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## The Role of Women in the Egyptian 25<sup>th</sup> January Revolution

By Manal al-Natour<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines women's roles in the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in Egypt. I examine portrayals of women's roles in the revolution in literary fiction released shortly after the revolution and in digital media. I argue that the fictional and even nonfictional texts are incomplete in their depiction of female roles. I further examine the representation of women's roles in digital media, specifically blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, and argue that digital social media give the most pervasive, extensive, and accurate description of women's roles in the revolution; it not only engages women politically, but it also provides a wide range of roles for female participation in the revolution.

*Keywords:* Revolution of 25 January, Women's rights, Digital media

### Introduction

The stories of women and revolutions have always intertwined, and the revolution of 2011 brought women in Egypt new opportunities and avenues for participation in social and political reform. From the start most women had been at the forefront of civil resistance, which took virtual and real forms. Their fight for democracy and a secular society sprang from the social and political oppression they had witnessed for decades. The key role women played in the revolution may have shaken the social power structure and deconstructed master narratives about the Arab woman.

However, that key role was downplayed in the literature, specifically the fiction that was released shortly after the revolution. I argue that the digital media, unlike fiction, was inclusive in its representation of women's roles in the revolution; it allowed for the emergence of new, uncommon sensibilities, shapes, and actualities that brought to life not only new patterns and types of order but also new realities. In the future, such realities could change thought processes and practices for those who work with digital media and its chaotic system. For example, a message posted on a blog could bring about new realities that create change and affect the production of new norms. The dynamic and constantly changing system of posted messages establishes new meanings that could not have been predicted in advance; with every message it is possible that iteration could bring new meanings and new knowledge to life.

Aiming to contribute to the recognition of women's roles in the Revolution of 25 January, I examine how those roles are portrayed in two literary works, [Fu 'ād Qandīl's](#) *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* and Hishām al-Kashān's *Saba't Ayiām fi al-Taḥrīr*, representative examples of the literature produced and widely advertised about the revolution, as well as in digital media, specifically Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns' *Tweets from Tahrir*. The former two works marginalize the gender configurations in the critical times before and during the revolution. This underrepresentation of women in the revolution harms the genesis of the revolution and its goals and ignores the political implication of women's reactions, restraining females within males' monolithic experience. *Tweets from Tahrir*, by contrast, accurately reflects the crucial revolutionary roles played by women.

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My analysis of women's role in the revolution is guided by two main theoretical notions: Judith Butler's gender performativity and chaos theory's notion of the "butterfly effect."

Gender, Butler says, "proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity which is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1999, p. 33). The perception of gender is regulated through its performativity, which relies heavily on the social anticipation of the subject and its identity. She criticizes this anticipation of gender, claiming that it does not allow for representations of the subject to extend to a wider sphere in which more possibilities could occur:

In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.  
(p. xv)

Gender is constructed through the performance of the subject and what that subject's performance is anticipated to be; this very fulfillment of anticipation is dangerous; such performances are "deadening clichés," killing the opportunity for new social practices and acts to emerge (p. xxi). Therefore, Butler calls for opening the field, considering what is in the margins—what is unthinkable or not anticipated instead of foreclosing the dimensions and deciding what is right and what is wrong for the subject to be; that is, thinking about range of the subject's possible practices before foreclosing these practices and excluding the subjects from being held accountable and recognized (p. viii). She contends, however, that when a person opens up the field and engages in the practices assumed legitimate for him or her as a subject, he or she fears the lucidity of the space and the loss of identity (p. xi). This problem of loss of identity appears clearly in *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* [Birth in Tahrir] and *Saba't Ayyām fi al-Taḥrīr* [Seven Days in Tahrir], both of which mainly represent women as confused about the revolution and its causes and frightened to take a major role, thereby relegating women to the role of the female follower of male political actions.

On the other hand, *Tweets from Tahrir* offers women a wider space to participate in the revolution and exceeds the radical assumptions of gender and feminine subjectivity that still linger in many Arabic fiction works. The power digital media offer women resembles to a great extent what chaos theory terms the "butterfly effect." As applied to social dynamics, this term refers to a high degree of sensitivity to incipient circumstances such that small changes cause unexpected and significant results in the system: "The flapping of a butterfly's wings in Tokyo theoretically can alter weather patterns in New York" (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 219). Despite its name, chaos theory is greatly invested in order. The "chaos" in this case refers to the base level of complexity and intensity of information that produce noise and finally order. Hayles contends that in Western tradition there are two main ideas that explain how order arises from chaos: "In chaos theory, chaos may either lead to order, as it does with self-organizing systems, or in yin/yang fashion it may have deep structures of order encoded within it. In either case, its relation to order is more complex than traditional Western oppositions have allowed" (Hayles, 1991, p. 3)

According to Paulson (1991), rather than assuming that such systems lack order, the theorist must recognize that such a complex intricate system is, in fact, rich in information. By

way of example, Paulson describes the transfer of information between A and B: when B receives only the message in its entirety, then all that B receives is an exact copy of the message that A has. Most people assume, on the other hand, that when noise intervenes in the process of communication less information is received by B than was sent by A; in fact, however, B receives more information than what A sent: in addition to the exact copy of the message that A sent, B receives noise that includes more information. This noise makes this system intricate, complicated, and “heterogeneous” (p. 50). “Systems of interest in chaos theory are dynamic. They change over time. These changes are expressed through differential equations, which describe how the behavior of a variable—say, the angular position of a pendulum—changes with respect to time” (Hayles, 1991, p. 16). Because of its dynamic nature, the process of iteration produces unpredictable, continuous “coupling,” which finally generates order, which in turn is exemplified in patterns, or what Mandelbrot calls “fractals” (Mandelbrot, 1977, p. 2). While fractals are strikingly similar to each other, each is different. The peculiarity and distinctiveness of each posted message appear in *Tweets from Tahrir*; their complexity brings about changes in existing structures, for example, the overthrow of Mubarak.

