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Performative Egyptian Female Resistance: A Study of Dalia Basiouny's *Magic of Borolus* and *NooNeswa's Graffiti*

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to trace how contemporary Egyptian women artists express their performativity through two different mediums namely theatre and graffiti. The basic argument behind this study is that the selected artistic products with their innovative experimental techniques enact the process by which these contemporary women writers perform change. Judith Butler's performativity informs the methodological framework for the current reading/decoding of the selected works. Both forms are characterized by being the oldest expressive forms yet continue to be charged with the power to realize change and subvert hegemonic authorities. Although the study is divided into two separate yet complementary sections, it aims to reveal the common ground between both projects. In fact, both came to light in response/ reaction to the 25th of January Egyptian revolution. In March 2013, Bassiouny wrote, performed and directed *Magic of Borolus*. This study looks at *Magic of Borolus* as an example of resistance literature with the objective of incurring change. The other form of expression analyzed in this study is graffiti. On February 11th 2012, the first anniversary of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, *NooNeswa: Graffiti Harimi* (Women Graffiti or Female Graffiti) launched its page on Facebook announcing that it is "going to overtake the streets of Cairo". The group of young Egyptian activists 'took the streets of Cairo' eleven months later by spraying its walls and fences with stencils of black and white graffiti of iconic female figures related in the hearts and minds of Egyptians with empowered women in their cultural heritage. All of the chosen figures (except for one) were popular faces of women actresses and singers. The intention of Graffiti Harimi was for women to reclaim public space as a tool of effecting change. Inspired by a belief in the power and uniqueness of written and visual arts as a means of expression, this paper explores the effects and responses of the incarnation/ reincarnation of cultural lore (the visual/ the performed) and captions and the text (the written) on the collective consciousness of a nation that revolts, revolves and will eventually evolve. Resistance art in general and such forms of artistic expression that involve direct interaction with the public in particular play the role (among other roles) of an indicator of contemporary social processes and behavioral dispositions to becoming part of a subversive structure of political, social, medial, gender and artistic activism.

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Women's struggle to incur change is as old as history. Throughout history, women's fight for change has been associated with rebellion against existing conditions. In fact, to rebel or to revolt is simply to fight in order to incur change. The prefix 're' in either rebel or revolt points to the repetitive nature of insistence and consistence in this inherent behavior that is expected but not necessarily accepted. The second syllable of the verb rebel comes from the Latin word *bellum* or 'war'. *Rebelle* in old French refers to a stubborn and obstinate person. On the other hand, despite the close synonymy between rebel and revolt, the verb revolt is also related to the feeling of repulsiveness and abhorrence. The etymology of revolution also refers to the cyclic motion of the celestial bodies. Hence, the very concept of inducing change, be it on the political, cultural or human level involves (by definition) an obtrusive struggle with hegemonic powers/symbols; a struggle that necessitates tenacity, ingenuity, repetition and support. In this sense, rebellion or revolution is indefinably linked to performing change.

The aim of this study is to trace how contemporary Egyptian women artists express their performativity through two different mediums namely theatre and graffiti. The basic argument behind this study is that the selected artistic products with their innovative experimental techniques enact the process by which these contemporary women artists perform change. Judith Butler's performativity informs the methodological framework for the current reading/decoding of the selected works. Both forms, or artistic projects, as they were, are characterized by being the oldest expressive forms yet continue to be charged with the power to realize change and subvert hegemonic authorities. Thus, although the study is divided into two separate yet complementary sections, it aims to reveal the common ground between both projects. In fact, both came to light in response/ reaction to the 25th of January Egyptian revolution. In 2011, Dalia Basiouny, an Egyptian dramatist, dramaturg, director, actress as well as activist (or as she prefers to call herself, artist) wrote, performed and directed her post-revolution multi-media monologue play entitled *Solitaire*. The play was originally written in 2009 but was re-written and updated after the January revolution because the play gained a fresh momentum with the evolution of the revolution. In February 2011, after leaving Tahrir Square, the real-life theatre of the revolution, Basiouny wrote, directed and performed what she described as "a documentary piece of testimonies" called *Tahrir Stories*. In March 2013, she wrote, performed and directed another play called *Magic of Borolus*. The plays, though different in content and approach, can be regarded as a sequel as they mostly focus on women's diverse yet related forms of resistance. In this study, I will focus however on *Magic of Borolus* as an example of resistance literature where women incur change through their performativity.

Another form of expression where women incur change through their artistic endeavors is graffiti. On February 11th 2012, the first anniversary of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian President for 30 years, *NooNeswa: Graffiti Harimi* (Women Graffiti or Female Graffiti) launched its page on Facebook announcing that it is "going to overtake the streets of Cairo". The group of young Egyptian activists 'took the streets of Cairo' eleven months later by spraying its walls and fences with stencils of black and white graffiti of iconic female figures related in the hearts and minds of Egyptians with empowered women in their cultural heritage. All of the chosen figures (except for one) were popular faces of women actresses and singers. The intention of Graffiti Harimi according to Nawara Belal, one of the group's members, was "for women to reclaim public space". Our choice of the theatre and street art was driven by the rhizomatic nature of the 2011 mass movements in Egypt which had as one of its aims the dissolution of pre-revolutionary rigid beliefs and narratives with attempts to replace them with individuation, political and medial agency. Inspired by a belief in the power and uniqueness of written and visual arts as a means of expression to incur change, this paper explores the effects and responses of the incarnation/ reincarnation of cultural lore (the visual/ the performed) and captions and the text (the written) on the collective consciousness of a nation that revolts, revolves and will eventually evolve. Post-revolution art in general and such forms of artistic expression that involve direct interaction with the public in particular play the role (among other roles) of an indicator of contemporary social processes and behavioral dispositions to becoming part of a subversive structure of political, social, medial, gender and artistic activism.

