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Introduction: Egyptian women, revolution, and protest culture
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This special issue comes at a time when the Egyptian nation is facing deep divisions about the notion and definition of revolution. The articles here aim to look at the 2011 revolution and the central role of women within it from a critical perspective. Our objective is not to glorify the revolution or inflate the role of Egyptian women within its parameters, but to analyse and critique both the achievements and setbacks of this revolution and the contributions of various strata of women to this revolutionary process. Women’s participation is part of a broader picture and needs to be theorised as an essential aspect of the ongoing struggle for freedom and social justice, not in isolation of it. The reader will soon realise that the authors in this issue, perhaps, agree on one important element of the 2011 revolution: the struggle is ongoing, and the revolutionary process is still being shaped and recreated. Thus, I argue in this introduction that the story of the Egyptian Revolution still resists any kind of closure. Indeed, as political events continue to unfold, the years to come will no doubt witness an expansion of the political and cultural archive of the Arab uprisings, accompanied by much academic work on their meaning and significance. Women’s roles and contributions need to occupy a central position in these academic analyses.

Keywords: Egyptian revolution; protest culture; Egyptian women

In her recently published memoir entitled *Athqal min Radwa* (Heavier than Radwa), novelist and scholar the late Radwa Ashour concludes with these lines: “There is another possibility for realising our pursuit rather than defeat, since we are determined not to die before we try to live” (2013, p. 393). Through these seemingly simple words, Ashour has perhaps summarised the pursuit of many Egyptians in their ongoing struggle to fulfil the demands and aspirations of the 25 January 2011 revolution: we will keep trying as long as we are alive. At the same time, she revives the memory of many revolutionaries who were killed and injured since the breakout of the uprising, whilst paying tribute to them. She refers to them as the “extended family of activists, revolutionaries, and dreamers” who belong to the “party of stubbornness” and “who detest defeat” (Ashour, 2013, p. 393).

Many of these names and faces will remain in our memory and in our history forever (thanks to photography and graffiti): Mina Danial, Emad Effat, Alaa Abdel Hady, Gaber Salah (Gika) (among the thousands of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the revolution); as well as Ahmed Harara, Hind Nafie’ and Malik Mostafa (and thousands others among the injured or those who lost their eyes during the protests). Ashour’s
memoir intersects aesthetically with a graffiti book compiled by painter and artist Heba Helmi, entitled Gowwaya Shaheed: Fann Sharei’ al-Thwra al-Masriyya (Inside Me is a Martyr: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution, 2013). Helmi’s visually stunning book chronicles major events of the first year of the January revolution through graffiti interpretations and revealing images which reflect critically on the trajectory of the revolution. The last image in Helmi’s book is by graffiti artist Keizer showing a chandelier and underneath it we read this line: nourhom ‘omroh ma hayentifi (Their [the martyrs’] Light Will Never Fade). Through such books as Ashour’s and Helmi’s, the story of the martyrs will remain alive to remind us continuously that the perpetrators of these crimes have not been brought to justice.

In another part of her memoir, Ashour writes:

Life draws its frame around death. It [Life] advances before death and flows after it; it draws its borders surrounding it from top, bottom and the two sides. This is my belief. I don’t know if this conviction has something to do with living in my early childhood until I reached the age of nine in a house that overlooked the Nile. The river was profoundly present, dictating to me its strange daily lessons. I’m saying ‘strange’ lessons because we internalise them even before we fully realise or articulate them in words. Later on, slowly, we will know that the Nile has been present since times immemorial, and it is staying for a time that is difficult to imagine, a future that is ambivalent and enigmatic; its [the Nile’s] persistent features are the river’s water, the sun, and the evading moon that comes and goes, in full or as a crescent. (2013, p. 391 – my translation from the Arabic)

Ashour insists in her memoir that life is indeed stronger than death, more profound than defeat and disappointment. She links the experience of many Egyptians in perseverance, endurance and resilience to fundamental elements: the persistence of the river Nile itself. Ashour’s poetic images in the book allude metaphorically to the essence of revolution, where people struggle to live (a better life), rather than die (defeated or humiliated). This sense of continuity and change, and lineage to land, history and river provides the essential framework for our understanding of the 2011 Egyptian revolution in the making.

