



BLOGGING THE RESISTANCE: TESTIMONY AND SOLIDARITY IN EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S BLOGS

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Abstract

Much has been written about the role the internet played during the Arab uprisings of 2011, with particular attention paid to social media, whether Facebook, Twitter or blogging, and the extent to which it contributed to organising the mass protests. Another recurring theme of the analysis of the uprisings was the role played by women, with Western media in particular emphasising their contributions and debating whether this marked a pronounced increase in women's agency. My article seeks to respond to these issues through an analysis of two Egyptian women's blogs. Instead of contributing to the well-known debate about the internet's capabilities for facilitating action, I examine how blogs observe resistance, exploring this through notions of digital testimony and autobiography. I then consider the issue of solidarity and whether this is gendered, which is an important issue to consider in light of the focus placed on women's roles during the protests. Ultimately I aim to demonstrate that these Egyptian women's blogs offer us new and productive ways of thinking about the role the internet played during the Arab uprisings and the autobiographical act, leading us to acknowledge the complexities of both solidarity and articulations of selfhood.

Keywords

blogging, autobiography, Egypt, Arab uprisings, feminism

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The wave of protests that swept across the Arab world from late 2010 onwards was interpreted by many commentators – Western media predominantly but local elite too – as organised by and reliant on the internet, in particular social media. A typical example of this was the assertion in the *Guardian* in February 2011 by the foreign affairs correspondent Peter Beaumont that the defining image of the uprisings was not Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia, widely accepted as one of the key triggers for the protests across the region. Nor was it the celebrations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square when Hosni Mubarak finally stepped down. No, ‘that defining image is this: a young woman or a young man with a smartphone. [...] The barricades today do not bristle with bayonets and rifles, but with phones’ (paras. 2 and 3). Whilst Beaumont does also acknowledge the limitations of social media, the only people profiled in his article, which focuses on Egypt and Tunisia, are those with access to the internet, most of them well-known bloggers and activists, a courageous and impressive group of people but hardly representative of most ordinary Egyptians or Tunisians. This, coupled with the implication of a shift from ‘rifles’ to ‘phones’ that diverts attention from the shocking brutality of the protests – violence which is only mentioned in his article insofar as it is cleverly captured on camera-phones – inevitably sets forth a heavily edited version of what happened.

Such narratives nonetheless gained traction because they faithfully corroborated the illusion of a technology-dependent revolution that much of the Western media was keen to promote, an analysis that elided long-standing class distinctions and socioeconomic factors but which tied in so neatly with Western visions of the Arab world fighting for democracy one tweet, Facebook update and blog post at a time. In other words, fighting for what the West had, with the shiny new tools it had provided, thus reiterating patronising Orientalist attitudes that depict the East as catching up with the developed West. The prevalence of such beliefs was no doubt a result of how familiar and accessible they were. As Todd Gitlin, an American sociologist notes in his interview with the well-known Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey, ‘[t]he easiest Egyptian revolutionaries for a non-Arabic speaking American to find are the young bloggers, wielders of camera-phones, YouTube uploaders, and social-network activists. [...] They are tech-savvy, cosmopolitan, often from elite origins, well-educated, and tend to speak excellent English’ (2011, p. 5). None of this is criticism on the part of Gitlin. Nor does he pause to reflect on class or sectarian divisions, or offer an analysis of the economic factors that render the vast majority of Egyptians unable to become tech-savvy. Instead, he describes the events of 25 January 2011 as ‘summoned through the Internet’ (p. 7). Whilst he acknowledges that there were a very limited number of Facebook users in Egypt, he nonetheless continues to overstate the importance of social media and also aligns the uprisings with past protests in Chicago, Berkeley, Belgrade and Paris, giving the impression that what happened in Egypt was due to lessons learned elsewhere (the West).

Another major focus for mainstream Western media was the role that women played during the uprisings, an interest that often reverted to tired stereotypes about previously passive women finally finding the courage to speak out. Such evaluations ignored the varied nature of women’s participation – not to mention their different ethnic backgrounds, politics and class affiliations – in favour of homogenising the category ‘women’ and inevitably falling back on understanding this monolithic category through familiar Western discourses on feminism and gender politics. Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) criticised precisely this when she expressed exasperation at the continued focus by much of the Western media on women’s roles and the assumption of a marked increase in women’s agency that she sensed was driving it. At the same time, she lamented that class, race and political differences were often overlooked in favour of using one category, defined by the

belief ‘that there is a bulk called “Egyptian women”’ (p. 684)¹.

