. http://eipr.org/pressrelease/2013/03/14/1656
Harassment of Kifya women protestors did not stop at that, it was also accompanied with an unofficial, government-run smear campaign against anyone who dared publicly oppose the rulers or the system. When it came to women protestors, the campaigns always took the manner of intimidation and rumours about so called indecency, sin, adultery, and so on. Sexual discrimination, has necessarily espoused a purportedly moral attack: A bad, or more specifically, shameful choice by women, namely, demonstrating injustice in Egypt.

The Egyptian Military Junta, appointing themselves as the Moral Police, used these same tactics at the end of 2011 when they conducted virginity tests on female arrested protestors. Worst was the case of beating and stripping of a woman near Tahrir Square in Dec. 2011 a case also known in Egypt as Sit el Banat— The queen of girls—incident also known as “The Blue Bra Girl" in the Western media. Egyptian official media news called her a thug and morally indecent and accused her of purposely stripping herself to destabilize soldiers. It was pure fabrication, since that the beating and stripping incident was caught on video and clearly depicted how the soldiers and police violated the unconscious woman. When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in 2012, they followed practically identical methods against their opposition protestors, as the current now-reigning military continues to do. What all of them did not realize or appreciate, however, was that what started as a secret intelligence tactic against the government opposition had now progressed into an out of control social phenomenon. It is the perfect example of how authority’s ill practices translate into and empower social ills when violent sexual harassments began happening to ordinary women at many crowded public events.

37 The incident was first photographed and reported by Reuters as the “Blue Bra Girl” incident. Many Western media outlets followed. The woman chose not to expose her real identity especially that her face was covered.

38 On the night of December 6, 2012 and during the Muslim Brotherhood crack down on a sit in that was taking place in front of the Itihadya presidential palace, a number of anti Muslim Brotherhood women protestors reported being beaten and sexually harassed by armed Muslim Brotherhood members. The case was widely discussed by the Egyptian and international media. http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3503/egypt-islamists-sexual-assault

Figure 17. One of WOW's posters. Small caption on the right reads “How I see myself.” Small caption on the left, “How society should see me,” The caption at the bottom reads “Liberate the minds” (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)
Figure 18. WOW stencil graffiti. It reads “What do you see?” The word “see” here can mean the act of seeing as well as thinking. “What do you see and think?” covered eyes and mouth is meant to empower women to voice their opinion and not get silenced and intimidated by the male dominant society. (Courtesy of www.womenonwalls.com)
Chapter 3.

Sing and Rebel

Yousra el Hawari

It was a warm Cairo night when I walked with my Palestinian poet friend to the nearby old cinema. We wanted to watch a new movie by the well-known independent director Mohammed Khan. Almost everyone in the art scene was talking about Factory Girl. We ran across the streets racing between the non-stopping cars and avoided bumping into people in the crowded streets. For me as a woman I tried my best to avoid the piercing stares of men just like every other woman around me was doing. We got to the cinema and, like most buildings in Cairo, it was a beautiful architecture of a glorious past; and, alas, like most of them, it was completely neglected. My friend looked at me and jokingly said: “Do you want to clean this one, too?” He was referring to what I always say when I look at these beautiful old buildings in Cairo: “I want to get a big water hose and start scrubbing these buildings, then just sit there and admire their beauty!” “Of course,” I answered him with a determined yes. Inside, it was dark and even more beaten up. The man at the counter was bearded, in his forties, wearing a wide stripy shirt and a with a very serious look on his face, an appearance that is usually associated with the Muslim Brotherhood members. I asked for two tickets and handed him the money. Instead of taking it from my hand, he pushed an old folded newspaper to me to put the money on, without saying a word or even looking at me. I put the money on the newspaper, biting my tongue trying not to comment about the way he was treating me.

39 Egypt is known to host lots of aspiring Arab poets, writers, actors, artists and intellectuals who call Cairo’s intellectual vibrancy and its artistic scenes home.

40 Like the ultra-orthodox Jews, and some puritanical Christian sects, for the ultra-orthodox Muslims it is unacceptable to be in contact with a female (e.g., shaking hands, touching hands, etc.), especially if they had performed ablution (i.e., washing of extremities and face) for prayer, known as Wedhu.
He pushed the tickets to me using the same newspaper. I was really getting angry at this point when I looked behind the man and saw a huge poster of a new big-production movie with the picture of Haifa Wehby, the Lebanese sex symbol, wearing a very seductive red dress revealing her legs and cleavage. I took the tickets and looked at my friend in disbelief, we shook our heads laughing and walked in. This, after all, is what Egypt is all about: contradictions.

As soon as the movie started, everything was forgotten, the neglected, sad-looking building, the rude man in the ticket kiosk, even the uncomfortable chairs we were sitting on. The movie excellently dealt with the reality of everyday women and their struggle in a society full of contradictions. While they are asked to get jobs and work hard to earn money, they are judged harshly for expressing normal human feelings, like simply falling in love. The movie was a rollercoaster of sadness, happiness, tragedy, and hope, all at the same time, which was perfectly captured in the movie soundtrack. *Ba abtisim*—I smile—a poem written by Salam Yusri with music and vocal by Youssra el Hawari.

I smile out of my love to the world
I smile out of the fear I’m raised with
I opened my eyes to worries
As if my pain is looking and smiling
I ride the railways to the opposite side
I see green in the heart of the desert
And love is still my light
Although shy, but a little smile will set my heart free
I smile out of my love to the world
I smile out of the fear I’m raised with
I knock softly on all doors and smile
My pain is like a very tight string
I smile,
It’s a human pain yet never understood
Never understood by others
Yet my pain smiles to those others
My heart wants to overflow with love
My heart wants to sink in love
Yet it wants to stay afloat and smile
Smiles, out of its love to the world.⁴¹

El Hawari, 30-year old musician, singer, songwriter, actress, and mime came to the spotlight in 2012 when she released her first single el Soor—The Wall—on YouTube and it became a hit. El Hawari attracted lots of attention with this song for many reasons. The first one was the song’s subject matter. In the year 2005, a cartoon by a young Egyptian caricaturist named Waleed Tahir was published in al-Shorouq newspaper, criticizing the huge walls people were building around their homes and properties to protect them from onlookers. It was the poem that Tahir wrote with his cartoon that el Hawari sang seven years later against another wall. This time it was the wall the military Junta built blocking the roads leading to the Ministry of Interior in downtown Cairo after the brutal clashes that took place there between revolutionary protestors and riot police in 2012.

In front of the wall
In front of those who built it
In front of those who made it high
And also in front of those who are protecting it
Stood a poor man

⁴¹ Poem translated directly from the movie by Dima Munaff.
And peed,
On the wall,
And on those who built it
And those who made it high,
And those,
who are protecting it.\(^{42}\)

In her first single, el Hawari broke many societal norms. It is very unusual and mostly scorned at when a woman talks about a man answering nature’s call, let alone clearly utter the action in a song. What makes el Hawari’s music different is that she deals with serious social and political issues in a humorous manner using Egyptian slang and her cheerful accordion, which might make her the only known woman musician in Egypt (and arguably the Arab world) playing that instrument—yet another norm she was breaking. There is very little information how the European accordion became one of the main instruments in Egyptian folk music, *Baladi*. It is possible that it came with the many Europeans who chose to live in Egypt in the early 1900s or maybe the Mediterranean sailors played a role in getting this instrument to the shores of Egypt. The fact that this instrument—usually played solely by male street performers—is small, portable and, most importantly, carries the quarter note (essential in Arabic music) has certainly facilitated its acceptance on a wide scale.

