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## Global Societies Journal

### Title

Women Spring: Reclaiming Resistance as the Ultimate Other

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jr8s5v2>

### Journal

Global Societies Journal, 1(1)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2013

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# Women Spring: Reclaiming Resistance as the Ultimate Other

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## ABSTRACT

Arab women are often marginalized in the minds of the West as oppressed by Arab, Muslim men. The language used to represent these women is often that of victimhood, stripping the women of the possibility of self-determination and agency. This article looks at a total of six articles and their commentary from Al Jazeera, Fox News, and Huffington Post to analyze how the language used in news articles both reproduce and challenge these stereotypes. The articles are specific to events related to the Arab Spring and women's involvement in it. The commentary proves to be the true representation of Western knowledge production about Arab women as it ignores the elements of empowerment echoed in the articles, and focuses solely on the elements of Arab women's passivity and Arab men's brutality. I make the argument that this discourse is produced and reproduced in order to sustain a sentiment of Western superiority over the "brutal", "oppressive" East. First, I discuss the absence real discussion about women in this conversation about women, and how it quickly turns to men and the East/West divide. Arab women become collateral damage in the bigger war and quest of the West to confirm its' moral high ground above Arab Muslim men and their culture. I then discuss how some Arab women are taking control and subverting these images through a call to violence and a call for equal rights.

**Keywords:** Arab women, Arab spring, Representation, Knowledge production, News

## INTRODUCTION

Mohamed Bouazizi lights himself on fire in Tunisia and suddenly the whole Arab world is set aflame. Fighting, chaos, and the prospect of a better future fueled the passion driving the Arab spring. Women have played an integral role in the struggle but have received very little credit at home and abroad, despite the vast media coverage. Their representation in western thought is materialized through depictions in the media. Because there are few examples of Arab women writing about themselves, views are shaped through the language of our news sources.

This important moment occurred because Bouazizi felt he was not allowed to adequately care for his widowed mother and six siblings. After being publicly slapped by a police woman for not providing a proper permit for his fruit stand, he felt so humiliated and desperate that he

marched to the government building of the rural town of Sidi Bouzid and made his final act of resistance. This act ignited others in the town and protests followed later that day, citizens across the country demanded for President Zine El Abiding Ben Ali to step down. He fled about a month later. The success of Tunisia served as inspiration for Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain, all with varying levels of success. Egypt and Libya, for example were successful in forcing their leaders Mubarak and Gaddafi out of power. Syria, on the other hand, is still in the middle of a bitter civil war. All Arab-Spring-countries; however, face some struggle in reconstructing and restructuring their countries post revolution (NPR.com).

Historically, images of women during wartime were often used as symbols of objects that need protection. In one poster used by the allies during WWII, women are framed as “wholesome, healthy women...[threatened by] the ‘claws’ of fascism... The poster was aimed at appealing to men to join the war effort and, in so doing, give expression to chivalry, invulnerability, bravery, and physical strength; features of masculinity that cast men as the role of defenders...”(Chetty, 34). These images invoke a discourse about women as objects that need protection, rather than individuals contributing to the war effort, thus often eliminating the history of women in war.

The narrative of women involved in the Arab spring that is presented to the American public has to be understood within the framework of a western, phallogocentric knowledge base. In the case of Arab women, we often see images of completely covered bodies in “oppressive” burkas, which many people assume they are forced to wear. Arab women are often seen as victims of a patriarchy that validates oppression through religion, and who need to be saved from the brown men who subjugate them. (Joseph, 4). This can be taken as justification for racism and Islamophobia because people are angered by the belief that Arab men do not allow for the same freedoms women have in the West.

After 9/11, the US government often benefitted from the flood of Islamophobia that followed the attacks on the twin towers. Some conservative media assisted this by guiding Americans to believe Muslims are a part of jihad warfare. Nancy Lindisfarne argues that according to western ideals, the only suitable revolutionaries from the Arab world must be “secular, well-disposed to capitalism, and at their most radical, of a mildly liberal political turn” (3). These preconditions problematize the religiously fueled revolutionary movements of the Arab spring because they fall outside the realm of a good freedom fight.