The articles included in this special issue were among many others presented in two workshops entitled “Women and Political Activism in Egypt” (held in November 2012 at the University of Manchester) and “Egyptian Women Artists and Writers, and Cultures of Resistance” (held in March 2013 at Ain Shams University – Cairo). The two events were funded by a grant from the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) with the aim of consolidating an international network of researchers and scholars whose work focuses on studying the leading role of women activists, writers and artists in a revolutionary context. The two workshops provided an intellectual and creative space for discussing diverse viewpoints as well as providing a critique of women’s participation and contribution to the ongoing revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere. Even though the selected articles in this issue focus on the experience of Egyptian women during and after the 25 January 2011 revolution, a number of authors contextualise this experience in relation to previous revolutions in Egyptian modern history, particularly the 1919 and 1952 revolutions, while others interweave it with struggles in other contexts whether in the Arab region or beyond.

This special issue comes at a time when the Egyptian nation is facing deep divisions about the notion and definition of revolution. The articles here aim to look at the 2011 revolution and the central role of women within it from a critical perspective. Our objective is not to glorify the revolution or inflate the role of Egyptian women within
its parameters, but to analyse and critique both the achievements and setbacks of this revolution and the contributions of various strata of women to this revolutionary process. Women’s participation is part of a broader picture and needs to be theorised as an essential aspect of the ongoing struggle, not in isolation of it. The reader will soon realise that the authors in this issue perhaps agree on one important element of the 2011 revolution: the struggle is ongoing, and the revolutionary process is still being shaped and recreated.

In other words, the story of the Egyptian Revolution still resists any kind of closure, even when we consider the return of the old military regime to power with Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el Sisi’s ascendance to presidency in June 2014. As Samia Mehrez aptly remarks in the introduction to her edited book Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir:

Indeed, as a multilayered text, revolution and its translation(s) – not just in Egypt but in many countries in the region – is not to be read as a string of meaning or a single, linear line of signification, but rather, as layers of narrative and fields of meaning that are at once open and dynamic. (Mehrez, 2012, p. 1)

Mehrez perceives the Egyptian revolution as an “open text” following in the footsteps of Umberto Eco’s theory of the “open work”: “To use Umberto Eco’s formulation, both the revolution and its translations remain ‘open texts’ at the literal and semiotic levels” (Mehrez, 2012, p. 1).

The term ‘revolution’ itself has been a subject of wide debate and contestation among academics. Can we refer to the January 2011 events in Egypt as a full-fledged revolution, or was it an uprising, or a revolt, or a coup? The Arabic word for revolution is thawra from the root verb thaara, which specifically means to ‘revolt’ or ‘rise’ against something or someone. Millions of Egyptians believe that what happened in January 2011 and after was a thawra because people from all walks of life across the country rose against a dictator and toppled him, even though the regime itself, in terms of its heavy grasp of state institutions, has not been overthrown. Millions of Egyptians went out on the streets to demand the downfall of the regime, chanting the now iconic slogan al-Sha’b Yureed Isqat al-Nizam (The People Want the Downfall of the Regime), which first echoed on the streets of Tunisia during its uprising in December 2010. But did the Egyptians who were chanting this slogan agree on what they meant by the ‘regime’? This question has also been subject to wide discussion and critique over the past few years. For example, Mark Levine contends in his article “Theorizing Revolutionary Practice: Agendas for Research on the Arab Uprisings” that:

The revolutionaries at the forefront of the revolutionary eruptions might have wanted the ‘downfall of the system,’ but they by and large did not want to be the ones to replace it. Such lack of immediate and coherent political goals – that is, in the seizure of state power – are both a strength and a weakness of the uprisings, but the dynamics behind both consequences still are largely unexplored. (Levine, 2013, p. 193)