In an article entitled “The People Want”, Elliott Colla argues that activists and protestors in Egypt depended on repertoire and familiarity of ideas and terms when designing their slogans and chants.\(^{43}\) That perhaps does not go well with the general concept of change as understood in the West; after all change and repertoire are two very different, if not opposite, things. Yet, in a country like Egypt repertoire proved successful in engaging the general public in songs and music, too. Poetry is a profoundly engaging part of Arab culture. It is very common for example, in the middle of

\(^{42}\) Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
a normal conversation for someone to recite a poem to explain or prove a point. And because of the hard and difficult Arab history of colonization by the Ottomans, British, and French, and other empires and powers, poetry was one of the main tools of resistance, and poets were and still are, oftentimes, perceived as revolutionaries. This notion was palpable during the 2010 Tunisian revolution when protestors chanted famous poems by the brilliant Tunisian-born Aboul-Qacem Echebbi (1909-1934):

If, one day, a people desire to live, then fate will answer their call
And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall
For he who is not embraced by passion for life will dissipate into thin air
At least that is what all creation has told me, and what its hidden spirits declare^4^4

The Arab world was immediately and emotionally moved by the young voices singing and chanting that well-loved poem. Most of those who were chanting were not even born at the time of the poem's conception, yet they chose it because of its emotional value. They chose repertoire. So when those same young men and women came up with the chant "The people want to topple the regime" a month later, that same chant was shouted in the street of neighbouring Egypt—then Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

In the early 1980s a movie called el-Harrif—The Street Player—came out which dealt with struggles of the Egyptian working class. The movie starts with a poem that was written by Amina Jaheen, a woman poet and also the daughter of Salah Jaheen, one of Egypt's most renowned and beloved poets writing in colloquial Egyptian. Disappointingly, but characteristically, the poem was recited by a man, Ahmed Zaki, a very much-liked Egyptian actor. In 2012 Yousra El Hawari, also using the idea of repertoire, decided to give that selection of poetry the female voice it was written with in the first place. She wrote the music for Fi el Share‘—In The Street—and sang it with her simple accordion tunes giving the poem a new spirit by representing a woman's view of

^4^4 Translation from Arabic to English by Elliot Colla. It was published in "Three translations of Abu al-Qasim al-Shareb’s ‘If People wasnted life one day’", Arab Literature (in English) weblog, N.p., 16 January 2011 https://arablit.wordpress.com
the male-dominated public space. The song shows the many contradictions society carries when it allows so many bad and cruel things to happen in the streets, yet it goes berserk and forbids a simple kiss between two lovers.

Some people play soccer in the street
Some sing, some take a picture, in the street
Some people curse each other, some beat each other up
Some are homeless sleeping on the ground
Some are selling their bodies, in the street
And in the street
Lots of wrongs became rights
Yet it will be a real big deal
If we forgot ourselves and kissed each other
In the street

It is not easy to be an independent artist. It is a career that does not pay well and certainly does not have the advantages huge marketing corporations and big production houses offer. Nonetheless, being an independent artist particularly in the Arab countries means avoiding being subjected to governmental censorship or dictate on the one hand, and, on the other hand, over-sexualized imagery of women artists created in the mainstream media to speak to the needs of the mostly sexually-deprived male in conservative societies. More and more women musicians are joining the independent art movement in the Arab world specifically for these reasons. For them, it is not only a passion for art, but it is more of a social movement for change.

If one takes a walk in downtown Cairo or sits in one of its coffee houses, there is a good chance that one would run into one or more of the underground artists and, if one is lucky enough, one might witness them working on their music or singing with their friends. This is where they started and where they built their popularity by singing for

45 Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
revolution and social change. The back streets of downtown Cairo is where revolution is happening, it is where the revolutionary commune meets, lives, and carries on spreading the spirit of change.

Like any other revolution that took place elsewhere in the world before, humans see change in different lights. Some see change with religion, while others fear political religion. Some merely want authorities to admit atrocities, while others demand justice to the victims and fair trials to those who committed crimes and atrocities against the people. Yet others may lean towards executing them. During the 18 days of protests and sit-ins that started the (still) ongoing revolution in Egypt, Tahrir Square was a commune of revolutionaries of different walks of life, ages, and ideologies. What brought all these people together was the desire to change a dire reality of a police state that had governed for far too long and had far too many victims. They had another thing in common, history. History in the Arab region has a big influence on the collective mindset. Therefore, slogans and songs are a familiarity that can definitely move the masses. Sheikh Imam’s songs and Ahmed Fouad Negem's poems have become once again—since the early 1950s—revolutionary lyrics sung by (now) younger voices like Maryam Saleh, who had the chance to learn the songs from Sheikh Imam himself during his visits to her parents’ house.

Maryam Saleh

Creative people in our society have what I call some kind of Social Autism. People around us don’t comprehend that solemn idea of having a choice, let alone the choice to be different or unique. 46

46 Maryam Saleh in an interview in El Fan Enwan—Art is a home address—an art and culture talk show on the Egyptian ON TV, 14, Jan 2013.
In her song *Sura'at el Ayam*—Speed of Days—Maryam Saleh tells her audience to realise how fear is destroying their souls. She immediately puts the listener on the spot using second-person narrative and sharp cynicism. A fusion of Arabic and Western rock music, the song goes on describing how stray dogs can smell our fear and start following us, describing the running scene till we, the listeners, get hit by a car, fall on the head and forget who we are or where we are going. Only then we forget our fears, social taboos, and feel happy and liberated. It is, however, not only social fear that Saleh is talking about in her song—written by the young poet Mustafa Ibrahim,\(^4^7\) who writes in colloquial Egyptian—it is especially political fear:

Count the speed of days
Multiplied by your life in years
Divided by the effect of your long lived fears

\(^{4^7}\) Mustafa Ibrahim is a young Egyptian poet, born (1986) and raised in Cairo. He primarily writes in colloquial Egyptian, and was praised as the Revolution’s Poet. Ibrahim has three poetry collections, written in colloquial Egyptian, and have been very popular among the youth of Egypt. Young musicians turned several of his poems into popular songs.
Your body exudes strong Adrenaline smell
Which stray dogs know far too well
They chase after you
You run and trip on your shoe
Get hit by a passing car
You fall hard on your head not knowing where you are
Nor your name
Nor your age or your address
Or why you were walking alone that far
You throw all your questions behind your back
You stop feeling sad
Or care what others think you lack
You stop caring
If you were naked or clothes are covering your back
And you forget the effect of your long-lived fears
You don’t care.
You don’t care!  

The 28-year old Maryam Saleh was born into a family of theatre professionals. Her father Saleh Sa’ad was a well-known theatre director in Egypt until his death in the tragic fire of the Cultural Center Theatre in 2005, which was widely blamed on government negligence and corruption. Her mother was a singer and theatrical actor.

48 Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
49 A fire took place in the Cultural Centre and theatre in the town of Beni Souief, 71 miles south of Cairo. The fire claimed the lives of 34 of the 120 theatre professionals and intellectuals who were inside preparing to start a festival of plays and workshops. It was confirmed that these tragic deaths were the result of inexisten basic safety considerations—exit signs and fire extinguishers, as well as bad maintenance in old buildings in contravention of fire codes. Those buildings, including the theatre, were under the supervision Egypt's Ministry of Culture. To this day, no one was charged with this crime.
who taught Maryam Saleh and her younger sister Nagham the craft of singing. Since her early years, Saleh was involved in theatre and was part of several theatre and music bands, including her own band Baraka, until her solo singing career took off at the onset of the 2011 revolution. Revolution and Tahrir Square, in particular, gave independent artists like Maryam Saleh and many others! the space and freedom to express themselves and to challenge the dominant state of censorship. Her first album Ana mosh baghani—I’m not singing, which is also the name of one of the songs in the album, describes Saleh’s style of singing very well.