Before examining women’s utilization of digital media in the Revolution of 25 January, I will discuss the roles in the revolution of the female protagonists in two works. The first is a collection of short stories, *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*, by Fu’ād Qandīl (1944–), a widely known Egyptian novelist, short story writer, essayist and critic whose literary production consists of seventeen novels, thirteen collections of stories, and six children stories. His studies and background in philosophy are clearly reflected in his work. The second is al-Kashān’s novel *Saba’t Ayiām fi al-Taḥrīr*. These literary works represent women as followers or questioners, or merely supporters of male political action, ignoring women’s voices and the variety of female roles that sustained the revolution and brought about political change. All translations from these works are mine.

*Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* focuses on Egyptians’ struggles against degradation in their own country. It begins with a short story about a married couple in their sixties at the onset of the revolution: while shopping for a birthday gift for the wife, the couple recalls the revolutions in 1970s Egypt, during which they had met and fallen in love. The collection ends with another joyous story about the revolution, this one taking place in 2011 in Tahrir Square at a wedding party. Among other things, Qandīl examines Egyptians’ struggles to survive under Mubarak’s despotism.

In *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*, women are referred to almost exclusively as nameless, faceless entities: “women,” “girls (*banāt*)” “ladies,” “the Mrs.,” and “the mother.” For example, in one paragraph in “*Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*,” Qandīl refers to two of his female characters by three distinct labels: one is “a Mrs. in her sixties” and “an elderly woman” (*ḥajja*), and the second “a young lady” (p. 59). In “A Nation Rising Up,” Qandīl refers to a particular “young girl” over and over. As if rebelling in spite of the author, the girl finally interrupts her father mid-speech to go and participate in the revolution despite his many attempts to prevent her from doing so.

Men, on the other hand, receive actual given names, such as Maḥrūs and Ḥāmid, and even honorifics, as in the case of Ḥaj Sirḥj (pp. 31, 37, 89). They are highly recognized and in most cases, receive respectable social labels, as do Dr. Sāmīr and Dr. Nājī, who transfer their clinics to Tahrir Square in order to treat injured revolutionaries (pp. 89, 95).

In “*Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*,” the main story in the collection, which exposes the reader to a variety of scenes that depict the revolution and many participants’ reasons for rebelling against the regime, the character Dr. Mīlād receives special acknowledgement. Tahrir Square has

become the new home for all Egyptians, and Qandīl captures the revolutionists' feelings towards each other, their love and care for each other, and their ability to taste their future triumph. Mīlād, an old Egyptian scholar, after spending many successful years in the United States, loses his job and returns to Egypt, uncertain of how life will be there. Once he understands the people's burdens and becomes convinced that revolution is urgently needed, he spends twelve days camped out in Tahrir Square, supporting the revolution by supplying food, drinks, and blankets. He finds himself experiencing what people experience and calling for what they call for—freedom and liberty. The social injustice that Mubarak's regime imposes on him to find a home other than Egypt is the same injustice that the people in Tahrir have been suffering from for thirty years. He brings potatoes to an unnamed pregnant woman who has followed her husband to the square. The woman gives birth to a boy and calls him Mīlād, after Dr. Mīlād.

Women are represented in *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* as followers, making decisions based on the men in their lives, and their voices emerge only in engagement with men. For example, one of the main characters in "Mīlād fi al-Taḥrīr," a woman who has no name, who is portrayed as a follower, one incapable of making her own decisions and who takes to the streets to demonstrate against Mubarak's regime only after her husband has done so. The woman's husband also finds himself in Tahrir Square only because he thinks of it as a good place for stealing from the massive number of the revolutionists; however, after he experiences for himself the joy of rebelling against the oppressive government that all of them are subject to, he discovers that the revolution has started to craft a new subjectivity for him. His wife does not believe him when he tells her on the phone that he is in Tahrir Square. She appears to be alienated from political life and is solely concerned with her familial sphere: she embodies her role as a female and performs only within that sphere, following what is anticipated by others on the basis of her gender and cultural norms: deadening clichés—her gendered performativity kills her ability to engage fully in the revolution; her voice and opinions on the revolution are never fully disclosed to the reader. Despite her presence in Tahrir Square and her experience of witnessing the Egyptian masses overcoming their fears, she remains silent regarding changes in the country. She maintains this silence even during the excruciating physical pain of giving birth to her son in the square, embodying the role of the silent female and the shy woman to avoid losing social acceptance. In the face of a revolution that shakes the highest authorities in Egypt, her only contribution is to name her son after Dr. Mīlād; her silence about and ignorance of the events raise questions about the righteousness of gender performativity, men's writing, and men's representations of women's political perceptions and social sensibilities.

Similarly, Rihām is a young girl suffering from a kidney infection and thereby barred from being an agent in the revolution in a story Qandīl devotes to her recovery, a metaphor for Egypt's recovery from oppression by its former president. Rihām's father finds a kidney donor, Tariq, who falls in love with her and marries her. By the end of the story, Egypt expels Mubarak, and people celebrate their triumph and Rihām's wedding party in Tahrir Square. However, after Rihām recovers, she remains detached from the political situation in Egypt. Her indifference toward the revolution makes for an interesting discussion or debate on Qandīl's interpretation of the way in which female characters interact with the emerging political and social changes, as well as the role of Egyptian women.

Even though Rihām is suffering from a kidney infection, she is blessed to be from an upper-middle-class family, and therefore her father can afford to pay thousands of guineas for medical treatment to relieve her pain. Further, Rihām enjoys a great deal of freedom, including not having been assigned to a traditional marriage by her father. Yet her political opinions

remain unknown: The author silences her, and the joy she feels about her wedding is completely unrelated to the joy of the revolutionaries celebrating freedom in Tahrir Square, as if those events have no influence on her. Although the political developments in Egypt are complex and the events unpredictable, Rihām's subjectivity remains shaped by strained performativity: she does not depart from the normal practices of her gender. Her joy is to be a bride, and although her wedding takes place in Tahrir Square, the heart of revolutionary activity, Rihām remains self-centered and completely detached from the sweeping transformations in the nation and the thunderous cries for freedom all around her. Qandīl's representation of Rihām, the unnamed woman, and other women, and his fixation on gender dynamics, invites further examination of the validity of his representations of men.