The Egyptian revolutionaries may not have agreed on what they had in mind by ‘regime’, but the sacrifices made by many of them since the breakout of the 2011 revolution; the thousands who lost their lives, the thousands upon thousands who were injured, the thousands who remain in military and civilian prisons without trials, the perpetrators of the killings and other forms of violence within the police and military forces who have not been tried for their crimes, make the revolutionaries believe that they are still a long way from achieving social justice and human dignity through the dismantling of state structures which oppressed them in the first place.
In the introduction to his book *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Gilbert Achcar opens a discussion around the term ‘revolution’ in the context of the 2011 Arab upheavals. He makes this observation about Egypt:

> The immense uprising that began on 25 January 2011 constitutes a bursting of the masses onto the political stage that had no precedent in the very long history of the land of the pyramids. Hence it has, beyond the shadow of a doubt, set a revolutionary dynamic in motion. It is too soon to pronounce on the consequences. The most radical results of the 1952 coup appeared only many years later. We would do well to bear that in mind. (Achcar, 2013, p. 15 – emphasis in original)

It is precisely this revolutionary dynamic which many Egyptians have coined *el sawra* (*thawra*) *mostamirra* or the Revolution Continues. Achcar further explains that although the masses in Tunisia and Egypt have successfully conducted a political revolution where a despotic ruler was overthrown, what has not been achieved yet is a “thorough transformation of the social structure” in these countries, what he refers to as a “social revolution” (Achcar, 2013, p. 17). Achcar goes on to say:

> If socioeconomic factors are at the very heart of the Arab uprising, it follows that there are still radical changes to come. At the very least, they will bring in their wake new episodes of revolution and counter-revolution in the countries that have already experienced upheavals, and in others as well: and they will do so over a protracted period. (Achcar, 2013, p. 18)

Throughout his illuminating book, Achcar investigates the possible causes that led to these upheavals in the first place, whilst underlining the possibility for more revolutionary waves to occur as long as a radical socio-economic transformation has not taken place in the region. I would like to add that although in the case of Egypt such a radical transformation of state structures has not taken place yet, perhaps the forceful and violent return of the police state indicates that the two institutions which have been most deeply shaken by the 25 January uprising are the military establishment, and the police and its intelligence apparatus.

Although it might seem that the demands and achievements of the January revolution have been overthrown, a deeper assessment of the process of the revolution can provide a different outlook. The articles in this issue aim to emphasise and explore this theme. Through their analysis of diverse topics and engaging a number of theories and approaches from a multiplicity of disciplines, the authors here try to investigate the deep struggle dynamics which occurred at the start of the revolution and their trajectory. The 2011 revolution started as a peaceful uprising, which had clear demands: bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity. Egyptians today are still staging protests in the streets across the country in order to fulfil these demands for humane standards of living, for freedom of expression, for the release of thousands of political detainees and for justice for all those who were killed and injured during the revolutionary process.

The present moment in Egypt is characterised by a number of major setbacks. Firstly, the military regime is back in power and the police state is reconsolidating its force by cracking down on all dissenting groups whether secular or Islamist. Secondly, media outlets such as newspapers, journals and TV channels are overwhelmingly in support of the Sisi regime and increasingly showing the 2011 revolution’s supporters as traitors and agents of foreign countries, to the extent of portraying the revolution as a big *conspiracy* against Egypt. In this sense, the media channels are mobilising their means and resources not only to *erase* the revolution from Egypt’s history but in fact
to distort it, to make it look as a *diversion, a disruption* and a *conspiracy*. To give only a few examples here, the satiric programme of Bassem Youssef entitled *Albernameg* was stopped airing on MBC Masr because of his harsh criticism of Sisi and the military apparatus. Moreover, two renowned writers, Alaa al-Aswany and Belal Fadl, stopped contributing their regular columns in the press because their criticism of the police and military was not tolerated.