Nonetheless, even articles which disdained common Western stereotypes often made other stereotypes, or glossed over difference. The prominent American feminist Naomi Wolf (2011) heavily criticised the lack of analysis of women’s roles during the uprisings and persuasively argued that their importance cannot be underestimated. And yet in the same article, she refers interchangeably to Muslim women, Muslim countries, Arab countries, the Muslim world and the Middle East, thus collapsing all terms into one and ignoring the diversity within the region; never mind that ‘Muslim women’ is not a stable category either. There is also a constant reference to the bravery of women bloggers and Facebook as a tool for feminist interventions, as well as a final reference to ‘these awakened women’ fighting for democracy (para. 13). Such a vision of awakening, with its implication of previous dormancy, undoes Wolf’s opening indictment of Western stereotyping. The fact that she neatly categorises this awakening as an echo of the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and ‘educated women in America’ fighting for the abolition of slavery and female suffrage only serves to unravel her initial criticism entirely.²

As with many generalisations, there was a kernel of truth within both of these narratives; blogging and social media played its own role, as of course did women. But it was the way in which these issues were discussed and the conclusions that were drawn that devalued the arguments put forward, the over-emphasis of internet-based activism on the one hand and the perceived passivity of women prior to the uprisings on the other. What must be grasped is this: participation in the protests was countrywide and included every social stratum, protesting against poverty, unemployment, state corruption and the thirty-year dictatorship of Mubarak. Decades of repression, violence and deep-set frustration provided the fuel that the protests needed to spark such a massive response from Egypt’s citizens. The population of Egypt was just over 80 million in 2011; the number of Egyptians with internet access was estimated to be around 20 million. There were five million who had Facebook accounts and 131,000 active Twitter users, 51% of these based in Cairo.³ This is not to assert a simplistic either/or dichotomy for assessing the protests but it is to suggest balance so that root causes are addressed as well as the different ways in which people were brought together. There is no doubt that blogs and prominent social networking sites played a significant role in creating networks and allowing predominantly urban-based activists to mobilise others. This is something which Walid El Hamamsy (2011) illustrates well in an article about the use of digital media during the protests, in which he acknowledges that it did play an important role. However, in contrast to most coverage in the West, he also stresses the use of Blackberry instant messaging and text messaging in general as a means to share information, which were inevitably relied upon far more than less accessible platforms such as

1 It is worth pointing out that El-Mahdi also wrote an article online entitled ‘Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising’ in which she reiterates her disappointment at how the uprisings were reported on and the ‘othering’ that continues in order to ensure that Western attitudes remain the normative standard. See: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>

2 Her analysis is particularly disappointing given that elsewhere Wolf has written in a more nuanced way about women’s lives in the Middle East as a response to Western Islamophobia and the misguided sense of superiority which drives it. See for example: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/behind-the-veil-lives-a-thriving-muslim-sexuality/2008/08/29/1219516734637.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1> There are still certain stereotypes at work here but it nonetheless demonstrates a more balanced and thoughtful analysis of women’s lives, even if ‘Muslim women’ are still treated as one entity.

3 Please see <http://www.worldpopulationstatistics.com/egypt-population-2013/>, <http://interactiveme.com/2011/06/twitter-usage-in-the-mena-middle-east/> and <http://interactiveme.com/2011/06/facebook-statistics-in-the-mena-middle-east-q1-2011/> for these statistics and for further detailed analysis.

Facebook and Twitter. Ultimately though, as El Hamamsy pertinently points out, digital media was just one tool that was used in order to bring Egyptians together and that to focus on tools is to ignore the reasons *why* people were protesting and what the real triggers were.

Related to this, it is worth adding that common to a lot of narratives about the efficacy of social media was an implicit assumption that its different components were intrinsically enabling. Tim Markham (2014), whilst asserting the effectiveness of social media during the Arab uprisings as well as Egypt's well-established blogging culture, resists what he perceives as the common impulse by both Western and Middle Eastern academics to assume that social media is somehow inherently liberating and that its very use automatically encourages subversive and radical practices. He thus rightly resists the presumption that the adoption of social media, whether tweeting or blogging, is in and of itself radically transformative, and instead posits that as with other platforms, social media delivers multifarious content, ranging from the argumentative and the expressive to the banal and the unimaginative. Thus, he adds, it would be wrong to associate a particular and defined kind of agency with social media, an important point to bear in mind.

My own interest in the Egyptian blogosphere vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings is therefore not concerned with bloggers as activists, always spreading time-sensitive information, but moves away from this prevalent notion to instead focus on them as observers as well as participants, with long-standing interests in the events that they follow and are affected by. To consider blogs interesting only insofar as they explicitly instigate protests is to ignore other important aspects and to assume that agency cannot take other forms and manifest itself in perhaps subtler ways online. The bloggers that I am examining demonstrate their own forms of agency and are heavily invested in the future of their country, no less so than bloggers whose material is more concerned with day-to-day activism. Both approaches contribute to our knowledge and understanding of solidarity and protest, contributions which are often overlooked. Indeed, Western media's celebration of the blogosphere and online activism does not often acknowledge that such a celebration should also point out that these online acts go some way to obviating the need for Western media to tell the story of the protests. Instead, much of the Western media continues to construct its own narrative, one that inevitably does not acknowledge its own limitations. We might recall one of Edward Said's epigraphs to *Orientalism*, which draws our attention to precisely this attitude of speaking on behalf of others instead of allowing them their own voice. By opening with Karl Marx's statement that, 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented', Said emphatically begins the process of critiquing such assertions of authority and their far-reaching consequences – traces of which we can still see today in the way in which the Arab uprisings have been narrated (1985, p. xiii).