In addition to the silent female characters, Qandīl provides a plethora of secondary female characters who cheer enthusiastically for their sons and husbands to participate in the revolution and to come back safely. Qandīl does not call them by their names, instead labeling them "Mrs." or "the wife of." This contrast is most blatant in "Milād fi al-Taḥrīr," where a woman is delighted to see her son distributing sandwiches to the revolutionaries: "A Mrs. lit up when she saw her son Ashraf distributing hummus sandwiches to the revolutionaries, who were very happy to be going home" (p. 64). 'Am Bāz's wife's feeling is no different from the joyous feelings of this "Mrs.": When 'Am Bāz goes home at the end of Angry Friday, he finds his wife waiting for him at home, embracing her role as a good wife who does not cross over her culturally constructed feminine space. Unable to contain her excitement when she sees him home safe and sound, she "burst[s] out" and "crie[s]" for her man. 'Am Bāz describes the scene:

When we arrived at Al-Sanādīly Street, [Kāmil] tried to pay for the taxi but I refused and told the driver that I wouldn't get out of the car if he took the money from Kāmil. The taxi driver was scared and agreed not to take the money. Kāmil carried my wheel chair and placed it in front of a supermarket, then came to carry me home...My wife burst out in excitement that I was back, and then [...] I told her, "Let me hear you ululating for me, and this time let it come from your heart." She cried [for joy]. (p. 28)

Clearly, 'Am Bāz's wife and Ashraf's mother, "the Mrs.," are homebodies, not revolutionists: they have not exercised their right to demonstrate against the tyrannical regime and to achieve democracy; instead, they rely on their men to voice their struggles and needs, anticipating that it is their males' natural responsibility to do so. Rather than being portrayed as feminists and assessed as social and political activists, the female characters in *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* are secondary in both the narrative and the nation's politics. Appropriately, then, 'Am Bāz's wife and Ashraf's mother's stay at home instead of taking a major role in the revolution, thus reinforcing the division between political reform and gender reform, and demonstrating the priority of political affairs over feminist and gender struggles.

Qandīl's short stories also depict a third category of woman—those who question the revolution: they are confused by the rapid changes around them and are unable to grasp the revolution's new beliefs and ideals. Most of these female characters find themselves, by chance, in Tahrir Square among the revolutionaries, worrying, looking for their husbands or sons, or just passing through. They are passively swept into the moving masses and taken from the periphery to the heart of the revolution. Women in this category are so perplexed, confused, and possibly astonished that they find themselves asking people around them if they are really in Tahrir

Square, as in three scenes in “*Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*”: Mīlād’s story of oppression in Egypt and the United States after losing his job there, the arrival of confused women at Tahrir Square to ask about their men, and Ḥamīda’s giving birth to Mīlād. The otherwise unnamed mother of Ashraf is introduced as “a woman in her sixties”; she “and a young lady came to [Tahrir Square] to ask about Ashraf al-Nagly. Someone who sensed her confusion said, ‘Ask there.’ ... The woman and the young lady went to another group to ask about Ashraf, and then went to a third group. The woman’s confusion and anxiety began to escalate” (p. 59). As the Egyptian subjectivity becomes more fluid and complex due to its interactions with the political fluctuations, these women become more confused and in jeopardy of losing their identity and feminine space. Another bewildered woman comes to Tahrir Square with her little girl to look for her husband: “The woman, who kept looking around for her husband, told [Ashraf’s mother] that she was unsure that the place was Tahrir Square and was suspicious that this was a revolution or possibly even a demonstration” (p. 61). Women in this story are detached from the historical period and its political implications, and even from the revolution’s location. This confusion compels them to leave their homes to grasp for a sense of the present reality, rather than to create a new reality. The structural relationship between the signifier and the signified seems to be broken; the women are unable to link the name of the square with its location, unable to conceptualize the meanings in words.

Only a few of the women in *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr* have names. In “A Nation Rising Up” ’Amal, a teenage girl full of hope, believes that she should fulfill her duty to participate in the revolution to bring change and reform despite the refusal of her father, ’Am Bāz, to let her do so. She insists on going to the mosque and participating in the revolution. In her one sentence of dialogue, she articulates her political stance as if claiming a role within the narrative. She does not wait for an opportunity; she is proactive in making things happen and seizes opportunities without accepting concessions or negotiating gender limitations to her role as an Egyptian female citizen:

[’Am Bāz:] On “Angry Friday” my two sons had already gone to the mosque [to participate in the revolution after performing the Friday prayer]. *The little girl*, who is not yet sixteen, asked to push my wheelchair to the mosque. I tried to tell her that I don’t need her help and that I am able to push the wheels with my hands. She said she usually goes to the mosque to pray. I told her, “Stay home with your mother and help her prepare lunch.” She answered immediately and firmly, as if she wanted to end the conversation, “My mother will be coming after a few minutes.” (pp. 19–20 [emphasis mine])

Yet she is not referred to by name until the very end of the story. From the beginning of the story until after she defies her father she is referred to only as “the little girl.”

’Amal makes her decision to go to the mosque and participate in the revolution despite her father’s command that she not attend. With her firm feminist beliefs, she is able to shift the power structure and steer the dynamics of the conversation with her traditional father. Her firm answer and prompt action reflect the importance of women’s resistance to sexism and its institutions and demonstrate the possibilities of political progress if women are determined to improve their status. As a strong feminist character, ’Amal speaks on behalf of her mother and insists on defending the older woman’s right to go to the mosque and participate in the revolution.

