

Body, Gender, and Power Problematics Manifested in Arab Revolutions

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Over the course of Arab revolutions, many individual and collective phenomena and behaviours emerged, proving the importance of sex and gender in the concretization of the concepts of authority, and the methods of addressing them in both the public and the private spaces. Among such occurrences are the exacerbation of physical and symbolic violence against women, the frequency of violence, rape, trafficking, and child marriages, all of which have increased to the beat of religious *fatwas* and new laws that oppose women's citizenship and humanity. The rise to power of Islamic movements has nurtured and further fuelled these phenomena, unveiling the extent to which these currents rely on gender and women as a cornerstone for their discourse. Political Islam, in all its currents, constituted an extremist expression of phenomena and behaviours disseminated throughout Arab societies, prior to the revolutions. These phenomena are ingrained in the inherited cultural frameworks, and have for many decades contained the violence resulting from the inherent ideological and sentimental contradictions both in the unconscious and in social representations.

Accordingly, one could say that the Arab uprisings represent a watershed in history, setting the stage for the explosion and unveiling of the intentions behind the preponderant political, ideological, and religious discourses, by granting, for the first time in modern history, considerable space for freedom of opinions and practices within the public space. Away from geo-strategic and political interpretations of Arab revolutions, one can consider these uprisings as a critical historic turning point that unveiled what was silenced in Arab culture. Freedom of expression, enabled by the revolutions, has granted Arab societies the opportunity to come face to face with decadent cultural values. The speeches, stands, and actions caused social tremors shocking the general consciousness. The revolutions were mirrors reflecting the true image that these societies were unaware of. They changed the ways in which societies recognized themselves, and defined themselves in social representations and academic discourses. For Giles Deleuze (1991) the "event", from a philosophical point of view, consists of all the facts that change history's patterns by causing a shock to the recipients, violently shaking their feelings and pushing them towards action and change. Similarly, Michel Foucault (1972) stresses the importance of approaching history by studying the changes carried out by societies through events that contribute to changes in the patterns of social knowledge.

One of the paradoxes brought about by the uprisings is the acute schizophrenia generated by fundamental human notions and principles that are categorized in accordance with binary notions of masculinity as opposed to femininity. It became clear that the freedom, dignity, democracy, social justice, and citizenship that the people called for were dealt with as fragmented concepts monopolized by males, as shown by a number of political and religious speeches and practices. The exclusion and violence that women were subjected to in public places, streets, parliaments, and laws during the revolutions and the subsequent transitional period brought about a deep-rooted belief that the revolution, as a political act, must be carried out by men to dismantle and appropriate power from other men.

In social representations, women are not concerned with these principles, because they are still considered a separate social category with lower status to be kept under the authority of men. This cultural vision that was bolstered by jurisprudence (*al-Fiqh*), and theoretically consecrated by contemporary Arab theories of knowledge since the beginning of the twentieth century, through an array of publications, still constitute the framework of the dominant Arab mindset.¹ The writer Nabawiya Moussa (1920) maintained that “men have written much about the differences between men and women, to the point of portraying them as belonging to different species” (p. 32). This fundamental deficiency in the system of values constitutes a major focus of this research, which tackles the dilemma of intellectual and cultural obstacles that impede the Arab mindset’s comprehension and consecration of the principles of freedom and equality in their full dimensions. It also deals with the problematic of limiting the entire system of values and morals to the feminine body, and its role in obstructing Arab intellectual advancement and mental emancipation. This study aims at analyzing the real and symbolic mechanisms used to appropriate the feminine body and transform it into a public affair to legitimize and normalize tyranny, by targeting certain common phenomena that emerged in the Arab revolutions. The analysis is based on dismantling the concepts of body, gender, and power, and underlining the basic relation between them, by considering them as the basis on which the prevailing intellectual patterns, social representations, and behavioral orientations depended.

The Crisis of Power Representation and Re-Production of Tyranny

Very few studies in the Arab world have investigated “the archeology of power” through analysis of the structural relation between the axes of power represented by society’s institutions and its intrinsic relations with the political variables in light of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on power and society. Historically, save for some important publications by Nawal El-Saadawi, that studied analytically the relation between power, gender, and women’s bodies, the work of Hisham Sharabi (1988) on the social and political patriarchal system, and the work of Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri (2001) on the Arab mindset, the question of power in its global social dimension has not been treated in depth, the way it has been in its political dimension. As a result of this theoretical dearth, there is little understanding of the course of power building as a cultural concept, and as a horizontal and vertical phenomenon that branches out into all institutions, be they familial, educational, religious, political, or gendered.