To examine blogs through the lens of autobiography, which I intend to do here, is hopefully to avoid any such impulse to represent and to instead pay attention to individual voices and their personal observations. In 2013, Margot Badran, a historian of women's lives within Muslim societies, published an article entitled 'Theorizing Oral History as Autobiography'. Badran, who has used oral histories throughout her long career, collected oral accounts from Egyptian women who participated in the protests of 2011, paying attention to the narratives 'both as slices of autobiography and as a part of the story of the revolution in the making' (p. 162). Badran argues that the interviews she conducted provide the means for rethinking and extending the category of autobiography, as well as allowing for new understandings of the revolution and of how particular moments unfolded. It is for very similar reasons to those of Badran's in relation to oral history that I am drawn to the practice of blogging. Like her, I am interested in reading personal accounts of resistance as autobiographical acts. For Badran, these acts are engendered by oral testimony; for me, they are produced through blogging.

The blogosphere and the effect that technology is having on autobiographical practices have become major areas of research within auto/biography studies. For many auto/biography critics, the internet provides an opportunity to further transform an already complex and wide-ranging field of research. A characteristic approach is John Zuern's belief that, 'when we put our lives online, we expand the capacities of the more traditional genres of life writing [...] Life writing research, already profoundly interdisciplinary, opens onto even more fields of inquiry when it ventures into the domain of computer-mediated communication' (2003, p. viii). Paul Longley Arthur (2009) takes this much further, asserting that digital developments have caused such a paradigmatic shift that it is not just the genre of auto/biography that is called into question but also our understanding of fundamental concepts that govern our lives, such as 'self', 'identity' and 'truth'. Whilst Arthur does admit that these concepts have never enjoyed fixed meanings, he nonetheless asserts that digital developments have radically transformed how we understand them.

Zuern, however, asks whether it would not be more fruitful 'to explore the specific effects that computers and networks have on the activity of representing an always already virtual life?' (p. xi) His question is a crucial one because it challenges us to consider whether the autobiographical self that we now encounter in the twenty-first century has radically altered, ultimately encouraging us to acknowledge that identity has always been an unstable and complex concept, one that does not lend itself to easy or neat categorisation. Thus any assumptions that a networked and decentred self is a new phenomenon seem limited and certainly not universally applicable. Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009) has noted that in terms of conceptions of selfhood in postcolonial autobiographical writing, one must pay attention to historical and material differences between the West and the non-West. He observes that '[s]ome non-western cultures clearly articulate ideologies, epistemologies and cosmogonies which are often strikingly at odds with the norms of, notably, the secular post-Enlightenment West' (p. xix). He also draws attention to the commonalities between feminist and postcolonial identity formation, noting that both assert relational, embodied and decentred models of personhood, characteristics which stand in opposition to a stable notion of an autobiographical self, especially one inspired by Enlightenment ideals.⁴ He thus advocates an approach to postcolonial life-writing that is interdisciplinary and that acknowledges the specific circumstances that come to bear on a person's articulation of selfhood.

Exemplary of this interdisciplinary approach to the genre – alongside Moore-Gilbert's own research – is Gillian Whitlock's work, in which she pays particular attention to the limits of what constitutes the autobiographical form, testing and persuasively expanding it. Whitlock's interest in autobiography has invariably revolved around the issue of cross-cultural understanding and she notes that at its best, 'it can personalise and humanise categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard' (2007, p. 3). Blogs, in particular, hold a huge amount of potential for Whitlock. In her account of Salam Pax's blog *Where is Raed?*, an unsparing account of life in Baghdad during the invasion of 2003, Whitlock asserts that '[a]s testimony goes digital, it travels differently and acts differently' (p. 41). These differences enable Pax to interact directly with his readers, to provide personal testimony of the bombing raids as they happen, to easily track global media's assessment of events and to counter certain myths and dispel persistent stereotypes. It is thus by adopting new technologies in order to interrogate what is happening around him that Pax produces such a powerful autobiographical work. Thus, even though Whitlock points out – echoing Markham's warning about uncritically celebrating online activity – that '[t]here's

⁴ To emphasise this, Moore-Gilbert deliberately uses the increasingly popular term 'life-writing' instead of 'autobiography' in order to highlight that his focus is autobiographical writing which does not necessarily adhere to the traditional Western ideals associated with the genre.

nothing inherently liberating or democratic about weblogs', her reading of Pax nonetheless leads her to conclude that '[t]he Internet can be a public sphere where groundbreaking work that might empower individuals in new and more democratic ways can occur' (pp. 43-4).

By examining Egyptian blogs, I thus hope to offer a different perspective on how social media was used during the Arab uprisings, as well as contribute to the development within auto/biography studies that increasingly seeks to pay attention to digital testimony. I will be looking at two female bloggers: Baheyya, who remains anonymous and who began blogging in 2005, and Soraya Morayef, who set up her blog, *suzeeinthecity*, in 2011.⁵ I am certainly not positing that these blogs are representative of the Egyptian online community, let alone arguing that they are indicative of the broader Egyptian experience. These are both English-language blogs, inevitably written from a position of relative privilege within the societies that they are critiquing. But I would argue that examining such blogs can allow us to think in new ways about authorship and affiliation. In particular, both bloggers challenge enduring preconceptions about Egyptian women, as well as allow us to think anew about the use of social media platforms in Egypt. I shall begin by exploring the notion of personal documentation of the uprisings, before moving on to consider the issue of solidarity and how it is expressed.