Thirdly, the numbers of political detainees are on the rise (estimated to have reached 40,000) and harsh prison sentences have been handed down onto those who have been tried in a court system that is marred by corruption and injustice. A number of writers in both the Arabic and English press in Egypt, for example, Ahdaf Soueif and Fahmy Howeidi, in their regular columns in *al-Shorouk* newspaper, have been highlighting and analysing the consequences of this unlawful detention (Loveluck, 2014; Soueif, 2014a, 2014b). Many of these detainees have been arrested as a result of voicing their dissent against the so-called “Protest Law”. In November 2013, the then interim Egyptian president Judge Adly Mansour issued Presidential Decree 107/2013: Law Regulating Right of Assembly, Processions and Peaceful Protest, commonly known as the Protest Law. The law came to provide a legal framework for the police force to arrest protesters who do not acquire prior permission from the ministry of interior to organise protests in the streets (for an overview, see Charbel, 2014; Kaldas, 2014). Moreover, activists have launched a website entitled “Down with Egypt’s Protest Law”.

Many activists and writers in Egypt have voiced their opposition to this law since it flagrantly contradicts Article 73 of the new constitution, which was ratified in January 2014. The constitution grants all citizens “the right to organize public meetings, marches, demonstrations and all forms of peaceful protests, without carrying arms of any kind, by serving a notification as regulated by Law. The right to peaceful and private assembly is guaranteed without need for prior notification. Security forces may not attend, monitor or eavesdrop on such meetings” (*Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt*, 2014, p. 21). At the time of writing, there was a large campaign in Egypt that was increasingly gaining momentum to annul this law on the grounds that it is unconstitutional (for example, *Ahram Online*, 2014). Also, since November 2013, many political activists, men and women have been arrested and handed down sentences only on the grounds of “protesting against this law”, for example, activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah who was handed down 15 years in prison, (which was reduced to 5 years in a court ruling on 23rd February 2015) and the Revolutionary Socialist activist and lawyer Mahinour Elmasry who was handed down two years in prison, reduced to six months after a court appeal (*Down with Egypt’s Protest Law*, [http://egyptprotests2014.tumblr.com/]). Elmasry’s sentence was later suspended and she was released from prison on 21 September 2014.

In the face of these setbacks, what are the options available to the revolutionaries? When we look at the deep problems which the 2011 Egyptian revolution has gone through since the fall of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, sometimes the picture becomes blurred and perhaps many are unable to consider the achievements of the revolution. However, I argue that perhaps one of the most important achievements of the 2011 Egyptian revolution thus far is that it has consolidated a *culture of protest* that is proving hard to contain or ignore. The revolutionary “dynamic” in Egypt has become so pervasive that the counter-revolutionary discourse is unable to crush it. But it is equally important to bear in mind that protest culture is not new to Egypt. Over the centuries, Egyptians have developed and enhanced their tools and strategies to resist, protest and pay with their blood against invaders, colonialists and dictatorship regimes. For example, Zeinab Abul-Magd charts this history of rebellion in one province in
Upper Egypt (Qina) in her newly published book *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (2013). But if we only consider the decade preceding the revolutionary explosion on 25 January 2011, we will see clearly that there were critical precursors to the uprising.

Specifically, since the year 2000, the Egyptian streets have seen huge protests, first in solidarity with the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising), followed by the large protests against the war on Iraq in 2003 when Tahrir Square was occupied for two days in March by tens of thousands of protesters to voice their outrage against the war, whilst demanding the Egyptian president to intervene to stop it. Out of this protest momentum sprang the *Kefaya* (Enough) movement which emerged in 2004 against Mubarak’s regime and challenged publically for the first time his plans to bring his son Gamal as his successor to the presidency. Then, the strong wave of workers’ strikes and sit-ins which started in 2006 with the successful strike of the Mahalla textile workers, and spreading like fire across Egypt, culminating in the General Strike, also initiated by the Mahalla workers in April 2008 and leading to the rise of the 6 April youth movement who played a central role in the 25 January uprising are events which point to a high volume of protests by almost all sectors of Egyptian society: youth groups, students, factory workers, lawyers, judges, teachers, government employees, as well as writers and artists (archival material in English and Arabic on these strikes and protests can be found on several websites such as [http://www.arabawy.org/](http://www.arabawy.org/) and [tadamonmasr.wordpress.com](http://tadamonmasr.wordpress.com)). In their edited book *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (El-Mahdi & Marfleet, 2009), Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, together with the authors, analyse how strikes and protests against Mubarak’s neoliberal economic policies were changing the country “from below” particularly during the first decade of the new millennium. Also, Asef Bayat, in his expansive study *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Bayat, 2010) takes an in-depth look at how ordinary citizens were claiming the streets of urban centres in countries like Egypt, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Morocco and others by literally “living” political life on the streets, where they could find means for livelihood under neoliberal economies.

