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To cite this article: El Naili, S. (2019). The Contribution of Female Writers in the Libyan Post Arab Spring: The Voice of Azza Al-Maghour`s Short Stories. *Al Raida*, 43(1), 1-11. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v43i1.1745

To link to this article: [10.32380/alrj.v43i1.1745](https://doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v43i1.1745)

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Article type: Article

Article accepted: 10<sup>th</sup> August 2019

Published online: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Publisher: Institute for Women`s Studies in the Arab World

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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# The Contribution of Female Writers in the Libyan Post Arab Spring: The Voice of Azza Al-Maghour`s Short Stories

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## Abstract

Alongside the rapid political and social change post Arab Spring, Libyan writers were constantly producing volumes of literary work, whether in print or online, to reflect on the socio-political issues in the society. Among these writers is Libyan lawyer and writer Azza Al-Maghour; Al-Maghour has published a great many short stories during and after the revolution. What makes her work distinctive is that she not only narrates fictional events, but that she simultaneously reflects on the Libyan reality post revolution; and her voice, she is the voice of the people. Her narrative style is structured as a cultural and intellectual revolution. Using a critical discourse analysis, this paper will examine how Al-Maghour contributes to the socio-political construction of Libyan society, and argues that Al-Maghour`s narrative structure, story frame, language style, and word connotations are used as tools to channel her political views. This paper will pay special attention to Al-Maghour`s discussions of women rights, social justice, and Libyan nationalism through her story settings and her characters. This paper begins by giving a brief overview of the context of Libyan women in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, followed by Azza Al-Maghour`s biography. The paper will then present an analysis of her stories through language, style, story structure, socio-political discussions, and her contribution as a Libyan female writer to the context of the post Arab Spring.

**Keywords:** Libya, Libyan revolution, Arab spring, Azza Al-Maghour, short story.

## Introduction

In February 2011, Libyans marched the streets demanding the end of a four-decade dictatorship. The uprising brought radical changes to several institutions. Libyan journalists and activists were driven by nationalistic sentiment to write and express their thoughts during the revolution. Hundreds and hundreds of news reports and columns in local newspapers and online were published. After the downfall of Qaddafi`s regime, discussions about the formation of a new state, democracy, and fighting terrorism occupied printed and digital news platforms. However, discussions of human rights, especially women`s rights, were, and continue to be, limited.

Despite being formally allowed equal status to men in labor and financial independence, such as, equal promotion and career development opportunities, equal access to training and career development, and equal pay, in practice, Libyan women suffered under Qaddafi`s civil rights` restrictions, especially in the types of education they could access. They were also excluded from any political or leadership roles. Traditional family law also discriminated against women in areas of child custody, marriage, divorce, and domestic violence. The 2011 revolution, unfortunately, did not bring about any radical change: although women played a significant role in the revolution - marching in the streets next to men, writing for, and participating in social media platforms, and in some cases actually leading political movements- they were, and still are underrepresented in official institutions and lack access to leadership roles. Libyan women remain prisoners of tradition and conservative legal framework in a patriarchal society.

Despite the political pressure and the instability accompanying the popular uprising, Libyan elites, journalists and writers, challenged the regime by publishing their works, such as news/critical articles and literary texts in local publication houses and some online. Most of the literary works in the first months of the revolution supported the people`s movement and expressed revolutionary sentiments. Some works reflected on Qaddafi`s repressive regime. Adaptation to the new reality encouraged writers to write about the fight against the emergence of social and political injustice (Gheblawi, 2011).

Under Qaddafi`s regime writers struggled to express their socio-political views freely, their literary works mostly depicted the struggles of the characters without any room for political criticism or call for reformation. According to Fagih (2008), the leading character in Libyan short stories is mostly a simple man struggling daily to survive hardship and oppression. Al-Haddad (2010) points out that the image of women in literary works is mostly negative; they are pictured as helpless and suffering from social inequality. The revolution did not change this trend: literary works in its aftermath of the revolution continued to portray women as helpless victims of social oppression (Elnaili: 2017). Many writers, however, are dedicated to challenging this portrayal of women as weak and vulnerable especially in the wake of the revolution, which saw the same mass mobilization of women fighting for social justice and equality not only in Libya, but across the region. One such writer, Azza Al-Maghour, challenges such portrayals by celebrating the female protagonist in her story, revealing her strength and positive contribution to the socio-political reform of Libya following the Arab Spring.