Blogging: Documenting Resistance

As Badran asserts in her work on oral testimony, valuable personal stories are embedded in the narrative of revolution, with momentous events documented through a personal lens. In the case of Baheyya's blog, this documentation of both the personal and the political is at first glance hard to account for. Whilst her blog regularly catalogues abuses of state power, censorship, police brutality, fraudulent elections and the painful circumstances under which many Egyptians live, there is little personal detail. She often posts book reviews and when reviewing an autobiography, she has the following words to say about the genre: 'Autobiography is my least favourite literary genre, too easily prone to posturing and self-exoneration, or else heavy woe-is-me tales about the author's suffering at the hands of a cruel world' (9 August 2008). Despite this, I would argue that her criticism of autobiography does not imply a rejection of the genre but instead indicates the precision with which she defines successful attempts at autobiographical writing. She goes on to reveal that there are two autobiographies that she does value, both of which deal with political issues, national instability and structures of power in intimate detail: one written by the Egyptian politician and playwright Fathi Radwan and the other by Edward Said.

Another book review the following year further hints at her vision for personal narratives. In 2009, she reviews the recently published diary of Karima Al Hifnawy, a woman best known for her activism within Kefaya, a grassroots movement that emerged in 2004 to challenge the dictatorship of Mubarak. Baheyya highly praises Al Hifnawy's social critique and observations of Egyptian life, claiming that '[p]art of the great pleasure of the book is its writer's genuinely unobtrusive presence, neither falsely self-effacing nor insufferably self-promoting. [...] As a writer, her precise prose is a refreshing reminder of the power of words' (11 June 2009). One intuitively from these comments Baheyya's strong belief in the inseparability of personal life and political developments, with the former sometimes required to fade out. Her praise for Al Hifnawy's unobtrusive presence in her own narrative, which in Baheyya's eyes allows for

⁵ <http://baheyya.blogspot.co.uk/> and <http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/> are the web addresses of these blogs. When quoting from them, I have included the specific date of the respective blog post so that they can be easily found.

crucially unimpeded observations of life, indicates the necessity for analysis which is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, subjective but not overtly personal. Her blog's name, 'Egypt Analysis and Whimsy', further emphasises this project of personally inflected social critique. Yet another early indication of this alignment with Egyptian politics is the short explanation she provides for the alias she adopts to blog. She writes on her home page that 'Baheyya is a female name that has come to stand in for Egypt. [...] I make no foolish claims to represent Egypt or all Egyptians. I just like the name'. Thus she simultaneously reveals her national ties whilst emphasising that this does not indicate a desire to speak *for* the nation. Such ties, we are led to infer, must therefore be individually distinct, even if they are often experienced collectively. One can perhaps read her decision to remain anonymous as part of this negotiation between the individual and the collective. By not revealing her name, she emphasises her identity as an ordinary citizen, who nonetheless has an individual voice but who does not wish to be identifiable and thus more easily separated out from collective concerns, perhaps reminding us of Moore-Gilbert's observation that relational identities are integral to conceptions of selfhood within postcolonial life-writing (as well as women's life-writing more broadly).

The cumulative effect of reading Baheyya's insightful blog posts is to sense the intimacy with which she identifies with her country and follows its fate, in particular the political machinations that serve to uplift and depress her in a rather cyclical fashion. In 2012, after the ousting of Mubarak, Baheyya observes that 'the revolution reversed Egyptians' forced alienation from politics. It put politics back in its rightful place, in people's daily lives where it belongs' (21 May 2012). What Baheyya does is track the meandering and often painful route to that moment when politics and the freedom to protest became openly acknowledged as part of individual identity and collective experience. She does this by charting Egypt's ever-growing resistance movement and deftly analysing and responding to government propaganda and mainstream press coverage as it happens. Her assertion of both individual and collective sensibilities can be traced throughout her writing and subtly reiterates her identification with her country as well as her need to be able to criticise it. A particularly revealing example of this comes in late 2012 when mass protests erupt again:

In this moment of profound disenchantment with both government and opposition, a detached historical perspective is for me the only solace. Leon Trotsky has a brilliant observation about the French Revolution that works nicely for our Egyptian saga. "A revolution is a mighty devourer of human energy, both individual and collective. The nerves give way. Consciousness is shaken and characters are worn out. Events unfold too swiftly for the flow of fresh forces to replace the loss." (13 December 2012)

Baheyya testifies to the gains and reversals of protest, cataloguing them in an even-handed manner but not denying her own frustrations or fears, as is evident here. Her presence is shadowy but it is not self-effacing and thus her blog posts produce subtle acts of disclosure, providing her reader with insights into what it means to feel both individually and collectively invested in change for one's country.