In this context, the moment of the uprising on 25 January in Egypt did not come from nowhere, but indeed, had years of rehearsal preceding it. Throughout all these struggles prior to 2011, women from all social and educational backgrounds were at the heart. For example, women played a leading role in the Mahalla strikes in 2006 and 2008 and in the famous tax collectors’ strike in 2009. Young women from the Kefaya movement, the 6 April group, the Revolutionary Socialists, feminist organisations and other human rights groups mobilised and organised for demonstrations on the streets across the country demanding social justice and an end to the Emergency Law, which was in force since Mubarak came to power in 1981. Women artists, journalists, writers, lawyers and many others called for and organised demonstrations to demand freedom of expression and human dignity in a society marred by deep social and class divisions and corruption.

The huge cultural output since 25 January 2011 also attests to this revolutionary dynamic which Achcar points to. Since the breakout of the revolution, Egypt has witnessed the production of a strikingly high volume of artistic and visual works (documentaries, graffiti, photographs, films), poems and songs, literary works and numerous TV programmes. Women have been playing a central role in this radical cultural movement, and we have witnessed the rise of a younger generation of women in various spheres. In cinema, for example, such new filmmakers as Ayten Amin, Maggie Morgan and Nadine Khan have collected awards for their new feature films in the past two
years. In documentary filmmaking, directors such as Hala Lotfi, Hanan Abdullah, Amal Ramsis and Jehane Noujaim are reshaping the genre. Also, journalists, bloggers and TV presenters such as Nawwara Negm, Dina Samak, Rasha Azab, Gigi Ibrahim, Reem Maged and Dina Abdel Rahman have expanded and consolidated the demands and aspirations of the 2011 revolution. The initiatives taken by women in founding political and cultural campaigns such as Mosireen (We are Determined), Kaziboon (Liars), No to Military Trials for Civilians, Freedom for the Brave, Bossi (Look), HarassMap, the short documentaries of “Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution” and others have spread out in many Egyptian governorates, not only the urban centres. This huge cultural archive is expanding further and attracting more members and supporters. Thus, this army of activists, writers and artists are persistently making a profound political statement: the aspirations of the 2011 revolution are constantly being renewed and energised.

In the Introduction to their edited book Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook, Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman comment on the Arab revolutions and uprisings, saying:

Alongside the political dynamics brewing in different areas of the region, parallel forms of cultural production surfaced to reflect what was happening on the political level. As many observers have noted, what is currently taking place in the region is not only a political revolution; it is also and equally forcefully a social and cultural revolution. (2013, p. 12)

Samia Mehrez summarises this boom in cultural output, remarking: “This new found power of ownership of one’s space, one’s body, and one’s language is, in and of itself, a revolution” (2012, p. 14). Similarly, Hamid Dabashi states the following in his book The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism:

These uprisings, in the long run, will leave not a stone unturned in the economic, social, political, and above all cultural disposition of these societies, and by extension the geopolitics of their region and thus beyond into the global configuration of power. The longer these revolutions take to unfold the more enduring, grassroots-based, and definitive will be their emotive, symbolic, and institutional consequences. (Dabashi, 2012, pp. 5–6)

Yet, women’s leading and influential role in the ongoing 2011 revolution is not a novelty of the protest culture in Egypt. As a number of articles in this issue illustrate, particularly Kamal’s, Haghani’s and Mazloum’s, Egypt has witnessed an influential women’s movement in political life, as well as in journalism and the arts, as far back as the late nineteenth century. As Beth Baron remarks about the pioneering presence of the women’s press during this early period: “Three trends – secularist, modernist, and Islamist – stood out. […] They perceived themselves as a vanguard and saw their movement as one that would touch all women: Egyptian, Muslim, and Eastern” (Baron, 1994, pp. 189, 191). In the early decades of the twentieth century, the rise of a nationalist-feminist movement against British colonialism coincided with a cultural and artistic movement where women pioneers in journalism, theatre, music and cinema in urban centres played a crucial role. Baron highlights the fact that women’s involvement in the nationalist struggle necessitated a “redefinition of gender relations” (Baron, 1994, p. 188).

