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Book Review Essay: Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring¹

Sadia Uddin²

*I am no longer a tenant of my body. I am no longer enthralled in snares of silences. I am ME, birthing a new life into my soul, catalyzing change, and becoming an agent of change. I am ready to sail, to brave the horizon and go beyond*¹

The viral image of Sudanese activist Alaa Salah appears on the cover of Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad's *Women Rising* and projects a young and defiant Arab woman draped in a white cotton thobe and gold earrings standing on top of a vehicle amidst a throng of Sudanese protestors.² These protestors are predominantly women carrying smartphones to document and broadcast the Sudanese revolution in real time, which is symbolic of a repositioning of Arab women's role in activism. This iconic photograph captured by Lana Haroun became widely popular in 2019 and has since been used to represent women's resistance in the contemporary Arab world. Salah, as a young Arab woman, signifies a continuation of the efforts of Sudanese women who came before her yet, her image also serves to remind readers that Arab women are still defiant although their modes of protesting and activism have changed over time. The use of Salah's image plays a pivotal role in capturing the reader's interest and invites one to anticipate the forthcoming contents of the book.

Another reason to reflect on Salah's image is that it stands in stark contrast to commonly used Orientalist tropes of Arab women as silenced, demure, or politically unaware. Historically, Western perceptions of Arab women were shaped by Orientalist artistic depictions which imagined them as sensual and erotic beings often languishing in harems.³ Beyond these visual depictions, Western notions of Arab women also carried over into literature and were widely disseminated. As Edward Said (2003) noted, women were receptacles of what he described as a 'male-power fantasy'.⁴ These ideas correspond to and are reproduced through popular culture whereby Arab women are depicted as silent victims in need of rescue.

However, this bold image also initiates inquiry into whether women were always present, vocal, and involved in movements of resistance across the Arab world. Western conceptualizations of Arab women have often relegated them to the confines of silence, invisibility and oppression to perpetuate ideas of Arab women being in need of saving by the West. Sherene Razack (2008) also builds on this by examining how Muslim populations, in particular, are regulated under the pretense of protecting Muslim women from patriarchy and Islam.⁵ Thus, when the Arab Spring gained momentum in 2011, it was assumed that this new and infectious wave of resistance had finally spread to Arab women and was now beckoning them to rise up and fight for the quintessential 'Western' ideals of democracy, social justice and specifically, women's rights.

¹ Stephan, R, and Charrad, M. M. (Eds.). (2020). *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring*. New York City, New York: New York University Press.

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The Arab Spring is thus cited as the catalyst for Arab women's empowerment but Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad as Arab research scholars, demystify this claim by providing readers with historical insights that outline the ways in which Arab women's involvement in social and political activism has predated the Arab Spring. Yet, the Arab Spring serves as an underpinning to examine how innovative or modified modes of outreach and mobilization such as social media and technology are being used as tools to better organize an array of Arab women's movements and initiatives in their respective societies.

While it is important to reflect on Arab Women's increasing use of technology and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogging websites to mobilize, it is also imperative to note that their use of technology is how we, as outsiders to the Arab Spring, have been privileged to gain insight into the change they initiated. This volume makes it apparent to the unfamiliar reader that Arab women have been frontrunners and agents of change who used their own methods to offer us a look into their activism in several ways. It is emphasized for the reader that Arab women emerged from the Arab Spring not as 'victims' as some narratives would suggest but as social actors in the changes they helped to usher in (p. 61). In addition to the euphoric images of the Arab Spring, women were signaling change in more ways than one and as the title of this work suggests, strides of change are being made and will continue into the future.

The editors thematically divided *Women Rising* into five parts, with each part containing eight personal reflections and forty chapters in total. Each part of the volume is equally as diverse as those sharing their experiences and insights as activists or participant observers. The editors present this work under the broad categories of the three R's, which include *resistance*, *revolution* and *reform* and serve as the theoretical concepts that subsequently correspond to three bodies of literature (p. 4). Firstly, this volume aims to *resist* feminist literature and more blatantly critiques transnational feminists including Alexander & Mohanty (1997); Enloe (2000); and Kandiyoti (1988), who propose that all victims of colonialism and imperialism share a collective subaltern identity.⁶ This critique necessitates the contributions of diverse Arab women spanning across fifteen states and as the reader learns, their diversity is certainly not limited to a specific social class, religion, ethnicity, language, sexuality or space. Furthermore, this resistance sets the ground for taking an intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of Arab women in and beyond the Arab Spring. The editors thus, identify gaps in existing Third World feminist scholarship which does not adequately represent Arab women and subsequently provide a platform for Arab women to be heard (p. 5). The next theme addresses social revolutions and explores the role of the Arab Spring in facilitating Arab women's more pronounced involvement in public life, their subsequent leadership in organizing protests and their demands for increased representation (p. 6). Lastly, the book addresses reforms in gender politics by examining how women have stepped up their efforts to introduce gender reforms in politics through 'intensified pressure from below' (p.7).

