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Book Review: Performing Democracy in Iraq and South Africa: Gender, Media and Resistance

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Performing Democracy in Iraq and South Africa: Gender, Media and Resistance; Kimberley Wedeven Segall; 2014; Syracuse University Press; Syracuse, NY; xxvii + 290pp; e-book. ISBN 978-0-8156-5256-4.

Reviewed by Lindiwe D. Makhunga¹

The widely held belief in the entrapment and 'imprisonment' of non-Western women by cultural patriarchal traditions establishes a discourse of disempowerment where the ability for non-Western women to exercise agency and choice, or even articulate their own experiences, is severely curtailed by the imposition of a 'top-down' narrative. In *Performing Democracy in Iraq and South Africa: Gender, Media and Resistance*, Kimberly Segall (2013) challenges the reader to re-orientate their thinking about what constitutes feminist activism, its protest forms and the performance of democratic claims through a rich exploration of creative gendered resistance in three settings defined by protracted civil conflict: Kurdistan, Iraq; Iran and South Africa. It is a provocative dare that is done through examining women's individual and collective performance politics and cultural protest during periods of protracted conflict in the aforementioned settings. Segall (2013: xxvii) 'attends to alternative spaces of protest, following massive relocations after violence in order to challenge the way that we know democratic springs—a relocation of both time and place, an altered genealogy'.

In this study of feminist counter-narratives, the reader encounters the female subaltern speaking in various creative forms and through various old and new social media that embrace non-Western cultural frames. We encounter Iraqi women narrating stories of loss and dislocation through poetry and Arab women simultaneously appropriating the performance of Islamic prayer and destabilising its repressive connotations through enacting it as political protest. In examining South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation, Segall reminds the reader of the importance of performance in creating national collective memories and histories that enable mourning and healing, particularly music, poems and dance. In this sense, the arts transcend their entertainment role and make collective political claims.

Segall's recognition (2013: xix) of the impact of the media in shaping collective thinking informs her sustained critique of, not just Western media and its value-laden lens but, the equally difficult role involved in 'how we can understand non-Western democracies after the mediated depictions of the Islamic and African world after 9/11'. The author uses the word 'Spring' to emphasise the fact that certain political ruptures are not insignificant because they are undocumented and 'to create icons out of crowds, flash to violent spectacles, and politicize violence against women fails to note the changing street politics and gendered practices' (Segall, xxiv). The frequent invocation of the word 'Spring' to describe collective national protest, however, is problematic and the conflation between South Africa's transition from apartheid in 1994 and the Iranian revolution and Kurdish uprising needs to be treated with more caution by the author. Different political contexts inspire different forms of collective and individual responses and protests, even more so when analysed through a gendered lens that delves beyond the macro-level.

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The book is an invitation to think beyond embedded stereotypes about non-Western feminisms and establishes a discourse that does not reflect a neutral and objective portrayal of the ways in which African women live, but is steeped in the power dynamics that influence and appropriate knowledge production, discourse and the realities that individuals perceive (Fraser, 1997). In fact, the book's most critical contribution is in interrogating embedded gendered stereotypes that collectively exist about what constitutes the 'Muslim woman' and how this enables the masking of women's individual and collective protest. It does this by showing the reader that performance politics and various forms of new social media encapsulated by Twitter, Facebook and blogs especially in patriarchal non-Western societies, can constitute women's individual and collective articulations of agency, which are masked by the blanket attribution of 'the oppressed' to Muslim women. Segall (2013: 66) actively confronts notions of struggle by *deliberately* 'challenging stereotypes of silent Muslim women, locked in harems and fixed political identities'. The book attempts to address the marginalisation of non-Western women in the construction of their own realities and images, alerting the reader to the reductionist implications of understanding diverse women's lives through a Western gender-lens:

'As a subtext here, there needs to be a distinction between American feminist ideal visions of "individualistic fulfilment" and women across the globe who are fulfilled by communal affirmation in spiritual communities, establishing what Kelly Chong describes as diverse "moral and cultural" goals.' Wearing the headscarf, when an individual's choice, can function as a sign of an honorable status that commands respect: the religious role can be a form of cultural capital, offering possibilities for spiritual leadership within feminine circles, extended families, and the larger community, especially through religious charities' (Segall, 2013: 89).

Implications that go beyond the theoretical but extend to the ways protests and activism is defined and Segall (2013) warns that 'activists must not ignore these binaries, but rather confront assumptions buried within the debate, placing challenges of injustice into what Nicola Pratt calls a more global context'.

Challenging conventional notions of feminist protests is not solely about creating spaces for cultural relativism, but also about allowing the choices that women make to be dignified and validated and to acknowledge the possibility that women who live in non-Western societies celebrate their tradition and find spaces within these structures to empower themselves. This possibility suggests that, in fact, African and Arab women are able to be empowered within their own societies and find the spaces, within the confines of restrictive patriarchal and traditional structures, to be autonomous. Segall illustrates this well, showing that the fact that non-Western women who are not necessarily burning their bras should not, in any way, detract from the recognition of the ways in which they live in restrictive spaces and mark out new ones. The utility then, of employing an analytical framework based on creative forms of protests, is that instead of identifying what culture and patriarchy are *doing to* African women, the emphasis would be on what African women are *doing with* culture and patriarchy.

The study's most significant methodological innovation is also its most prominent weakness, namely the appropriateness of the South Africa, Iran and Iraq comparison, which is not followed consistently and is undermined by the dominance of material on Iraq within the book, with South Africa and Iran seemingly positioned as footnotes. While the relevance of the

first two case studies was immediately obvious to me, the inclusion of South Africa admittedly caught me by surprise. It is not an obvious comparison and while the book's organization does not necessarily facilitate a sustained comparison, as stand-alone single case studies, each country's analysis is exceptionally rich, detailed and at times, as poetic as the cultural forms of protests that Segall aims to illuminate. Particularly enjoyable are the author's own personal vignettes and her self-insertion into the book as a protagonist. Segall (2013: 7) informs us of her interactions with her research participants at various locations and how she ends up encountering them, informing the reader that one encounter with Kurdish music emerged from the fact that 'she had limited cooking tools and even fewer culinary skills, [and therefore] I went several times a week to my favorite lamb kebab joint'.

The process of writing marginalized and subaltern histories which have not been widely publicised in public consciousness through internationally disseminated Western media, is not an easy one. It is especially difficult when civil conflict within the same geographical context in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt and Tunisia have received widespread media coverage and been saturated with propagated narratives of victimhood that have eclipsed smaller, ethnic nationalist struggles such as the forgotten Arab spring in Kurdistan, Iraq in the early 1990s. In this sense, the author's task is expanded in that she has to fulfil the additional role of historian, providing the reader with background and context. It is well executed.