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Engaging the Revolution: Feminism, Art, and Resistance on the Front Lines

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Abstract

Lebanese women's active and impressive participation in the revolution has led to the wide use of "the revolution is female" as a new slogan. This article will try to explain why and how women have been able to appropriate the revolution, and whether men and women are asking for the same rights. The article will analyze gender in the revolution through insights from a piece of street art painted by two young artists. It will demonstrate that the revolution per se is not female; rather, it is the characteristics of Lebanon's revolution that have put women's faces at the fore.

Keywords: Revolution, art, street art, graffiti, women, men, women's rights, protest art, activist art, Lebanon

Is the Revolution Female?

Women have been on the front lines of the Lebanese revolution, participating as mothers, grandmothers, artists, heads of household, businesswomen, and activists, to name only a few. Women's strong revolutionary presence has triggered the use of the slogan "the revolution is female," an important feat considering Lebanon's patriarchal structure.

This article will try to explain how women have been able to appropriate the revolution, and whether or not the revolution means the same thing to men and women. To that end, the article argues that the revolution is not female per se. Rather, it is the characteristics of Lebanon's revolution that have, in many instances quite literally, put women's faces at the fore. This has been

especially highlighted through art, as many paintings and graffiti have emphasized women's participation in the revolution.

This article examines the revolution through an analysis of a piece of street art painted by two young artists, Sara Richani and Wissam Kibbi. Richani and Kibbi painted a self-portrait (Figure 1) without premeditation, placing the word "ثورة" (revolution) at the heart of their piece. As Kibbi stated, "It was all about emotions. It was half of my face and half of Sara's put together as one during this revolution" (Kibbi & Richani, personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Each artist has painted half of their own face, reflecting the revolution we are witnessing today: a peaceful yet daring and confrontational revolution. However, the man and the woman in the artwork are not shouting for their rights. If they were, would they be calling for the same rights? Would that separate them from each other? At the time of my interview with them, the two friends were already miles apart: Richani had left Lebanon, and Kibbi was preparing to move abroad. Their eagerness for change united them. In their own way, they were



Figure 1.

revolting against the situation that pushed them, like many young people, to leave Lebanon, their families, and their friends. Their faces painted in an abandoned house, far away from curious onlookers, are a reminder that anyone can be part of the revolution no matter where they are, and that distance is trivial when it comes to building a country where equality prevails.

Are Women and Men Asking for the Same Rights?

The answer to this question lies in the artists' choice of clothing. In contrast to the man, the woman's clothes are not shown. In this sense, she is provocatively removing the cover that has framed her body, and is defying patriarchal norms. She is regaining control over her body; she cannot be objectified by the gaze of the viewer. She has revealed her "hybrid" side—half "normal" woman, half something we have not yet seen—and this is why she is a remarkable carrier of a strong message in the revolution. The way a woman is dressed should not reflect what personal status law she must abide by. She is asking for equal rights following divorce, equal inheritance rights, custody rights, and the right to give her children her nationality. She is asking for more than just her basic rights. She is asking for a ban on the system that deprives her of those rights simply *because she is a woman*.

The contrast between the man and the woman in the painting is clear. The man seems quiet. The colors used to draw his figure are white, black, and yellow. Aside from yellow, which is a warm color, white and black are neutral colors; the neutrality of the black and white reinforces his calmness. His features, his gaze, the whiteness of his clothes, and the high collar he is wearing all give the viewer the impression that he is suffocating. And yet he appears calm, as if he is used to the situation. Yes, he is protesting for his basic rights: better economic conditions, access to healthcare services, job opportunities.... But is he protesting against the patriarchal society? Is he trying to shake its foundations? Is he asking for gender equality?

As for the woman, the colors used to paint her and her prominent features (her cheekbone, her eye) translate into her confrontational position against the world. She is seeing red! It makes us wonder whether the woman painted in blue is a part of this world, or whether she herself is a world of her own. She reminds us of Pandora in the movie *Avatar*, the forested blue moon that is a victim of humanity's greed. This fictional moon is occupied by humans who, having violated Mother Earth and depleted all her resources, are looking for another planet/body to colonize and

violate. She is Neytiri, *Avatar's* blue woman, who falls in love in an unconventional way but is obliged to abide by patriarchal societal norms. She is somehow also Pandora from Greek mythology, rewriting her own story free of all gender connotations, and offering what is left in her box: hope!