This dearth of knowledge resulted in the absence of any interaction between the Arab mindset and contemporary concepts. It also resulted in hindering the positing of this

issue as a psychological and cultural dilemma, especially after the re-emergence of the notion of a schizophrenic Arab personality – the contradictory principles held by individuals, on the one hand, and the gap between these principles and practices, on the other. The Arab revolutions were a shocking historical trial shaking the cultural values that organize social relations and feed stereotypes on the nature of power relations among social strata, genders, and representations of the values of modernity. Four years after the Arab movements, and following the transitional period that resulted in the emergence of legislative and authoritarian regimes – most of which do not reflect the people’s aspirations for liberation and democracy – the question arises: Were the people aware of the real implications of democracy, freedom, and social justice they called for when they rose against dictatorships?

It may seem that making final judgments on the consequences of the revolution can be considered a form of intellectual arbitrariness, given its short duration, and the still-incomplete features of the social project in most countries that witnessed revolutions. Guy Rocher (1968) maintains that

a revolution is a historic event, with a target that goes beyond the period of the first sparks; the changes it generates appear in the long term, often in a manner that is unfamiliar and more profound than we can imagine. (p. 257)

However, we can consider some social behaviors that have emerged during these revolutions as important indicators that help us understand the extent to which peoples understand the concept of tyranny, and the principles of freedom, at a first stage, followed by their commitment to and implementation of these principles as a second stage. Recognizing the organic relation between tyranny and freedom in their absolute human perceptions is the main gateway to awareness of the principles of gender equality, and of all aspects of discrimination and exclusion disseminated across social strata in all domains.

Political tyranny is no more than a reflection of social tyranny, and gender-based discrimination is the thin line that links male tyranny in familial and tribal structures, to authoritarian ruling patterns on the political level. Feminist researchers, at the start of the emerging feminist movement in the eighteenth century in France and Britain, made lengthy elaborations on the thin line between male authoritarianism within a family framework, and the tyranny of the then-reigning monarchy, in an attempt to uncover the relations between gender discrimination and its outreach in both the private and the public spheres. British feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft’s elaborate study titled *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) examined common denominators between the absolute tyranny of men over women, and the absolute tyranny of a ruler over his subjects. Linking these two matters to the feminist discourse during the French revolution allowed for criticism and the dismantlement of androcentrism, and concepts of power and tyranny which characterized revolutionary principles. Women activists protested against the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen”, which stemmed from the French Revolution, because it included men alone, not the entire society. Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) is considered to be the first martyr of the feminist struggle; she was assassinated after confronting the symbols, philosophers, and thinkers of the revolution, and showing them the contradictions

within their ideas and principles that stood against the tyranny of a ruler over its subjects, but retained the tyranny of men over women. For example, Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the most prominent figures of the Revolution, wrote in the first volume of his book on the science of education in 1759:

Thus the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to council them, to console them, and to make life agreeable and sweet to them – these are the duties of women at all times, and should be taught them from their infancy. (1997)

The history of the feminist struggle in the West is a progressive corrective path for the principles of the enlightenment, from its emergence until the end of the twentieth century; it was able to incorporate all-embracing general principles such as freedom, citizenship, justice, and gender equality into laws and constitutions, and to incorporate them into the educational programs in order to generate profound change in intellectual, cultural, and behavioural structures.

A comparison between the feminist struggle in the West, and the struggle of Arab women reveals that western feminism allowed for the possibility of advancing women's causes in the Arab world during the renaissance and the colonial periods. The cultural friction between Western and Arab elites, coupled with the struggles of Arab women, allowed for the addition of certain basic women's rights (education, voting, health, and work) to the constitutions of most post-independence Arab countries. However, the principles of modernism, such as equality, freedom, democracy, and social justice, advocated by *al-nahda* pioneers in the context of the intellectual reform movement were quelled both ideologically and politically, and were stripped of their philosophical and cultural meanings after being linked with dictatorial discourses, which used them as hollow slogans to embellish the image of their regimes.

In the absence of any renewal of the cultural values, following the demise of the intellectual renaissance, the concepts generated by modernism remained ambiguous in Arab culture. Post-independence regimes did not take on the task of upholding the modernizing project, and did not adopt pedagogical policies that would explain contemporary concepts and equip new generations with the ability to revise their indigenous concepts to be able to engage in the production of knowledge.