Both forms of artistic expressions will be viewed through the critical lens of philosopher, feminist and gender theorist Judith Butler and her theory of performativity. Though Butler's feminist theories have always been associated with Gay and Lesbian studies and what got to be known as 'queer theory', to my mind, the core and essence of her philosophy come from a firm feminist stance of subverting conservatism, tradition, authoritarianism and the status quo. Butler's performativity offers the perspective that agency allows for change in established authoritarian concepts. These women chose to employ "revolutionary" artistic forms to express the possibility of change through resisting traditional roles.

Historically, socially and politically, women have always been driven to the private sphere. The stereotyping of women as 'the angel in/of the house' has always been reiterated by hegemonic powers that have almost always been represented by patriarchal authority. Though, statistically, women mostly conceded to such definitions, humanity has always been surprised, or rather shocked, by the very so often Hypatian model emerging to topple or in the least disturb the status quo. According to the Butlerian theory of performativity, one is not born male or female.

Butler does not obviously refer to the biological facticity of male or female genitalia. One is consolidated as male or female through a series of acts that produce certain effects that may be intended or unintended. Performativity, therefore, is a ritualistic reproduction that is reiterated by repetition. How one constructs one's gender is through one's own performance of gender. Not accepting a fixed or stable identity, gender, from the Butlerian perspective is a repetition of acts that is both stylized and discontinuous. These acts are neither original nor creative; they are acts that have been prevalent and ongoing since long before. Therefore, because gender is performative, it is "radically free" (Gender 34). In an interview with Liz Kotz, Butler explains that "[g]ender is an impersonation . . . becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits" (85). To this effect, it is the society that either constructs or deconstructs certain social meanings within any given culturally-specific situation. Because gender is radically uninhabitable "[i]deals have to be altered and dissolved and rearticulated (85).

When Butler states "I think for a woman to identify as a woman is a culturally enforced effect", (quoted in Kotz 88) she deconstructs one of the most stable staples of social sciences. To further explain, she states:

I don't think that it's a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that 'coherent identification' has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame. (Kotz 88)

Butler resorts to the simplest of examples to prove her theory. In very basic terms, a girl is perceived a girl (with all the accompanying connotations and denotations of girlhood) from the moment she is given a girl's name and is dressed in pink and all the ensuing verbal and non-verbal acts. The phrase 'It's a girl' is "a performative utterance that henceforth compels the "girl" to cite both sexual and gendered norms in order to qualify for subjecthood within the heterosexual matrix that "hails" her" (Salih 8). Any deviation is deemed an act of defiance and any defiance if seen negatively is deemed preposterous and if seen positively is a cry for a revolutionary change. Butler's feminist stance is by all means a revolutionary stance as well. The position of women in a society changes according to many cultural and situational variables but the one constant is that women have spent stretches of time fighting for equality and recognition. One of the patriarchal means of subverting women was by defining and confining her. According to Butler, when a woman is identified as a woman, she acts "womanly". The women of this study break the socially-constructed parameters of women and set their own gendered identity, not by imitating the performative acts of men but by inventing their own performative verbal and non-verbal, continuous and discontinuous acts. The result is an act of revolution that

could alter Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement of "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" to one is not born a revolutionary; one becomes a revolutionary both consciously and unconsciously. In this respect, Butler states:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing, discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained by various social means. (*Gender Trouble* 33)

Performing Performativity:

Dalia Basiouny, in her literary oeuvre in general, and in the play focused upon in this study in particular, always presents the image of the woman who subverts the traditionally accepted model of the female. The proposed gender binarism of Butler is demonstrated in the women of her plays and by iterating certain acts and words, they disband the typical inherited socio-cultural image of women and present a model of a woman who defies, deviates, shocks and thereby dispels the status quo. In doing so, these women are sometimes defined by the mainstream as mad, other times as irresponsible and in *The Magic of Borolus* as devilish witches who should be burnt alive (which will be referred to as *Borolus* thereof).

The stated objective of *Borolus* from the first introductory lines is to exercise change and to alter awareness. Basiouny's priority is also to highlight what she calls "the usual and unfamiliar conflict between modern science and primitive and inherited knowledge" (*Borolos* 1). The will to induce change and eventually enforce it by necessity involves persistence, consistence and preparedness. The story is of an imagined village overlooking the Borolus lake in the north east of Egypt called Kafr Abu Salem ⁽¹⁾. The story is of a group of women who meet every month by the lake, when the moon is full, to perform certain 'invented' rituals that include singing, dancing and informative storytelling. They are led by Om Sa'ada (whose name means the mother of Happiness), a sixty year old woman, the first woman in the village to be educated outside the village in a boarding school in the city and who decides to return to her 'fellow-women' to teach them reading, writing and traditional herbal medicine. Having lost her only son, because of medical malpractice, Om Sa'ada gives up on western medicine and adopts traditional methods. The setting of the opening scene is entitled a lunar ritual. Om Sa'ada and her all women-followers ranging from the age of 8 to 30 attend their monthly gathering to celebrate the lunar eclipse and to discuss the relation between women and the lunar cycle. Worried about the repercussions of such meetings, the men of the village spread rumors that these women are witches whose devils need to be

exorcised. The repetition of this rumor leads the inhabitants of the village to demand for the incarceration of these women. The play ends with the burning of the prison where the women are confined. To justify the burning, one of the villagers says that if they are guilty, they will burn and if not, they will not be affected by the fire. The women do not burn but as one of the witnesses says, they spread their wings and fly. This is reminiscent of Isis who changed to a bird when she was looking for Osiris to re-unite his parts (to be discussed later in detail.)