The book includes a forward by Suad Joseph, a Research Professor at the University of California-Davis and lays the groundwork for the personal accounts that necessitated the compilation of this book focusing on Arab women. Joseph recognizes the tendency of Western social media, news and popular culture to perpetuate ideas of Arab women as either being apolitical or lacking a political voice (xiii). Thus, *Women Rising* has become an important body of work to reflect on

Arab women's activism "not as a fleeting moment, but as one moment in a long genealogy of Arab women's activism" (xiii).

In the *Introduction*, Stephan and Charrad therefore, make apparent their aim to challenge totalizing perceptions of Arab women. They effectively achieve this by providing a platform for those voices which are either rarely heard or deliberately silenced. Thus, this volume includes chapters that lend voice to filmmakers, poets, artists, students, rural women, queer feminists and housewives (p.3). These voices are diversified further as the contributors focus on issues that range from citizenship, voting rights, civil liberties, family law etc. The editors also acknowledge that change is not swift and takes time. But they argue that change is not stagnant because it continues to occur behind the scenes. Their effort for compiling this work is to document some of these ongoing changes so that readers may appreciate how the past has led to the improved conditions of women in the present and the ways in which this will continue into the future. Thus, the title *Women Rising* 'in' and 'beyond' the Arab Spring embodies hope and demonstrates very clearly that strides for further change are already in motion as they had been prior to the Arab Spring as well.

Part One explores what Arab women fight for and includes eight accounts of how women have challenged the status quo against violence, oppression and injustice to demand sociopolitical, economic, legal and sexual rights in various capacities (p.13). The late Rula Quawas reflects on how literature, feminist theory and discourse connected her to her students and encouraged them to *unlearn* the patriarchal perspective which has been deeply ingrained in how Arab women are expected to see the world around them (p.13). Quawas also shares poetry through which she frames the collective experiences of students in her feminist theory courses and hails their emergence as independent individuals and 'active agents' who learned to question their male dominated surroundings in Jordan (p. 16). Amal Amireh takes an intersectional approach in locating queerness in Palestine and examines the entanglement of queer sexualities with the Palestine-Israel conflict (p.44). Lina Abirafeh and Ghida Anani provide insight into the partnerships formed by Arab men to educate men and youth about violence against women in Lebanon using filmmaking and audiovisual materials (p.50). This positive social shift represents men as partners rather than perpetrators of violence who can support women's efforts for social change (p.50). Next, Ginger Feather pens Najia Adib's efforts to raise awareness about pedophilia and child rape, which had previously been taboo in Morocco's conservative society (p. 53).

The second part of *Women Rising* is perhaps the most crucial as it effectively encapsulates the diversity of Arab women. These chapters outline the importance of ideologies and beliefs in mobilizing women both locally and regionally. The section begins with a chapter authored by Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh and frames the Islamist and secularist debate on opposing readings of women's status and social placement in the Tunisian Constitution (p.83). This is followed by Syrian Parliamentarian Maria Saadeh's belief that as both a patriot and a Christian, she must remain within the Parliament despite its flaws to actively partake in implementing political reforms in Syria and promote the democratic process (p. 96). Professor Nadjie Al-Ali shares the challenges faced by feminist scholars who simultaneously have to confront Islamophobia and racism while striving towards gender equity and equality for Iraqi women (p. 98). These tensions are exacerbated in Iraq through its colonial legacies, which have shaped Iraq's exposure to Islamic militancy, sectarianism, and authoritarian militarism (p. 105). On the other hand, Samaa Gamie engages with the complications of feminist activism being equated with a

Western pact against Egypt (p. 117). Gamie shares how Egyptian women's struggles against intolerance, fanaticism and oppression are misrepresented and undermined to the extent of questioning their patriotism. Using Asmaa Mahfouz as a focal point, Gamie outlines how Mahfouz's defiance was met with disapproval as it violated the "code of silence and invisibility" (p. 125).