Briefly, one can say that Arab regimes did not prepare their peoples for concerted political action, for the rotation of power, and for the comprehension of the principles of justice, freedom, and respect of the rights of others. Quite the contrary, they strove to mould minds that live in the past, and remain closed off within a fatalistic and fundamental vision of religion, identity, and social and familial relations.

This did not lead to the dismantlement of the mechanisms that produce tyranny in representations, thoughts, and practices in Arab societies in the twentieth century, a period of great transformations. The patriarchal and unilateral structures of power within families, tribes, and the state constantly bequeathed signs of tyranny, class and gender-based discrimination, and absence of justice in all these circles. Accordingly,

each circle acquires its powers and legitimacy from other circles which support and nourish these powers through legislative systems as well as educational and religious media programs. Therefore, the ordinary Arab individual was unable to grasp the contemporary concepts because he/she lacks the tools to understand and analyze them. We have witnessed how rapidly the concepts of “secularism” and “laicism” fell victim to this cognitive insufficiency after the Arab revolutions. Religious movements preyed upon this inadequacy to carry out media campaigns that presented secularism and blasphemy (*kufir*) as interchangeable, in their efforts to repel currents advocating the separation between religion and politics; this was the case of the Islamic *al-nahda* movement in Tunisia, for example. The fact that large social strata were affected by this campaign proves the fragility of the political and intellectual culture, the Arab mind having lost its cognitive and inventive capacities, copying others and accepting uncritically the interpretations of religious texts by religious scholars. The contradictory and feeble dealings by Arab societies with the demands of the revolutions reflect their affective and impulsive relation with social phenomena, and their inability to find solutions to overcome them. The Arab individual suffers from and is enraged by tyranny in all aspects of life, but he/she practices it in his/her daily life, in the environment and family, and soon reproduces and selects it as a ruling model. The representation of power is still limited to the image of the savior-tyrant leader, which in the words of Hisham Sharabi (1988) corresponds to the authoritarian protective father figure.

Woman’s Body and Public Affairs

Revolutions were an opportunity to bring into view the gender crisis in Arab culture, the neurotic representation of women’s bodies, and the gender-based division of social spaces. There have been attempts to exclude women and restrict them in the public space by making them the targets of physical violence, harassment, rape, threats, and symbolic violence through humiliation, verbal abuse, and marginalization; these are all symptoms of numerous, complex, and branched-out crises that reflect a deep flaw in the value systems related to the representation of women, and gender relations.

This imbalance stems from several factors, such as loading women’s bodies, in the cultural and religious discourses, with sexual connotations to the point of obsession. This led to the transformation of women into a “chronic sexual phenomenon”, in the words of researcher Fatima Mernissi (1987, p. 67). In addition to sexual symbols, the bodies of women became laden with enforced concepts of identity, morality, religion, and honor, serving as the backbone of the social structure, the container of political social discourse, and anchor of authority and decision-making. In Arab societies, women’s bodies are subject to all forms of control, through upbringing, customs, and laws. Their behavior is shaped to correspond to the societal feminine stereotype that exists to serve, protect, and help reproduce the patriarchal community. This is what implicates the female body in the political field, because it is subjected to relations of power that affect, subjugate, and use it. A body is not viable for use unless it is fertile and yielding at the same time, as Foucault puts it. This submission is achieved, on the one hand, through violence – as was the case in the Arab revolutions – to force women to return to the private sphere, in order to once again carry out the traditional tasks assigned to them. At the same time, submission is achieved through tacit nonviolent or invisible practices that affect women’s bodies in the way that

Foucault refers to as “the political technology of the body”. Foucault’s approach may help us shed light on varied phenomena, if we adopt what he calls the “microphysics of power”, in order to understand how gender-based discrimination is entrenched in all social categories, women included. The “microphysics of power” does not refer to the prevalent definition of power, the power held by social groups or a certain class; rather, it refers to the existence of strategies and tools that are directly linked with a cohesive and effective network of power.