Derwish: The women of the *jinnis* have been burnt. It is over.

Atif: No they didn't. They flew.

Yes, they flew, I saw them.

They grew big wings

They spread their wings and flew together

They got out of the prison, flew to Borolus

Sunk in the lake and then rose up

To the sun

So that nobody bothers them any more

So that nobody can confine them

Don't upset these women, *these* women (54)

The reference to the infamous episode of the Salem witch trials is obviously clear and definitely intended by Basiouny. The irony and cynicism lies in the meaning of Salem in the Arabic language which is 'safe'. The women of Kafr Abu Salem are not safe because they dare to deviate from their assigned gendered roles and overstep to encroach on gendered male territory of leadership and autonomous identity. Apart from their simple desires of dreaming of a simple life where they can learn, socialize and dream of a better world, these women also wanted to dissociate their sexuality from their identity. They considered their meeting a monthly convention for enlightenment and entertainment. But the men refused to see otherwise. Not only do they accuse them of witchcraft and evil magic, they also accuse some of them of infidelity. Nagat, one of the followers, suffers from a large-sized fibroid in her uterus causing her belly to enlarge. The men spread a rumor of her pregnancy despite the fact that her husband has been away for two years. When Om Sa'ada cures her with herbs, the tumor shrinks. The men strongly believe that with the help of Om Sa'ada, Nagat had an abortion to get away with such an immoral act.

To subvert the traditional socially-constructed gendered male / female roles, Basiouny dismantles the established cultural givens. In the play, it is the men who panic, gossip, follow and depart. One song that is recited by children on stage says that the men have left the village whereas the women have gone to the lake to play with the moon. On the other hand, the women do not assume the socially-structured male role. Their

performative utterances and acts reveal a unique identity that is in the process of self-structuring. Aided by inherited lore, contemporary sciences and the potency of Isis, the pharaonic goddess, the women of Salem defy their assigned gendered roles not by adopting typical male practices but by enforcing a different image of the female who refuses and rebels. By doing so, they manage not to avoid the pitfall that sometimes plagues feminist theories or what Butler calls “the tie of loss”:

The point there was that in order to identify as a “woman”, it is necessary to background or refuse masculine identifications, but that that refusal is itself a way of being tied to that masculine identification, the tie of loss. (Kotz 88)

After the women sing a traditional song in the opening scene in which they highlight their repetitive act of meeting every month when the moon is full, they play a game called “In my world”. The participants dream of ‘their’ world and with the intervention of each woman, a mental image of a Utopia is born; a world where there are healthy laughing children and liberated respectable women. They also dream of fairness, justice and charity. The 8-year old Reem dreams of a school where there is no screaming, where children play, draw and sing. This ‘created’ world which Reem sums up by saying “a world like this world” (8) alluding to the Om Sa’ada world, is constructed gradually by visitations and consultations to their mentor, Om Sa’ada, when needed and is consolidated every month by their meetings. It is this repetitiveness which Butler prefers to label as performativity. The repetition or iteration of the phrase “In my world” consolidates the idea making it more valid, more tangible and more achievable.

To construct an “alternative awareness” (*Borolus1*), and therefore alter the presupposed gendered identity, Om Sa’ada also empowers her followers with basic schooling. When Bahiyya enquires about Loza’s inexplicable change in looks and behavior, Loza tells her that the reason is the monthly circle and that Om Sa’ada teaches them reading and arithmetic on Sundays and Tuesdays and herbal medicine on Mondays and Wednesdays. She also explains to them that during the lunar eclipse, the moon does not “suffocate” but the earth blocks the sunlight. She repetitively tells them not to hate or curse anybody because this will incur negative energy. She also advises the married ones to drink bergamot four times a day to balance their hormones. The ‘regular and limited repetition’ of the act or what Butler calls iterability (Butler, *Bodies*, 1993) is the means to reform the assumed socially and culturally-structured identity to an alternative one that challenges obstinate cultural norms. Bahiyya, the character whose curiosity is roused and is invited to come to join their circle so that “the circle of light becomes bigger” (10) is symbolic of Egypt, an iconic name often attributed to Egypt. Hence, the possible identity change of

the small circle could have a more extensive chain reaction incurring an alternative perception of women and by women.