I’m not singing
I’m not talking
I’m not sleeping
I’m not awake
I’m in particular and I’m in general
I’m everything and every day

Saleh with her unconventional music—a fusion of Rock and Pop—might be succeeding in creating her own way of breaking musical as well as social taboos. She uses her theatre training to perform the songs, whether they are her original songs or repertoires of Sheikh Imam’s (1918-1995) and Sayed Darwish’s (1892-1923) songs. Saleh uses sarcasm and mockery with her exaggerated vocals or bodily performance to deliver mostly a political message. She changes her vocals from soft and dreamy to sheer dissonance at times—something she has often been criticized for—thereby bringing elements of surprise and, sometimes, shock to the listener.

Maryam Saleh belongs to a generation of taboo breakers, and has succeeded to attract a wide base of loyal fans, especially amongst the youth. She represents their

50 Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
51 A blind-by-birth Egyptian composer and singer famous around the Arab region for his political songs, and for which he was jailed many times. Sheikh Imam is still a symbol for revolutionary artists, not only within Egypt, but for the entire Arab left.
52 A famous Egyptian composer and singer. Sayed Darwish is considered the father of Egyptian popular music.
dissonant ironic reality of corrupted governments, oppression and a huge generational
gap. Young Egyptians, like all Arab youth, are caught in the middle of so many layers of
new and freshly-acquired knowledge and pervasive oppression. They are open to other
cultures and ideas because of the way technology is able to connect the entire world; yet
they live in a grim reality that has not been changed, if not worsened, since their parents’
generation. There is a vibrant and unequivocal sexual and social revolution that is
happening amongst today’s Egyptian youth, however, this is completely ignored, even
denied, by their parents’ generation. The young generation talks about reality even if it
means pain, sadness, and chaos. The parents’ generation is still clinging to painting a
rosy picture although it is not true, because they simply want stability while their kids
want freedom. It is an ironic state of affairs that was captured extremely well in Mariam
Saleh’s song *Wala’a Sooda*—Black Lighter:

```
Black lighter
Bamboo hanger
Life is a labyrinth
And I’m a player
I live alert
And reality is a mess
The Camera is stupid
And the memory card is empty
And I agreed to
Sit facing myself
Hey you, government of bastards
I want a decent judge
It’s a crowded place
It’s crowded
```
Yet it’s shallow.53

The young generation is more in touch with the sociopolitical reality. One might feel the overall cynicism they carry with them but it is because they understand the paradox of what is happening in their country and they refuse to accept it as “the way things should be.”

Figure 20. One of the most iconic photographs of Maryam Saleh.

It was printed and published in different forms and illustration versions. The photographer is unknown but he/she captured the rebel in Maryam Saleh starting from the challenging pose and facial expression to the cigarette in her hand. There’s a very

53 Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
strong smoking culture in Egypt. Almost every Egyptian adult smokes tobacco or weed. Yet, when it comes to women publicly smoking, it is frowned upon as a reflection of a daring and challenging attitude. This is starting to change however.

Dina el Wadidi

Figure 21. Dina el Wadidi in Cairo’s Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution.

The first time I saw Dina el Wadidi in person was on my third day in Cairo. I was walking in downtown Cairo with a friend. Dina el Wadidi crossed in front of us almost running: She is a petite woman with typical Egyptian beauty, big black eyes and dark curly hair. She was carrying an instrument that seemed too big for her physical size, surrounded by a handful of young men and women with their instruments too. What seemed a normal scene to everyone else in the street, which was full of people, was fascinating to me. Dina el Wadidi is a well-known artist, and has a relatively wide fan base in Egypt, especially after she was a guest on few popular TV programs like the
award-winning satirical program *el Bernamg* and the more serious intellectual and political program *Akher Kalam*.

Like Saleh, el-Wadidi also found her musical space during and after the revolution, right in Tahrir Square. By November 2011 the country’s political situation was slipping into bigger and wider tensions. After the fall of Mubarak at the beginning of February 2011, many unresolved issues remained and new ones sprang up leading to intensified protests and sit ins. Protestors challenged and objected to the manner in which the military Junta took over governing the country, the slow transition to civilian rule of law, military trials of civilians, and the infamous virginity tests that were performed on female activists. These tensions culminated in the clashes of Mohamad Mahmoud Street, and the brutal role the riot police played—against civilian protesters—under the direct supervision of the military. At the time of that battle the Muslim Brotherhood, who were preparing for the presidential elections and vying for the military’s blessings, sided with the military Junta and denied the obvious brutality used by riot police against civilian

54 The program started as Youtube political satire videos following the concept of the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. When its popularity took off, it became an actual program that was called *El Bernamg*. It created many controversies. Three different TV stations, three different rulers—Mubarak’s military junta, the Muslim Brotherhood and, finally, the new military rule of al-Sisi with a civilian guise—tried to stop the program. In June 2014, following the ‘election’ of al-Sisi, the program was stopped. Bassem Youssef, a practicing cardiothoracic surgeon who volunteered his services to attend to the wounded in Tahrir Square, was inspired by the Egyptian revolution. He was the program’s host and originator, and was recognised in 2013 as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World by *Time* Magazine, and awarded, in the same year, the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists.

55 An intellectual/political/cultural talk show presented by the poet and intellectual Yousri Fouda who was known before for his serious and powerful reports on al-Jazeera TV. He quit his job on the air in protest of al Jazeera’s Arab-gulf-financed propaganda to mislead the public and spread a well hidden religious ideology. He stopped his Egyptian program in September 2014 protesting the current malaise in Egypt and the government’s role to limit freedom of expression.

56 *Mohammad Mahmoud Street* is where one of the bloodiest clashes took place on November 19, 2011 between the riot police and the army against civilians who were protesting military rule after the fall of Mubarak. Riot police used excessive force, which resulted in many deaths, and deliberately targeted protestors by, for instance, shooting them straight in the eyes. Many activists lost their eyes in that battle, and nicknamed the street ‘Oyoon al-Hurriya, or Eyes of Freedom. The clashes lasted for almost a week and occurred during the time the Muslim Brotherhood were preparing for presidential elections. It was a watershed moment when people evidently realised that neither trust nor hope could be placed with the army or the Muslim Brotherhood. BBC article commemorating the battle in November 2012 a year after the event: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20395260
protestors.\textsuperscript{57} Official media outlets, along with Muslim Brotherhood-run media, as well as the Islamist-majority parliament twisted the facts and painted the protestors as thugs and troublemakers.\textsuperscript{58} There was a deep sense of betrayal, disappointment, and resentment among the revolutionaries and activists towards all of those who let them down. When Dina el Wadidi wrote the music and sang \textit{Adeen bi deen el Gada’anah}—I believe in the religion of courage—a poem written by Mustafa Ibrahim commemorating the battle of Mohammad Mahmoud, it became the motto for revolutionaries and activists and a reminder of the betrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood and their followers (who claimed to have been active partners in the revolution). The poem/song was a poke at the claims of religious morals and ethics that the Muslim Brotherhood pretended to hold, and how quickly they forgot the brutality they themselves had suffered at the hands of the police and secret service once they felt an electoral victory was in sight. It, indeed, was like shaking hands with the devil.