From this perspective, power is not held – it is practiced, and this is what puts it within the reach of all strata of society. It is the result of the strategic positioning of the dominant class in all fields and spaces, rallying marginalized social strata to engage in the same discourse. This is how we can explain, for example, the electoral behavior of large social categories, which re-produced tyranny after helping tyrannical religious movements to come to power in Arab countries, during the first stage of the revolution, and did likewise to the military class in the transitional periods. This analysis can also direct us towards the behaviors exhibited by large groups of women, who took to the streets to call for constitutions that go against their rights, or to demand the cancellation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as was the case with the protest organized by the women of the Islamist Movement in Tunisia, in 2013. This brand of control generates behavior which is not forcibly imposed on the group that does not “hold” any power; however, it penetrates, induces, and turns the group into an active force serving the interests of the class in power. In this context, one understands the statements made by Rashed Ghanoushi, the head of the Islamist Movement in Tunisia, during the peak of its conflict with civil forces, when he said: “We will not impose Islamic law (*shari’a*) by force, but we will make people ask for it”. These statements reflect the intention of the movement to infiltrate society by using influence as a basic strategy, disseminating it across all categories, especially the marginalized groups, to use it for the benefit of their project. We all witnessed how, in Tunisia, a simple vegetable seller in a marginalized neighborhood was transformed into a propagandist, and head of a religious association, along with other delinquent youths who were transformed into leaders and organizers of Islamist demonstrations.

This control directly targeted the receptacle of gender relations, represented by the body, whereby gender polarization was used to direct sexual connotations of the body, and by impacting the symbolic power relations that it encompasses. Tunisia’s 1956 Code of Personal Status, and the granting of several rights to women, was catastrophic for a patriarchal structure that had a deep impact on the collective cultural imagination, resulting in a sort of “symbolic castration” of virility in its Freudian sense among traditional men. Indeed, the elimination of men’s power over women through laws that prohibited arbitrary divorce granted women the legal capacity to enter into a marriage contract, prohibited polygamy and other related laws, shook the very foundations of conservative religious views, and caused a deep schism between both genders in Tunisia, being the only exception of the kind in its Arab environment, only deepening the conservatives’ feeling of injustice. This explains the call made by Islamists, once they reached power, to abrogate these laws, and “bring Tunisia back to the Islamic ranks”, or so they put it. Women are the scapegoat in this comeback; bringing them back to the Islamic fold of obedience is considered a form of penance

for Tunisia's cultural "disobedience", always linked with the image of women. Islamists have consistently insisted on the right to polygamy and the need to ban abortion, and to wear the veil (*hijab*). Simultaneously, such calls were accompanied by a parallel advertising campaign to revive the "lost" masculinity, as it has been described by conservatives since the tenure of the first President, Habib Bourguiba. This was carried out by flooding markets with Viagra, and masculine sexual energy boosters. These rites to "regain" masculinity and patriarchy, in order to compensate for the feeling of symbolic castration, were accompanied by a counter-campaign to denigrate, weaken, and accuse women of taking over men's positions and repudiating their natural functions.

The reconsideration of all rights granted to women over the course of the twentieth century was seriously considered, after they had become undisputed facts, and was the major topic of political debate in many Arab countries after the rise of Islamic currents. This matter revealed the close relation between the patriarchal project of these movements, and the status of women, or rather, the complete focus on women by these movements in order to realize their social project. The events of the revolutions and political debates have shown the infiltration of this mentality, not only into the religious currents; but also into a number of liberal groups, civil associations and syndicates that had never granted this matter any importance, revealing a strong complicity with patriarchal mentality.

Numerous historic events in other countries have proven the complicity of numerous progressive powers and conservative currents when it comes to women's rights. Such was the case with the French Revolution, and the American Revolution, along with other national liberation movements in countries such as Algeria. In these cases, promises of recognizing women's full rights were not fulfilled after liberation.

This situation only served to fuel the momentum of the feminist struggle, and intensify it in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and other countries, when women found themselves alone in the face of the Islamist currents and all the changes that threatened their rights. This reality also poses the problematic of the lack of faith in issues of equality that penetrated all ideologies, social categories, and the most effective political powers. This is a striking cultural dilemma represented by hardened intellectual residues and psychological obstacles that obstruct any attempts for social change. This dilemma was diagnosed by some thinkers as a crisis of one's relation with time; Fatima Mernissi (2010) considers it a problem of cultural and epistemological break with the present, when people turn towards the historical imagination in search of the warmth of past glories, and an escape from a present riddled with defeats. Latifa Akhdar, describes it as a phenomenon that consecrates the "return to origins" (2001), which still dominates Arab culture, and feminine identity is still pulled towards, and even subjugated to this turn to the past. It's as if societies are chained by their own traditions, and feel an urgent and constant need to maintain the status quo when it comes to women, and reproduce the same feminine pattern as a protective shield against a frightening modernity which has generated a culture of critical thinking, and self-criticism. Latifa Akhdar maintains that the "discourse on women emanates from the space of the sacred, or any space that disregards historical laws, and constructs timeless identities subject to routine and repetitiveness" (p. 176). From the very early eras of Islam,