Although 'Amal's insistence on going to the mosque comes from her resolve to participate in the revolution that will take place there following the Friday prayer, her father assumes she is going for religious reasons: "I was pleased with my daughter's response, and we went to the mosque" (p. 20). He then expands on the importance of performing the five prayers and criticizes his oldest son for not fulfilling this part of his religious responsibilities toward God:

All of us pray to thank God for his blessings and ask him to make our lives easier. I feel sorry for my oldest son, who got married several years ago and lives away from me; he smokes and does not perform his five prayers. I cannot understand why the youth do not perform prayers; it's as if they believe it will bring hatred rather than spiritual peace and love. Performing the prayers is a pleasure and a form of conversing with God and a way of purifying the soul and lessening suffering, and it is an ever-lasting invitation for refining the soul. (p. 20)

'Am Bāz interprets 'Amal's political engagement and resistance within a religious framework, and his reshaping that resistance is, itself, a form of patriarchal oppression and an underestimation of women's capacity for self-expression. In this way, 'Am Bāz misunderstands women's primary role in the revolution and social reform, and misreads 'Amal's attitude; when he comes home at the end of the day, he finds 'Amal still demonstrating with other revolutionists in the streets. 'Amal believes that joining people in the mosque is a way of exercising her right to participate in the revolution.

Qandīl glorifies and reinforces the roles of 'Am Bāz, Kāmil, and other men with intricate details that magnify their courage and celebrate their authority: for example, as they work together in the fight for dignity and freedom, 'Am Bāz and Kāmil resolve a longstanding conflict they have had with each other. Male revolutionaries carry 'Am Bāz in his wheelchair on their shoulders; they are beaten and attacked from every side, but in most cases they recover their strength and prevail over the armed forces:

The armed forces surprised us with an attack from the rear. We ['Am Bāz and Kāmil] were in the back taking brutal beatings. I imagined a humorous scene where my clever neighbor Kāmil screamed so loud that the officer's ears were hurting and they quickly shut him up. A heavy club was about to fall on my face, but my neighbor grabbed it and with his large fist, hit a soldier in the chest; he almost fell, but he was caught by a friend [...] The soldiers became more vicious in their attack. Were these cruel soldiers so blind that they couldn't see that I am handicapped and sympathize with me? I was beaten, but my neighbor protected me and only one club got me, but the blow was so harsh that I felt it all the way on my other side. (p. 24)

'Am Bāz and Kāmil are depicted as courageous and defiant; they are taken by surprise and attacked from behind by men with clubs. Several times Qandīl juxtaposes 'Am Bāz handicap with his physical strength in defying the police. However, they manage to maintain high spirits and sense of humor even in the battlefield.

Qandīl presents another glorified image of men during the revolution in "The Urologist." Dr. Sāmīr and Dr. Nājī decide to camp in Tahrir Square and treat the injured revolutionaries.



While the story mainly concerns their treatment of Rihām's kidney infection, it also holds the two doctors as moral examples of the revolution and celebrates their roles in resisting the regime, sacrificing their jobs and souls by camping in Tahrir Square, and even credits them with inciting the revolution in Tahrir Square:

My friend Dr. Sameer told me that several people decided to begin a revolution in Tahrir Square on January 25. He also mentioned that he will participate in the revolution despite the fact that January 25 is his wife's birthday and she always accuses him of deliberately forgetting it. (p. 89)

We cooperated to treat minor injuries and transferred the more critically injured to 'al-'Ainī Palace Hospital and 'al-Muniyrah in our friends' cars. Our junior doctors welcomed some cases in their own clinics at Bāb Allawq and Ṭall'at Street. [...] The injuries are in specific areas. Why in the eye? It is a strange kind of aggression that the Egyptian soldier practices in any war against his enemy. (p. 96)

In contrast to his glorification of men's roles, Qandīl marginalizes the role of women by not even mentioning the scene in which they were most visible in reality. Women's roles in the actual Revolution of 25 January were far more sophisticated and cultivated than the representations offered in *Milād fi al-Taḥrīr*.

Hishām al-Kashān's *Saba't Ayiām fi al-Taḥrīr* (*Seven Days in al-Taḥrīr Square*) sheds light on the context of the revolution; though primarily about the individual's experience and his struggle to live a dignified life, the novel provides a critique of Hosni Mubarak's dictatorial regime. Rather than reading it solely as a documentary novel, however, I argue that *Saba't Ayiām fi al-Taḥrīr* is about the pride and the role of the protestors and how and when they approach this sacrifice:

This book is not a documentary of the Revolution of 25 January nor about its leaders; it is about *the pride* of those who protested in the Tahrir Square and how their participation in Tahrir Square comes at different times depending on the progress in their journey of self-independence, and how the protestors succeeded in the end to work together to resist the oppression. (p. 8 [emphasis mine])

The main characters in the novel are neighbors who represent a cross-section of Egyptian society. Abdullah belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood, Sharīf to the security forces, Khlaid to the private sector, 'Ilhām to the lower-middle class, Ramiz to a traditional Christian family, Carol to a high-class family, and Basim and Shīrīn to the upper-middle-class. They are united not by nationality, but rather by a search for the self-esteem that the regime has stripped them of for thirty years.

While al-Kashān does try to represent the competing ideologies, varied religious beliefs, and political dispositions in the background of the revolution, his view of the role of young women in the revolution is limited and does not encompass the multifaceted roles they played in it.