In her article “Challenges of Thinking Feminism and Revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014”, Lucia Sorbera observes: “In modern Egyptian history, if there are two words whose meanings are constantly and deeply intertwined, these words are feminism and revolution” (2014, p. 64). Sorbera goes on to say about the early feminist movement in Egypt:
In a period when women were still un-enfranchised, were not allowed to run for or vote in
elections, and were not even enjoying equal opportunities in education and paid work,
feminists challenged two patriarchal cultures: the indigenous patriarchal culture (both the
secular and the religious), and the colonial patriarchal culture. Both of them represented
significant segments of modernity, which was certainly promoting women’s modernization,
but was ambiguous towards their emancipation. This was the context which was the dawn
of women’s revolution. (p. 65)

Throughout the twentieth century, women have taken countless initiatives in revolu-
tionary struggles whether under Nasser, Sadat or Mubarak to enhance a women’s as
well as a feminist agenda: emphasis on women’s equal rights in all spheres of life;
activism against the patriarchal structure within both private and public domains;
foundling campaigns to combat domestic violence against women as well as sexual
harassment on the streets; using the spheres of writing, journalism and art to promote
women’s issues and concerns. Since January 2011, Egyptian women have built on this
history of struggle and extended their mobilisation skills to form a great variety of
coalitions and groups. Many of these women met for the first time during demonstra-
tions on the squares and streets of Egyptian cities and towns during and after the revo-
lution. As Sorbera observes: “Young women activists are articulating new approaches
to feminism, and the experience of the 18 days in Tahrir Square has been crucial in
developing a new awareness, and experiencing what they call ‘a personal revolution’
[…’]” (Sorbera, 2014, p. 68). I would like to add that perhaps it is time to consider the
deep feminine sensibility which these women, who come from all sectors of Egyptian
society, are bringing to the struggle for freedom and justice. Such a new sensibility is
crucial to combat the masculine chauvinism which the military regime is reinstalling in
Egyptian political and cultural life.

Since the volume of work produced by women since the breakout of the 2011 revo-
lution has been immense as mentioned earlier, the articles included in this issue are by
no means comprehensive, but rather, aim to bring to the fore a number of themes
which we find key to our understanding of women’s roles in revolutionary movements.
The issue opens with Ziad Elmarsafy’s article “Action, Imagination, Institution, Natality,
Revolution”, which conceives the revolution as a new ‘birth’. The article draws on
Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality proposed in her book The Human Condition and
argues that a revolution cannot be imagined and enacted without women’s political
action at its centre. Action, here, is envisaged as a challenge to the morbidity of moral-
ising discourses which attempt to contain women/revolution. Here, natality, novelty and
revolution go together; and natality provides the ontological ground for action. By
looking at two early accounts written on the first 18 days of the revolution, Ahdaf
Soueif’s Cairo: My City, Our Revolution (2012) and Mona Prince’s Ismi Thawra (My
Name is Revolution, 2012), the article highlights the linkage between women’s action
and their imagination in configuring and expressing the revolutionary nature of the
events which started on 25 January. Arendt’s natality is thus conceived as enabling
newness and opening up possibilities previously unimagined.

