

INTRODUCTION: WHOSE SPRING?

And when we speak we are afraid
Our words will not be heard
Nor welcomed
But when we are silent
We are still afraid

So it is better to speak
Remembering
We were never meant to survive
From *A Litany for Survival* by Audre Lorde

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.
From *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by S.T. Coleridge

“Gender, gender everywhere, and not a space to win.” Starting from March 2011, I kept almost humming this line in parody of Coleridge’s famous line

in his Romantic nineteenth-century poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Unconsciously, I started humming it after the shameful virginity tests perpetrated by the military, but wasn't that too early? Perhaps, and perhaps not. I view this incident as a warning sign that worse incidents were bound to follow. The arguments and logicalities that ensued were disappointing and shocking, and they meant that the gender battle had erupted. The analysis of that incident was confined to whether it happened or not, emphasizing how authority (the military at that time) tends to oppress women. In the case of Samira Ibrahim, a victim of the virginity tests, nobody ever raised the issue of her origin (Upper Egypt), her age, her class, and her veil. These were essential factors that should have been taken into consideration to understand how gender—as a main component—will seek real agency. They were factors that, in the past, should have worked against the victim; paradoxically and fortunately, they worked for her. Without the Revolution, nobody could have sued the authorities. One wonders how between January and March 2011 society was capable of breaking the fear barriers.

The transformation of the sociopolitical scene was a corollary of the Revolution. It was neither positive nor negative transformation; just transformation—a substantial change and a conspicuous shift toward the readiness to confront. The scene was overpopulated with voices and actors whose main concern was to designate and fix what came to be called 'Egyptian identity.' The appearance of the identity discourse signified a crisis that was political, intellectual, ideological, and societal. In addition to going back to the obsolete definition of identity as fixed, stable, and unchangeable, gender was taken to be a marker of identity. This explains why the former Mubarak regime was so concerned with controlling and legitimizing a certain system of gender—one that consolidates the power of the patriarch, in his multifarious manifestations, especially the father figure. Consequently, women's agency was hindered, and women were forced politically and discursively to conform to a monolithic 'modern' image that has shielded all the sociopolitical and cultural differences and problems.

How the 25 January Revolution endowed women with the opportunity to initiate the route to agency while struggling over identity

construction is the main concern of this book. I want to examine the emergence of women's agency in the post-25 January moment, and, in order to do that, we have to trace many ideas back in time. The history of certain ideas could, in turn, trigger the history of gender. For example, the history and trajectory of nationalism in Egypt since the beginning of the twentieth century is, in my view, the history of the women's movement. Authoritarian regimes always find an excuse by which to control the people's choices, to limit their practice of agency, to shrink their space of appearance, and to channel their anger through false causes. Women, on the other side, usually pay double the price as subjects and as women. The power of the central state and its system has always been so tight that the Revolution never managed to demolish them. Yet, every power carries within it the regimen of resistance. If the Revolution demolished anything, it was the principle of homogeneity; it turned out to be a mere illusory notion, propagated for a long time by the state. The Revolution has allowed for the eruption of differences previously silenced and suppressed through the incessant celebration of homogeneity through the state-run media. The Revolution marked the appearance of a real diversity on several levels: ideological, cultural, religious, educational, class-based, and gender-oriented. The revolutionary act has functioned as a political and cultural shock that effected subversions in a previously solid national gendered discourse. Nonetheless, the refrain remains, "gender, gender everywhere, and not a space to win."

The *mise-en-scène* of Tahrir Square revealed the fact that there are several constructs of gender; simultaneously, rethinking gender was a necessity. In this sense, the Revolution acts as an eye-opener to the gender issue. A new era that requires a new approach. However, it turned out that it will be much more complicated than one can imagine, especially with the rise of multiple political factions. Amid this mishmash of power relations, the poignant link between gender and nationalism comes to the fore. The first consequence of the rise of nationalism is always the trivialization of women's rights. There are always more pressing and urgent issues that the nation needs to address. Due to this high-pitched tone of nationalism (that comes close to chauvinism), the space for lobbying for and supporting women's rights has become frayed and thin. Certainly, the

link between nationalism and feminism in the Third World is as old as Kumari Jayawardena's book,¹ maybe older, yet what is reemerging is not the nationalism of postcolonial periods. What we have now is nationalism in a new cloak: it is the nationalism of the patriarch.