In the play, every performative act, during the lunar meetings, takes the shape of the circle. :

Our circle was beautiful, but the night is over Days
will pass soon, and we will gather again as family Our circle
was beautiful, but the night is over Days will pass
soon, and we will gather again as family. (59)

The emphasis on circularity with the relevant significations of continuity, endlessness, repetitiveness and impenetrability demonstrate the clarity of these women's objectives. Their will is to establish their own self-alteration and self-reformation in order to be able to later reform. The indigenous notion of the circularity of time is augmented at the end of the play, with the appearance of Isis, the goddess of the moon and motherhood, on a digital screen on stage, rising from the Borolus Lake. The timing of her appearance is crucial as all the women are now imprisoned awaiting an obviously unfair and discriminatory trial by the men of the village. She describes herself as the goddess of wisdom and power thereby not setting herself within the parameters of being the ideal mother / wife as per the typical historical definition. In her opening lines, Isis first underpins the following relation:

My daughter,
You are me
I am you
You are me
I am your mother Isis
The goddess of wisdom, power and the underworld
I see myself in your image, like you see your face in mine.(40)

By underlining her oneness and concordance with the women, Isis closes the circle. She then sends them a two-fold prescription of advice and assurance. After reminding them of her story of assembling the parts of her husband's body that were strewn all over the Earth and that she "made him a man after having been a corpse", she states that she immersed herself in the sacred lake and cleansed her soul of their ignorance and sins. The result was "I gave birth to myself from the inside of myself / More powerful, more glorious and more sacred" (59). She then prescribes the path to salvation; a path that would dismantle their imposed gendered identity to assume a more empowered and capable one:

Come on my daughter
Immerse in the sacred lake within you
Liberate yourself from restrictions of their narrow world
Grow two wings and soar in the world of light.

The second part of the message is a note of reassurance and fortitude:

There is light after darkness
 There is light after night
 There is light after injustice. (59)

The choice of Isis as a historical, religious and cultural icon reverberates with many significations. Isis's longtime diligent strife was exclusively with men. Her tireless/tiresome efforts were also for a man and her achievement was her son Horus, another man. Her battle is one of defiance of authoritative symbolic symbols represented by Seth, their brother, the god of violence and desert. After her husband / brother Osiris was killed by their brother Seth, she defies fate and reassembles her husband's body parts for long enough to conceive Horus. To protect Horus from the evils of Seth, Isis hides with him in the desert until he is old and strong enough to retrieve his throne protecting him from the natural perils of the desert. When Horus senses traces of sympathy with Seth, being her brother, he beheads her but the beheading is reversed by magic and Horus eventually regains his throne. Isis is more known in mythology for her magical and healing powers. She uses her magic to aid the dead and in the case of her husband, to resurrect the dead. Symbolically, this is what she does to the Salem women after they accomplish their mission of self-reform and enact Basiouny's alternative awareness. The recurring impression on the pharaonic temples of Isis suckling her son Horus and protecting him evokes the archetypal image of the Madonna and her child. Only in the Christian representation, it is Jesus who has the magical healing powers. In the Isis story, the roles are reversed and the extent of the powers is magnified.

The socially-constructed traits of both males and females are embodied in Isis. Patriarchal cultures have always attributed the qualities of protectiveness, care, soft-heartedness, inherent motherhood to females as opposed to male characteristics of protection, potency and survival mechanisms. Isis is an embodiment of both. Her iconic tragedy is ironically a symbol of hope and persistence. Her tears (a sign of female weakness and helplessness) have mythically made the River Nile overflow to give life and vegetation to a desert country. She is known as the friend of the marginalized and the downtrodden but her story kindles the spirit of empowerment. So, in short, Basiouny rightly chooses the figure of Isis to appear in the confinement scene to guide and reassure the marginalized women of Abu Salem; women who chose to deconstruct the traditional image and to reconstruct a new image that defies the socially-constructed one. The closing scene ends with an array of characters on stage with overlapping conversations and monologues only to end with women having the louder voice. Men speak helplessly of jinnis and the fact that 'their' women have been haunted with evil spirits whereas women speak of positivity and determination. Najat says she will continue her education and wonders why 'they' (meaning the men) are afraid of songs sung by the lake.

Reem, the eight-year old, reiterates her dream of an ideal school where children, play, draw and sing. She asks a rhetorical question of "What is tyranny?" and responds by saying "If one is afraid of ghosts, then one will see ghosts" (*Borolus* 56) to underpin the notion that authoritative and tyrannical figures/concepts are ghosts that one creates and then is enslaved by. Bahiyya on another side of the stage regrets the fact that she was married at the age of sixteen and dreams of giving birth to a girl and not a boy to teach her that education is not only to be literate but to walk around with her head held high. Om Sa'ada ends these overlapping monologues by saying:

We teach those who need to be taught, the circle of light will grow
We should say what we want not what we don't want
Our bodies are influenced by the gravity of the moon
We meet whenever there is a full moon
What jinnis and what superstitions???
In my world, children laugh loudly
Where is the crime that people meet and talk to express their
opinions?(59)

Performative Graffiti

In a way similar to Basiouny's endeavor, the short-lived but significant artistic output of a group of graffitists called *NooNeswa* bears witness to the enhancement of street art and secures its place within the revolutionary narrative. Indeed, the plethora of artistic expression by young people in the wake of January 2011 and, notably, various forms of street art, acted as a new social bond in extremely challenging circumstances and enabled new understandings of the relation between art and activism. Needless to say, Graffiti or street art is neither ground-breaking nor innovative. As a matter of fact, despite its apparent novelty, using walls as a medium for expression outdate any other medium. Paintings and inscriptions found on the walls of caves have been proved to be of prehistoric origin as early as 40,000 years back. What is indisputable is that such wall paintings, artistic and elaborate as they were, can by no means be considered expressions of whimsical decorative creativity. Anthropologists have proved that cave paintings were either for communicating certain messages, or for ceremonial purposes or interestingly enough to cast a spell of magic to make something happen. South African archeologist David Lewis-Williams theorizes that the early shamans would hide in caves to enter into a trance and paint their visions on cave walls with the purpose of drawing power out of the cave walls. It was believed that these paintings were ascribed with magical secrets to increase the number of hunted animals (Whitley 35).