This analysis studies the way in which news sources depict women in the Arab Spring and how readers respond to the articles, in order to study the media’s representation of women who have risked their lives to join in the revolutionary efforts of the Arab Spring. I pose the question, are various forms of popular media and their readers able to rethink stereotypes of Arab women as passive, weak, and oppressed, so the US people can better understand these women as three dimensional reflections of their culture, language, nation, family, personal experiences, etc?

## **UNIT OF ANALYSIS / ARTIFACT**

My analysis focuses on two sets of three articles which share a common theme and commentary from the readers. One set is about the sexual assaults on women in Tahrir square and the other relates to various protests by Tunisian women. I use three popular sources that represent several dominant voices. I chose Fox News to represent conservative media, Huffington Post as a liberal news source, and Al Jazeera as a representation of a moderate, non-american news source. During my research, I found that the comments from the readers, rather than the articles, were the most telling of linguistic knowledge production of women in the Arab Spring. The conversations showed how people read these articles and the points they take away, as well as the points they miss. Through these articles and conversations, I found three themes to be discussed 1) the absence of women in the conversation about women 2) women as a battle ground for the clash between the East and the West and 3) women subverting their submissive stereotype with a call to violence. By comparing the language of each news source and their readers, I analyze how language is used to represent women who are a part of the Arab Spring. By doing this, I deconstruct the meaning of the presence and absence of women in the articles and commentary and the assumptions the writer makes about gender and power relations, including how they vary between news sources. I examine what kind of articles are prevalent (ie women as rape victims vs. freedom fighters), along with the word choice and imagery associated with women, and the use of pathos, logos, and ethos. Through this analysis, I pose the question, how do the news sources and commentary reproduce and/or challenge normative stereotypes of Arab women, specifically the women involved in the Arab Spring? How is the language from the articles internalized and reproduced by the readers?

## **ANALYSIS**

The articles published by Al Jazeera, Fox News, and Huffington Post vary less than one would expect. However, the commentary is polarized. My analysis compares two sets of articles, one about the outbreak of sexual assault in Tahrir square and another about politics and Tunisian women. It may appear biased to use articles about sexual assault; however when doing a very thorough search of articles about women's involvement in the Arab spring, the only common denominator among the news sources was sexual assault in Egypt, making it a useful topic to analyze.

Much of the language of sexual violence carries strong implications about power relations among men and women. Considering the overwhelming presence of articles about sexual assault on women in the Egyptian Arab Spring, coupled with a lack of articles about other issues about Arab women, it can be inferred that western media still has the tendency to frame Arab women inside a heavily patriarchal society, and also from the point of view of another patriarchal society that is demonstrating their superiority by emphasizing the moral weakness

and violent nature of the Arab men. This framework is important in understanding the rest of this paper's analysis.

## **ABSENSE OF WOMEN**

Looking at the articles and their commentary, men are discussed more frequently and passionately than are women. In the discussion of an Al Jazeera article about the sexual assaults, this is particularly clear. The article itself addresses the issue of sexual violence and the actions taken to combat it; however the very first comment completely ignores the content of the article and jumps straight into an argument about clash between the East and the West. "This is the result of the Arab uprising for what the West was optimistic. This isn't a surprise, because in a peaceful country such as the United States, more rapes take place everyday (Ahmed, 2012). Though he is speaking about rape, the content is about pointing fingers at the West. He attempts to use ethos and pathos by addressing the irony of a "peaceful" place with "more rapes" to undermine the moral superiority he feels the West is showing. The argument is about proving that the West is no better than Egypt, not about violence against women. The absence of women in this conversation omits Arab women's history and struggle from our knowledge base because no new language is produced to discuss and understand Arab women. In this context, they remain invisible.

