

NUDE REVOLUTION

The photograph of 20-year old Aliaa El-Mahdi took Egypt and much of the Internet world by storm in November 2011. A domestic photograph posted to a personal blog went viral in hours sparking praise and death threats. Egypt was sobering up from the spring uprising and trying to establish where the boundaries are in the turmoil of change. The timing of her photographic act was significant, discontent with the lack of real political progress was exposing the paradoxical nature of freedom encased within revolutionary fervor. If one issue can uncoil the loose patchwork of groups trying to affect change in Egypt, gender could be that fissure.

El-Madhy's B&W self-portrait depicts a naked young woman, returning our stare and is reminiscent of much preceding photographic historyⁱ. On this level the image itself would barely raise an eyebrow in the West, or Egypt for that matter where there is no censorship of the Internet.

This amateur self-portrait is aware of art history and the red tinted motif draws attention to some artistic aspirations and embellishment. Indeed she categorizes the photograph under a section entitled "Nude Art" on her blog. However, the cultural charge of the image lies in the transgression of social boundaries for the majority of women in Egypt. The deep-rooted traditional mindset of Islamists who embraced the removal of the 30-year corrupt regime with gusto felt outraged and betrayed by El-Mahdi's freedom of expression; this was not their definition of freedom. More extreme voices threatened violence and in December a female lookalike of El-Mahdi's was beaten up in Tahrir Square. Furthermore other detractors came from the liberal side criticizing her for personalising the revolution at a politically sensitive time.

The majority of her support came from an external audience who saw the negative reaction to the image as an infringement of womens' rights and perhaps even a chance to criticize conservative views in Islam. El-Mahdi's blog was inundated with 4 million hits and the image circulated across the world in an appropriated storm, arguably in part driven by voyeurism. A solidarity photo by Israeli women didn't actually do El-Mahdi's case much good in Egyptian eyes. Another key facet is the form of the solidarity photos which were made in more modest fashions, often paintings, drawings or poems written, as El-Mahdi went underground in Cairo fearing for her safety. Her image became a briefly iconic, and was stenciled onto the walls of the Ministry of Interior near Tahrir Square alongside an image of a veiled female detaineeⁱⁱ. However, this revolutionary alignment failed and even the April the 6th activists distanced themselves from El-Mahdi stating she was not a member, as had been rumored.

Certain clues about this negative reaction can be discerned from the image itself and importantly its public distribution. The image is not only a feminist statement and this complexity is a highly provocative position for an Egyptian woman to take. El-Mahdi's gaze expresses a shy confidence, slightly unsure of her own erotic capital but assured there is something to be exchanged as the pose and props invite or succumb to a sexualized gaze. The photograph is encased in the politics of now, that has so far failed to put gender politics firmly on the reform agenda. El Mahdi's act complicates the revolution myth, piercing the bubble of optimism for those hopeful for progressive social change. Unlike other photographs documenting the violent treatment of women protesters, this image transgresses victimhood, probing deep-rooted paradoxes in Egypt as the society faces some hard truths about women's roles held by the traditional majority. In the contested but seemingly emancipated space of Tahrir Square, women have been raped by groups of men in uncontrolled sexual frenzies, while the police have carried out highly questionable 'virginity tests' on women arrested during protests. Such violent incidents are a dark mirror that few contemporary political figures choose to address. Implicit social values shape gender divides in Egypt and create a cultural distinction between private and public behaviorⁱⁱⁱ. In this light a minority communicate to the West and perhaps tend to misrepresent the political landscape in the aftermath of Mubarak and transition into Muslim Brotherhood rule. This goes some way to explaining why the El-Mahdi image provoked this reaction with few in Egypt ready to defend her in public. A revealing reality is the lack of response from other Egyptian women; none followed El-Mahdi and fused the body with the body politic. Her act has arguably left her empowered but isolated in a society in flux struggling to define gender issues in its own revolution.

ⁱ E.J. Bellocq's playful portraits of New Orleans prostitutes in the early 20th Century resonate.

ⁱⁱ Graffiti on a wall in front of The Prime Minister residence at the time of November 2011 sit-in translates as: "Samira Ibrahim, 25 years, was forced to Strip in front of army officers and soldiers , however she refused not to revenge and took legal action against them , but no interest, no crowd, no media there is nothing at all. Aliaa el-Mahdi , 20 years stripped her own will the public and media rushed to her". El Mahdi's appearance on CNN and other media outlets did not garnish much support with the majority of Egyptians.

ⁱⁱⁱ Female circumcision runs at alarming rates, some studies claim up to 95% of women have been affected. The problem is further compounded by female illiteracy levels over 50% as well as the obvious economic injustices.