Part Three explores Arab women's myriad forms of creative expression as agency to advocate social change and demand social and political rights. The chapters draw linkages between artists and the protestors by outlining their use of artistic expression such as graffiti and street art. Rita Stephan authors the formative chapter to discuss how Arab women's cyberactivism has evolved and advanced since 1999 (p.149). Using the Arab Women Solidarity Association United (AWSA) as a reference, Stephan's reflection on the early days of connecting and mobilizing via email allows readers to grasp that cyberactivism among Arab women existed much before the Arab Spring gained momentum and that change is rooted in women's ongoing struggle with power, oppression and male dominance (p. 159). The creative expressions of Arab women are further captured through film, photographs and literature. Katrina Eileraas Karakuş discusses Aliaa Elmahdy's nude protest in Egypt and her subsequent exile to Sweden (p.161). Online outlets enabled Elmahdy to engage in transnational activism after losing physical connectivity with local Arab feminists (p. 162). However, Karakuş argues against the 'emancipatory' potential of Elmahdy's alliance with Femen, which reflects to the reader that diverse and competing perspectives can be expected (p.167). Andy Young takes the reader through the trajectory of Egyptian activism documented in sketches and literature from 1158 BC, which has since been developed further through visual arts such as graffiti and street art which manifested particularly during the Arab Spring and transformed the streets of Cairo (p. 190). Young's work thus, links the past to present and clearly demonstrates this transition through the artworks of Bahia Shehab (p. 196).

Part Four engages with how women use space to mobilize. Amina Zarrugh documents women's efforts to recover disappeared family members from Libya's Abu Salim prison (p. 234), while Theresa Hunt surveys the lead Egyptian women took in developing anti-sexual harassment campaigns (p.245). Young Cairo-based women identified harassment as a prevalent social issue that garnered less attention due to a lack of data (p. 249). These tech-savvy women developed the HarassMap system to collect data on harassment while simultaneously providing women with an interactive platform to speak out about their experiences of harassment (p.254). Developed in 2009, HarassMap became especially useful to women's safety during the Arab Spring and emphasizes Arab women's ability to find innovative solutions. Soumia Bardhan and Karen A. Foss's contribution showcases graffiti and street art as an act of expression and reclamation of public space that directly confronts attempts to make women invisible (p. 267).

The final part of this work explores how Arab women organize and debates the efficacy of disruptive and non-confrontational actions of organizing (p. 311). Fatima Sadiqi represents an example of nonconfrontational action by sharing her success in launching the very first Centre for Studies and Research on Women at the University of Fez in Morocco (p. 313). In contrast, Namie Tsujigami shares Saudi women's defiance in taking the driver seat and challenging religious and political authorities that prevent women from driving (p. 339). Readers also observe a role reversal through Emanuela Buscemi's contribution as Kuwaiti women reclaim public spaces in the Karamat Watan protests and also take the lead in protecting male activists (p.351).

Gayatri Spivak posed a question through her influential work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*⁷ *Women Rising* exemplifies that subaltern Arab women can not only speak; they can also take charge of how Arab women are represented and spoken about. This body of work is necessary not only as a means to offer perspectives on resistance, revolution and reform. Rather, the host of perspectives offered by an array of contributions from and about Arab women, to me, reflect *repositioning*, *representation* and *reclamation*. Through a reading of *Women Rising*, one can observe how Arab women's activism has repositioned following the Arab Spring and increasingly, Arab women are using new modes of mobilizing and organizing to better represent themselves and simultaneously, upset normative ideas of Arab women. This in itself is a reclamation of Arab women's identity, which as this volume clearly indicates, is not a monolith. To capture the diversity of Arab women and contest uniform and erroneous ideas of Arab women as passive and apolitical, the editors have compiled a volume that draws upon "literary expression, street art, photographic discourse analysis, interviews, critical biography, testimonies, ethnographic interpretation and political commentary" (p. 3). These myriad expressions are representative of Arab women and the activism they engage in. While this book will certainly benefit students and activists, it disseminates knowledge about Arab women from their own perspectives and should be read by anyone seeking to learn about Arab women's experiences beyond the confinements of existing scholarship. *Women Rising* also furnishes academia with a new and valuable body of work that can be taught in Postcolonial Studies, Political Science, Women and Gender Studies and the Humanities.

¹ Rula Quawas, "Barefoot Feminist Classes: A Revelation of Being, Doing, and Becoming" in *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring* ed. Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad, (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 19.

² Vanessa Friedman, 'It's Going to be the Image of the Revolution' *nytimes.com*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/fashion/demonstration-clothing-women-sudan.html>

³ Jennifer Meagher, 'Orientalism in Nineteenth Century Art' *metmuseum.org*, October 2004 https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 207.

⁵ Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 17.

⁶ Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3: 274-90.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).