The discussion only turns to women to argue about the sex industry. Comparing the sex trade to sexual assault in Tahrir square problematizes the women's role in the revolution. One woman makes a sweeping generalization about how women get involved in the sex trade through "A father who sold his daughter, or a boyfriend who forces his girlfriend to do it to give him money, etc. So who is evil? Man...He's got Satan living in his mind" (Van Rooyan, 2012). She is affirming a victim motif through pathos and extreme word choice and drawing on her own negative experience with men to establish their fault. She then uses pointedly negative words such as evil and Satan to explain why. This simplistic analysis eliminates societal causes of sexual abuse and boils it down to a discourse of how men cannot control themselves; therefore women fall victim to their animalistic urges. This discourse is dangerous in the discussion of sexual assault in Tahrir square. By passing men off as inherently evil, it is easy to draw the conclusion that women are, therefore, inherently victims, while at the same time excusing men of their behavior because they just can't help themselves when Satan occupies their mind. The sex trade is a very different kind of sexual violence and has implications of victimization and abuse for an end goal that is economic. Women involved in the sex trade are typically young, and often tricked into involvement (CNN.com, 2001). This implies naivety, lack of agency, and youth. The women discussed in El-Sabbahaya's article are none of these things. They are independent agents who made a decision to be a part of the revolution despite the dangers and were targeted by men trying to keep women away. This violence is a tool to put women back in their place. The comments do not frame women as agents or the violence as a gender normalizing strategy used to create fear.

The absence of women in articles about the Arab Spring is even more prevalent in Fox News. Of the few articles about women in Arab-Spring-countries to choose from, seven of fourteen articles were about sexual assault. This was the highest number of references to sexual assault of the three news sources, showing a heightened interest in women as sexual violence victims, rather than articles about women's political events. The Fox article about Tunisian women, is barely over 100 words and keeps a narrow framework about the "Islamist Ennahda Party" and women are almost a side note. The brevity of the article downgrades the importance of the issue. This is further established with the image described of "some 200 women" protesting in Tunis. The number creates a pathetic image of a few women protesting, especially when compared to the hundreds of thousands of people protesting during the revolution. It then emphasizes that Tunisia already has some of the most protected women's rights in the Middle East and the Ennahda Party has already ensured them their rights will remain protected (FoxNews). The small number coupled with the logos establishing the high level of women's rights in Tunisia discredits the women protesters and brings a question to the reader's; are these few women making a fuss for nothing? This narrow report of the event leaves out the cause of the protests and simplifies it to the democratic election of the Islamists. It also eliminates the voices of women, providing no discussion of their issues, so they are left out of the conversation.

Not one of the fourteen articles relating to women in the Arab-Spring-countries have any comments, showing that these issues are not considered worth discussing. In both Al Jazeera and Huffington Post, there were passionate discussions following all four articles studied going into great depth about various issues and proving that the issues brought up are worthy of contemplation. Fox's reader don't see as much value in discussing the two issues. Thus, the western, male view can be seen as the privileged point of view on this site.

#### Clash of the Civilizations

All three writers use vivid imagery of the attacks in Tahrir square to use pathos to create an emotional response to the brutalization of Arab men against Arab women's bodies. Fox News's article opens with with a heart-wrenching description. "Her screams were not drowned out by the clamor of the crazed mob of nearly 200 men around her. An endless number of hands reached toward the woman in the red shirt in an assault scene that lasted less than 15 minutes but felt more like an hour" (Foxnews). This quote forces an emotional response from the reader through a horrific scene of a innocent women being attacked by a huge mob of men. The reader feels sympathy for the woman and hatred for the men. It is easy for the reader to put his or her self or a loved one in the woman's shoes. By making this distinction of good and bad on such a personal level, the readers mind morphs their perception of Arab men into violent monsters and Arab women into helpless victims. This image of men as monsters is furthered by word choice such as "crazed," "clamor," and the picture of an "endless number of hands." The writer distinguishes the violent men of the East from their progressive Western counterparts who are horrified by the scene.

This same kind of imagery is replicated in Al Jazeera's article. "Hundreds of men pulled my limbs apart and threw me around. They were scratching and clenching my breasts and

forcing fingers inside me in every possible way.” This imagery is similar to a picture of pack animals attacking their prey. It is followed by a statistic from a report published by the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights which states that only 2.4% of Egyptian women and 7.5% of foreign women who feel “victimized” by sexual violence actually report it. Mixing pathos created by violent, appalling imagery with the logos of a shocking statistic is supposed to anger the reader. This is furthered by a quote from Abd El Hameed, a researcher for Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, that affirms that there has been an increase of sexual assault. Pathos is used again when it is said that police cannot stop the sexual violence because they are also afraid of the crowd. Arab men are identified as so brutal that even the police fear them (El-Sabbahy). The writer singles out the men as exceptionally violent, creating a distinction not only between man and woman, but also between the East and the West. Through pathos, logos, and ethos, the writer establishes the victim motif that can be viewed as tool used to in the battle between the East and the West, while othering both Arab men and Arab women from the men and women of the West.