women's cultural and social identity has been linked to their jurisprudential identity in Islamic law, granting them an unchangeable status. For this reason, the issue of women has become primarily political, well-known to conservatives and Islamists for its link to identity, tradition, the economic law, and the familial and tribal systems. This takes us back to the concept of Foucault's "microphysics of power", a power that is not possessed, but rather implemented by all social groups.

Gender and Gender Mechanisms

Researchers have studied the history of persecution of Arab women, considered by Latifa Akhdar as the most dangerous type of persecution, because it is enveloped in knowledge, science, and truth, taking advantage of the power invested in these concepts. There is no doubt that the relation between men and women, and the situation of women, is one of the matters most dealt with from the perspective of Arab culture. Latifa Akhdar maintains that the notion of "Muslim women" was constructed as a cohesive and tightly-bound concept directly linked to inherited religious knowledge, crystallized within the dominant male vision. This dominance does not stem from a natural sacred system, as much as it emanates from the conception of what is holy, through doctrinal and scholarly interpretations. Depriving women of their rights and exploiting them are not considered forms of persecution in the prevailing culture; they fall under the natural laws of life. The doctrinal juristic legacy based on interpretations of religious texts that spring from a godly willpower affirm the inimitable dimensions of gender differences which spring from a divine will. This takes us back to Althusser's view (1970) on the role of gender as an ideology, which was borrowed by Theresa de Lauretis to expound the gender system as a strategy to legitimize gender-based discrimination (1989).

This presumption hampers the possibility of integrating the concept of tyranny and authoritarianism in their all-inclusive aspects, and presenting them socially within the framework of relations between men and women. This has led to attempts to exclude women in revolutions, as they were not considered to be involved in issues of freedom, justice, and dignity. It also explains the violent rebuttal feminism has faced, as a struggling movement, and a theoretical critical framework in contemporary Arab history, not only because it has always been considered as one of the tools of the Western cultural invasion, but also because it shakes up the foundations of knowledge and widespread conceptions based on given doctrinal facts about the relation between genders. This fierce war waged against feminism has not subsided since its first emergence in the nineteenth century. Its flames were stoked up once again after the Arab revolutions, i.e. over one century later, without any change in the intellectual basis, concepts, and counter-arguments to feminism, despite the changes that have occurred in societies and in knowledge. This reflects the barrenness of a traditional culture that is incapable of revising its legacies and theories to keep up with local and international changes. This tunnel vision has exerted strong control over all loopholes of change, especially in the last decades, with the emergence of the authority of the clerics. These sheikhs took advantage of media channels and modern communication technologies to fill the cognitive and cultural gap within many segments of Arab societies, and broadcast a radical religious discourse that mainly focuses on women. They did that by issuing *fatwas* that were utterly degrading to women and the human self in general, such as sanctioning the suckling of young adults; having sex with the

dead body of one's wife; marrying child brides; authorizing provisions that placed women on par with the devil; introducing rules for beating women; viewing a woman's face as a blemish (*'awrah*); and other disparaging and misogynist accounts.