With all the long-deferred aspirations after performing agency, women were quite aware, more often than not, of the risks that lurk in adopting a feminist discourse that mistakes the discursive formations of gender identity for mere sexual difference and for an additive element of nationalism. Direct and unmediated, women's presence in the Egyptian Revolution was so inspiring that it could not pass unnoticed; many analysts have conflated such "space of appearance"² with the public sphere, which in itself was conflated with nationalism and with the streets. Unfortunately, at the toxic crossroads of culture, religion, and politics, women lost their "space of appearance," and the female body was turned into a site of different ideologies. This is where the confrontation and the process of identity construction started, on one side, and co-option and usurpation, on the other, became irreversible. The female body has become a text that must be read against the grain. That is to say, it is a text about how women turned physical violations into a tool of rewriting the culture of the body and is essential in understanding the new gender positions. One cannot say that the task is already complete. What matters is the discursive dynamics that managed to change the stagnant position of gender that was limited to sexual differences.

The most important aspect, however, of gender transformation in post-Revolution Egypt is that of positioning. Starting from March 2011, it was obvious that power circulated in a very complicated way, and this allowed the subject to reenvision and rethink the issue of positionality that was previously governed by class. The network of power that lacked transparency allowed the subject to adopt multiple and contradictory positions, hitherto unthought of. The Revolution functioned as a traumatic eye-opener where alliances were revised and where the possibility of connection across other factors, in addition to gender, was very liable to happen. The new situation generated a new text. The manifestations of multiple gender subject positions through new forms of expression constitute the new text of the Revolution. Perhaps the term 'text' has undergone a radical change in Egypt recently (the Revolution itself is

a text). The rise of a new revolutionary generation meant, among other things, the rise of new texts fully independent of the state's authority and, thus, completely oppositional. The female body, in this sense, is an oppositional text, if not one of revolt. Bringing these texts into focus, and, consequently, constructing a new narrative that relocates gender in the Revolution is the aim of this book.

Interestingly enough, when women felt that the Revolution had demised, they came up with other ideas that would sustain their presence in the public sphere. They resorted to ordinary activities and the practices of everyday life. Having taken to the streets for a long time, women developed new strategies of resistance that I perceive to be a "collective action by non-collective actors," as Asef Bayat presaged early in 2010.³ The trajectory of this resistance meant that women were (and still are) caught in the highly contesting controversy of identity politics where a new lens of analysis other than patriarchy or misogyny should be adopted to read the complex picture. In general, it is in the daily micropolitics that women were capable of asserting their vision by bringing the personal and aesthetic into the political and public. The politics of memory and what the women's culture of protest chooses to forget and to remember was (and perhaps still is) another means of resistance to the attempts at homogenizing and subduing gender.

Several convincing arguments have focused on the alleged rise of democracy and the concomitant fall of women's rights, a situation that has been termed the "gender paradox"⁴ and "democratic paradox."⁵ The combination of rising political camps that attempted to co-opt gender as a means of establishing a foothold resulted in the formation of the new geographics of gender identity; these have been drawn discursively, aesthetically, and visually in spite of the "gendered grammar of violence"⁶ and in the face of all the gendered politics of an imagined nation.

Many readings of the Revolution were baffled about the position of gender and, indeed, if there was any gender in the Revolution. Mostly, they reached the hasty conclusion that women's rights were in crisis. It is true that women activists had to face several ambivalent moments where triumph and danger were intertwined. The successive political shifts in Egypt, the rise of religious fundamentalism, the increased militarization

(and masculinization) of the country, and the naturalization of neoliberal values along with global hegemonic privatization pose new challenges to the concept of gender and its role in identity formation. The problem lies in the way the elements of the revolutionary scene were dismembered. Islamists, women, the youth, workers, for instance, were each dealt with separately. This arbitrary separation contradicts and negates the spirit of the eighteen days (25 January to 11 February), that is, the point of departure. And, thus, the point of arrival was erroneous. Women were everywhere and so they should not have been viewed as standing as a category on their own. This meant that the voices of the rising generation could not be taken to be a manifestation of a shift in the strategies and vision of women. This generation uses a different discourse and lexicon; its alliances are completely transversal, and, most importantly, its strategies of resistance transgress the expected and traditional.