'Ilhām is the secret second wife of a middle-aged man named Abdulhamid, who works for the regime. He beats her, and exploits her sexually and emotionally. Abdulhamid's role in her life gains its legitimacy from his position as the husband, the one who holds the power. This

position is grounded in gender performativity: he constitutes 'Ilhām's subjectivity and confines her within his paradigm, depriving her of power in their marriage and the ability to occupy a social space in which she could become accountable for herself and society. 'Ilhām is confused and bewildered, conforming to her gender identity and the expected social subjectivity, allowing Abdulhamid to regularly contest her space and performativity and so to cast her as a *normal* woman instead of one who can be read as herself, as 'Ilhām. When the revolution starts to escalate in Cairo, Abdulhamid leaves Egypt with his first wife and children. Alone and abandoned in her apartment, 'Ilhām decides to walk across town to visit her family and escape the sense of loneliness and alienation that captured her when the revolution erupted. Her first encounter with the revolutionaries comes by chance, when she finds herself among them in the streets:

'Ilhām felt suffocated in her house, so she decided to leave for her family's place in Saft ellban. She found herself suddenly in the street among streams of protesters and policemen, smoke rising high in the sky and a mix of the sounds of shooting and the thunder of angry shouts. It was a gloomy scene that filled her heart with fear and forced her to run back to her apartment. She couldn't wait for the elevator to take her to her apartment; instead, she immediately climbed the stairs until she found herself in her apartment. She closed the entry door several times to make sure that the gloomy scene was behind her. She threw herself on the floor and burst into tears. (p. 53)

'Ilhām's melancholic behavior in this passage is Alkashan's way of assigning her total powerlessness; she is too terrified to discover a space for herself outside the confines of her marital cage and her expected role as a woman. She seems unable to take a social or political stand within the situation of the revolution, as she is unable to express herself or even experience the pleasure of the liberating movement against her husband in either of his oppressive capacities, as a member of the regime or as her husband. By escaping the battlefield, 'Ilhām questions the revolution and appears as an ambivalent character far removed from the reality her people are witnessing during the revolution. It takes her a long time to redefine her role, not only as a wife in her declining marriage, but also as a female who plays part in redefining the gender status in Egypt through carving a space for her gendered enactment and active resistance.

Yet by the end of the novel 'Ilhām finds her social space by taking to the streets and gaining power in her institution of marriage and country. Her revolutionary role comes as a response to the political oppression and the domestic patriarchy and marks her emerging subjectivity within its new complex context. The change in her subjectivity is vividly described when Abdulhamid comes back from abroad for a very short visit and texts 'Ilhām, who is demonstrating in Tahrir Square, and tells her about his eagerness to see her. She answers that if he is willing to see her, that her new location is Tahrir Square; she is not going back to her apartment. Her declaration reveals a shift in the power dynamic of her relationship with Abdulhamid. 'Ilhām not only changes her location but also gains a new role as the one who gives commands to be followed. Moreover, as Abdulhamid is texting her about how much he misses her, she questions what she is used to hearing from him: "Oh. Really? You miss me? Or you mean you miss my body? Maybe you do not even miss my body, but you want to have some fun before you leave town again. I am in Tahrir Square, if you want to see me!" The narrative emphasizes her insistence in embodying a new role: "'Ilhām was pressing the button so hard and

insistently that she didn't stop pressing it even after the message has been sent." As she embodies the new role and enjoys a free revolutionary subjectivity that is not tied to anything but freedom and dignity, she writes a subsequent text in which she asks Abdulhamid to leave, to divorce her, to step down from his role: "A few seconds after her first message, very quickly she wrote a subsequent message, which reached Abdulhamid immediately after he had finished reading the first one. It read, 'Leave ... Leave'" (pp. 116–117). Interestingly, 'Ilhām's response to the political oppression and the domestic patriarchy comes in identical content and form, "Leave ... Leave"; it uses the same counter-narrative and the same strategy, direct resistance, to resist both forms of oppression. As 'Ilhām applies this unidirectional strategy, new spaces open up for her, and perhaps they will also for women like her when they apply the same strategy; the potential for liberation will be offered and new conceptualizations of social reality will emerge. 'Ilhām's strategy makes room for a profound rethinking of the female role within the social and political schemes and beyond the dichotomy of masculine/feminine, a strategy that hinges on searching for alternatives that mediate not only the relationship between the ruler and the ruled but also alternatives that destabilize and restructure such well-established roles.

Qandīl's *Milād fī al-Taḥrīr* and al-Kashān's *Saba't Ayiām fī al-Taḥrīr* fail to represent the new realities the revolution has created for Egyptian females at the individual level; they do not forge the parallel fluid perceptions of the revolution and the varying gendered and social spaces offered to women that revolutions and wars usually offer. Rather, the narrative in these literary works is a form of propaganda to showcase men's heroism instead of an encompassing representation of the revolution in all its diverse dimensions and complicated dynamics. Women are aligned as passive recipients of change and reform; they are not given an active role in the new Egypt. Political actions are detached from women's empowerment and rights. Qandīl and al-Kashān are still caught up in the vicious circle of male writing instead of adopting what Faqir calls "a genderless space" that breaks away from the dichotomy of female/male writing, sex, and gendered identity (1998, p. 21). Their representations of the female characters and their experiences in the revolution widen a gap that feminist Arabic literature and Arab subjectivity are determined to bridge. This critical time in the Arab region demands writing from within a genderless space that allows for the exploration and understanding of life experiences that are not confined by the gender of the author or his characters.

### **Citizen Journalists' Representation of Women's Roles**

Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns' *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made It* (2011) reveals women's leadership in the Revolution of 25 January in Egypt, a role that is not depicted in other genres that have made predications about or explored the revolution. Idle and Nunns depicts women's participation as a source of provocation and inspiration, as they spread hope, cover the news, and recruit for political resistance. As the book reveals, the primary goal of these women is to dispel the tyrannical regime and achieve democracy, and on many occasions they stress that the revolution is led by people from across every social, religious, and political spectrum; they stress the urgency of people working together in solidarity in order to overthrow the regime.