Over the past decades, the Arab world began to produce, broadcast, and consume a culture of hatred towards women, around the clock, through private and public religious channels, with spaces that allow sheikhs to spread their ideas and interpretations. The concept of knowledge has been monopolized by sheikhs who promoted themselves as scholars and therefore called into question the sciences, or adopted scientific discoveries and interpreted them the way they saw fit for their own readings. By doing so, they blocked any scientific reading of religion outside the doctrinal clerical context. The clerics now represent the only ethical and cognitive reference for millions of people. This bolsters a culture of dependence and indoctrination, and dangerously isolates Arab peoples from science and human knowledge. The wave of religious extremism invaded many social categories, in various Arab countries and their diasporas in western countries, with the collaboration of the broadcast media aimed at women in the first place. The social pattern adopted in some oil boom countries, more specifically the wahabi current, has been marketed as a model, in its vision of social relations, the image of woman, and clothing traditions such as the *burka* and the *niqab*. This also falls within the dynamics of globalization, which is not only limited to spreading the Western cultural and economic model on an international level, but also within the specific regional Islamic pattern, made possible by the economic and financial dominance of some oil boom countries, and their control over the most important media networks. Arab countries where revolutions took place also witnessed the invasion of the markets with books and publications that promoted their doctrinal religious vision, and became part and parcel of the economic and media competition within these countries. Analogous with attempts made to hide women's bodies through the *hijab* and the *niqab*, there was a proliferation of discourses around women's bodies in the media, and discourses by clerics and *fatwas* on all platforms. Woman has become a topic of public debate, and a political and social issue without being considered an independent political entity. This conception of women requires the taming of the feminine body as a receptacle for male control through three features: the body as a sexual receptacle, the body as a receptacle for morals, and the body as a force of work and production in the service of the family. This domestication of the body, in Foucault's opinion, happens through producing knowledge that feeds these representations and draws arguments for its subjugation, as well as through a series of efficient mechanisms referred to as the "technology of the body". These mechanisms are represented in all discourses produced by social institutions that affect the ontological conception of the body and its functions, and subjugate it to the dominant social power. Foucault maintains that "these mechanisms are represented within a specific type of control, imposed directly in daily life (...), a type of authority that turns the individual into a subjugated being through monitoring and dependency, an entity holding on consciously to its subservient identity" (1994, p. 46). Theresa de Lauretis's additions to Foucault's theory on the "technology of the body", had a strong impact on the understanding of the uses of the feminine body, in what she calls the "technology of gender" (1989, pp. 1-30). She shows after having criticized Foucault for failing to notice the gender dimension in his analysis of the body that the mechanisms for subjugating women's bodies are vastly different than, and exceed those used with

men. Women's bodies are subjected to a precise and comprehensive taming process from birth, so as to meet the expectations of the male community. Women's bodies and genitals are considered both sacred and "taboo" as put by Pierre Bourdieu (1994, p. 2). Women are subject to strict rules and tight regulations that determine what is lawful and unlawful. Even more attention-worthy in the gender dimension of Arab revolutions is the emergence of two important pieces of data that can be analysed in the spirit of Theresa de Lauretis' (1989, p. 6) "technologies of gender" and "gender semiotics". The first datum consists of the activation of the mechanisms of repression and surveillance of women, by allowing all institutional discourses (cultural, media, religious, and political) to participate in returning radical and recalcitrant women to the matrimonial home through all psychological and symbolic pressures available. These are multiple-discourses that promote the predominant patriarchal ideology, consolidate it in social representations, and safeguard it from any insurgence or violation

We have witnessed the mobilization of social institutions against women, especially following the rise to power of Islamists. In fact, such institutions, such as education, justice, places of worship, and the media, were appropriated and began broadcasting a culture of women's exclusion. In terms of gender as a semiotic system, it is concretized through visual and indirect communication symbols, that consecrate the separation between both sexes, and specifically reveals that aspect of feminine "identity" that is organically linked to the cultural and religious. The reactivation of the religious and political dimensions of the *hijab*, for example, and its purposeful definition as "a symbol of Muslim women" – an exclusionary linguistic term that distinguishes between women who wear the *hijab*, and those who don't, considering the latter to have forfeited their belongingness to Islam – falls within the activation of the semiotic gender system within the Islamist political project.

This concept, disseminated through Islamist propaganda, encompasses implicit coercive and deterrent mechanisms based on fostering guilt rooted in women's religious upbringing, and containing threats of social exclusion. It is to be opposed to a social model of women represented by women wearing the *hijab*, exchanging common referents and rituals, and earning the acceptance and support of conservative groups. The relation between groups of veiled and non-veiled women follows a game of persuasion and intimidation that is practiced in the context of tense relations among divergent social groups, as tackled by Serge Moscovici (1998) in the context of group social psychology. The contemporary *hijab* is a symbol of a new and renewed social system that reflects, on the one hand, a particular perception of women's functions and behavior, to be upheld by the veiled woman within the framework of the religious system. On the other hand, it represents an acknowledgment of the "danger" posed by woman's body, as a source of *fitna* and a major cause of "sexual chaos" and disequilibrium. The purpose of the *hijab* is to control male sexual energy; this sets the scene for a deterministic perspective of male sexual instinct, culturally known to be pre-eminent, all-encompassing, and insistent, in comparison to the culturally known fatalistic perspective of women's sexual desire, known to be lukewarm and not insistent. However, the instances of sexual violence and harassment that also targeted women wearing the *hijab* and the *niqab* during Arab revolutions shed light on the flimsiness of this deterrence argument; and uncover its ideological motives as a tool to subjugate women to patriarchal *fiqh* and order and a means to monitor women and

turn them into an integrated social group, homogenous in appearance and behavior, a group used to reproduce the male project and ensure its continuity by preserving its semiotic system, its outward form and clothing rituals.