In her article “Egypt’s Revolution, Our Revolution: Revolutionary Women and the
Transnational Avant-Garde”, Caroline Rooney expands the discussion on the fundamen-
tal elements of revolution by linking the writings, art and experiences of a number of
Egyptian and English women who took part in revolutionary struggles and wrote about
their experiences: novelists Latifa al-Zayyat and Ahdaf Soueif, writer and activist Ethel
Mannin and artist Huda Lutfi. Thus, Rooney aims to contextualise the Egyptian Revolu-
tion within a transnational framework, whilst engaging the concepts of ‘avant-garde’ and
the ‘common ground’. She observes that this transnational aspect of the 2011 revolution embodies a ‘common humanity’, which we need to maintain and continuously reflect on. This “enables us to understand that universality entails a perpetual revolution through which the collective is maintained incessantly and creatively”, as she argues. Rooney shares with the readers her own personal experience of ‘inheriting’ the writings of Ethel Mannin and shows how this courageous English woman went against the grain with her uncompromising stands in support of national liberation movements in Egypt and elsewhere. In this way, the article addresses the phenomenon of the Egyptian Revolution as “an event that is simultaneously specifically Egyptian in its provenance and universal in its import”.

With Hala Kamal’s article “Inserting Women’s Rights in the Egyptian Constitution: Personal Reflections”, we move from the transnational to the local, exemplified in a specific ‘battle’ carried out by Egyptian feminists: inserting women’s rights in the new Egyptian constitution. Kamal’s article can be perceived as a historical document which traces the steps taken by feminist groups and coalitions to include women’s rights. It depicts women’s struggles since the drafting of the first Egyptian constitution in 1923 following the 1919 revolution, and the different phases of women’s participation in this process up to 2011. Kamal’s article underscores the crucial lineage to past struggles, whilst stressing continuity between past and present generations of Egyptian feminists. Drafting a new constitution has always been a sign of a new political era in Egypt as this article outlines. Within this broad context, Kamal also unpacks her own experience as a feminist activist in the long process of formulating a women’s rights agenda and negotiating it in the new Egyptian constitution, which was finally ratified through a referendum in January 2014. Yet, the struggle to fully implement the articles of the new constitution in laws that protect women’s rights on the ground is a long and arduous journey. History has taught us in Egypt that ratifying a new constitution is not the end, but in fact the beginning of a new chapter of struggle.

In her article “Egyptian Women, Revolution, and the Making of a Visual Public Sphere”, Fakhri Haghani focuses on another side of women’s participation in public life after the 1919 revolution, that is, of artists, journalists and singers. She explores the theory of visibility as a site of performativity for social practices and relations between Egyptian women during the interwar period (1920s–1940s). Whilst drawing a link between the 2011 and the 1919 popular revolutions, this article reflects back on the 1919 revolution in order to examine the gap that the archival documents have left out in the study of the historical experience of women’s contribution to the emergence of a visual public sphere. Through her analysis, Haghani emphasises the point of how a visual public sphere was created and enhanced mainly by middle and upper class women in the early decades of the twentieth century, and how this has shifted significantly with the breakout of the 2011 revolution. Women from all social classes have taken an active part in 2011 and their cultural output has been widely acknowledged and documented.

For example, Sherine Hafez further complicates the issue of performativity and women’s bodies in her article “The Revolution Shall Not Pass Through Women’s Bodies: Egypt, Uprising and Gender Politics” (2014). Hafez analyses how Egyptian women who have been taking part in the ongoing protest movement have articulated a “discourse of dissent” in public life. She makes this observation:

Their bodies perform new meanings and re-inscribe new understandings of what a woman’s body in a public space has to say. In performance, therefore, there is always the
potential for disruption. Public performance in particular holds much potential for transformation for women who are otherwise construed as belonging to the private sphere and who, more often than not, are perceived as disruptive and unruly. (Hafez, 2014, pp. 177–178)

Nadia A. Shalaby’s article “A Multimodal Analysis of Selected Cairokee Songs of the Egyptian Revolution and their Representation of Women” takes the theme of performance into another domain, that is, of music videos (MVs). Shalaby focuses on three songs released by the youth band Cairokee during the first year of the 2011 revolution, in order to depict how the public sentiments of the revolutionaries changed from joy and euphoria at the start of the revolution, to a sense of disappointment and frustration with the close of 2011. Shalaby argues that a full appreciation of the three MVs under analysis, Sout El Horeya (Voice of Freedom), Ya Al Midan (Oh Midan, in reference to Tahrir Square) and Ethbat Makanak (Stand your Ground) can be achieved through a multimodal analysis as opposed to focusing only on the lyrical and musical compositions of the videos. Such an analysis is significant as the MVs integrate a number of semiotic modes such as still and moving images, frame, camera angle, spatial organisation in the composition of images, the gaze, and facial expressions and gestures of individuals to create meaning. Shalaby’s analysis is expansive and detailed and addresses a number of semiotic resources necessary for our understanding of the songs, which have become very popular on the Egyptian protest music scene.

