

Book Reviews

The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World

Marwan M. Kraidy
Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA,
2016 \$39.95, pp. 223. ISBN: 9780674737082

A large number of books have been written about the Arab spring since the first Arab uprising in January 2011, in Tunis. Writers from across the Arab world and beyond have been reflecting on the revolutionary vigor expanding throughout the region. Topics range from the rise of civil society, rebellion, revolution, and the new world order to the potential of social media in changing the political landscapes in the Middle East and North Africa region. However, little has been covered on the role, challenges, and opportunities of artists and women in their participation in the uprising. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* stands out as it addresses the role of artists and women in the rise of creative insurgency, focusing on the representation of bodies and space within the Arab social movements. It uncovers the different forms of creative insurgency that occurred simultaneously with the Arab uprisings. The book examines how protesters, fueled by desire for popular sovereignty, flooded the streets and the media, voicing dissent through graffiti, puppetry, and satire that called for the overthrow of dictators and oppressive regimes. It looks into the will to risk one's life to express freedom of thought by using rebellious art in the context of

the revolution. Marwan Kraidy's book consists of recording events as they happen and offers an open discourse which tracks the unfolding of a historical narrative of the Arab spring as it happened. It is an attempt to insert often overlooked, yet indispensable, figures in the process of social and political reforms that is part of the narrative of history.

The main focus of the book is the fundamental role of the human body in a context where coercive governments found themselves confronted with the bodies of protesters, challenging authorities by burning their bodies with defiance and exposing them naked in order to boldly violate social restrictions. The book includes ten black and white illustrations and case studies of creative insurgency in the form of self-immolation, nude activism, and hunger strikes on one hand and on the other hand, attempts to ridicule corrupt dictators by transforming their bodies into wretched finger puppets in the case of Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the widely circulated figure of the laughing cow that represented Egypt's Hosni Mubarak.

Parts one and two of the book look into the act of self-immolation as a powerful expression of the rejection of the dominant ruling system. Kraidy shows how this act of burning bodies ignited debates about progress and backwardness while symbolizing the people's aspiration to free will against political powers that install social constraints on and reinforce the economic

deprivation of its people. Self-immolation is presented as a manifestation of radical and bio-political insurgency that fuelled the Tahrir square revolution in Cairo among other revolutions throughout the Arab region.

Parts three and four examine political humor as a graphic type of insurgency. The author demonstrates how the use of satire and irony in graffiti and street murals is turning political leaders into puppets and laughing cows, not to be respected and feared. Reducing presidents to grotesque figures is a technique employed by the prominent Syrian cartoonist Ali Farzat, whose fingers were crushed by the regime for daring to mock the Syrian authorities. Farzat's satirical cartoons opened a space for criticizing the abuses of power within the Syrian community. His tortured body refuses to surrender, it stands as body politics symbolism. Farzat continues, through his cartoons produced in exile, to subvert the system.

The author engages in an absorbing and insightful analysis of the popular perception of animal symbolism and the meanings it generated in the particular context of the Egyptian uprising. It presents the large repertoire of ephemeral images circulating in public spaces and ranging from lions, eagles, beasts, poodles, bears to more degrading symbols of cows, donkeys, pigs, and dogs depending on the amplified deeds or misdeeds the artist intends to capture in order to belittle or empower the political leader.

In the last part of the book, Kraidy focuses on human bodies taking over public spaces. The author illustrates creative acts of insurgency with examples of the up and coming creative graffiti

artists and muralists in Cairo. The author presents the case of its title, Aliaa al-Mahdy, who posted a photograph of herself naked on her blog, *The Rebel's Diary*. Al-Mahdy's blog started in 2011, the first in a series of incidents that put women and their bodies at the very heart of revolutionary struggles. Al-Mahdy's act has been widely criticized among the local culture for violating boundaries of decency and borrowing from Western culture practices. The author offers a thoughtful analogy with Marianne, the allegorical figure of the French revolution, and the symbol of liberty and emancipation as portrayed in Eugène Delacroix's iconic painting of 1830. The author traces the different meanings this symbol has sparked while circulating in the World Wide Web. Both Marianne and Aliaa al-Mahdy have been repeatedly contested as a woman-symbol.

Considering the title of the book, however, it is notable how little weight is placed on the naked blogger of Cairo's creative insurgency. It is not before chapter five, the chapter preceding the last part of the book, that the author offers an in-depth analysis of al-Mahdy's insurgent act and its meanings. Al-Mahdy's activism brings new ways of thinking about women and Middle Eastern cultures in general. It highlights the complexity of gender roles, and the representation of gender expressions in the Middle East. Despite the author's acknowledgement that the revolution can be threatening to women, for they are repositories of moral virtue and political symbolism, Kraidy's analysis of al-Mahdy's dissent would have benefited from additional documentation on female bodies and their polysemous

interpretations when circulating on the Internet.

Moreover, following the interdisciplinary approach of the book, the author could have elaborated on the analysis of al-Mahdy's activist act by drawing from additional resources in gender studies and body representation in contemporary art practices. A critical discussion of the polemic of the representation of female body in Arab culture requires a more precise definition and stricter use of gender categories and perspective,

particularly when it comes to representation of the body as a battleground.

In general, the book will spark debates on the role of art in contesting oppressive regimes within the context of a rising digital culture in the Arab world which complicates our understanding of the human body, more particularly women's bodies, in revolutionary times.

Yasmine Nachabe Taan
Lebanese American University