\begin{quote}
I believe in the religion of courage and camaraderie
I believe in “we” instead of “I” when bullets are flying
I believe in the same principles we always fought for
And in all the unknown corpses in the morgue
I condemn those who left their brothers and sisters on the roads, dying
I tell them: repentance is accepted,
Except at the time of war!\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Despite—or because of—everything the Muslim Brotherhood won the Egyptian elections. It was like a dream come true for their followers ever since the establishment of the group 80 years ago, and their back-and-forth change of tactics from violence to peaceful resistance to violence again. They were thrilled to be in power ruling Egypt. But


\textsuperscript{58} http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/police-deliberately-killed-mohamed-mahmoud-demonstrators-fact-finding-committee-concludes

\textsuperscript{59} Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
the group that the Egyptian people put their trust in, albeit with a pinch of salt, proved to have a completely different plan for how they wanted to rule the most populated and dynamic country in the Arab world (and in the Middle East at large). The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic groups (i.e. Salafis) unleashed a media and a (literal) street war on everything they believed not suitable for religious or Islamic rule. They attacked almost every value the Egyptians held dear, from music and the arts to famous Egyptian historical sights. Their designated TV channels became a place for libel and smear campaigns against anyone who differed with their views. Liberalism turned into blasphemy, and women’s rights became a daily theatrical scene of trying to strip women from every right they had gained over a hundred years. Artists and intellectuals, in particular, felt under attack and they had to fight back with protests, sit-ins and, sometimes, through their art. In a song called *El Haram*—in this context means The Sin—el Wadidi played on the most used word by the new religious rulers and their media:

Sin is a sin, you who talk a lot  
It’s not a sin that I sing  
It’s not a sin that I fall in love  
But it is a sin that you say nothing but lies  
Sin is a Sin, you who talk a lot  
It’s not a sin that I sing  
It’s not a sin that I feel

---


61 Sheikh Murgan, one of the Salafi leaders and ex-fighter with al Qaeda in Afghanistan, caused an outrage when he went on several national religious and secular media outlets (e.g., Dream TV, el Rahma TV, Nile live TV) declaring his fatwa calling for destruction of the pyramids and other historical statues and sights as it was done in Afghanistan with the destruction of Buddha statues. Hussien el Shahat, a prominent figure in the Muslim Brotherhood agreed with the Murgan fatwa, but said that it was a sensitive issue, and they would only cover the statues and monuments with wax.

62 National religious media (e.g., Masr 25 and Al Nas TV stations) were constantly discussing sending women back to domesticity and male control.
Your lies are the Sin.\textsuperscript{63}

While Maryam Saleh depends on satire in her rock-infused songs, and Yousra el Hawari relies on colloquial and cheerful baladi tunes, Dina el Wadidi seems fascinated by African heritage in her music. At the beginning of 2013 she joined the Nile Project group of musicians\textsuperscript{64}. In the wake of the June 30 uprising against the Muslim Brotherhood that was followed by a total military coup on July 3, ambivalence started to control everything in Egypt and very strong political divisions hovered over the streets. It started feeling like Mubarak’s iron fist was back only with more force and, this time, to get even with those who dared to revolt against the regime in the first place. It became difficult to exhibit vocal disapproval, since the reins were explicitly in the hands of the most powerful, most experienced institution in the country: the Military.

Vocal media personalities against the military and television programs started falling off the air accompanied with personal smear campaigns and serious threats\textsuperscript{65}. This time—and unlike previously with the Muslim Brotherhood—these threats were backed up by official media organizations and, critically, a thuggish base of devoted followers to the military rule glorified as the ‘saviour’ of Egypt from the rule of religious fanatics and represented in General Abdel Fatah El Sisi. Streets in downtown Cairo, the hub of revolutionaries, began to have many new faces roaming them and watching everyone. Intelligence agents were in full force, and the prevailing thoughts were that this time around, the revamped 30-year old Mubarak regime was back with scheming

\textsuperscript{63} Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.

\textsuperscript{64} “The Nile Project was founded in August 2011 by Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis and Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadro to address the Nile basin’s cultural and environmental challenges using an innovative approach that combines music, education and an enterprise platform.” Courtesy of the group’s website: www.nileproject.com

\textsuperscript{65} For example, Reem Maged, the host of Baladna Bel Masry talk show on ONTV, who was known for her strong opposition of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the military rule; and Bassem Yousef, the host of the popular political satire show el Bernameg. Most of the religious TV stations were also shut down.
vengeance.\textsuperscript{66} Leading to this moment and since the fall of Mubarak there was an intentional neglect of community services (such as garbage collection, electricity and water and gas distribution) and everything else but political conflicts.\textsuperscript{67} Unemployment rates hit historical highs, and tourism, one of Egypt’s biggest sources of revenue, suffered terribly.\textsuperscript{68} One could feel people’s frustrations that nervously would match the chaotic, neglected, and crowded streets of Cairo, while official media outlets beat military drums, as Egyptians would like to say, labelling dissidents as traitors and revolutionaries provocateurs. This palpable tension was best described in Dina el Wadidi’s song \textit{Ya’ani Eeh Kilmet Watan}?—What does a homeland mean?

What does a homeland mean?

It means people who don’t have homes?

Or, does it mean their eyes carry dreams

Yet die of sorrow?

Then accompanied by powerful, loud and fast-paced drumming—likely to reflect the idea of the media drumming to glorify all things military—el Wadidi goes on to sing:

You people of loud voices,

\textsuperscript{66} Egyptians, like many Arabs, lived through years of government spying on people’s business and personal matters and they developed a talent of spotting \textit{el amnagy}—an intelligence agent—anywhere. Young people in downtown Cairo could point out many “strange” faces in the places where they usually hung out. The city’s downtown is not only the place where revolution started, but it is also where foreigners usually mix with the young locals which makes it a constant target of intelligence operations and monitoring. Two days before I got to the city a Belgian independent photographer was detained with the Egyptian man who was accompanying him for taking photographs. They kept them for a few days for investigation, a story I was reminded of every time I pulled out my camera.

\textsuperscript{67} Services worsened especially at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood rule and chaos dominated the already chaotic streets. Electrical outages, gas long line-ups as well as neglected streets became the sources of anger and disappointment towards the Muslim Brotherhood government. A few days before the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government, Morsi addressed the leaders of his government and the nations claiming that remnants of Mubarak’s regime are behind services worsening, and he accused them of creating the crises to hurt his government image. http://youtu.be/hDlnZ-hOIMQ


Your voices are giving us headaches
Take a moment of silence for God’s sake
We had enough of your “this and that”
And all your meaningless talk
Take a moment of silence for God’s sake
And now that she has their attention, it is time for the truth:

Society is like a filthy sidewalk
It needs to be cleansed
There are people who sweat to put food on the table
And others who sweat from playing tennis.\textsuperscript{69}

It is a loud scream in the face of social and political corruption, where class segregation is robbing the ordinary and unprivileged citizens of their sense of belonging.

\textsuperscript{69} Translated directly from the artist Sound-Cloud account by Dima Munaff.
Dina el Wadidi. One of the most important things that independent women artists are defying, is the stereotypical over sexualized look of a female artist that was created during the era of big productions and satellite channels. Independent female artists reflect the new simple look of everyday women.
Chapter 4.

Smashing the Frames

I’m tired of being a symbol of motherhood, life, love, weakness, oppression and all of those words society usually attach to women. I just want to be myself, a human being that happened to be a female

Samia Asaad, Egyptian actress.

Starting with a fast shot of two kids playing at the back of an old and dusty truck, then moving to a waving Egyptian flag, the camera takes us into a race of very fast moving shots of people in the streets going on with their business, officers refusing to be filmed or the sole fact that a camera is filming anything.

“Hey you little boy! Wait! Tell me what are your dreams?” The voice of the director yells

as the camera takes us on a run after a boy riding a donkey.