#### **Azza Al-Maghour: Lawyer, Woman Rights` Activist, and Writer**

Azza Al-Maghour is a senior Libyan lawyer who graduated from law school in Benghazi, she studied international law at Sorbonne University, and lectured at the School for Judges in Tripoli, Libya. She was a member of the inaugural committee of the Tripoli Bar Association that issued the first Libyan human rights report in 1998. Among Al-Maghour`s accomplishments, she assisted a Libyan detainee in Guantanamo. She was also the first to address and lecture about HIV positive Libyans in Benghazi<sup>1</sup>; and she addressed feminist issues such as domestic abuse, women`s rights, and sexual harassment. She is both a human rights activist and an author.

Al-Maghour`s name is well recognized in modern Arabic fiction. She has two collections of short stories: *Thirty Stories of My City* (2013) published by Dar Al Rowad Press in Tripoli, and *Fashloum* (2012). A number of her stories have been translated into English, such as *The Bicycle*.

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<sup>1</sup> More than 400 children were infected with the AIDS virus at a children's hospital in the 1990s. The Libyan government declared it a foreign act.

She has a large volume of short stories published online<sup>2</sup>. Since the Libyan uprising, Al-Maghour has published several political articles and essays discussing the national struggle for freedom, in addition to many short stories. Al-Maghour's stories have an interesting style: she first familiarizes her readers with the place and time by giving vivid images of the streets and homes. She describes her characters in critical style, for example, in her story *Pepper*, she describes the militia leader as a "pepper": curvy, cheap, and harshly bitter as a means of demonizing and politically stripping Libyan militias of power and, at the same time, empowering unarmed citizens and associating, for example, one of her protagonists with the famous international character in the movie, *Mowgli*.

### **Fighting the Political Oppression of Men**

The aftermath of the revolution was destructive. Weapon smugglers helped arm Libyan men, thereby empowering local militias and radical groups. After the fall of Qaddafi's regime, these local militiamen filled the political vacuum with an iron fist. Al-Maghour's stories highlight the violent rule by these militant groups, tackling issues that were consistently ignored by the media, especially rape and sexual violence. In *Alwilaya*<sup>3</sup> *A City's Tale*, Al-Maghour discusses the sexual assault of a Libyan woman by local militiamen that went viral across social media platforms, including Facebook. The video, *Andakum Wilaya*<sup>4</sup> stirred anger among the public on social media. However, the assailants were neither identified nor arrested, and the case was soon forgotten: The lack of civil society institutions and a weakened legal framework that did not protect women's rights all contributed to avoiding of the story.

Al-Maghour, however, took a strong stand by openly addressing the rape. She does that by symbolizing the capital city, Tripoli, as a woman who has been violated by forces that lurk in the dark. She associates the decency and dignity of a woman with that of the whole city. With that symbolism, she is indicating that a city is a home, as is a woman in Libyan society, where she is the main pillar in the family. Al-Maghour channels her anger through her writing criticizing Libyan society for negligence and accusing officials for being bystanders. She uses the power of her

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<sup>2</sup> Most of her digital publications are on the Libya Al-Mostakbal website.

<sup>3</sup> Lit. translation: women.

<sup>4</sup> *Indakum Wilaya* translates into: You have women. This was said by the raped women to the assaulters to remind them that they too have women in their families.

writing to, at least, shed light on the rape incident and give Libyan women a voice in a society ruled by men.

The criticism of militias is also seen in her work *Pepper*. Al-Maghour describes a militia leader as a pepper, a vegetable that is light in weight and sold cheap in the market. She compares the militiamen to the spicy vegetable which is pungent, hot, and harshly bitter; yet the effect is fleeting and fades away quickly. Al-Maghour continues:

Pepper is the cheapest vegetable... all prices go up except for pepper...despite its various, bright colors, it's a cowardly thing because it grows hiding behind the leaves of trees.<sup>5</sup>

Her comparison emphasizes that despite the harsh and bitter taste of peppers, this harshness fades away instantly, and so does the effect of the militias on the will of women: their power is weak and their violence is limited and short-lived.