*Tweets from Tahrir* begins by introducing Gigi, an Egyptian female, who posts a provocative message about the success of the Tunisian revolution and the overthrow of its previous president, Bin Ali, in order to inspire Egyptians to change history: "The black and white days are coming, there is no grey." She covers the news of three Egyptians who set themselves on fire in front of Parliament, a plea for people to engage politically, which initiates a change in

Twitter posts. Because the system of posting on Twitter is sensitive and unpredictable, Gigi's breaking news about the three Egyptians entices people to post in an unprecedented fashion. Nora Shalby, another female leader and instigator on Twitter and a protestor in Tahrir Square, writes, "I think it is time for Mubarak to set himself [on] fire. He is the one who really deserves to burn #Egypt #fuckmubarakj [fuck Mubarak]." Gigi's response to set goals for the revolution is even more unexpected, as she emphasizes that the regime will fall in less than a year: "There is nothing that #Mubarak can do now to prevent the madness that will end his regime [...] It WILL HAPPEN THIS YEAR!! # Down with Mubarak 2011" (p. 28). Although *Tweets from Tahrir* incorporates posts of iconic male figures such as Wael Ghonim on the revolution, "Down with Mubarak" is a very daring message that announces the end of the regime and is sent by two Egyptian women: Asmaa Mahfouz on YouTube, and Gigi on Twitter.

Yet female leaders are absent from male-authored revolutionary fiction and nonfiction produced so far. Though 'Amal and 'Ilhām do break out of their passive gender performativity, Qandīl and al-Kashān never cast them, or any other females, as leaders. By contrast, *Tweets from Tahrir* clearly depicts the leadership of Asmaa Mahfouz and Gigi.

After people take to the streets, the leadership Gigi had shown as a tweeter as a provoker takes on a new form, as she recruits and inspires people to continue their struggle and overcome fear: "Don't let [the] police intimidate us with their presence, they always have been there and always will, it's time to move #Jan 25." "Liberation Square is being protected by the brave youth [...] we are beating the thugs even with our few numbers [...] We Will GET HIM OUT!" (p. 28).

Mona Sosah, another female who takes on a leadership role and encourages people to join, rouses and inspires them by tweeting, "You want Mubarak out? Stop whining, get off ur [your] asses and join us in the streets #jan 25[January 25]." As Twitter is a self-organizing system, Nora Shalby responds with sarcasm to spread hope and joy among protesters: "It's really satisfying to c [see] Egyptian police officers working & [and] anxious on their day off#Jan25" (p. 28).

More posts flicker and allow for constant change and a flow of more unpredictable messages, one of them by a man: "#Jan 25 the central security guys look miserable. Crowd making A major push against them. Happy Police Day guys!" Like the men, Gigi plays the role of a leader who guides people, gives commands, and communicates with people and influences their decisions, as she understands their motivations: "Everyone in Cairo who wants Mubarak out and stands for justice come to Tahrir NOW!" Mahmoud Salem reports one of the most important women's roles is to encourage their mothers, friends, and everyone else to join the revolution: "today is the big day :) going out soon. Heard that girls r [are] getting their mothers to join. People getting friends. Everyone is going#Jan25" (p. 28). The mother of a martyr goes to Tahrir Square to inspire people, raise their spirits, and remind them of the many martyrs who have died for the cause of democracy: "The mother of a martyr named Ramy was in Tahrir yesterday and spoke to the protestors. Very touching words. [1/3]"; "Stay strong, my sons. Ramy died for you. He had no interest in politics & could barely buy a shirt for himself. [2/3]# Tahrir"; "When Ramy heard of #Jan 25 he said, 'I'm leaving, mum. I'm fed up. I can't live well or even marry. I'm going to get my rights' [3/3]" (p. 166). Not only do women incite the revolution, they also build a sustainable movement that reaches its climax in Egypt on January 25. Jano Charbel writes, "My camera is stolen, my body is bruised and my eye is still black & blue, but I've never felt better in my life. #Egypt # Revolution" (p. 148).

Moreover, Gigi's leadership is shown by her challenging of the regime by resisting the police and fear: "I am back for a few...The police is fuckin [are fucking] back on the streets and

WE WILL NOT STOP!! It is me or them at this point!!” As a leader, she speaks on behalf of her people and sends Mubarak messages: “The people have waited 30 years for this, no way will back out now!! *The people or Mubarak in this country!*”(p. 89 [emphasis mine]). She bravely challenges her own fear as well other people’s: “Fear is over in EGYPT!!! Fear has left the people and [is] now with Mubarak” (p. 83). “The situation is escalating by the minute, we WILL NEVER GIVE UP! Down with Mubarak and his thugs!” (p. 112). Another way in which Gigi challenges the regime is by calling for a strike. Like many other Egyptians, she believes that a civil strike would destabilize the power structure: “Strike strike strike..strike for the revolution.” “To all students: DO[ ]NOT GO BACK to ur [your] universities and schools until the demands of the revolution are met.” (p. 188).

In addition to the virtual roles Egyptian women played in the revolution, their active roles inside Tahrir Square made the survival of the revolution possible and problematized gendered issues and the subjectivity of the female Egyptian. The women who camped inside Tahrir Square played a significant role in making survival possible; they delivered food and water, and acted as nurses to wounded people. Mosa’ab Elshamy posts, “Incredible role played by women in Tahrir: delivering water, carrying & [ ] aiding the injured, even breaking large stones. #Jan 25” (p. 114). Women are always equipped with techniques, mechanisms, and problem-solving skills in emergencies. Mahmoud Salem notes that women took on the role of protector, which has been always assigned to men in revolutions and wars: “women carry sticks & join volunteer protection committees on the streets of Heliopolis. Ppl [People] saluting [the] army. It’s great #Jan25” (p. 74). Women in Tahrir Square defied their performativity and did all they could to bring success to their revolution; they blocked the entrances to the square, and they donated money, food, and their jewelry (p. 164).