“No one can dream in this country,” a man yells from afar answering the question.

“This is the land of no dreams,” yells another.

Little kids in a schoolyard, others on a bus yelling their dreams of what they would become in the future.

“A Doctor,” says one.

“A Soldier,” says another.
They start copying each other’s answers as they look out of their school bus windows. A little girl selling tissues in the street hides behind her friend.

“Don’t hide your face, Nada,” he tells her.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” the director asks.

“A teacher,” Nada replies.

As the eight-minute movie Bahlam—I dream—goes on very quickly, Sandra Nasha’at introduces us to many regular simple people and we hear their dreams. They are students, street vendors, workers or unemployed. The youth dream of finding a job or getting married, while the older generation wishes for stability, peace and for their kids to be able to find jobs. With the quick pace, people’s cynicism, and the common feeling of never-realized simple dreams, Nasha’at tells the story of the Egyptian working class, the ones who cannot afford to stop moving or take a break because their survival depends on it.

Born in 1970 to an Egyptian Coptic family, Sandra Nasha’at studied French Literature at Cairo University while simultaneously studying filmmaking at the Egyptian Film Institute, one of the best cinema institutes in the Arab world. She started her career as a music video director and then worked on commercial movies for which she received much praise from both critics and audience. After the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, however, Nasha’at found herself in independent filmmaking in the form of very short—not more than 15 minutes—documentaries where she depended on fast moving pictures and close-up portraits of the simple everyday people in Egypt. Nasha’at’s short movies explore terms—such as “democracy”—that are often over-used by the elite to serve their elitist agenda(s) and to distinguish themselves from the “inferior other,” the generally poor and uneducated public for whom they say they have a lack of understanding. Her movies feature ordinary, unlucky men and women who have a modest yet very deep understanding of such terms, one that is more logical, non-ideological, and closer to real human needs for a decent life.
“The scale should be balanced,” says a vendor balancing the scale in front of him with weights while answering the question.

“What is democracy?” Nasha’at asks.

“I don’t know what that means,” says a women picking up her groceries.

“We want to feel safe when walking in the street,” she continues.

“Peace,” says another.

“Equality and freedom,” adds another.

While a young man explains, “I want to work.”

“ I want to live a decent life,” interjects an old man.

“I have no say in anything, I’m a simple man, one of 90 million others. My opinion won’t change anything,” explains a small boat operator, precisely summing it up.

It is after all the lack of democracy that matters, not its definition.70

Forbidden

It should not take more than 10 minutes from the hotel I am staying at in Zamalek to downtown Cairo. In reality, this trip that I did almost everyday took more than 30 minutes there and another 30 minutes back. Cairo has very crowded and chaotic streets, which is expected in a city where more than 10 million souls call home. That is not the only reason why my daily trip took triple its supposed time, however. When driving or even walking in the city it is completely normal to face delays due to road blockages,

70 Sharek—Participate—By Sandra Nasha’at. 2014. You Tube.
usually for security reasons that are mostly obscure. These are Lagna\textsuperscript{71} checkpoints and Egyptians try their best to avoid going through them. They usually consist of a mobile metal barricade and a few officers who control the flow of traffic, while also looking back and forth at their “boss” who might be standing in the shade quietly gesturing which car should be searched and which can be let through. In addition to cars being searched, IDs checked, and the hustle that comes with it all, there is a strong possibility that officers ask for bribes to allow the person and his or her car through. Egyptians know very well that not paying that bribe could create a bigger problem—it could land one in jail for no crime other than refusing to pay a it, but the Lagna officers usually call it “insulting officers on duty” or “resisting orders.” So when Amal Ramsis, a young Egyptian filmmaker and founder of the Cairo Women’s Film Festival, made her short documentary \textit{Mamnou’}—Forbidden—she was exploring the idea of living in that world of controlled movement and limitations.

“Their techniques to forbid are based upon the logic of detention centers,” says Arab Lutfy, an Egyptian professor and filmmaker. She then describes the permanent metal barricades that divide the city and hide the Nile River behind more metal monstrosities for the benefit of either government-owned properties or big privately-owned companies. In her documentary, however, Ramsis explores more than the physical barricades; she delves deeper into the idea of censorship, be it societal or state censorship. From intellectuals like Arab Lutfy and her struggle as a filmmaker with censorship to journalists and from ordinary middle class young women to a cleaning lady, Ramsis takes us through the difficulties people, especially women, face with the “forbidden” and how this word is used by society and state to control and limit what people can or cannot do.

“What’s not forbidden?” asks Arab Lutfy. “Everything is forbidden in Egypt,” she declares.

\textsuperscript{71} Ligan (plural), meaning committee in reference to various organs of the intelligence and security agencies.
She describes how difficult and sometimes impossible it is to shoot movies or documentaries in the streets of Cairo and the fact that filmmakers need to have permissions for every single day of shooting and for every little street where filming may take place. Like her movie interviewee, Ramsis herself explains that she broke the law by shooting the movie without obtaining the right permissions. It is like those laws are there to be broken.

Ramsis starts her movie with the scene of the sky as if capturing the longing to fly to freedom and away from all the limits on the ground. The pictures are accompanied with the sound of trickling water and the soft and relaxed voice of a woman singing with a slight echo, giving the impression that she is singing in the bathroom, a place of privacy and solace, perhaps some kind of freedom as well:

I, attracted by the impossible
I saw the moon
Jumping and rushing into the air
If I reach it or not
What does it matter to me?
And why,
Since my heart with joy is satiated.\(^{72}\)

The bathroom in the Arab female collective mind gives another dimension to privacy. Women of all ages heard the term “If you have something to say, go say it in the bathroom” said to them or heard of it in their mothers and grandmothers life stories. The phrase is directed to women and it is meant to be demeaning. The location itself, traditionally and religiously, equals the place of dirt, filth, and human waste and, also, it is where “Satan” resides. Therefore, according to Islamic norms, it is better not to enter a bathroom with bare feet, for instance. So saying something in the bathroom is meant to reflect that whatever a woman has to say – i.e. her opinion—is not important. Starting with this idea, Ramsis prepares viewers to feel the limitations and the great desire to

\(^{72}\) Translation was taken from the movie’s English subtitles.
The sung words mentioned above —“I, attracted by the impossible”—the forbidden—communicate the idea that it does not matter if one reaches her goal because what does matter is breaking the chains. From here the movie takes the viewers to the world of the forbidden where the whole country, not only women, seem to be trapped in the bathroom, dreaming of rebelling.

“I wish I could take off the hijab,” explains a woman in her late 20s.

“Why don’t you?” wonders the director.

“Because society won’t accept it!” exclaims the young woman.

The woman is afraid that her society will judge her as a quitter, a classic struggle for veiled women in Egypt and the Arab world in general. Once a woman wears the veil it is very difficult to take it off. It is actually easier to not wear it in the first place since the veil usually becomes more of a moral decision that one cannot repent of once one makes it. Although there is no clear text in the Quran about its eligibility, Hijab, is believed to be a duty of all Muslim women. In order to get redemption, a Muslim woman must start wearing it at some point in her life, and it doesn’t matter if she is religious or not since believing in God is considered a given, indisputable fact. Many times, however, the family makes the Hijab decision for women, not the women themselves. However, many women, especially young ones, rebelled against this since the 2011 January 25
revolution. What helped that rebellion to be more accepted or less judged in certain circles was the general frustration with the Muslim Brotherhood’s imposed religious standards and rules, in particular when it came to women’s issues. This gave many women the chance to take off their headscarves and veils as a political statement against the MB attitude.