Ahmed Kadry’s article “Gender and Tahrir Square: Contesting the State and Imagining a New Nation” provides a critique of the ‘new’ image of the nation claimed by many of the Tahrir protesters during the early days of the revolution. He questions the extent to which this discourse of the new nation was drawn around gender paradigms. Through several interviews, Kadry provides an interesting insight into how a number of women protesters viewed themselves in relation to men, whilst opening a discussion on the difference between ‘state’ and ‘nation’. Kadry’s article can be viewed in conversation with Sherine Mazloum’s conceptualisation of nationhood and belonging expressed by three women writers who took part in the Tahrir Square protests. Whilst writers such as Ahdaf Soueif wrote their memoirs about the early Tahrir days to demonstrate a sense of unity and cohesion amongst the protesters, as Mazloum analyses in her article, Kadry’s analysis provides a different viewpoint through the voices of other women activists, who reflect back on their experience of the first 18 days in Tahrir.

Thus, Sherine Mazloum’s article “To Write/To Revolt: Egyptian Women Novelists Writing the Revolution” also takes as its time frame the first 18 days of the 2011 revolution to investigate a regained sense of belonging to the nation from the perspective of three writers/texts: Ahdaf Soueif’s memoir Cairo: My City, Our Revolution; Mona Prince’s testimony Ismi Thawra (My Name is Revolution); and Donia Kamal’s novel Sigarah Sab’a (A Seventh Cigarette), which were all published in 2012. Mazloum’s discussion of Soueif and Prince’s texts adds an extra layer of interpretation to the exploration of these texts by Ziad Elmarsafy. Moreover, Mazloum engages a number of feminist theoretical threads to analyse the intersection between the personal and the political in the three texts. Her critique of Soueif’s notion of homogeneity among Egyptians and the risks this approach entails can be viewed in juxtaposition to Caroline Rooney’s discussion of Soueif’s ‘common ground’.

The issue closes with Roger Bromley’s article “‘Giving Memory a Future’: Women, Writing, Revolution”, where he provides an insightful discussion of what Paul Ricoeur has termed “giving memory a future” to illustrate the relationship between writing and memory during revolutionary times. Bromley focuses on Ahdaf Soueif’s Cairo: My
City, Our Revolution but also traces the additions included in a reprint of the book under the title Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed (2014c). He compares these two texts to a number of Soueif’s journalistic commentaries in the press to show how time has impacted the novelist’s perception of the revolution from the early optimistic phase during the first 18 days of Tahrir to the period following the military coup on 3 July 2013. In juxtaposition to Soueif’s texts, Bromley analyses another memoir by an Arab writer, the Syrian Samar Yazbek’s A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution (2012), whilst looking at a number of her later press articles published in 2013. Through his analysis, Bromley argues that these two writers combine reflexive observation with eye-witness testimony and in each, there is a staging, a performative act of memory-making, in the sense that they are constructing a present for remembering, with the writer as witness within a ‘we-memory’ community. It is interesting to see how Ahdaf Soueif’s work has been central to the discussion among the authors of this issue, due to her prolific writings since the breakout of the revolution (in both Arabic and English).

Read together, the articles in this issue open new directions for research on the 2011 Egyptian revolution as well as the Arab uprisings. As Mark Levine remarks: “[..] the unprecedented scope and richness of the archive available to scholars, activists and the global public alike ensures that the production of knowledge about the uprisings will continue for the foreseeable future” (2013, p. 211). Indeed, as political events continue to unfold, the years to come will no doubt see an expansion of the political and cultural archive of the Arab uprisings, accompanied by much academic work on their meaning and significance. This special issue aims to underscore the fact that women’s roles and contributions in the ongoing struggles need to occupy a central position in these academic analyses.

Notes on contributor
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References