Modern day graffiti and primitive cave paintings exhibit obvious similarities as they are both artistic forms of communicative expressions with the intention and magical ability to move and induce change (be it real or surreal). However, there lie two prominent differences. Graffiti is an outdoor activity deemed by authority and the bourgeois as an illegal or illicit public expression that defaces public spaces whereas cave paintings were mostly preserved and treasured in hidden places being the intellectual property of wise sages and shamans. Although graffiti is defined in most dictionaries as "a rude decoration inscribed on rocks or walls" or "drawings, messages, etc., often obscene, scribbled on the walls", the etymology of the word proves otherwise. Graffiti either comes from the Latin *graphium* which is a sharp iron pen used to write on barks and wax or from the Greek word *grapheion* from which comes the English verb 'graft'. Graft is to unite (a shoot or bud) with a growing plant by insertion or by placing in close contact or to transplant or implant (living tissue, for example) surgically into a bodily part to replace a damaged part or compensate for a defect. Therefore, graffiti is erroneously dubbed an illicit act of expression that defaces and disfigures thereby guiding/ misguiding the collective consciousness.

Hence, graffiti is a loud uninhibited counter-hegemonic manifesto to reclaim public spaces. What is considered by state authorities as defacement and vandalism is conceived by graffitiists as an underlying subversive social and political message. What is perceived as an urban epidemic that needs to be addressed is deemed as a spatial conquest where the conqueror claims the territory using weapons such as the aerosol can. Authorities and laymen alike would rather prefer a 'clean' public space where sleeping dogs are left to lie and therefore the 'crime' of spraying the walls is seen both as a vile and destructive act disrupting the ostensible serenity of the place.

One of the by-products of the January revolution was the re-activation of the art of graffiti. Revolutionary street art, graffiti, tags and slogans overtook the walls and pavements and undersides of bridges and tunnels to announce the launching of a revolution. The walls that stood in arbitrary silence were suddenly bellowing with overt and covert messages calling for change. Individual attempts of stenciling and spraying soon became organized groups with known collective identities and with different political stances. Public spaces became marked territories, there-from starting an unannounced but visual struggle between activists on one hand and the authority and anti-revolutionists on the other hand. Persistent and relentless acts of spraying, removing, re-spraying, adding, re-spraying.....prove the desperate resoluteness of both parties to reclaim the territory hence proclaiming the 'winner'.

NooNeswa was one of the groups of graffiti artists whose members started off individually and then became a collective of young artists of both genders with the aim of empowering women. The name of *NooNeswa*

graffiti pertains to the letter "N" or *noon* ن in the Arabic language, a suffix that is added at the end of verbs to relate to the female gender. The choice of the name corresponds to the objective of its founders. Its Facebook profile information explicitly said that "[T]hrough graffiti, the campaign will tackle and invert negative social ideas /stereotypes, and instead, build images that are positive and powerful to honor the women of our society".

By organizing street campaigns, stencils of faces of powerful Egyptian women were sprayed in the public spaces. Different stencils relayed different messages: of warning and threatening on one hand and reassurance and support on the other and mere matter of fact information on a third (Illustration 1). On the whole, all their creative output underpins the subversive will to revolutionize the stereotypical image of the victimized woman and to challenge the surfacing voices calling women to 'take refuge' in the private sphere. The orthodox notion of classical literary/ historical figures such as Julius Caesar's wife Calpurnia and Brutus' wife Portia staying at home after warning their husbands of the imminent dangers are strongly opposed by feminist collectives like *NooNeswa* and many others such as Monalisa Brigades. Merna Thomas, the co-founder of the group worries that "women are finding themselves increasingly squeezed out of public life". In an interview with the Associated Press, Thomas says:

Every day the space for women shrinks on the streets and then we saw the parliament after the revolution and the representation of women was one per cent...There's no one in the government, so basically we have no space left in Egypt.

Preoccupied with the public spaces, Nawara Belal, another member of *NooNeswa* tells *Egypt Independent* that "women are not comfortable in public places...we must feel that we belong there, that it's our zone." To overtake urban public spaces, *NooNeswa* decided to spray the walls and pavements of cities with black and white stencils of iconic female references mostly from pop culture; figures that are identified in the local collective sub/consciousness with patriotism, pride, nationalism, political struggle, triumph, success, achievement and the power of the feminine. The group revived from the past faces of Egyptian songstresses such as Om Kolthoum dubbed as "The Star/ Planet/Nightingale of the East" and Shadia, better known as "The Voice of Egypt". Another face, much respected by Egyptians and Arabs is actress and film producer Faten Hamama or "Diva of Arab Cinema Screen". Souad Hosni, an extremely popular Egyptian movie sweetheart was also selected. The only character, outside the scope of pop culture was Widad al-Demerdash, the famous protest leader in the workers' strikes of the industrial city of al-Mahalla, the strikes that foreshadowed the breakout of the revolution. All the selected icons except for al-Demerdash belong to the sixties of the twentieth century. In this

respect, co-founder, Thomas deplors this fact saying that "It's sad that we have to go back to the 1960s, when the feminist movement [in Egypt] was doing better." An objective of the campaign was/is "to re-inject positive ideas and images to the public" instead of the meek social and political representation of present-day Egyptian women (Thomas, *Egypt Independent*).