In Soraya Morayef's blog, digital testimony takes a very different form as she documents the explosion of graffiti in Cairo after Mubarak's fall in early 2011. She observes that 'after January 25th, things are different; at least in my hood. For one thing, graffiti is appearing everywhere in Zamalek, with new pieces popping up on main streets this time, instead of hidden alleyways and the back wall of El Ahly Club' (11 June 2011). Her blog posts are a mixture of analysis, personal

reflections and photography, which is often accompanied by explanatory captions indicating the locations of the pieces as well as who created them, if this is known. The graffiti consistently references the uprisings and the political corruption in Egypt, incorporating popular slogans such as ‘The People Want the Downfall of the Regime’ and ‘The Revolution Continues’, as well as satirical depictions of some of the country’s villains, including Mubarak and Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, former chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the de facto head of state after Mubarak. There are also portraits of Egypt’s martyrs, most frequently Khaled Said, who was brutally murdered in 2010 by police officers in Alexandria and in whose memory a popular Facebook group, ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ (another common graffiti slogan) was set up. Morayef’s photographs of this graffiti, which are also photographs of the city and often of the sites of protest, reveal the enduring symbols of recent Egyptian resistance and both she and the artists continue to narrate this resistance through the artists developing their work and Morayef in turn cataloguing these developments as they take place. Morayef is explicit about the narrative that street art can provide, asserting that ‘I like to think that you can read my country’s recent history through graffiti, tracing back the chronology of protests, triumphs and failures, deaths and celebrations’ (20 September 2012).

Thus, as Baheyra does, Morayef reveals the ups and downs of recent events, without hiding her own frustrations. She remains acutely critical of her country and aware as time passes of how much still needs to change for the revolution’s demands to be realised. By paying tribute to what Egyptians achieved in early 2011, graffiti offers a sense of hope for Morayef when such demands have still not been met:

Some of these pieces have existed since the 18-day revolution, including the murals ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ and ‘Helw Ya Balady’ [my beautiful country] by HK. Seeing these still intact six months later gives me a sense of hope that the boundless optimism and almost frightening sense of euphoria of that time isn’t just a thing of the past, in light of all the setbacks Egypt has suffered in the past months. (7 July 2011)

Whilst some street art survives intact, in most cases the graffiti in Cairo is erased, painted over or altered. This makes Sorayef’s own task of recording this evolving artistic practice that much harder, as well as making digital documentation essential for keeping up with the changes. Evolution is part of the nature of street art and its adaptation often reflects political developments in Egypt (just as blog posts tend to reveal an evolving perspective as their author continually responds to events as they take place). An interesting parallel emerges as we view the images and read the blog posts: through directly responding to events and doing so in such a provocative and visually striking manner, the graffiti of Cairo seems to ingest and reproduce both the energy and the trauma experienced in the city. And in her blog posts, Morayef also reproduces these highs and lows through the emotions that she articulates in response to both the events themselves and the art they inspire.

Already by the end of 2011, Morayef observes how new street art ‘covers layers of previous graffiti [...] only this time the tone is more sombre, calling for the freedom of jailed activists, commemorating those who lost their eyes or died during the November 19 protests, and denouncing the regime for the atrocities and injustice it is responsible for’ (3 December 2011). The solemn mood of the city is replicated on its walls. Throughout her blog, Morayef charts these visual shifts, from moments of celebration to mourning, and thus testifies to Cairo’s momentous chain of events. Also present are Morayef’s own personal reflections on these events,

a particularly poignant example of which is her return to Tahrir Square at the end of 2012, where the heaviness of the atmosphere, strongly influenced by the new portraits of martyrs, leaves her in tears and uncertain about the future:

Mohamed Mahmoud [Street] and Tahrir [Square] have always been museums of memories to many of us over the past two years, especially through the graffiti and the beautiful plaques now placed on the street entrance honoring the dead.

But today, the street feels like a museum of ghosts, not only of the dead, but of the fighting, the fighting spirit and the resilient hope for change, and in some sense, of me, an Egyptian who felt part of something massive and life changing and is now left with faces on a wall.
(29 December 2012)

In this post, both Morayef's honesty and the many photographs she includes of the portraits reveal the personal costs of Egypt's ongoing cycle of protest and violence. Both of these impulses – to speak personally about unfolding events and to share photographs of works that narrate those events – are enabled by the blogosphere and together they produce an insightful and at times highly personal account of resistance culture.

