

Writing the 2011 Arab Uprisings: Visions and Realities

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In an essay published in *The Kenyon Review* in summer 2012 and titled “In Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo (An Oriental Essay in Seven Parts),” Egyptian novelist and cultural editor Youssef Rakha writes:

It is hard to admit, but as a novelist of accomplishment you will sooner or later come to the realization that, judging by the revolution and its aftermath, Aswany is more relevant to Arab society than you could ever be; that with the ‘political’ setup automatically marginalizing you, the Egyptian free press of the nineties is an altogether more practical gauge of ‘social forces’ than your work; and that—while it did express value to which you aspire, at least in its earlier manifestations—even the revolution, encumbered by its own conservatism and duress, can hardly champion your activity of choice: the epistemological exercise of trying to make sense of the world through words. (165)

Rakha distinguishes between writers and revolutionary forces that hegemonize the political and cultural fields and those who are or feel marginalized in either/both fields. Specifically, he undermines the international fame of Alaa al-Aswany and criticizes the Western reception of *The Yacoubian Building* (the wildly famous 2004 translation of the 2002 *Amarat Ya'qubyan*) as a novel that articulates some of the social dynamics that ultimately fueled the 25 January Revolution in Egypt. While this criticism dominates Rakha’s essay, his initial comments on the novel deserve special attention. He sees *The Yacoubian Building* as a “modification of the century-old tradition of expressing grassroots patriotic and romantic sentiments through poems written in Egyptian dialect (as

1. Ahmed Fouad Negm is an Egyptian vernacular poet born in 1929. He is most known for his work with the Egyptian composer and singer Sheikh Imam Eissa. Across the last six decades, he wrote revolutionary poetry that criticized successive Egyptian presidents (Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak) and articulated the indignation of the working classes. In 2007, he became the United Nations Ambassador of the Poor. He spent almost eighteen years in prison. His poem “The Brave Men are Brave” was chanted by protesters in Tahrir Square during the 2011 uprising.

opposed to standard Arabic) and then set to music” (155), and he mentions Ahmed Fouad Negm¹ as a representative of the “far more unequivocally oppositional register” as compared to others in this tradition of patriotic poetry. As for al-Aswany, Rakha sees him as an example of the “incredible success” of this method that is based on “transporting the concomitant notion of the bard as the voice of public conscience across societal planes: from the aural to the printed, from the lyrical to the prosaic” (155). Despite Rakha’s slightly elitist reservations with respect to popular culture products, there is in his essay an indirect recognition of achievement, at least on the level of influencing the public sphere, in the simple inclusion of al-Aswany in a category of artists that comprises Ahmed Fouad Negm whose subversive poetry stirred the Egyptian popular imagination especially in the aftermath of the 1967 crisis.

Rakha’s essay draws our attention to the increasingly debatable issue of the role of the Arab writer as public intellectual on the stage of the uprisings from the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia to the ongoing conflict in Syria. While al-Aswany has been the main star of much of the media attention and controversy around this issue—*Foreign Policy* magazine gave him the top spot in its list of global thinkers in 2011 “For channeling Arab malaise—and Arab renewal”—other Egyptian writers (namely Ahdaf Soueif), but also other Arab writers (namely the Libyan novelist Hisham Matar), have played similar roles and have been perceived within the same framework, though with different assumptions with respect to aesthetic value. In the last two years, Soueif and Matar commented in various public forums on the significance of the uprisings, the dangers posed by counter-

revolutionary forces, and, through the example of their own writings, they highlighted the powerful impact of literature in depicting injustice and the inevitability of political transformation in countries ruled by decades-old dictatorships.

Having contributed many essays (in *AlSharq al-Awsat*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The New York Times*, and others) that bring together his creative and critical perspectives on Libyan literature with his personal fight against the Qaddafi dictatorship that cost his dissident father Jaballa Matar a ‘disappearance’ in its notorious jails, Hisham Matar made numerous insightful public statements on the larger relationship between literature and revolution. In an interview with National Public Radio two months after the start of the Libyan uprising, Matar stated that: “Dictatorship by its essence is interested in one narrative, [an] intolerant narrative, and writers are interested in a multiplicity of narratives and conflicting empathies and what it would be like to be the other, to imagine what the other is thinking and feeling. [...] And that sort of completely unsettles the dictatorial project” (*NPR*, 28 April 2011). Statements like these, which were made by literary figures who achieved international prominence, have established a platform for engaging with some Arab writers of the last two decades as public intellectuals who contributed to envisioning, fueling, and shaping the 2011 uprisings. However, what Rakha’s essay draws our attention to are the various myths and realities, created by both Western and Arab critics about agency in this revolutionary Arab republic of letters.