The other aspects of gender as a semiotic system are concretized by the gender-based and ideological distribution of space. When Arab streets and squares became free of images, slogans, and symbols of the dictatorships that dominated public space, religious currents worked on gaining control over these spaces, by propagating their own slogans, discourses, and symbols. The *hijab* was one of these prominent symbols, used as a visual extension of the gaps that separate genders in public spaces. It constitutes a gender-based visible tool, tasked with stressing difference between men's hair, which appears clearly through the beard as a sign of masculinity, on the one hand, and the concealing of women's hair under a veil, on the other. This appearance-based classification paves the way for anchoring stable gender identities, and for the continuous separation of gendered functions in the public space. Gender-based segregation of public spaces is not only concretized through a gender distribution, but also through the body itself, which is transformed into a social and political space, or a "social body", to use the words of Foucault.

Delving deeper into the anthropological and social dimensions to reintroduce the *hijab* and the *niqab*, especially over the past three decades, takes us back to a cultural matter deeply entrenched in the religious legacy and which is related to the Islamic standpoint on the image and its ontological and social connotations through scholarly interpretations. One should not also forget the residues of such cautious positions towards the image in contemporary Arab culture, especially that we live in the age of the image par excellence, as confirmed by media and communication experts, such as Paul Virilio, Régis Debray, and Jean Baudrillard. This is attributable to the dominance of visual media, and the spread of images that have swept the scientific and social fields, which have become models of contemporary knowledge in the post-modern world, according to Mitchell (1992). The invasion of images has disturbed the restricted visual system of Islamic societies, mainly when it comes to the body, and its representations, functions, and relation to the organization of sexual relations and the traditions of concealment and disguise. This has also created confusion as to the separation of private and public spaces. In the age of the image, viewing, and exhibitionism, the concept of privacy has fallen to pieces to allow for a new phenomenon, coined by Umberto Eco as "exposed privacy" (2010). In this age, behavioral schizophrenia has become more deeply ingrained within Arab societies which are at the top of the list of the largest consumers of internet sexual images compared to their total population, despite being ranked among the most conservative cultures in the world. These are cultures in which one half seeks to cover and to hide the other half. The recent outreach of the *niqab*, especially in countries where it is neither a traditional nor a religious outfit, and the social debates that sparked around it, can be considered an indicator of the image crisis in Arab societies.

The *niqab* is an image that cancels out the image. It is a semiotic indicator that represents women in their absence, turning them into a sort of sexual "fetish", in the Freudian interpretation of the term. A fetish is an item of a woman's clothing, or a small part of her body, that is brought forth in the male imagination to compensate for

the woman; it is an expression of the desire to cancel her out, since her full presence threatens males with symbolic castration. Not only does the *niqab* play the role of completely blocking a woman out of sight, its black color is considered a symbol that challenges the culture of the globalized image and points to the religious Islamic roots that are free of image-representation, a dangerous tool that can mirror the sacred. Since woman's body is considered taboo, it is governed by this contemporary anti-image vision. Indeed, the attempts to hide the feminine body through ritual clothing reflect the failure of Arab culture to face contemporary variables with solutions based on innovative knowledge and behavior, away from rigidity and fanaticism.

As for the system of semiotic gender linguistics, the concept of "bareness", for instance, was used by conservative groups. It is a word laden with a violent moral charge – to describe women who do not cover their hair. Nowadays, a large number of clerics use, in religious and media platforms, that word in order to generate aversion towards the hair of unveiled women, in a clear call to reject and exclude them. This linguistic violence is part of the microphysical gender authority mechanisms referred to earlier.