Blogging: Practising Solidarity

Inseparable from the online personal testimony that both Baheyya and Morayef provide is the intersection with other material and voices that is built into the blogosphere and social media more generally. What I want to focus on here is the blogosphere as a space where we can trace the narrative of solidarity as it unfolds. In particular, I wish to consider to what extent this solidarity is gendered, as a way to explore the issue of women's participation in the 2011 protests, something which, as I indicated in my introduction, became a major subject for Western media. When it comes to discussions about women in the Middle East, whether locally or abroad, the discourse of feminism is inevitably raised and is often fiercely debated. These discussions are incredibly varied and incorporate debates over versions of feminism, such as Islamic, postcolonial and transnational forms, which often critique feminist discourses from the West. There is certainly not the space to grapple with these discussions in a way that would do them justice, but there are several relevant arguments that I wish to draw attention to for my discussion of solidarity.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1998) notes that discussions of feminism in Egypt are too easily forced into a binary of cultural authenticity versus foreign influence, a binary that must always be challenged if a true examination of the politics of gender and the status of feminism in a Middle Eastern context is to happen. Her own definition of feminism, which she notes is now an unavoidable term of reference in the Middle East, is deliberately broad. She asserts that the discourse and its forms of praxis need to be far more inclusive and elastic in order to incorporate local projects or action groups that do not conform to a set definition of feminism and perhaps even directly challenge the discourse and its methodology. Much of her work emphasises her argument that 'feminism always occurs in particular contexts, historical and social' (1998, p. 23). She reiterates this importance of context out of concern for what happens when women's issues are extracted from their social and geopolitical realities. In particular, she criticises transnational feminist practices for this, arguing that such practices often run the risk of focusing on local culture, traditions and religion in such a way that these issues (always referred to pejoratively) act as a

camouflage for the global structures of violence that affect women's lives (Deb, 2012, p. 10). Her recent work has therefore aimed 'to confront transnational feminism with its complicity, willing or unwitting, with transnational governance and the divisive geocultural imagination that facilitates it' (Deb, 2012, p. 11).

Deniz Kandiyoti (1995) echoes many of Abu-Lughod's concerns. In her essay, 'Reflections on the Politics of Gender in Muslim Societies', she draws attention to the complexity and contradictions of international interventions on women's behalf in Muslim communities. In a section entitled 'Global Agendas, Local Responses', she analyses the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, especially between secular feminists and women adhering to an Islamic framework for their activist work. Reiterating Abu-Lughod's emphasis of geopolitical realities, Kandiyoti assesses the effects of international development funding and liberalisation policies, which have curtailed important state functions, including many which affect women directly. Her analysis demonstrates how complicated – and problematically interconnected – these issues are. She thus concludes with an observation about the development of feminist theories and their (in)applicability to all contexts, warning that 'discourses, like wines, do not necessarily travel well' (p. 27).

What is useful to consider alongside Abu-Lughod's and Kandiyoti's valid analyses and reservations is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) notion of a transnational feminist praxis rooted in principles of decolonisation, anti-capitalist critique and solidarity. Her vision is internationalist and yet always attentive to specific class, race and gender distinctions. Integral to the success of this vision is the practice of solidarity, through which feminist discourses can become transnational in a responsible and respectful manner:

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (p. 7)

Mohanty highlights an ethics of alliance, not intervention, which points to a more sensitive and collaborative approach to feminist praxis, motivated by solidarity and kept in check by a respect for diversity. Interestingly, such an approach echoes Whitlock's aforementioned definition of best autobiographical practice in its emphasis of diversity and cross-cultural understanding, which draws the two discourses together in a constructive way. It is with these ideas of the problems with transnational frameworks on the one hand and the potential for solidarity on the other that I wish to return to Baheyya's and Morayef's respective blogs in order to analyse the forms of solidarity articulated in their blogs.

The subtitle to Baheyya's blog is 'Commentary on Egyptian Politics and Culture by an Egyptian Citizen with a Room of Her Own'. This on its own is illuminating; there is the assertion of her nationality, so integral to her writing as illustrated earlier. The use of 'citizen' further emphasises this sense of belonging to Egypt as well as a right to be involved in its affairs. There is also, surely, a nod to Virginia Woolf's seminal text, *A Room of One's Own*, which argued for both a literal and figural space to be made available to women writers, so often marginalised by patriarchal literary traditions. We can interpret Baheyya's assertion of having a room of her own as a declaration of her right – as a citizen and as a woman – to provide a commentary

on Egyptian politics and culture. This commentary never directly addresses women's rights, nor advocates a particular form of feminist discourse, and yet if we adopt an elastic definition of the term, as Abu-Lughod urges us to, we must accept that narratives such as Baheyya's are capable of contributing to debates on the status and activity of women in Egypt. Her astute blog posts, dating back to 2005, thoroughly refute the assumptions often made by Western media that women in the Middle East only recently became politically engaged. She demonstrates acute awareness of Egypt's political climate, attending elections, protests and rallies and her analysis of specific circumstances, such as the ongoing student and labour protests, the intimidation of independent media outlets and police tactics during fraudulent election campaigns, further illustrates her knowledge. She writes critically about these issues, embedding her posts with links to other people's stories and video footage so that we read across from one item to another, creating a montage of different voices, examining the same event from shifting (and sometimes opposing) vantage points.