“I don’t feel like it’s about religious dedication anymore, it became more of a tradition and a social statement,” explains the woman in the movie.

As the early 1980s dawned and with it the Arab-Gulf petrol wealth, there was a shift in power in the entire Arab region. Iraq had just begun what was to be an eight years long exhausting war with Iran that depleted the country’s resources. For example, as a result that war, Iraq’s oil revenue declined from $26.1 billion in 1980 to $10.4 billion in 1981 Lebanon was in an on-going brutal and bloody civil war, while Egypt and the rest of the North African countries were suffering from collapsing economies that left a big percentage of the population either unemployed or struggling with poverty. The need for foreign workers in the relatively newly formed Gulf sultanates of the Persian Gulf filled that void. Getting an “employment contract” in those countries became the new dream of many young Arab men. Thereby, countries rich in history and culture became effectively dependent on the huge petrol wealth of miniature countries that had

73 According to the (honourable) Al-Azhar university, a centre of Islamic law and rhetoric Hijab is a duty of every Muslim woman. That confirmation in a mostly conservative society made it easier and more acceptable to oblige the women in the family to wear the headscarf, especially after the economic crises in the 1980s when young men went to work in the even more religiously conservative Arab Gulf countries (Bradley, 2009). The importance of the headscarf was promoted by the appearance of widely televised and popular religious preachers (following the American evangelical TV programming style) like Amru Khaled in Egypt. Yet after the January revolution, precisely when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, and as a reaction to the strict religious rules they were trying to impose on the Egyptian society, many women took off their headscarf as a sign of resistance and disapproval. According to an article titled Hijab Wave Gets Broken in Egypt published in Rose el Youssef, a very well known Egyptian magazine, Hijab wearing in Egyptian girls’ high schools decreased from 90% before the revolution to 80% during the Muslim Brotherhood rule. http://www.sabahelkher.com/news/8441/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1

practically no history or deep-rooted civil culture. As working young men sent their hard-
earned money to their families in Egypt or came to visit, they brought with them a new
and different conservative approach to women’s issues. “What seems especially to
irritate fundamentalists is the casual mixing of men and women during *moulids*
(religious festivals and carnivals), and this point to the growing influence of Saudi
Arabia’s state ideology, Wahhabism\(^{75}\), on Egyptian cultural life since the 1970s, when
millions of Egyptians started to migrate to Saudi Arabia to work as a result of the oil
boom”\(^ {76}\). And because patriarchy was not particularly a novelty to the rest of the Arab
region, those young workers and professionals were influenced by the tribal approach of
the Gulf sultanates, rather than influencing the Gulf with their deeply rooted culture.\(^ {77}\)
Wearing headscarves became increasingly the norm among women as desired by their
fathers, brothers, and husbands. With it came a whole new set of “forbidden” norms for
women, from the way they should walk, to how loud they should laugh, to the places
they can or cannot go to, and so on. It became almost impossible to follow the difficult
rules society began to place around *Hijab*. “Gulf returnees apply their newly learned
Wahhabi doctrine with vengeance, insisting that their womenfolk bathe in the sea in
a full *abayya* (a long black dress that covers the whole body)”\(^ {78}\)

“Indecent behavior” is another vague name for a forbidden norm. While showing
a clip from a 1970s romantic movie of Suaad Hosni, the late beloved Egyptian actress,
singing, holding and kissing her lover in the movie, Ramsis discusses with her
interviewees, how loose and unclear is the term of “indecent behavior.”

“It can be as simple as holding hands,” says Mohamed, in derision.

\(^{75}\) Wahhabism is an ultraorthodox religious movement of Sunni Islam. It was founded in the 18\(^{th}\)
century by Mohammed Abdel Wahab in the Arabian Peninsula and it believes in the literal
interpretation of the Quran and deems those who do not believe in their rigid teachings as
heathens, especially other Muslim sects and liberals.

\(^{76}\) Bradley, John R., *Inside Egypt, The land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution*, New

Global Perspective: report on economy in the Middle East during the1980s
http://www.coti.edu/earthinfo/meast/MEeco.html

\(^{77}\) John R, Bradley, *Inside Egypt, the Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a revolution*, New

\(^{78}\) Bradley, John R, *op. cit.*, p.93
“It really depends on the officer’s mood,” declares Nawara, another interviewee.

She then explains that holding hands in public might get one into trouble, while kissing, might not, it all depends entirely on the officer’s decision at the time.

“Maybe be it means kissing” answers Salma.

On a crisp day in October 2011 a self-described Egyptian feminist Alia el-Mahdi posted a nude picture of herself on her blog, *Muthakarat Tha’era*—Diary of a Revolutionary. Under the picture she wrote:

Put on trial the artists’ models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.

In her picture el Mahdi wore nothing but a red flower in her hair, a red flat pair of shoes, and black stockings. There was nothing erotic about the picture, at least in the prevalent standards of erotica. In a Facebook post she describes her picture as “screams against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy.” The photograph, along with some later footage that el Mahdi filmed with her boyfriend Kareem Amir, stirred a lot of angry reactions in Egyptian society. The movie el Mahdi and Amir filmed was of them kissing in a public garden in Cairo thereby drawing the attention of the security personnel who took them in turn to the park’s head of security for the “crime of indecent behavior.” They managed to film their entire encounter with the security officers. This included el Mahdi and Amir asking for a specific definition of the term “indecent behavior.” But the most important issue in that video was the way the security officers treated el Mahdi. The officers focused on her act rather than on the man who committed the act with her, and they were very irritated with the fact that she was not ashamed, as it is usual with women caught committing

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79 Alia el Mahdi blog: [http://arebelsdairy.blogspot.ca/i2011_10_01_archive.html](http://arebelsdairy.blogspot.ca/i2011_10_01_archive.html)
“indecency.” The more she defended her act as individual freedom the more the officers got irritated.

As with her nude picture, a lot of rage was directed at the video and el Mahdi, even from self-described revolutionaries who commented that this was not a good time for her to act as such. Alia el Mahdi now resides in Sweden, having claimed refugee status after receiving death and rape threats in Egypt. She has been also adopted by the controversial feminist group Femen. She still protests using nudity.

After el Mahdi, a Tunisian women activist, Amina Sboui, was detained by the Tunisian authorities for three months for posting nude pictures of herself online. Amina found much larger support from women inside and outside of the Arab region than did el Mahdi, because of her unjust arrest and trial fabrication. Amina also left her native Tunisia and, like el Mahdi, found her voice with Femen. She left the movement later however, accusing them of being “too Islamophobic” and for “the lack of financial transparency.”

“I commit 10 to 15 forbidden things a day, because that’s how life has become. We cannot live without doing so, and we adapted to this, whatever we do is forbidden but we do it anyway,” declares Mohamed, one of the interviews in Ramsis’s movie.

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80 In their website www.femen.org, Femen describe themselves as “An international women’s movement of brave topless female activists painted with slogans and crowned with flowers” and their goal is “Complete victory over patriarchy.” They are mostly known for nude-protesting against Russian government war in Ukraine as well as Sharia law in Muslim countries.

81 “Quitting Femen, Tunisia’s Amina Accuses protest group of Islamophobia.” Alarabiya English. 20 Aug 2013. www.english.alarabiya.net
Figure 23. Graffiti in Cairo depicting illustrations of Alia el Mahdi (left) and Samira Ibrahim (right).

