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WOMEN IN ICONIC PROTEST IMAGERY ACROSS SWANA

by
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ABSTRACT
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The mobilizations of the past thirteen years in Southwest Asia and North Africa suggest a shift in the visual culture of the region. From the start of the Arab Spring in 2011 to the latest uprising in Iran, the visual output of protests has been marked by the hypervisibility of the figure of the female protester as an icon of revolution. The following thesis dissects five cases of women in iconic protest imagery across the region: Egypt's blue bra girl and Turkey's woman in red, Sudan's *Kandaka*, Lebanon's Kick-Queen, and Iran's hair-cutting ceremonies. I both adopt and depart from Hariman and Lucaites (2007) study of photojournalistic icons to explore different dimensions of iconicity and its impact on women's mobilization. From iconic images to iconic action, the newfound centrality of women in protest imagery seems to be paving the way for new observations on visual culture, gender dynamics, and communication in the region.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party (in Turkey)
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (in Egypt)
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Revolution has long captivated the attention of academics and laypeople alike. From Hegel and Marx to Sartre and Marcuse, scholars from every field of knowledge have been asking the fundamental question of what makes people revolt. More recently, a second line of inquiry started haunting academics: not why, but rather how do people revolt? To light the spark for reform, a society needs its Luthers, its Che Guevaras—the freethinkers and troublemakers that disrupt the status quo and invoke challenging discussions. But Luther became canonized with Cranach's portrait and Guevara with the "Guerrillero Heroico" (Figure 1). Today more than ever, we understand that "the actual meanings of revolutionary discourses emerge not merely 'accompanied' by iconic images, but crucially dependent on them. Images and discourses feed back into one another and remain in a mutually constitutive relation" (Bartmanksi, 2012, p. 46). The use of iconic imagery has been a common feature in many historical revolutions. In many cases, these images have become synonymous with the revolutions themselves and have continued to be used in various forms of media and popular culture long after the revolutions have ended, transcending time and place.

Figure 1. “Guerrillero Heroico,” the photograph of Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara at a memorial service for victims of the La Coubre explosion, March 5, 1960, Havana, Cuba. [Photo by Alberto Korda]

Photography is one medium through which the use of revolutionary visuals has been most potent. From birds-eye-view shots of converging crowds and occupied squares to close-ups of raised fists and dissenting bodies, photographs of revolutionary moments have been able to captivate public attention and catalyze collective imagination well beyond the particularities of the contexts from which they arise. Ariella Azoulay’s aphorism “the revolution is the language; the photographs are its writing paper” (2011) speaks to the crucial role photography plays in the context of social and political revolution. This notion is only amplified in the information era, where photos depicting revolutionary visuals have become a ubiquitous feature of a globalized contemporary society. Although rooted in specific locales, the visual language of revolution is not confined to these places. Rather, the photographs that emerge from the streets and squares of revolutionary movements can traverse vast distances, both physical and virtual, and take on new, sometimes drastically different meanings. The photo of the “Tank Man” standing in front of a line of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, for instance, is one such image that has come to symbolize the struggle against authoritarianism and the desire for freedom (Figure 2).

As it was imbricated with transnational meanings and symbolisms, the Tank Man photograph was able to attain iconic status despite the fleeting nature of the moment it captures. Yet, just as iconic as the image of the unarmed man facing the militarized state, the figure of the woman in protest has been a fertile and recurring trope in the visual archive of revolution (Figure 3).

Figure 2. “Tank man,” a man stands in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square, June 5, 1989, China. (Photographer Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos)

Figure 3. Photograph of “Flower Child,” or “La jeune fille à la fleur,” during the March on the Pentagon rally of October 21, 1967 (By Marc Riboud)

The past decade of political life in Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) has seen tens of thousands of men and women taking to the streets to protest various

regimes and injustices. The visual output of these mobilizations has been marked by the prominence of women captured in different revolutionary moments. As media and publics adopted, appropriated, and reproduced these photographs, the images, and the women within them, were bestowed meanings that made them iconic. Some of these images become iconic only through the process of appropriation, remaking, or filtering, while others find their way back to the spaces from which they originated, in the form of murals, signs, reenactments, or clothing. The central focus of this research project is precisely these often surprising and occasionally predictable journeys of revolutionary imagery that receive iconic status.

This thesis examines five moments that span over a decade of protest imagery in the SWANA region. The images are single, iconic shots, and, as Hariman and Lucaites write in their exploration of photojournalistic icons, “it is important to keep in mind that much was never pictured and already has been forgotten” (2007, p. 20). However, the study of iconicity and symbolism in revolution can provide valuable insights into the power of visual communication and the ways in which social movements can use symbols and imagery to mobilize and inspire their followers. Therefore, I treat each of the five iconic images to different modes of examination, spacing them in a slide show that explicates the iconicity of women in protest and the role they play in the changing visual culture of the region.