The Naked Body in the Face of Authority

The body of "Muslim women", not men, became laden with the responsibility of preserving identity, the continuity of the tribe, the moral system, and the concepts of chastity and honor. The revolutions, the lack of surveillance, and dictatorial authority led to the exacerbation of prejudice, physical and symbolic violence against women, the targeting of women's body for harassment and rape, and the complicity of the security and judiciary systems with the perpetrators of violence. The sexual and sexist explosion accompanied by campaigns to impose the *hijab* led to a counter-explosion, the emergence of the phenomenon of nude protests. Alia Mehdi, a young Egyptian woman, broke all social and religious taboos when she posted a picture of her completely naked body on her blog, along with a message that clearly called on Islamic societies to face their own moral contradictions, and put an end to systematic violence against women. Amina, a young Tunisian woman and activist within the FEMEN movement embraced this unique form of protest in the Arab world, and displayed topless photos of herself, with a message against the social moral values that she considered hypocritical. These actions caused a considerable social stir, followed by a debate between those for and against these methods of expressing one's rejection of the tyrannical system aimed at women. Remarkably, a large array of intellectuals, human rights activists, and feminists stood together against these protests, since they do not represent the best forms of activism, and merely resort to baring one's body for expression. Many female activists disavowed these practices, missing the opportunity for a widespread social debate around the Arab world on the issues they had put forth. The protests were limited to the cultural conception of nakedness, laden with moral overtones and taboos, without looking into the demand to free women's bodies from the cultural burdens and taboos that had shackled them. Naked protests were seen as attempts to draw attention to the blatant contradictions within Arab cultures, and to the abuse of women and their bodies which reached its peak during the Arab revolutions. The aim behind causing all this commotion was to point out that women's nakedness does not, in itself, constitute a moral problematic in Arab countries when women's naked bodies are harnessed to the service of patriarchy. Adult breastfeeding, child marriages, and intercrural sex, (*moufakhatha*) sanctioned by some sheikhs did not

move religious men to officially condemn these *fatwas* or issue a statement blaming those behind them. The public uproar about the practices of virginity tests conducted in Tahrir square, dragging and stripping girls naked in the streets, and gang-raping women in public spaces was flimsy compared to the depth of the shock that followed the naked protest pictures, which challenged the norms of society by way of the proscribed female body.

On another note, the nakedness of women in public spaces is not alien to the history of societies that enslaved women as late as the end of the nineteenth century and exposed their naked bodies in public markets for everyone to see. Islamic countries were also the last to abolish the slave trade. Therefore, the nakedness of women's bodies, when it is in the service of men's sexual and economic systems is not considered morally problematic, because it is channelled for a specific task. But the rise of women against these systems, by breaking taboos related to the body, is considered a gross violation of cultural norms.

Towards Revisiting the Moral System

Arab elites have failed to build on these events, seize the opportunity to put these essential issues forward for debate, or analyze contradictions and paradoxes within the social system based on gender discrimination and the flaws in the moral system of Arab societies. Arab revolutions have uncovered a great disparity between the ways Arab societies reacted to the storming events of the past years where a great schism unfolded in the value system, and the dangerous slippage that moral concepts unraveled. This system was emptied of its spiritual and value-based dimensions, when political Islamists and their media supporters insisted on religious rituals, appearances, and doctrinal symbols as the main gateway to control society and the behavior of individuals. To attain power, became the primary justification for all sorts of practices that go against the most basic rules of morality, human rights, and dangerous practices carried out in the name of religion. This impoverishment of the moral system in the Islamic world led to reducing all moral values to the woman's body. We have witnessed how the Islamic world raged against two photographs of naked young women, and at the same time, did not rise against any *fatwa* calling for heinous practices on the bodies and identities of women and baby girls. Consequently, it would be very difficult for values such as social justice, equality, and freedom to become part of a schizophrenic and flawed value system. It will be even more difficult for these concepts to become anchored in the collective consciousness, so long as a large part of the elite and intellectuals use strategies to embellish the decaying cultural heritage, instead of bravely fighting the shackling taboos related to the body, gender, sex, and their relation to power. In this context, it is worth quoting Hisham Sharabi (1988) on the issue of change in Arab societies – a quote that deftly summarizes this dilemma: “There will be neither change nor liberation in Arab societies without eliminating the patriarch/father, both as a symbol and authority, and without woman's emancipation, in word and deed” (p. 67).

ENDNOTES

1. See *Women's Education and the Veil* by Talaat Harb (1900), *Mourning the Women of Al-Haddad* by Mohammed Saleh Bin Murad, and *The Sword of Justice Sees no Justice* by Omar al-Madani.
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