

Book Review

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Manal Hamzeh (2020), *Women Resisting Sexual Violence and the Egyptian Revolution: Arab Feminist Testimonies*, London: Zed, ISBN: 9781786996213

This short but powerful book sheds light on a tumultuous period of Egyptian history, the revolutionary events of January 2011 and their aftermath. But it also raises profound questions about how to research and reflect violence against women. The book succeeds on two levels: first, by painstakingly revealing the testimonies of three Egyptian women who experienced and survived sexual violence during the course of *suwret yanayer* (the January revolution to overturn the corrupt regime of Hosni Mubarak): and second, by its use of novel ‘Arabya methodologies’. Manal Hamzeh, a gender and sexuality studies professor at New Mexico State University in the US, has placed women’s testimonies at the centre of her project which, she says, ‘are used not only to speak the truth, but rather to tell an account from an individual point of view whose consciousness has led to an analysis of the experience as a shared component of oppression’. It is a highly effective and compelling method

Following the January 2011 upheaval in Egypt, as they participated in widespread popular protests, three women were subjected to shocking acts of sexual violence at the hands of male strangers. This was not only an attempt by the authorities to discourage dissent but an attack on the rights of women and girls to be present in the public space, thus highlighting traditional ideas of female modesty, the threat of shaming and unbalanced gender relations.

In March 2011, the day after International Women’s Day, Samira Ibrahim was arrested in Cairo as she participated in a peaceful protest. She and several other women were arrested and held in a military prison; they were verbally abused by soldiers, their clothes were removed and they were subjected to forced genital examinations by a male military doctor, a so-called kushoof el’uzryyah (‘virginity test’).

Musician and activist Yasmine El Baramawy was beaten and raped by a violent mob in November 2012 in the area around Tahrir Square. Her ordeal, which lasted for over an hour, was brutal and terrifying.

A few days later, Ola Shahba, also an activist, was beaten and sexually assaulted by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood outside the presidential palace in Cairo. The three women were among hundreds of other women who were attacked and sexually assaulted during the period sometimes referred to as the ‘Arab spring’. It marked a ‘moment of

Egypt's feminist history'. It also implicated various Egyptian authorities, from Mubarak's thugs to Islamist ideologues, in the harming and humiliation of women.

The book relies on the shahadat (testimonies) of the three women, each of whom decided to speak out, to tell the world, and thus to challenge, what had happened to them, both through the legal system and in the public sphere. Their decisions were extraordinarily courageous and indicated a desire to confront a system designed to shame women. The shahadat are detailed and make often painful reading. They did not necessarily have 'happy' outcomes as the women remain traumatized. But the process of testifying also represents a reclaiming of dignity.

Manal Hamzeh's other achievement in this book is her ground-breaking methodological approach. She describes it as 'a small contribution to the Arab feminist movements of the past hundred years that struggled against colonial oppression and racist narratives about Arabs and Arab women'. Building on critical research that 'refutes Western imperial feminists and global liberal media narratives about the Arab revolutions of 2011', and particularly about the experiences of Egyptian women, Hamzeh deploys what she calls 'Arabiyya methodologies', an important contribution to decolonial feminist scholarship, described by Hamzeh as 'the knowledges and theorizing of Arab women's lived experiences during their 100 years of struggle against Western coloniality'. It is also an act of solidarity, building on Chicana and transnational feminist epistemologies. The focus of the book is, rightly, on the shahadat themselves and the methods utilized to allow the women's voices to be properly heard and, therefore, there is an absence of theoretical contextualization around issues of violence against women.

Violence against women, in its various ugly forms, is a global crisis, not unique to any part of the world. What varies, however, is how states and populations react, how they define it and the measures they take to address it; their responses are linked to social norms and patriarchal frameworks. During the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the military authorities and others in power made a deliberate decision to deploy gender-based violence as a tool to shame women and discourage them from taking part in public protests. But, with Samira, Yasmine and Ola, this crude tactic did not work as the three women immediately spoke out, and continued to speak out, in the process undermining a system designed to 'keep women in their place'. Their strategic use of shahadat was designed, as Manal Hamzeh eloquently highlights, 'to maintain their dignity', but also 'to counter the regime's narratives about women and about *suwret yanayer*'. Women such as Samira, Yasmine and Ola, by testifying, are starting to change the terms of the debate around violence against women, and Hamzeh's recording of their struggles makes an important contribution to the field.

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