***NooNeswa* as a Subversive Practice:**

Decisive events and momentous historic landmarks are difficult to perceive except retrospectively. The graffiti of the iconic pop culture Egyptian actress/ singer Shadia appeared on the walls of Cairo eleven months after the virginity tests were performed by the military forces on eighteen women protestors abducted from Tahrir Square during a peaceful demonstration commemorating Women's Day. The graffiti was a drawing of Shadia impersonating Foua'da, (Illustration 1) the heroine of the classic Egyptian film "Something of Fear" in 1969. The film tells the story of a despot, Atris, who 'disciplines' the inhabitants of his village who do not succumb to his tyranny by closing the flood gate or the water-lock, the only water access to quench the thirst of people and plants and animals. The only one who defies him is his long-time past sweetheart/ present wife who courageously turns open the valve of the sluice in a dramatic cinematic scene, highly familiar in the collective Egyptian memory. When Atris enquires about the perpetrator, Fouada utters her unforgettable line "I am the one who opened the water-lock" which is the caption used by *NooNeswa* for their graffiti. (Illustration 1) The heroic act spurs a revolution in the village and the film ends by the villagers setting fire to Atris' house. He is burnt alive after being abandoned by his followers.

The film is an adaptation of an Arabic novel of the same title, written by Egyptian novelist Tharwat Abaza in 1965. When it was published, innuendos that Atris symbolized Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser echoed in the cultural sphere. Public showing of the film required a special permission from Nasser himself who consented after saying "If I were Atris, and the people had not killed me then the people would be donkeys" (Abaza 98). So although his film was politically motivated, the events of the film remained in the modern Egyptian cultural consciousness symbols of the people's defiance of all forms of dictatorships.

Man is by nature a homo significans (meaning maker) i.e. driven by the desire to make meanings. Meanings are made through our conscious or unconscious interpretation of signs. It is virtually impossible to consider or interpret signs and therefore decode them while overlooking their cultural references. To a foreigner, such graffiti is one of a woman wearing a smile of determination and pride. The generated meanings surface only when the dynamic patterns of dominance are activated as "a sign has no 'absolute' value independent of this context" (Saussure 80). The diverse connotations of the given image and accompanying text are only relevant and

comprehensible within a culture-specific setting. The Saussurean legacy asserted that interpretation of any expression rests upon "a collective habit or on convention". Post-Saussurean studies further augmented the focus on the context of the text insisting on what Kristeva terms as the horizontal and the vertical axes. The concept of reviving a memory which in turn revives another memory is a performative act. According to Butler, the 'ritualistic reproduction' is an ongoing process that 'produces something'. The graffiti on the wall and its repetitive appearance on a multitude of walls produce certain effects. The repetitive employing of the correct picture with the appropriate caption in the proper place and time is an evident example of a performative practice. The Shadia graffiti evokes in the cultural collective the principle of defying authority and subverting tyrannical symbols. The repetition of the same graffiti produces an altered perception of the gender Shadia represents. The main concept behind performativity as mentioned before is that repetition produces certain intended or unintended effects. In Butler's words, gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (*Gender* 33). The outcome is newly-constructed identity; a performative accomplishment which the mundane audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to later perform.

The levels of intertextuality in the Fouada graffiti are multiple. Fouada is played by Shadia who in the heart and mind of Egyptians is an epitome of any typical middle class Egyptian girl. As an actress she was dubbed, the darling coquette of the Egyptian cinema and as a singer she was dubbed the voice of Egypt. This binary opposition between feminine fragility and masculine strength associated respectively and stereotypically to females and males is what makes Shadia resonate in the consciousness of the majority of Egyptians as a symbol of Egyptian women. Fouada, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a symbol of bravery and resistance. She is the spark of the revolution, the gateway to salvation and deliverance from injustice and dictatorship. Fouada simply stands for Egypt who has not and will not surrender to tyranny and despotism. For revolutionary and post-revolutionary activism, the resurrection of Fouada in the public sphere kindled the spirit of the revolution.

The graffiti of Fouada also brings to mind a famous phrase quoted verbatim from both the novel and the film. The villagers march in big numbers chanting "the marriage of Atris and Fouada is void" referring to their physical marriage due to the coercion of Fouada to marry him. The phrase evolved to be a slogan of rebellion and defiance impregnated with the ability of and possibility of change. It was chanted during the students' protests in November 1968 to oppose the lenient verdicts meted out to the Air Force top officials accused of the 1967 June setback. The slogan was

reincarnated in the January 2011 revolution in various occasions to refer to any suspiciously corrupt political affiliations.

On another intertextual level, the title of the novel/ film is a direct quote from the Quran. In *Surat Al-Baqarah* (The Cow), verse 155 says: "And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits". The verse warns believers and devout followers that they will undergo hardships to test their faith. The phrase "something of fear" however is sub/consciously related to a divine promise to "... give good tidings to the patient" 155. Who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.156". These graffiti messages enact how Egyptian women, one year after 2011, still carried the spirit of resistance and believed that they can incur change through performing arts.