She is all of the above, and yet she still manages to remind us of her human nature. She is Yamama, Zabaa, and Al Basus, the three famous blue women who lived in the pre-Islamic era and were renowned not only for their blue eyes, but for being rebellious and clairvoyant, and for challenging patriarchal society and norms (Mohamad, 2019). The blue Yamama, from the Jadis tribe, was known for her "mental acuity, discernment, and perspicacity which allow[ed] her to see in the future" (Stetkevych & Stetkevych, 2002, p. 38). She could see the enemies that were on their way to destroy her land, and so she could warn her tribe. "أبصر من زرقاء اليمامة" (more perceptive than the blue Yamama) is a proverb that pays tribute to her. When her tribe chose to ignore her warnings, they were all killed. Zabaa was a great warrior who defied patriarchal society. Al Basus Bint Munqeth of the Baqr tribe, whose "camel caused a forty-year war between the tribes of Bakr and Taghlib" (Al-Tabari, 2007, p. 225), is commemorated in the saying "أشأم من البسوس" (unluckier than Al Basus).

The revolution has awakened this "hybrid" side in the woman, the side that speaks a language called deafening silence, where:

- one can hear every woman's voice protesting, even if they are asking for different rights;
- one can hear the courage of women facing their oppressors;
- peace is not women's essentialist attribute; rather, it is a choice.

The woman in this painting is thus representative of Lebanese women: those who took part in the revolution, those who did not, and even those who are against the revolution. There is no "other" in her silence, just "us."

The absence of the “other” in her silence means the absence of war and conflict. This idea is reinforced by the Moroccan song “Zamilou,” sung by Bu Kholthoum, which Richani and Kibbi chose to use as background music in videos documenting their painting process, which they uploaded to various social media platforms. The song sheds light on women’s roles in society (as translated by the author):

When my mind is overwhelmed, and the beasts start tearing me up
You’re the only one who protects me, so I scare them using you [...]
They don’t fear blood and death doesn’t scare them
But they’re afraid of you when you state your opinion without fear
I’ll scare them using you
They’ll grow in you
I am teaching them using you

As Richani interpreted it: “The song is about peace materialized as a woman. People are not afraid of war, they are used to it. They are afraid of those who dare to have a voice and to give their opinion peacefully. They know how to deal with blood, and prefer it to peace.” “This is exactly what is happening now,” Kibbi added, “a peaceful revolution” (Kibbi & Richani, personal communication, November 27, 2019).

The revolution is not female per se. It is not exclusive: the revolution is everyone. However, the peacefulness of the revolution thus far can be seen in the ways in which women have participated in and directed it. It is not that women are peaceful and men are not; it is that women so far have been the prevailing force that preserves the peacefulness of the revolution. They remind us of the atrocities of the Civil War, and defend the protesters. Women are not afraid of war; they are “changing the value system which justifies war” (Skjelsbæk, 2001, p. 56).

In conclusion, the silence that seems frustrating for the man in the painting is the silence of a thinking man: “It doesn’t mean I don’t have thunder inside me,” said Kibbi. On the other hand,

the woman is angrier than the man; as Richani explained, women “struggle more to get what we want, we are continuously working to prove ourselves. We need, on a daily basis, to be louder to be heard. Being a woman artist is especially much more difficult” (Kibbi & Richani, personal communication, November 27, 2019). Women have been fighting for a long time to get their rights. They have witnessed numerous successes and setbacks, and have acquired the strength to face both success and failure without breaking down or losing hope. They know best that getting their rights is a long journey that must be led by patience, boldness, and forgiveness: a journey that can be neither postponed nor stopped.

Today’s revolution is an opportunity for Lebanese women to lead, shine, and make their voices louder than before. From generation to generation, they have passed on their eagerness to change their country and to make it better and inclusive. Will they succeed in keeping the revolution peaceful yet confrontational and on track? Will they protect it from those who feed on blood?

Lebanese women are born revolutionaries; they need only be awoken.

The analysis of the painting is the author’s sole interpretation.

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