The language in this article repeatedly frames women as objects. Women are often described as “hurt by men,” “rescued by men,” or “falling victim to gang assault.” As seen in the quote above, men are described as “clenching” her breasts and “forcing their fingers inside” her. Women are consistently described by the things that are done to them by men, making them the object of the man’s action. Framing women in such a way, the writer puts her into a passive, weak position. Men are either the attackers or the protectors, but rarely is the woman the doer.

The repetition of the word victim implies “passivity and acceptance” and “robs individuals of their agency and their ability to fight back” (Kolisetty). Survivor is the word that is typically accepted by feminist scholars because it implies “ingenuity, resourcefulness, and inner strength” (Kolisetty). Victim is a word of weakness and survivor is a word of power. The word victim appears 4 times in the Al Jazeera article and the term survivor is never used (El-Sabbahy). When reproducing the testimony of a woman who is brave enough to come forward and discuss her traumatic experience, survivor seems to be the appropriate word. However, in the description and analysis of her experience, she is referred to as a victim, which removes her agency and courage in how she dealt with her sexual assault.

The framework for understanding Arab women in relation to Arab men to distinguish between the East and the West is extrapolated by the commentary for the Al Jazeera article and Huffington Post’s articles about sexual assault. The commenters use the articles as a springboard in which they can begin a heated debate about western superiority and Islamophobia. One comment to Huffington Post’s article says “Arab women’s enemy is not Israel, it is Islam and Arab men” (simonbugatti, 2013). Another uses Tsunami as a metaphor for Islam (Farsha, 2013). Such a metaphor implies a natural force that destroys everything in its path. The comments reflect the racism and Islamophobia many Americans feel specifically towards Arab men. The language defines Arab men as the enemy of Arab women. Similar to the view of Arab men and Islam as an enemy of the West. Like a tsunami, Islam will destroy everything in its path if it is able. Unfortunately, women are collateral damage in this clash. In order to discredit Arab men,

Arab women have to be framed as oppressed victims to be juxtaposed against oppressive Arab men.

After an excessive amount of name calling, low blows, and volatile debate, one reader of the Al Jazeera article responds to another reader who is defending Islam. “90% OF ALL RAPES in Europe are “conducted” by Muslims ... My parents lived in Egypt for 2 years, until my mother had enough of being threatened EVERY TIME she went to the market. They packed their bags and left. Not that it matters (but for you primitive sand rats it apparently does)... Thanks Islam! You are the new ‘World-cancer’!” (Jordi). This reader attempts to establish ethos by saying that his parents lived in Egypt; therefore he would know something about its culture, and logos by giving a statistic about Muslims and rape. He uses violent and derogatory words like “rape,” “threatened,” “primitive sand rats,” and “world cancer.” The unfortunate truth is that there are many people involved in the commentary who support his inflammatory response. The reproduction of these stereotypes is meant to insult Arab men but, consequently drags Arab women down with them. Instead of the commentary focusing on the impressive steps survivors of sexual assault and their allies have taken to fight back, it focuses on ignorance and East-West dichotomy.

## **CALL TO VIOLENCE**

After wading through patriarchal language and islamophobic arguments, a third theme appears: a strong, subversive call to violence. Women have vocalized the importance of fighting physical, bodily violence with physical, bodily violence. There is a sense among many that appealing to the government or the international community is not enough to curb the influx of sexualized attacks on the female body. Due to the typically submissive stigma that is associated with Arab women, this call is very important. In Huffington Post’s article, there are very powerful images of the protests. “At marches against sexual harassment in Cairo, women have brandished kitchen knives in the air. Stenciled drawings on building walls depict girls fighting off men with swords. Signs threaten to ‘cut off the hand’ of attackers” (Rohan). This imagery of women is extremely different than the imagery of women raped in the square. In this vision, women are empowered, active, and declaring solidarity and unity among women and survivors. This is not a call for protection from others; it is a call to protect oneself.