The text reads: “Samira Ibrahim 25 years old was forcibly stripped of her clothes and subjected to virginity test by police and military personnel. To defend her dignity, she is taking them to court for what they did to her. Yet, nobody cared. Neither the media, nor society; her voice was never to be heard. Alia el Mahdi stripped off her clothes and took nude pictures of herself by choice. Everyone, from media to society, went crazy. Her picture had 3 million hits [on her blog], 50 articles were written about her and many TV programs were made to discuss her act!” This graffiti is meant to illustrate, among many things, how hypocritical society can be when it comes to women’s bodies and choices. Society was angry at el Mahdi for choosing to do what she wants with her body, but did not react with the same anger to what authorities did to Ibrahim’s body without her consent.
**Figure 24.** Amina Sboui, a young Tunisian-women’s rights-activist, in a picture she posted on her Facebook account. “My body is my own and not anyone’s honour” is written on her bare chest

**Those Girls**

She was around five years old, maybe less. As much as I was mesmerized by her tiny existence she did not have any curiosity or wonder about me in her eyes, no questions, no answers, nothing. I was one of many faces she encountered every day. I was one of those who came to her “home” to spend a little bit of time and money for leisure. Her home was there, in the street I was sitting in, smoking my hookah and drinking my coffee.

Coffee shops in Cairo usually use the streets and sidewalks as a seating area and of course, wherever there are people with money, there are panhandlers. My little friend was one of them. She walked to our table with an absolute neutral look on her little face. She did not ask for anything, she just stood there with wide eyes and sun-burnt cheeks. Her clothes were covered with stains and looked almost like rags. I called her to me; she came closer looking in my eyes with that uninterested look. I asked her how old was she and got no answer. I gave her a small amount of money and the second she felt it in her hand she ran back to her mom, a teenager herself who was sitting on a rock in
the street corner, and handed her the money. That girl and her mom are one of thousands of street kids in Cairo. One can find them almost everywhere, panhandling or selling simple items depending on where they are. Most of them work in groups that usually have a ringleader; in exchange, they often get a place to sleep, typically an abandoned warehouse, and some protection. Others are not that lucky, they live by themselves which makes them an easy prey for anyone and anything.

Egyptian director Tahani Rachid brilliantly captures the lives and struggles of Cairo street kids in her hour-long documentary *El Banat Dool*—Those Girls—which follows a group of teenage girls who call the streets their home. From the first shot in the movie showing Tata, one of the girls riding a horse in a crowded street while ignoring the honking cars to the first words uttered in the movie by Tata herself cursing another street-boy who was trying to touch her, viewers feel like they are into a heavy, emotional ride.

Tahani Rachid did not censor the language or the reality these girls and boys were living. Tata, Ridda, Maryam, Dunya, Fardoos, Abeer the pregnant 15 year old, and Iman with her two little kids, are only seven of the thousands of streets kids in Cairo. Those seven teen girls sleep, eat, play, fight, sing, dance, form friendships and enemies, raise kids of their own, and sniff glue and drugs all in the public spaces others call streets. They also cry, laugh, fall in love, fight for their existence, and often times, get raped. Rachid follows those girls in their day-to-day life and struggles to eat, sleep, and stay alive with the least harm possible.

“When there’s a group of them and they take you to an isolated place, you are powerless, you can’t fight them, you have to give them whatever they ask for,” says 16 years old Dunya.

“I told them you can all sleep with me, just don’t leave a mark on my face and don’t lock me up,” she continues.

In the law of the streets, a mark on the face is considered significantly shameful. “Marked” is a term that is known in Egyptian slang to mean beating up someone literally or figuratively, as in an argument. It also means embarrassing or shaming someone in
public, or teaching them a lesson: “I marked him or her,” or “he or she has been marked.” The origin of the word came from the abandoned street kids environment. To them a mark on the face means carrying the shame of losing in a street or rape battle. If it happened, it cannot be covered or denied and the loss is there to stay with and haunt the person.

“It’s called Ishat Wizza (Wizza hut), they may lock the girl there for days, weeks or months and keep raping her,” says Tata, sitting in front of the makeshift hut in an empty field outside the city.

Wizza hut is one of the places that haunt these girls’ reality. Abeer was gang-raped and she does not know who the father of her unborn baby is.

“They all did it,” she answers the question of the social worker. “It is not right for me to blame just one,” she continues.

A teenage boy is cleaning an old foam cooler box, washing it and wiping it. A younger boy is standing next to him, passing him clean dry rags to wipe the box.

“It’s the best bed you can find,” the older boy says.

He puts Abeer’s baby very gently in the box, covers him and gives him a kiss on the cheeks. The kids carry the box with the baby inside it and cross the street to the opposite corner.

“They left me there all alone. I was screaming. I thought I would die. Nobody came to me,” says Abeer.

She was describing her labour ordeal in the hospital to Tata. Abeer apparently was left alone by the nurses and the doctors to deliver the baby by herself.

“I saw his head coming out. I pulled him and put him on my chest,” she says.

“Did they cut the umbilical cord for you?” Tata asks her.
“Yes they came afterwards and the doctor stitched me up,” Abeer replies.

Abeer is considered very lucky since medical care and services are usually denied for homeless and street persons. Lots of times ambulances refuse to take them and hospitals deny them admission. They are usually left to deal with their medical problems on their own, even if they could result in death. It is the best example of society being overpowered by social stigma. There are no clear statistics about the number of street kids in Egypt, according to an article in Daily News Egypt:

The statistics on Egypt’s street children are confusing and unclear. In 1999 the Egyptian government stated the official number of street children was 17,228. Twelve years later the government estimated the number of street children to exceed three million. National and international NGOs disagree on the number of street children and some refuse to even give an estimate. Nobody knows exactly how many street children there are.

However, International Migration Organization in Cairo (IMO) estimated the number of street children to be around 2 million, as of 2011.

Although there are number of civil society organizations concerned with the plight of street kids, they face significant difficulties owing to massive governmental limitations that are usually associated with either corruption or negligence or both.

It was therefore natural for street kids to take part in the January 2011 revolution. Many of them were protesting injustice and against the brutality they consistently suffered at the hand of police and authorities and wanted justice. Other street kids were

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82 According to the National Council for Children and Motherhood in Egypt, healthcare is one of the most challenging problems street kids face since hospitals and health clinics usually refuse their admission due to the lack of documentation and official identification papers. [http://www.alkhbr.net/egypt/29725.html](http://www.alkhbr.net/egypt/29725.html) [http://www.soutalomma.com/articles/111896](http://www.soutalomma.com/articles/111896)


either tempted with money or threatened with harm by authorities and were therefore used to hit anti-government protestors. As expected, they got caught in the middle of the battle again, as it has been in daily life battles. There are no statistics to confirm how many of these kids got injured, harmed or even killed in clashes between protestors and riot police, especially since most of them are not registered and have no identification cards. After these clashes, activists reported witnessing many unidentified corpses in the morgues who they suspected to be street kids and homeless adults. Yet one case in particular drew the attention of activists and eventually media: Omar, a 13 year old street vendor got shot and killed by an army officer while selling roasted potatoes off his cart near the U.S. embassy in Cairo on February 3, 2013. Activists took the case to court while authorities denied responsibility; then when it was confirmed, they claimed that it happened by mistake. The officer later was given a three years sentence for mistakenly killing Omar. Activists believed that the sentence was a joke and did not match the act of killing a child. The boy’s death became a symbol of government brutality and inconsideration for street kids and the poor in general. Omar’s face was painted in a graffiti mural in downtown Cairo and a number of songs and poems where written about him.