Chapter one explores the road to the Revolution and the entanglement of gender and nationalism. The Revolution created a context where the encompassing rubrics ‘women of the Third World’ or ‘Muslim women,’ for instance, do not mirror the novel circumstances Egyptian women have to confront and engage with. Neither do these rubrics explain the complex interplay of powers where women’s agency and position are constantly negotiated. The new cartography of struggle has to be read in a context that takes into consideration the micropolitics of everyday life as well as the larger processes that work on separating the private from the public and political. The scene needs to be looked at afresh to understand how the new rising generation is resisting discursively and strategically the fixation of identity, simultaneously relocating it in a geopolitical, wider context. In addition, the new transversal alliances and coalitions have set free the potential fluidity and flexibility of identity; thus, allowing women to exercise agency in a highly turbulent and politically polarized location that works against them. Thus, rethinking gender in the light of the new revolutionary discourse is a means of rewriting culture or, rather, reading it against the grain. Audre Lorde had every right to say that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”;⁷ it takes completely novel strategies and means to do so.

The new revolutionary generation has managed to negotiate new tactics of identity politics by going beyond gender, without abandoning

gender. That is why the Egyptian political and cultural context requires a new approach to analyze women's discourses of positionalities that led to the discursive formation of agency. Susan Stanford Friedman's "locational feminism"⁸ is the most valid lens through which women's position can be understood. Gender, one constituent of identity, is not adequate to fathom the strategies and discursive formations undertaken by the new rising revolutionary generation to counter the current web of regressive power relations. The main goal is to find out how the discourses of positionalities set free the analysis of gender from the Western feminist methodologies. At the same time, one cannot overlook the fact that there is a strong revival of a nationalist–feminist discourse that prioritizes nationalist issues and, thus, deprives gender issues of their due centrality. Since going beyond gender means bringing in new factors of analysis, without abandoning gender, then disentangling nationalism from feminism is necessary, unless we want to reproduce the Algerian Revolution discourse on gender that comes close to Hamlet's yell to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery."

Chapter two rereads the nexus of culture and women. Culture is taken to mean the new aesthetic forms, the new text, which established a transversal relation with politics. The Revolution has gained substantial flesh through the artistic expression that reached the point of functioning as a tool of protest and resistance. Taking into consideration the discourse of going beyond gender, it becomes a bit difficult, and also contradictory, to speak about the gendered performance of art. Yet, it is an unforgettable fact that women and art were the two phenomena that directed the attention of the world toward the Egyptian revolution. Can we talk about the role of women and art in the Revolution? They were not assigned a role; they were committed to a revolutionary act. It was a revolution, an event in the world of which women and art formed a big part.

This chapter explores how women managed to assert multiple subject positions not only through art but also through a new established relationship between art and politics. Exploring the concatenation of art and politics in the post-Revolution era will always remain an unfinished task if the past is not also taken into consideration. To understand the relation between art, politics, and gender, we have to go back to the scene before the Revolution where the deep state supported a homogenous

artistic scene that guaranteed, unfortunately, a perfect alienation of the arts. Against this backdrop, one can understand how women aesthetically practice what Bayat calls, “The power of presence”; it is a power that exhibits itself as a “collective action by non-collective actors.”⁹ Hence, the new strategies of resistance. Such power of presence has been apparent in the chants, banners, jewelry, songs, slogans, and, most importantly, graffiti (an already overstudied means of expression).

The new text of the Revolution, in its different manifestations, has archived the anger and protests; it has also served as memory storage bank. What is remarkable about the new text is that it never presented a monolithic epistemic vision of gender; it was definitely far from that. In addition to reflecting different political positions of women, similar to the body, the new text performed gender in the most contested way. Against the backdrop of the aesthetic discourse imposed by the former regime, the new text reveals its capacity to signify a new discourse of gender. Whether the new texts can stand as a tool for rereading gender in the post-Revolution era is questionable.

Chapter three relocates the new poetic voices in juncture with the Revolution as an event. Put differently, poetry is not a new genre either in the literary or cultural milieu. However, the rise of new (and young) women’s voices that adopt a subjective feminist tone is remarkable. In this sense, the poem becomes a performative intervention in the public sphere. The new voices (with all the multiple connotations of voice) merge the private and public with the personal and political; thus, breaching and transgressing all taken-for-granted boundaries. They take issue with the father figure, whereas the mother is always questioned, as if almost on trial. Similar to the female body, the poem becomes a site of contesting identity politics where one poet, Sara Allam, laments the disappearance of God, or rather His death, in her volume *Down athar li qobla* (Without a trace of a kiss). It is noteworthy that these new voices are bent on subverting the logic of power; some negotiate, while others just shock the reader. That is, they stage a discursive confrontation that exalts the display of multiple subject positions.

Chapter four details the meaning of the gender paradox: how the alleged rise of democracy brought along the deterioration of women’s