Baheyya also reveals an understanding of the damning effects that Egypt's foreign policy and its ties to the West have had on its ordinary citizens, echoing many of Abu-Lughod's and Kandiyoti's assessments of how international agendas affect Muslim societies. When celebrating the fall of Mubarak, Baheyya announces that 'I'll never forget how ordinary citizens completely upended the best laid plans of the rulers in Cairo, Washington, and Tel Aviv' (4 February 2011). That she does not stop at 'Cairo' reveals her awareness of the geopolitical conditions that helped sustain the regime that ordinary Egyptians were fighting against. She also strongly cautions against making generalisations about people, knowing that it is the cause of so much prejudice. She criticises the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti for his disdain for Arab feminism and for his dislike of excessive religiosity, especially in women. Drawing attention to his disapproval of women who wear the veil, she concludes that his attitude 'made me sad, not simply because it's the secular mirror-image of religious bigotry and intolerance, but it commits the same blithe reductionism that the poet so vehemently detests' (14 August 2010). Such reductionism, which dangerously reproduces the binary of secular versus religious, is absent in Baheyya's blog posts, which reiterates Mohanty's call for an awareness of diversity and difference as the means for achieving meaningful solidarity between people. Her writing (and photographs) speak of Egypt as a country for all of its citizens, with stories and images of men and women who attend protests and stand up to the government.

Baheyya expresses solidarity with her fellow citizens while remaining alert to the problems that can arise through collective action. She acknowledges communality, such as '[t]he feeling of mutual recognition and collective empowerment' experienced in a crowd of protestors (12 July 2013) and expresses the desire for 'the possibility and practice of ruling ourselves' (10 January 2014). But she does not put blind faith in protest movements and she urges her readers to accept that expressing solidarity sometimes leads to uncomfortable realities. Following the protests which led to Mohamed Morsi's removal from office by the army in July 2013, Baheyya points out that it is always afterwards that difficult questions must be asked, in order for solidarity to have any meaning as well as a future. In this case, when the protests were co-opted by the army to suit their own agenda and a military coup thus took place, Baheyya points out that those who took part in good faith nonetheless have to face up to what happened (12 July 2013). Her analysis seems bleak in this instance, as does her faith in the future but ultimately, it reaffirms her ongoing pursuit of justice, which must look at the ugly and the weak aspects of protests as much as their potential if real progress is to be made.

The solidarity and agency that Baheyya conveys comes about not through advocating specific actions but instead through observations about Egypt's citizens and her own participation in

public events, as demonstrated by her eyewitness testimony and photographs of protests and election campaigns. She pays equal attention to men and women, careful not to explicitly gender her approach to solidarity. This is important to acknowledge because it indicates that her assertion of her rights as an Egyptian citizen and her hopes for the future are not underwritten by notions of female solidarity. She instead chooses to express solidarity with a wide range of her fellow citizens, dependent not on a specific feminist framework but motivated by the events that are taking place and inspired by the people that she meets, whether these are students at Cairo University or rural workers from Aswan. This might seem dismissive of the potentialities of feminist principles but to reiterate Abu-Lughod, feminism must be inclusive of those who do not conform to a set definition of it, such as Baheyya, who advocates a broad definition of solidarity that pays particular attention to individual differences. Such a definition is surely complementary to Mohanty's vision for a transnational feminist praxis and Whitlock's definition of exemplary autobiography, which both emphasise paying attention to issues of class and race and respecting difference.

The main way in which Morayef explores ideas of solidarity is of course through graffiti, often through the numerous profiles and interviews with graffiti artists that she includes, which are indicative of the sense of dialogue and collaboration that the blogosphere encourages. Morayef also expands her network to move beyond the Cairo graffiti scene and includes posts on artists working in Beirut, Tripoli and East Jerusalem. These posts, which often include input from other bloggers or artists, enhance the networked aspect of her blog while generating a wider sense of solidarity. Her focus, when it comes to other locations, is still on issues related to resistance, whether it is cataloguing the images of Gaddafi in Tripoli, or messages of hope for Gaza in East Jerusalem, or the rise in anti-Bashar al-Assad imagery across the region, which leads her to note that '[e]ven if it's just symbolic solidarity, it's inspiring to see art spread across three different Arab countries [...] And this is just the beginning. Soon, the Bashar stencil will appear in Tunis, and Syria, its most perfect position. Then maybe Europe. Who knows how far an idea can travel?' (11 August 2011).

Thus for Morayef, graffiti is a method of communication, telling important stories and, at its best, able to provide solidarity and encouragement:

The past 18 months have been psychologically exhausting to say the least, but street art continues to inspire and motivate Egyptians like myself, not only for the artists' ideas and messages, but also for the resilience and determination that they demonstrate in continuing to enlighten, protest and educate passersby with their art. (20 September 2012)

Morayef's photographing of this graffiti is a record of this determination on the part of the street artists. Whilst Morayef is quick to point out that the messages the artworks convey are not always appreciated or understood, she nonetheless emphasises how they have motivated her. Throughout her posts she interrogates what graffiti is capable of and acknowledges the impact it has had on her personally. The posts, taken together, also tell a version of Cairo's recent history of protest, both narrating the story as well as encouraging it to continue. For Morayef in particular, 'graffiti serves as a visual reminder and an emotional stimulus of our recent, often traumatic history' (20 September 2012).