Before 2011, this list of writers would have been restricted to the literary voices of dissent, social and political critique, and/or historical analysis who achieved international recognition after writing (particularly) in English or French or being translated into these languages. But in the wake of the hugely mediatized 2011-2012 events that have developed into popular uprisings, coups, sectarian wars and other configurations, there has been a considerable interest by publishing houses, international book festivals, the media and Arab and Western readership in democratizing the revolutionary republic of letters by admitting previously unacknowledged, or little known, ‘heroes.’ In the last two years, many new names have entered this increasingly attractive public space. For example, the Syrian Khaled Khalifa gained greater international fame with the translation of his epic novel *Madihu l-Karahiya* (published in 2008) into the edited English version *In Praise of Hatred* (published in 2012), that was adapted to the narrative of the conflict in Syria. In Tunisia, Kamel al-Riahi was

previously little known outside of his country and a close circle of Tunisian writers similarly harassed by the Ben Ali-regime, until it was recognized that his novels, especially *al-Gorilla* (published in early 2011), brilliantly render the nightmarish narrative of marginalization and repression in the Tunisian police state. *Al-Gorilla* is expected to be translated into several languages.

There is of course still much uncertainty about the place of Arab writers with respect to the ‘ongoing revolutions’ (given that most of the transformations of 2011 are still incomplete, have been threatened or even partially defeated by counter-revolutionary forces). Moreover, it is difficult at this stage to situate these writers’ contributions within the larger revolutionary world-republic of letters that comprises literatures depicting particularly anti-colonial resistance in the last century. However, there are several points of similarity between the two fields (Arab literature of revolution and world literature of anti-colonial movements): firstly, on the level of the pace of ‘democratizing’ the revolutionary republic of letters by admitting less known voices and sometimes more contested forces in the field (this includes the ongoing difficulty of agreeing on the aesthetic and political criteria of admission into the club of writers of revolutions and revolutionary writers—here Rakha’s essay provides several cautionary tales—especially with respect to their literary treatment of the subject of violence). And secondly, on the level of re-imagining the past, present and future of the ‘nation’ through a literary rendering of political geographies marked by oppression, human rights abuses, growing distrust and rising dissent.

In her epic novel *The Map of Love*, Soueif offers the reader a brilliant re-imagining of the political map of Egypt and particularly Cairo, that has been punctuated by signs of foreign interference and hegemony in its imperial and post-imperial forms. This realization is captured by the double consciousness of Anna the Englishwoman and Amal the Egyptian as they reflect successively on a space that they experience a century apart (the novel contrapuntally interweaves the anti-colonial struggles of the late nineteenth century with the anti-Mubarak movements of the late twentieth century):

It must be hard to come to a country so different, a people so different, to take control and insist that everything be done your way. I read Anna’s descriptions and I read the memoirs and the accounts of these long-gone Englishmen, and I think of the officials of the American embassy and

agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds. (70)

The *Map of Love* examines the recent topography of the Egyptian security state and its architecture, that could be perceived within the framework of what Joseph Massad, in a talk delivered in Dublin in April 2012 on “Love, Fear and the Arab Spring,” calls the Machiavellian tactics of Arab dictators read from a Gramscian perspective, according to which the autocratic regime colludes with American neo-imperial interests while it exploits the post-imperial issue of Israel-Palestine to maintain its grip on the social and political geography of the country, especially the capital.