The media unjustly and absurdly accused street kids of many things, from throwing Molotov cocktails at riot police and army officers, to killing police officers on behalf of the revolutionaries, to starting fires in the library of the Science institute of Cairo on June 20, 2014. Soon after Abdel Fattah el Sisi won the presidential elections and the military began to retain power, a newspaper article by an Egyptian journalist, Nassar

85The Science Institute of Cairo was built in 1798 by Napoleon. It is important as an archaeological site and as a place where tens of thousands of old and rare books are kept. On November 16, 2011, as the military junta was in charge of the transitional government backed by the Muslim Brotherhood who were preparing for presidential elections, a fire was set to the historical building during clashes between protestors and the riot police. Videos show police thugs throwing rocks at the protestors who were trying to put the fire down while army officers watch and not interfere even when people plead to them. But the military junta, Muslim Brotherhood, and the current government still accuse activists of burning the building backed by street kids. A number of activists are still detained or awaiting trial for that incident. http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/11/22/court-terrorises-defence-lawyers-cabinet-clashes-case-lawyers-syndicate/ This resulted in a wide prisoners and activists’ hunger strike campaign “We are fed up.” http://www.madamasr.com/news/hunger-striking-activist-ahmed-douma-bad-condition-says-wife
Abdalla, was published in *al Masr el Youm*—The Egyptian Today—newspaper, entitled “The Brazilian Solution.” The article claimed that Brazil was “suffering” in the 1990s because of the increasing number of street kids as is the case with Cairo. Abdallah alleged, without any evidence, that street kids had committed crimes and terrorized the residents of the Brazilian city Brasilia. In his controversial article, the “Brazilian Solution” was to hunt down street kids and to euthanise them. He legitimized his draconian solution not only because presumably the kids posed a criminal threat, but also a public health threat since many purportedly carry the HIV virus. Of course, the article stirred a storm of outrage from ordinary people, activists, human rights organizations, as well as UNICEF, and the author received a strongly worded letter from the Brazilian ambassador in Cairo condemning his false claim. Yet Abdallah also had supporters who defended him as either “misunderstood” or “being practical.” The newspaper dropped the article from its electronic version and an apology followed. Amidst all this, street kids continued to sleep in the streets of Cairo and many other Egyptian cities, and were the victims of negligence, corruption and brutality.

When Abdel Fattah el Sisi took office this summer as Egypt’s second civilian president since independence from the British Empire in 1922, he effectively began a campaign to crack down on pro-revolution activists. One particular case that received some international attention was fabricated against a 24-year-old American-Egyptian citizen, Aya Hijazi, who had been independently working to help street kids since the start of the 2011 revolution, and had opened a small education centre for them. She was detained with her husband and two of the centre volunteers and was accused of bribing these kids to attack and throw rocks at the police in anti-government protests, as well as using them as sex slaves, a claim that has been used by the Egyptian Authorities against their opposition many times along with the “crime” of being homosexual. Such claims usually send shock waves in a still conservative society, which results in wider support to authorities.

“What will become of him? Will he live on the street like us? What wrong did he do to deserve this life and live like this?” asks Ridha, one of the street girls the documentary had followed, as she was holding the baby and almost talking to herself.

“What will become of him then? Having neither name nor a birth certificate nor the state that will admit his existence!”

87 According to Egyptian authorities, a child cannot be officially registered or given a birth certificate without the consent of his/her father, which creates an endless loop of unidentified, unregistered people who inhabit the bare streets.
Chapter 5.

Conclusion

One might say that the aftermath of the Arab Spring movements resulted in a setback insofar as women’s rights are concerned. A quick look at the tragedies unfolding in Iraq and Syria might even leave one out of hope. But there is something underlying all of this chaos that might sound ironic and strange when said, yet it is worth noting. There is an undeniable shift in the role women are playing in the Arab region. It is absolutely true that women are still victimized by wars and the different fanatic ideologies, but it should also be noted that women are fighting these wars too, not only in the form of resistance but also as fanatics themselves. This is not to say that we should celebrate the reality of women Jihadis or even women who support military reign and dictatorship. However, this is to recognize that there has been a real power shift in gender roles.

In Syria and Iraq, Kurdish women fighters are an effective and powerful fighting force ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) is facing in the region. They are not just fighting, they are also leading battalions of women and men. The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was given to a Yemeni woman Islamist journalist, Tawakul Karman, while in Egypt a human rights lawyer and socialist-feminist activist, Mahinour el Masri, was awarded the 2014 Ludovic Tarieux International Human Rights Award.\(^8\) el Masri had just been released from jail where she was imprisoned for over a year for her participation in protests against police brutality in Egypt. Activists organized campaigns demanding el Masri’s release and several of them reported that when the presidential elections took place in early July 2014, many election ballots were filled with her name. Even religious groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or fanatics like ISIL understood the power of

\(^8\) An annual international prize awarded to human rights lawyers. It is worth Noting that Nelson Mandela was given the award in 1985. \url{http://www.ludovictrarieux.org/uk-page3.callplt2014.htm}
women, and began recruiting women members and fighters to support their ideologies. Perhaps the powerless, protection-needing woman image has been changing in many aspects.

In chaotic situations where governments and legal systems collapse, women have to be active and effective in protecting themselves. That power vacuum in the Arab world created a grassroots feminist movement with its own ideologies and ideas, different from previous feminist movements. Differences and disagreements notwithstanding, they are indicating that women will have a strong role in deciding the future of the Middle East and North Africa. Women’s art in Egypt, for instance, is not merely a reflection of women’s issues, it is a form of feminist activism. while it did not start in the last three years, having progressed throughout the last two decades, and found a powerful platform in most recent events. It is part of a wider feminist movement in the Arab world.

Less than two months into the 2011 revolution, and just as Egyptians were trying to make sense of their new reality of toppling the 30-year old brutal Mubarak regime, and while the military junta was rallying the media behind them calling themselves “The Revolution Saviours,” something very alarming happened: One of the worst military crackdowns on protestors since the revolution. On March 9, 2011 ordinary people’s cameras captured the grisly images of officers violently beating protestors. Several got arrested, including a number of women protestors. The women were separated from the men and were taken into a room where they were forcefully subjected to virginity tests. It was meant to humiliate the women and break their morale. One of the women, Samira Ibrahim, decided to take the matter to court. The case went on for a long period of time with media coverage celebrating Ibrahim or shaming her. She lost her case against the military doctor who conducted the tests, but the court ordered a ban on future virginity tests. Samira Ibrahim became an icon of feminist resistance and was celebrated by activists as a hero (see figure 23).

On March 16, 2011, the anniversary of Egyptian Women’s Day, the following poem was released on YouTube by the woman who wrote it:

You couldn’t find fear in my eyes so you went looking for it in between my legs?
What did you see in there?
Did you hear the screams of those whom you tortured?
Did you see the corpses of those whom you murdered?
Did you feel my vagina spitting in your face?
What did you see?
Did you see the freedom fetus in his third month?
Did you see how strong he is?
What did you see?
Did you see the sun of a brighter tomorrow? Did it blind your eyes?
Did you see my womb taking the shape of Lady Justice holding freedom in one hand and justice in the other?
What did you see?
Did you get scared?
If I were you, I would be really very scared
Do you really think you broke me?
Those who fight for justice do not get broken
I pity you
There was nothing I wanted you to see more
Than the anger and determination I carry inside of me
And there is no place you could see that better than there
Deep inside of me
Go ahead and look
Look and get scared
Get really scared

90 A poem entitled “Virginity Test.” It was written by a woman who is only known by the name Danya. The poem was read by Danya herself in a YouTube video following the virginity tests that were conducted on women protestors in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on March 9, 2011 almost 2 months after the fall of Mubarak’s regime. English translation by Dima Munaff.
Figure 25. “Change will win” Graffiti by WOW in Sitt Naguiba Garage, downtown Cairo. (Photo by Dima Munaff)
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