Her discussions of graffiti also incorporate the issue of gender, which she explores far more explicitly than Baheyya does. Some of the interviews she conducts are with female artists and Morayef pays attention to the challenges that they face and the ways in which they explore these challenges in their work. She also deals with Western stereotyping of Arab women and clearly

asserts a counter narrative, which both celebrates Egyptian women but also emphasises that just like their male counterparts, they were guided by a sense of injustice for which their government (and its supporters) was ultimately responsible. In a post entitled ‘Women in Graffiti: A Tribute to the Women of Egypt’, she addresses these issues:

It’s a battle, being a woman in an Arab country, but perhaps the dire conditions makes us fighters. Since January 25, so many foreign reporters have waxed on about the awakening of Arab women in the Arab Spring; and how the revolutions liberated us/made us wake up and smell the coffee/made us throw off our headscarves and run happily through the meadows.

This, in my opinion, is crap. When you look at the videos and photos of the eighteen days of Tahrir, you’ll see Egyptian women side by side with men in the thick of battles, some even at the front lines, braving tear gas and live bullets. We participated as Egyptians first, not as women, in January 25. And it’s incredibly patronizing to assume we ‘became’ liberated; 1. as if it was a revolution led by men that awakened and inspired us women 2. as if women were living in caves and making mud paintings before the revolution. (7 January 2013)

Morayef’s keenly felt sense of injustice at how she perceives women are portrayed by outsiders is a reminder of Kandiyoti’s point that cross-cultural understanding is not a straightforward matter. Morayef’s refutation of an Arab awakening also reads as a suitable response to Naomi Wolf’s assertion of just such an awakening, quoted in my introduction. It is clearly interpretations of women along these lines, which chart a course from longstanding passivity to nascent confidence, that unsettle Morayef. Whilst she does highlight a change in circumstances for Egyptian women since 2011, it is not the one that Wolf asserts:

The Arab women I’ve met are some of the fiercest women in the world with sincere dedication to their work, cause and sense of identity. We didn’t experience an ‘awakening’ since the revolution; but we’ve definitely had to fight harder. (7 January 2013)

She goes on to note the physical and sexual violence that has been committed against women in Egypt since 2011 and which has made circumstances harder, demonstrating not just a sense of communality with other Egyptian women but also an embodied perspective, generated by her identity as a woman and her awareness of the attendant fears this can evoke. Moore-Gilbert’s assertion that postcolonial life-writing tends to emphasise relationality and embodiment as dimensions of identity is once again particularly instructive, encouraging us to realise that subject position is always the driving force of articulations of selfhood, meaning that generalisations (especially if they are guided exclusively by Western conceptions of identity) run the risk of creating misrepresentations.

Morayef reveals that she derives inspiration from the ‘remarkable’ women that she knows, highlighting ‘their strength, creativity and perseverance’ (7 January 2013). The sense of admiration that she feels is clearly expressed here in 2013, indicating a development in her allegiances which requires her to emphasise her identity as an Egyptian woman, not just as a citizen. What this reveals is how solidarity for her sometimes becomes gendered in response to certain circumstances. Like Baheyya’s, Morayef’s overall narrative does not advocate a particular feminist framework but unlike Baheyya, she does highlight obstacles that only women face when events impel her to, as

she has done here. This is in no way to criticise Baheyya for not responding to these matters, as to do so would be to imply that women should privilege gender issues above all others. Instead, I would posit that taken together, the two blogs indicate the importance for any personal narrative to be guided by its author's own responses to circumstances and the knowledge that they have. This knowledge might highlight in damning detail state security intimidation of students on university campuses, or draw attention to the difficulties faced by women graffiti artists in Cairo. Both these examples serve to reiterate the importance of solidarity and indicate the diverse ways in which it is voiced.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as a comprehensive narrative of the Egyptian revolution. Anyone attempting such a thing will most likely fail, as the complex evolution of a people's uprising to where Egypt is today cannot be summarised in one story.
Morayef, 2014

Morayef wrote these words as an introduction to a recent review she published of *The Square*, a documentary which depicts Egypt's uprisings, starting from Tahrir. She signals the importance of not allowing any one story to be representative of Egypt's recent history, reminding us that complexity is an inevitable reality of mass protest. What I hope to have demonstrated through my discussion of her work and Baheyya's is how personal blogs are one component of the complicated narrative of Egypt's uprisings, a narrative that will never be comprehensive but that may be understood in snapshots. These blogs are two of those snapshots, or rather they each provide a series of snapshots as their posts accumulate over time and their interactions, images and narratives multiply. To examine them through the lens of autobiography is to move away from the argument that social media instigated the revolution and to instead consider how it also facilitated important personal observations of it. It is also to argue that the blogosphere is potentially a space where greater cross-cultural understanding can be generated, which the autobiographical form in particular is able to encourage; if we pay careful attention to the individual voices that are raised and the identities that they each assert, we can move away from prevalent false assumptions, such as those that guide Orientalist constructions of womanhood. In her assessment of the many new forms of autobiography that she has identified, Whitlock asserts that when it comes to the genre, 'I am, finally, less interested in its ends and its traditions than its capacity to perform small acts of cultural translation in a time of precarious life' (2007, p. 23). A similar motivation has drawn me to the Egyptian blogosphere, which also has the potential to perform such acts and to dismantle the stereotypes that impede a fuller understanding of Egypt's recent past.

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