In most of the literatures that anticipated the Arab uprisings, capitals emerge as the stage of rising and falling dictators and as the battleground across which oppressors’ monuments are built and torn down. After his coup against King Idriss, Qaddafi renamed Martyrs Square in Tripoli as Green Square. While it embodied layers of colonial, monarchical and dictatorial rule, the square was the site of both pro- and anti-Qaddafi rallies during 2011. In Matar’s *In the Country of Men*, his fascinating anatomy of Qaddafi’s Libya in the 1970s, the young protagonist Suleiman repeatedly mentions “the square that looked on to the sea, the square where a sculpture of Septimius Severus, the Roman Emperor born all those years ago in Lepcis, proudly stood” (Matar, *In the Country of Men* 3). Suleiman describes how he “leaned against the cool marble pedestal of Septimius Severus. The Roman Emperor stood above me, his silver-studded belt curving behind below his belly, pointing his arm towards the sea, ‘Urging Libya to look towards Rome,’ [...]. I remembered our Guide standing in one of his military uniforms like this, waving his arm as the tanks passed in front of him on Revolution Day” (4). The mirroring of colonial and nationalist hegemony in the monumental square embodies a history of violence, repressive coups, and incomplete revolutions. Matar focuses on Martyrs’ Square as the centre of the people’s clandestine resistance across the colonial and postcolonial periods, much like Cairo’s Midan el-Tahrir that Soueif in her 2012 *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*—half memoir, half diary of the ‘Egyptian revolution’—re-establishes as a central space in a long history of popular uprisings against dictators that had broken their revolutionary promises:

2. Bouazizi was a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor who protested the harassment he was subjected to by police and municipal officials, through the symbolic and tragic act of setting himself on fire on 17 December 2010. His act is widely considered as the event that sparked the Jasmine Revolution which toppled president Ben Ali.

And the Midan feeds us, nourishes us: this is the Egyptian Museum that holds our ancestors, the Museum that our Shabab defended—the Museum that bears witness to who we are. This is the Arab League—an example of the death-in-life that was to be our fate; we will breathe life into it. This is the plinthless space. What good fortune that no statue occupies this central space, that the absence of a leader is physically manifest in Tahrir, and our leaderless revolution is watched over, instead, from the boundaries, by Omar Makram, Simón Bolívar and Abd el-Menẓem Riyad. (57-8)

In both *The Map of Love* that preceded the revolution and *Cairo* that followed it, Soueif draws attention to the “plinthless space” (57) where Sadat crushed the 1972 student movement and to the margins of Tahrir square where anti-imperial historical figures are monumentalized and embraced for their revolutionary ideals and heroic achievements by a disaffected people.

Much of the literature of revolution in the Arab world engages with the monumental and counter-monumental dynamics of the rise and fall of dictators and revolutionaries. In this context, Al-Riahi rewrites a real event when in the summer of 2009, a Tunisian man, re-imagined as the fictional protagonist Saleh who is nicknamed the Gorilla, climbed to the top of the monumental clock tower that Zin el Abedine Ben Ali erected to replace the equestrian statue of his predecessor, which Ben Ali had destroyed after his coup against the former Tunisian leader Borquiba on 7 November 1987, and that gave the main square its name. Saleh-the Gorilla climbs the monument and resists torture by electric shocks administered by his lifelong tormentor, a security officer, until his burnt corpse falls

off the clock tower, thus both elliptically anticipating and recalling the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi who was harassed and beaten by the Tunisian police on the streets of Sidi Bouzid.²

The subject of torture, especially in the notorious political prisons of the Arab police states, has been at the heart of much of the literature written by the citizens of what I have described as the revolutionary Arab republic of letters. Many of these writers were themselves imprisoned or had a family member incarcerated in one of these prisons at some point in the last few decades. Matar's *In the Country of Men* describes how Libya's youth and intellectuals were jailed, tortured and sometimes executed for protesting against "the extremes of [Qaddafi's] revolution" (52-3) during what Matar powerfully describes as "a time of blood and tears, in a Libya full of bruise-checked and urine-stained men" (166). The novel poignantly portrays the suffering and humiliation that marked Libya's televised forced confessions and executions, and that rendered many of its citizens as prisoners and/or informers who are exemplified in Matar's novel in the figures of the narrator's neighbors, Ustath Rashid and Ustath Jafer respectively.

Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* explores deeply the tribulations of Syria's political prisoners, specifically among the Muslim Brothers who rebelled (in a civil unrest and assassination campaign) against Hafez al-Asad's Baathist regime and were brutally suppressed in the early 1980s. By narrating the breakdown of trust across Syria's sectarian map and portraying the indignation of both Islamists and other oppositional sectors of society and their longing for revenge for decades of pain and shame, the Arabic original of *In Praise of Hatred* anticipates much of the 2011-2012 conflict in Syria. In fact, the preface and translator's note of the 2012 English edition clearly form these links. Khalifa's nameless narrator and her fellow prisoners are confident that they will meet their former jailors after they are freed and that they will punish them physically and psychologically:

The guards' faces were no longer obscured, and they became a part of our daily life. We coveted these faces sometimes, just to feel that our lives would continue after our detention; we would meet them one day, and call them to account for their oppression. [...] Sulafa and I imagined various court settings: we were wearing judicial robes and holding the gavel, and then we began to interrogate them. "Why do you find pleasure in masturbating over a woman when she is tied up and electrodes are burning her breasts?" Someone, known to his associates as Abi Ali, answered, "I was serving my

master and my homeland.” The word “homeland” made me laugh. Everyone used it with veneration and respect, from members of my group to the torturers. ([2008] 2012, 249-50)

The sectarian and ideological contestation of the national imaginary is particularly relevant to the ongoing situation in Syria. *In Praise of Hatred* reminds us that across the revolutionary narratives and political geographies of perhaps the most complex situation within the optimistically named ‘Arab Spring,’ violent hatred has created deadly chaos and killed hopeful national visions of constructive change. In a moving passage that portrays battles in Aleppo (again very resonant with respect to the present moment as fierce battles rage in the ancient city), Khalifa’s narrator describes how:

Bodies on both sides fell like ripened berries; the atmosphere was oppressive, saturated with the fear of nameless chaos. The state, which had expected a resolution to this battle in the most important of its cities, sought out its supporters as the situation grew even blacker and more complex; our previous coexistence became a memory, and the subject of a cautiously exercised nostalgia—we were wildly optimistic of killing the people who were prone to such a longing. Retreat was no longer an option and hostility became like ripened grapes, dangling from a vine left to the passers-by. I would see Aleppo from beneath my black veil and it seemed like a fitting place to seek out the hatred I praised. (133)

While a majority of Arab and international analysts and thinkers find it difficult to ascertain in which direction the various Arab uprisings are going, there is a wariness among many Arab writers who have been actively involved in commenting about the ongoing upheavals in the media, in literary festivals, and in personal memoir, to address these transformations in fiction. In the context of a presentation at the 2012 Edinburgh International Book Festival, Ahdaf Soueif reinforced Matar’s point on the importance of empathy in formulating the literature of the previous decade that “produced texts of critique, of dystopia, of nightmare,” but she conceded that at this moment, amidst the violent battles between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces:

Attempts at fiction right now would be too simple. The immediate truth is too glaring to allow a more subtle truth to take form. For reality has to

take time to be processed, to transform into fiction. So it's no use a story presenting itself, tempting, asking to be written, because another story will—in the next minute—come roaring over it, making the same demand. And you, the novelist, can't grab one of them and run away and lock yourself up with it and surrender to it and wait and work for the transformation to happen—because you, the citizen, need to be present, there, on the ground, marching, supporting, talking, instigating, articulating. Your talent—at the time of crisis—is to tell the stories as they are, to help them to achieve power as reality not as fiction. (n. pag.)

At this moment of huge historical energy and uncertainty in the Arab world, it seems too early to expect a 'literature of the revolution' that is a mature product of the 2011-2012 events to emerge in the near future (of course there will always be disparate attempts with mixed results like Taher Ben Jelloun's *Par le feu* that reinvented the 'hero' Mohammed Bouazizi). Nonetheless, a priceless corpus remains to be fully explored across the various Arab literary texts that, in the last two decades especially, envisioned (to some extent) many of the transformations that we are now witnessing.

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SUMMARY

This essay briefly examines some of the myths and realities about agency in the revolutionary Arab republic of letters across which writers envisioned, fueled and shaped the cultural and political imaginary of the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world. These writers (in this essay I focus on novelists) contributed to the increasingly expanding world of 'literature and revolution' as they re-imagined the past, present and future of their nations through a literary rendering of political geographies marked by oppression, human rights abuses, growing distrust and rising dissent.

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