The other iconic female figures which were chosen by *NooNeswa* also serve in cementing their goal of empowering Egyptian women and in bolstering the idea of effecting change. Widad al-Demerdash, (Illustration 2) is the famous Mahalla activist ⁽²⁾ who, in 2006, led the women protestors who were demanding for shares in profits and equality in wages between women and men. The protests were joined by male workers only three days later. The graffiti caption subverts the traditional Egyptian patriarchal phrase of "Egypt gave birth to men" changing it to "Egypt gave birth to women" thereby transferring the culturally-attributed male significations to women. This of course could be interpreted from a masculinist perspective of male superiority; in order to be recognized as positive one has to be defined according to male parameters and to emulate male behavior. This however contradicts the historical reality of this particular situation Under the title of "An act of courage that launched a revolution", Liz Sly wrote:

When the men of the mill balked at joining the banned strike action, she seized the initiative and led her female co-workers out into the factory grounds. Chanting "Where are the men? Here are the women," they marched around the mill until the men were shamed into joining them. After three days, the workers won. (Sly n.p)

Aware of her socially-structured capacity as a woman, al-Demerdash's aim was to destabilize the intense normativity of gender. Not only does she challenge the rigid dichotomies of gender but by repeating her chant, she reverses the roles:

We could see that they were just standing by their machines. We could see they were afraid," says al-Demerdash, recalling the moment when she burst into her chant. "So we decided to incite them in any way we could. We wanted them to be ashamed. (Sly n.p)

The other graffiti of *NooNeswa* reiterate similar concepts. The image of Faten Hamama, (Illustration 3) dubbed, the Diva or Lady of the Arab

screen does not echo the expected femininity or nobility associated with her, but reverberates with resilience and defiance. Mostly known for playing roles of the innocent, the submissive and the effeminate, the caption chosen for her graffiti is "Egypt has always been free". Souad Hosny's (Illustration 4) graffiti, also known as the Cinderella, is definitely not down-trodden nor victimized because of rephrasing the title of her film from "For men only" to "Nothing is for men only". Another graffiti for Souad Hosny (Illustration 5) states "Girls and boys are alike"; her popular song from a T.V series in the eighties of the twentieth century. Om Kalthoum's (Illustration 6) chosen song for *NooNeswa* graffiti is "Give me my freedom/ let me go". This phrase comes from a 130-verse romantic poem called *Al-Atlal* (The Ruins) written by the famous Egyptian poet Ibrahim Nagi. Though the poem speaks of a failed love story, the grandiosity of Om Kalthoum's voice and the impressiveness of her looks dismantle the fragility associated with deprivation and frustration. On seeing or reading the graffiti captions of *NooNeswa*, the provoked response would not only stir their respective literary, cultural and political mind images but it would also refresh what Saussure calls *l'image acoustique*. The resonance and challenge would echo in the recipient's ears when the image of Om Kalthoum is seen on the walls. Similarly, Fouada's perseverance and indifference to fear is definitely heard when one sees the words (I am the one who opened the water-lock) which would in turn spur the cycle of associations mentioned before i.e Shadia (the voice of Egypt).

In his seminal book, *Limited INC*, Jacques Derrida asks the following: "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if ...[it] were not identifiable in some way as a citation?" (18). The appearance and re-appearance of such graffiti (with its discernible and hidden codes) and its situatedness in a particular time and place brings alive to the eye and to the ear memories of such icons that evoke capabilities of re-evaluation and incessant contemplation. This would eventually re-form and reform perspective. Dismantling the culturally and socially constructed image of the female brings forth a different image that cites notions of empowerment and subversion of the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Why have people rebelled and why do they still rebel and will continue to? Is the notion of 'begging to differ' an innate human feature? If so, can the first expression of rebellion, i.e. the archetypal Adam and Eve sin be considered a mere 'begging to differ' or was it the first outright cry against authority. The analogy in this case however is faulty. If it is accepted, within all traditional perspectives that Adam and Eve exchanged the better for the worse, the objective of most rebellious acts is to achieve a

positive change. It would be redundant of course to point to the fact that 'positive' is 'relative'.

In his article entitled *Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies*, Jack A. Goldstone rightly states that "Revolutions rarely triumph because ...conditions rarely coincide" (8). He further explains that revolutions, protests, workers strikes, students movements and peasants uprisings are usually aborted by the oppressiveness and empowerment of what he terms 'sultanistic regimes'. In this case however, and despite the general accordance that Arab Spring revolutions have not achieved their initial objectives, one can never claim that these desires for change were fully nipped in the bud. Augmented by art and supported by its nature of iterability and performativity, the 'sultanistic regimes' are challenged by the sultanate of art. Thence, a revolution is not a performance as some prefer to erroneously describe it but it is a performative situated act that constantly and continuously and repetitively re-claims its dynamism. The assumed ephemerality and temporality of political/historical events are subverted by the power of performativity and the perpetuality of cultural heritage as well as the endurance and 'long breath' of women. Therefore, revolutions are never complete. They are in a constant state of revolving. Though, very often, they are interrupted, are interminable because a revolution does not die. The act may die but the spirit is performative.