Women continued to work for the revolution even after the overthrow of Mubarak, as is evidenced by Nora’s posting of an invitation to clean up the square and “set up a memorial for the martyrs # Jan 25” (p. 226). Gigi eventually invited people to begin what she called revolution “level 2,” a revolution on the social level inside “factories, universities, towns, and streets” to take place after the overthrow of Mubarak (p. 228).

This article argues that digital media prove to be a more effective, transparent, and satisfactory medium for depicting women’s involvement and political enactment in the Arab revolutions than other media. Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter are complex and unique in that their systematic structure takes on various meanings, in spite of the disorder of the texts posted thereon. The rapid reception of these texts and production of meanings create a pattern of order in the chaos of posting. The longevity of blog posts arises from a post’s ability to inspire “noise,” the massive amount of information that leads to unpredicted outcomes. Although blogs and Twitter in general are egocentric public communication channels, the way they allow users to spread and otherwise respond to other users’ posts rapidly makes these social media sites ideal for public journalism. The complexity of blog and Twitter interactions relies heavily on the ambiguity of the medium’s structure and its sensitivity to messages from multiple sources. With every flicker, many and varied meanings are created. Social media creates bonds between people all over the world, shaping their shared perspectives regardless of their diverse identities and backgrounds. The immolation of the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi and the death of the young Egyptian Khalid Said are the best examples in this case. The news of the resistance and the death of these young men, which spread through digital media, generated sympathy and identification in the people it reached. With every image of the riots in the Arab region, a

massive number of supporters and freedom fighters created noise, spread information, and promoted democracy in ways that could not have been predicted from the initial posts.

Blogs present a realistic picture of the diverse reactions and variety of women's roles in the revolution that fiction and nonfiction texts have yet to incorporate. Women's leadership roles were pertinent to the continuance and success of the revolutions, and their remarkable signature of leadership and profound involvement in all aspects of the revolutions are represented in blogs more than in any other genre or medium of expression. Blogs diminish gender, class, social, and political boundaries, allowing for expression of individuality and femininity that cannot be fully captured in any other genre.

## **Conclusion**

The most recent Arab revolutions have been received differently by different people, according to their subjectivities and perspectives and their expectations of what these revolutions would mean to their lives. While some expect only to be rid of the previous authoritarian regime, others redefine not only political but also social and gender roles.

Feminists and women's rights activists challenge political oppression and believe that women have played an equal role in the Revolution of 25 January. They assert that this equality should be translated into a practical application of gendered equality in society and that now is the time to bring women's rights to the forefront, rather than pushing them down the list of priorities in favor of other political concerns. Women participated in and continue to participate in the revolutions alongside men, and their active engagement, rallying voices, genuine understanding of politics, spontaneous behavior, and remarkable leadership demonstrate recognition and acknowledgment.

Many scholars affirm that women's contribution to the revolution was equal to that of men, among them Zillah Eisenstein: "Women and men were in the streets together in these protest movements across N. Africa. Egyptian women organized the food distribution and the garbage collection, and the public discipline, and the peaceful strategies" (2011, ¶ 19). Another is Robin Morgan: "Women were (and are) involved at every stage, including leadership" (2011, ¶ 2).

Egyptian writer and feminist activist, Nawal El-Saadwi highlights the importance of women's urgent demand for their rights so that they can avoid being pushed back to positions they occupied prior to the revolution, and she warns them not to lose the opportunity to claim their rights:

Women and men are in the streets as equals now. We are in the revolution completely. Of course, if you know the history of revolutions you find that after the revolution, often men take over and women's rights are ignored. In order to keep our rights after the revolution, women must be united. We must have our women's union again. We cannot fight individually. (qtd. in Eisenstein, 2011, ¶ 19)

El-Saadwi calls for revolutionists to act immediately to support women's rights. She contends that it is time to challenge and defy gender inequality. These women participated in overthrowing the authoritarian regime, and even though the social media allows for them to give voice to their multifaceted experiences in the revolution to the whole world, Frederiksen believes

that Egyptian women are able to bring change to their social and gender lives if they work constantly and immediately toward this goal:

The revolution also changed the relation between the sexes. “[...] In the square, you had people from different classes, both men and women, mixing, talking and debating. They [men] were seeing that women are strong, that they can look after themselves. They were seeing women work hard for the revolution, leading protests, and their response [not groping] is their way of saying, ‘I respect you,’” explained Ms. Hassan. Sexual harassment has been a large problem in Egypt. More than four out of five women have been sexually assaulted at some time, and the police have used this also to intimidate women, but it has been completely absent in the struggle against the Mubarak regime. (2011, ¶ 7)

The revolutions could improve the women’s empowerment movement, and it is vital that women seize the opportunity to defend their rights and put a stop to the patriarchal paradigm before it is too late.

Many of the works of the literary critic and feminist Miriam Cooke treat the marginalization of women’s roles and experience in war and revolutions. In *Women and the War Story*, *War’s Other Voices*, and *Gendering War Talk*, she tackles the variety of the roles women have played in war, exposing their experiences and accounts about war, hoping to situate these accounts in a cross-cultural context about war literature. Cooke contends that women’s writings on war explore survival strategies and human experiences during the ugliness of war. Men’s writings on war, on the other hand, monolithically focus on heroism and violence, excluding women from these political paradigms: “It is not merely whim that derives women everywhere to claim their war experiences as combat. It is the growing understanding of the ways in which patriarchy seizes and then articulates women’s experiences so that they will be seem to be marginal and apolitical that now drives women as creative artists and as critics to re-member their pasts and then to write them” (1996, pp. 4–5) Therefore, fiction works written on the Revolution of 25 January, especially that written by men, demands an investigation of the articulations of women’s representation and roles in the revolution. Women’s accounts and their multifaceted roles in the revolution deserve not to be excluded from a political triumph that toppled an autocrat. My work here has been to recognize some of the many contributions of women to the successful overthrow of Mubarak.