Though much of the empowerment speech in the articles is skipped over by the readers posting comments, there are some who find the importance in the subversive message and continue to reproduce it. One commenter says “You think the Arab uprisings were a tide turner, you haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen women galvanize” (Intellifran, 2012). This language portrays women as a strong force incomparable even to the Arab Spring, implying that their uprising will be even more powerful than the Arab Spring, which shook the world. These readers recognize women’s agency and create a new form of knowledge production that includes Arab women’s use of militancy, self-defense, and defiance.



There are challenges to Arab women's submissive stigma in an article published by Al Jazeera about Tunisian women. Recently, in a draft of the Tunisian Constitution, women were defined as "complements" of their husbands (McNeil). This resulted in thousands of women coming out in protest to declare that they would not be defined in relation to a man. The women's protests are described with words and phrases of power such as "defy" and a "storm broke out." Comparing women's protests to a storm implies a powerful, natural force that cannot be hindered or controlled by mankind. Women are then seen as a force equal to nature's powerful and destructive elements. They too, are impossible to control.

Many of the commenters also reproduce this language. One man finds the article comical because "Nahdha may try to suggest anything they want but anybody that actually knows anything about Tunisian women would smile and move on after reading this article. You see, there is nothing to see here folks. Tunisian women came out by the 1000's and made their point very clear. The proof is that Nahdha came out the next day saying this article will not be presented EVER!" (Lassoed). This comment makes Tunisian women's strength common knowledge when he says "anybody that actually knows anything about Tunisian women would smile." He presents the facts of what happened and the government's quick withdrawal of the phrase. His use of verbs are definite and distinct action verbs such as "they came" and "made" and leave no room for argument about how the women quickly overturned this wording they found restrictive. This language shows women as the subject rather than the object. They are the ones taking action and doing, rather than having things done to them.

## DISCUSSION

There was a surprising lack of disparity between representations from the three sources, which posed the question, how different is our supposedly polarized media? The disparity between the constituency of the news sources and their knowledge reproduction was much more evident than the articles themselves. Huffington Post has more commentary referring to the women and the steps they have been taking to empower themselves in the Arab spring. There is support and understanding among much of the readership. Al Jazeera, being considered a moderate, non-western news source has a more widespread readership which results in heated debates and tension between the East and the West. Because Westerners and Middle Eastern people both read this site, the views of the readers are often very polarized. The conversation becomes very personal and offensive and often makes women invisible in their own issues. Lastly, Fox News readers do not respond to these articles in order to open up any sort of debate or discussion. Women are invisible because the readers do not have enough interest in the topic to respond to the content of the article.

Taking into account the three different news sources and their commentary, three major themes are prevalent to understanding the representation of women among Al Jazeera, Fox News, and Huffington Post. First, the lack of real conversation about women in articles about women. This causes women to be invisible in the revolution and continues the victim motif.

Second, women have become an arena of argument in the clash between the East and the West. By using women as part of a wider debate, they again become victims as they are juxtaposed against the aggressive, Arab men. Lastly, despite the reproduction of the victim motif, there is a strong call to violence. This is important because it subverts the victim motif and returns agency to women through the acknowledgment of their strength and their ability to fight back.

Knowledge production and reproduction is the center of this analysis and discussion. What is important in defining the differences in gender representation of Arab women between these three sources is how the reader takes in the information, what they find relevant, and what they discard. Unlike many typical representations of Arab women, each article says something about fighting back. Self-defense courses, knives, large scale political protests; these are the actions taken by Arab women as part of the Arab Spring, and as part of their own counter-revolution. Though the linguistic representation is not perfect, it is still there. The problem lies in how the public reads and takes in the knowledge provided. Furthermore, the media is moving towards an appropriate representation of Arab women who are a part of this revolutionary movement. The public just needs to catch up, quickly.

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