Simone de Beauvoir once claimed that from a masculinist point of view, women are women because of the aura of unknowability and mystery that surrounds them. All the women in this study whether on paper or on the wall reverse this theory. The women inhabiting Basiouny's play and those who used to be inhabiting the walls of Egypt do not 'act' in order to merely defy the 'Law of the Father' (though they partly do); they act accordingly to reinstate and resignify gender norms. Through repetition, they reinforce their gender coherence. Their mission is both announced and pronounced. The "trouble" they arouse, to borrow the term from Judith Butler, is neither coincidental nor casual but intended and predetermined. Within masculinist, hegemonic, patriarchal cultures "trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position" thus exposing *his* "autonomy as illusory" (Butler, Gender, 3). However, what this study proposes is that the aim of these women is not "the dialectical reversal of power" (Butler, Gender, 4) but to re-create a *different* social and cultural gender identity, one that subverts and defies the inherited, socially-constructed patriarchal one; an identity that thinks revolutionary, acts revolutionary and repetitively kindles a revolution.

الملخص

" اداء الأدوار" والمقاومة في الفن النسوي المصري المعاصر دراسة لمسرحية
سحر البرلس لداليا بسيوني وجرافيتي نون نسوة
ايناس احمد الابراشي

تعكف هذه الدراسة على تحليل شكلين تجريبيين من أشكال التعبير الفني للشباب المصري المعاصر وهما فن المسرح وفن الرسم الجرافيتي لتوضيح كيفية وامكانية احداث التغيير. تستعين الدراسة بنظرية "اداء الأدوار" لفيلسوفة والناقدة الادبية جوديث بتلر لقراءة العمليين وفك شفرتهما . ويتسم الشكلان الفنيان – أو ما قد يعرف باسم المشروع الفني – بأنهما من أقدم الفنون التعبيرية، ولكنهما لا يزالان مع ذلك من الأشكال المفعمة بالحياة والقدرة على إحداث التغيير وهدم السلطة المهيمنة. وتنقسم الدراسة إلى جزأين مكملين لبعضهما البعض وتهدف إلى استكشاف المساحات المشتركة بين المشروعين. وقد جاءت المشروعات استجابة لثورة الخامس والعشرين من يناير. في السنوات التالية لـ ٢٠١١ كتبت داليا بسيوني مجموعة من المسرحيات مستلهمة بروح الثورة والمقاومة والرغبة في التغيير. في مارس ٢٠١٣ كتبت مسرحية من تأليفها وأدائها وإخراجها أيضا بعنوان سحر البرلس. وعلى الرغم من تنوع هذه المسرحيات في محتواها ومنهجها، فمن الممكن اعتبارها سلسلة متتالية إذ تركز في مجملها على أشكال المقاومة النسائية المتنوعة والمتشابكة في آن واحد التي تهدف الي احداث تغيير ما. وتركز هذه الدراسة على مسرحية سحر البرلس بوصفها مثالا على أدب المقاومة. ثم تتناول الدراسة بالتحليل شكلا آخر من أشكال التعبير ألا وهو رسم الجرافيتي. ففي شهر فبراير ٢٠١٢ أثناء السنوية الأولى للإطاحة بحسني مبارك أطلقت مجموعة "نون نسوة" صفحتها على شبكة الفيس بوك بعنوان "جرافيتي حريمي" معلنة أنها "سوف تجتاح شوارع القاهرة". وبالفعل نزلت هذه المجموعة من الشابات المصريات إلى الشوارع بعد ١١ شهرا وأغرقوا حوايط مدينة القاهرة وجدرانها برسوم "استنسل" بالأبيض والأسود تمثل شخصيات نسائية ذات أهمية رمزية ولها مكانة في قلوب المصريين وعقولهم ترتبط بصورة المرأة القوية في إرثهم الثقافي. وباستثناء صورة واحدة كانت الصور المنتقاة كلها لوجوه ممثلات ومطربات واسعات الشعبية. وكان الهدف من وراء مشروع "جرافيتي حريمي" هو أن تستعيد النساء السيطرة على المجال العام. بهدف تغيير الانماط السائدة. ويستلهم هذا البحث الإيمان بقدرة الفنون اللفظية والبصرية على التعبير وتفردتها في ذلك، وبالتالي تستكشف أشكال الاستجابة والآثار المترتبة على تجسيد التقاليد الثقافية وإعادة تجسيدها (من خلال الفن البصري وفنون الأداء) والآثار المترتبة على التعليقات والنص (من خلال النص المكتوب) وتأثيرها على الضمير الجمعي لأمة تثور وتدور ومن ثم تتطور.

¹ Kafr in Arabic means a small village. Kafr Abu Salem means the Village of Salem. The name usually refers to that of the biggest and most influential family in the village. In this case, it is the Salem family. Usually, according to rural traditions, the *Omda*, or the Mayor of the village is also appointed by the government from this family. Ironically, the name Salem means 'safe' whereas in the play the *Omda* is one of the reasons for chaos and injustice.

² Mahalla is a large industrial and agricultural city in the middle of the Nile Delta in the North of Egypt. It is known for its textile industry. It is also known for its politically active workers and their famous protests and strikes for political, religious and working conditions reasons.

ILLUSTRATIONS

@Elmoshir
@Jadel_Radwan



ILLUSTRATION 1 (Shadia)



ILLUSTRATION 2 (Wedad al-Demerdash)



ILLUSTRATION 3 (Faten Hamama)



ILLUSTRATION 4 (Souad Hosny)



ILLUSTRATION 5 (Souad Hosny)



ILLUSTRATION 6 (Om Kalthoum)

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