Cooke titles one of the chapters in *Women and the War Story* (1996) “Silence Is the Real Crime,” and she discusses the danger of women’s silence during revolutions and times of political change. She offers as an example the Algerian women who remained silent during the Algerian revolution and prioritized resolving the political situation at the cost of their rights: this silence caused them to be excluded later from making political decisions.

Therefore, most feminists see that there is no better time than now to improve women’s rights and get them involved in the Constituent Assembly, which is responsible for drafting the country’s constitution and making social and political decisions. Many feminists and activists are fighting to get women engaged in parliament and assembly and enthusiastically committed to continue the revolution until women achieve their rights. In the new Egyptian parliament elections, some of seats will be for women, but their actual roles are not defined, and for that reason the difference and the change that they can bring to the new Egypt is not defined (Morgan, 2011).

Although women's representation in the Assembly is not satisfying to many activists and feminists, Mozn Hassan, the director of the Nazra for Feminist Studies, states that, "it is better to have ten women in parliament who have worked hard and deserve to be there [...] than to have many more who have no idea what they are doing. (*The Economist*, 2011, ¶ 15)

On the other hand, some other feminists such as Margot Badran seem more optimistic about post-revolution women's rights in Egypt. She contends that the revolution has redefined the concept of feminism to be "'freedom, equality and justice for all.' It asserts itself in actions, straight-forwardness, and courage" (2011, ¶ 2). Badran sees that women can achieve their rights as long as they demand them, and that the new feminism entails justice for all. In other words, she trusts that women will not be left behind this time; otherwise, the revolutionaries, men and women, will not be worthy of their name.

Ultimately, women's resistance threatens tyrannical regimes more than men's resistance because women oppose these regimes not only on political but also on feminist grounds. In response to efforts by feminists and women's rights activists, tyrannical regimes employ the mechanisms of patriarchy to shame women. Jumanah Younis claims that on International Women's Day, women demonstrated at Tahrir Square demanding freedom and equal rights; however, they were attacked, dragged off, and sexually harassed by the regime's thugs. While women were chanting "Egypt for all Egyptians," some supporters of the regime were replying with signs that said, "No to Freedom," a sign that women's rights and freedom will take a long and an uneasy path. Two hundred men were sent to this demonstration by the authoritative regime—the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which came to power after the overthrow of Mubarak—to harass women so they would give up their right to political participation. Younis, like many other feminists, links political freedom to women's rights and empowerment: "There is no freedom for men without freedom and equality for women" (2011, ¶ 8).

Egyptian women present another strong case for their capacity to redefine femininity in political and personal terms, and to challenge social taboos, defying traditional fixation on honor and stereotypes of the Arab female. As an example of the power of women's resistance and how the regime used the sensitivity of women's issue to enforce oppression, sixteen young female protestors were arrested at Tahrir Square by the Egyptian army, accused of being prostitutes, and forced to take a virginity test administered by a male army doctor (*The Guardian*, 2011). The doctor, Ahmed Adel, was later found not guilty of doing the virginity test because, as the judge claimed, there was inconsistency in the witnesses' testimonies. Samira Ibrahim, a brave young woman, relayed the story of the virginity test, as well as details about violation to her human rights; by so doing she defied the traditional fixation on honor and stereotypes of the Arab female. This is yet another example of the regime hiding behind women to seek and garner support from the patriarchal forces; however, Ibrahim and other Egyptian women redefine femininity by redefining the public and private spaces assigned to women. I conclude from the virginity test incident that women's resistance is more powerful and more threatening to any tyrannical regime than men's resistance. The regime realizes that women, if they were to consistently articulate their resistance and determinedly sustain their solidarity, would profit from the revolutions more than men would. However, Samira and her friends took to the streets, restructuring their domestic spheres, and Samira did not limit herself to her private space, where



she is assigned a specific social subjectivity along with intricate gendered implications; instead, she negotiated and entered a new social and political space.

How much the revolution will help or hurt women's rights and whether women will be left behind again are questions that invite more examination of the representations of women's role in the revolutions by literati, media, and citizen journalists. The incidents of sexual harassment on International Women's Day and the virginity test are evidence for Badran's claim that it will take Egyptians time and consistent work to empower women or bring women's rights to a satisfying level. This required time will allow for change in ways of thinking, or what the Egyptian-American journalist and feminist Mona Eltahawy calls "a revolution of the mind" (YouTube, 2012).

Activist women resisted injustice in its complicated manifestations, including the patriarchal spectacles within societal institutions. These women challenged the stereotypical images of themselves as silent, oppressed victims. They are vocal and visible despite their headscarves and veils, which have long been interpreted by many as a symbol of victimization and weakness. They took to the streets with their men and defied their images as victims of suppression. Their marching and rallying voices contradicted well-established political and social norms in their societies, or what Tapas Ray (2011, p. 1) calls "historical fiction." In this vein, Soumaya Ghannoushi writes, "The Arab revolutions are not only shaking the structure of despotism to the core, they are shattering many decades-long myths" (2011, ¶ 4).

However, in spite of their impressive work and the leadership roles they played to sustain the revolutions, women are, unfortunately, underrepresented in mainstream media and literature. The representation of women's roles in literature and the news media is incomplete; both, for example, overlook women's sustaining of the revolution in leadership, logistical, virtual, and humanitarian aid roles. Their roles in these massive revolutions need to be exposed in both literature and literary criticism. Women need to voice their views of the ways men interpret female participation and activism in these revolutions.

However, it is worth remembering that many activists describe the Revolution of 25 January as an unfinished revolution. The activist and professor of art Sarah Rifky says, "I am very scared about calling it a full revolution yet just because I do not know if it is complete or successful" (Kickstarter, 2011). Asmaa Mahfouz (2012) calls it "the continuing revolution"; thus, the role of women in this revolution has yet to be examined fully in fiction and nonfiction works. The coming years will bring new images of Third World women, and perhaps that will situate their struggle in a larger context, the global context in which feminists have invested and in which women will be able to call for change in their writings and literary criticism.

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