In *Busitta*<sup>6</sup> Al-Maghour (2016) challenges the socio-political views of Libyan men in the aftermath of the revolution. She addresses how the self-identified Rebels of the February 17<sup>th</sup> took advantage of their power to obstruct the peaceful, post-war transition. The greed for authority and control changed the moralities of many of those who were once called heroes. In the story, she describes how a close family member has turned into a man of power, neglecting family ties and, as *Busitta*, he is imbalanced and has no loyalty to the real cause of the revolution. Traditionally, the political role and loyalty of Libyan men are not to be questioned by women, Al-Maghour's manifestation of the state's failure post revolution empowers her as a female writer to criticize, discuss, and educate her readers in a time when men carrying guns role and silence others.

## The Role of Women

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<sup>5</sup> From Al-Maghour's online short story *Alwilaya: A City's Tale* "Balad Tieob" <https://tinyurl.com/y494njrf>

<sup>6</sup> A neighborhood in Tripoli that is in the suburbs and intersected between two big neighborhoods, Zawia Addahmani and Anofileen. It falls between the suburbs and the city center, thus connoting imbalance between two parts in the city.

Al-Maghour imbues her female protagonists with power. At a time when Libyan women were often depicted as weak and marginalized, especially in literary works. Al-Maghour stands out against stereotypes and portrays Libyan women powerfully. For Al-Maghour, women are the foundation of society, and as mothers, create true leaders. In the story *Mowgli and Shere Khan*, Al-Maghour (2017) clearly states the powerful role of mothers in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Within the discourse of disarming militias and supporting the national army, she tells the story of two young men who joined the armed revolution against Qaddafi. The first man, named Mowgli, was nurtured by his mother to return to civil life and university: “No more weapons in my house!” his mother implores him. The other man, Shere Khan, a drug dealer, an inmate, and an army deserter, has no family, and crucially, no mother figure to advise him. In this way, Al-Maghour, underlines the significant role mothers play in the lives of their children, and the contribution they can make in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and the reformation of a civil society. She demonstrates that women, like men, can play political roles in their families toward a gun-free, safer country. A similar discourse is seen in Al-Maghour’s *Aliwa The Parrot*, where Walid, a young man, is brought up in a loveless home, a home with a mother that clipped her children’s wings. Walid, symbolically, flew into the darkness, to the unknown where he was lost and never returned home. Again, Al-Maghour addresses the importance of a mother’s role in the lives of their children: she points out that the successes or failures of a person are dependent on the successes and failures of the mother. Her message in the story both educates women and shows their vital place in the community.

A more powerful image is portrayed in *Dried Tomatoes* through a business woman from Misurata<sup>7</sup> who owns an apartment building. One of the neighbors reports to another neighbor, who works in the city’s telecom company, the daily activities of residents in the building. The two cause fear among the neighbors, who are suspicious that they are working for the state intelligence agency. Al-Maghour presents the landlord as a quiet lady, steady in her steps, with a strong presence. As her manager, who is one of the residents, complains about the two men, the

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<sup>7</sup> A city located in northwestern Libya, 187 km east the capital. It was one of the major cities that rebelled against Qaddafi during the revolution. In recent years it has been in political conflict with several other Libyan cities. The city in the story has a socio-political connotation in the post revolution context.

landlord walks toward them and addresses the Misuratan with confidence and mockery: “Hey shorty! Why are you bothering my manager?!” he stutters and withdraws from the confrontation. Both men quit spying on their neighbors. Al-Maghour demonstrates how the small community in the building was liberated by the bravery of a woman. With the country divided by corrupt politicians and militiamen, social ties among individuals, families, tribes, and even cities have weakened. Al-Maghour’s two conflicting characters from Misurata connote that when men divide over power, women bring people together. Al-Maghour explains through the narration that women can be great leaders in bringing peace to a divided country.

In the chaotic aftermath of the revolution, reflected in political instability, no jobs, and constant power cuts, Al-Maghour reflects the daily sufferings of Libyan citizens through her female characters. She highlights the great efforts women are making to overcome such obstacles: they have taken the jobs of men in the society to provide for their families, as husbands customarily do, and they have broken traditional taboos and crossed societal boundaries such as in *The Taxi Driver*; where a widower drives a taxi to make her living, challenging stereotypes as she “hits the gas, [and] drives through the city of militias.” Similarly, in *The Electric Company* (Al-Maghour, 2017), an outraged mother angry with the power outage during the dead of winter expresses her opinions freely and fearlessly: “She rolled down the window...spits... and shouted at the top of her lungs ‘Damn you electric company, damn you!’”

### **Peace Offering**

As a women’s rights activist and lawyer, Al-Maghour uses her literary platform to address the readers with words of peace in a time of war. She narrates her stories and structures her writings within the frame of nationality and unity. In addition to her vivid descriptions of the city streets and alleys to familiarize the reader with the place, Al-Maghour discusses social equality and nationalism in a symbolic, yet simple style. In *Dried Tomatoes* (Al-Maghour, 2016) all the ladies in the building, despite coming from different backgrounds and cities in Libya, gather around for dinner to share a Libyan dish cooked with dried tomatoes. Dried tomatoes are a major ingredient in most Libyan dishes: they symbolize the values and traditions that all Libyans share. The image

of the ladies enjoying dinner together and eating from the same dish at the end of the story brings warmth after a conflict. This positive image is a call for a united Libya, and it is beautifully painted through women`s social activities.

In *The Afternoon Kids*, Al-Maghour (2017) addresses nationalism through the lens of her childhood. She shares a slice of her memory with another schoolgirl from the afternoon school period. Al-Maghour begins the story by describing how she alienates herself from the afternoon kids thinking they are different. She finally has an encounter with one such girl. The girl comforts her while her father picks her up from school and offers her a bite of her sandwich, they engage in conversation and break the barrier. She realizes that the afternoon period girl is just like her, they both enjoy recess, dislike homework, and enjoy the same school activities. Al-Maghour demonstrates through her younger self that, despite the division the aftermath of the revolution has created, all Libyans are equal; they share the same joy and pain. She wraps the memory with a simple, yet deep confession:

Then I realized that the ‘afternoon kids’ are the ‘morning kids’ and the ‘morning kids’ are the ‘afternoon kids’... We all wear the same black uniform, and the same white neck tie, we sit at the same desks under the same roof, we eat the same soaked in olive oil, tuna, and hot sauce sandwiches<sup>8</sup>.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A year after the start of the Arab Spring, many Libyan writers have focused their literary productions on the socio-economic and political issues in the country. These stories tend to carry a pessimistic tone reflecting the difficult post-war reality. An online article by Libyan critic Najat Agila in 2017 discusses the phenomena of picturing female figures in Libyan literature and TV drama in a negative way. In her article she urged Libyan writers to give women justice. Al-Maghour breaks traditions by giving women an authoritative voice in the face of social injustice. Her

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<sup>8</sup> From Al-Maghour`s online short story “The Afternoon Kids.” Libya Almostakbal <https://tinyurl.com/yxmf7q8n>

nationalistic sentiment in the stories changes that atmosphere by shedding light on hope and the true values that bind Libyans.

Al-Maghour's short stories stand out in many aspects; She takes the lead in discussing sensitive issues in Libyan society such as rape and sexual abuse. Al-Maghour does not hold back like her peers, nor refrains from discussing such delicate subjects through her stories. When the government and the media give a blind eye, Al-Maghour gives the rape victims a voice, a voice that speaks volumes and breaks old traditions: being a victim of rape is not a crime, the crime is shaming women and silencing them. Al-Maghour distinguishes herself also by stating and discussing social struggles in bold to enlighten and educate the public. She pinpoints the causes with clear criticism and suggests ways to resolve such issues through a positive perspective. Most importantly, Al-Maghour paves with her stories the path for future writings to be more honest and open about the social struggles of the society, to discuss issues freely and unconditionally, to give cultural justice to the marginalized, especially women. Al-Maghour's works after the revolution exceed the idea of being just stories, they are a cultural movement calling for positive social change.

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