In what follows, I begin by reviewing extant literature on the pervasiveness of images and the question of iconic images in social and political movements. This is followed by a brief exposition of my selection and methodology. The first set of images considered in this thesis are then explored in chapter four, which I use to lay the foundations for a running definition of iconic images (in other words, the question of

how an image becomes iconic). This chapter employs discourse and textual analyses to elucidate the different layers of meaning imbricated in the photographs that became known as Egypt's girl in the blue bra (2011) and Turkey's woman in red (2013). The following chapter delves into some of the history and context behind the photograph of Sudan's Nubian Queen or *Kandaka* (2019) to showcase the stakes involved with the valorization of iconic images (or some of the downsides of iconicity). Chapter six uses the case of Beirut's Kick-Queen and the graphic rendering of a viral image from the eve of Lebanon's 2019 uprising to show how an iconicity was first used to feminize public spheres and modes of protest (in other words, an exploration of the immediate, on-the-ground impact of an iconic artwork vs its afterlife). The seventh and final body chapter dives into a different breadth of iconicity by analyzing a recurrent trope from the visual output of Iran's ongoing feminist uprising. Looking into images of women publicly and ceremoniously cutting their hair, this chapter attempts to move beyond *the iconic image* and into what constitutes iconic action *through* images (i.e., how iconic visuals can be used to create new meanings and realities). Finally, the concluding chapter offers a brief recap of the arguments presented in each chapter, followed by my personal reflections and post-exploration thoughts on iconicity. It also discusses some of the changes and evolution my plan and thought process underwent during the research phase and attempts to situate my findings within a broader framework of the iconicity of women in protest imagery.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following section, I discuss a series of theoretical perspectives that guided this research and the analysis of the relationship between iconicity and the social contexts of which they emerge. I connect the discussed theories to provide a critical theoretical approach for analyzing the iconic images of women from recent protest iconography across the SWANA region. However, first, I explore a sample of the body of literature around images, icons, and social movements in the technological era.

2.1. The Pictorial Turn

The second half of the 20th century has been marked by the explosion of the visual medium as a primary mode of expression and communication. The advent of photography, cinema, television, and the Internet has given rise to an overwhelming flood of images in contemporary global culture and prompted scholars to theorize on what has been called a "pictorial turn" in modern culture (Mitchell, 1992).

Although previous scholars from Sontag (1977) to Barthes (1981) had lengthy dissertations on the proliferation of images and their impact on modern culture, the term "pictorial turn" was first conceived by Mitchell in his book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (1992). Mitchell demonstrated how the sheer quantity of images has led to a qualitative shift in their significance. Initially, this shift was marked by the mechanical reproduction of images through technologies like photography and cinema, which Walter Benjamin discussed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Later, Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously turned to electronic communication technologies, such as radio and television that

facilitated real-time broadcasting and communication, and thereby amplified the saturation and significance of images.

Nonetheless, leading this movement was the field of photography. Photographs are chromatic representations that reproduce reality (Messaris & Abraham, 2001) and command the attention of viewers (Garcia & Stark, 1991). They connect with readers on multiple levels by provoking mental processes of analysis and/or evoking heightened emotional experiences (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006).

As more interest poured into the subject, researchers were quick to establish that pictures are more than chromatic reproductions of a physical space or object. They are complex modes of representation that (at times) obscure their own processes of production, reception, and dissemination. As such, studying them entails not only examining the images themselves, but also what Rogoff (1998) has called the 'viewing apparatuses' with which they are produced and consumed. These include the ways we look and see, and our practices of knowing and doing. Similarly, Morgan (2005) stated, "the analysis and interpretation of […] the ways of seeing (gazes) that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work" are a crucial part of studying the image. But while Morgan was concerned with the ways images represent different realities through the gaze, Mitchell was interested in the ways images shape them.

Mitchell (1994) applied Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of "picture theory" (1980) in the field of philosophy to visual studies. According to Mitchell's picture theory, images (or visual representations) function similarly to language in that they are not simply passive reflections of reality, but active participants in the construction of meaning. Mitchell argued that images have a "double-ness" or "duplicity" –they

simultaneously show and tell, and this duality is what makes them powerful tools for shaping our understanding of the world. Moreover, picture theory emphasizes the importance of context in the interpretation of images. Mitchell (1994) argues that images are always embedded within a larger social, cultural, and historical context, and that this context is crucial to understanding their meaning.

2.2. Images and Politics

Politics has always intwined with contestations over the narratives, cultural practices, and symbols that shape social reality. In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen (1999) argues that "politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meaning." No more are these contestations more pronounced than in the media. In *Television and Everyday Life* (1994), Silverstone avers that "politics, like experience, can no longer even be thought outside a media frame."

A variety of scholars have noted the changing nature of public communication in an electronic age, and specifically, the centrality of images and the visual to questions of social issue creation and opinion formation (Jamieson, 1988; Gronbeck 1990; Olson and Goodnight, 1994; Szasz, 1994; Nelson and Boyton, 1995). Visuals had long been acknowledged as "a vehicle for news frames by visualizing and emphasizing a particular aspect of an issue" (Graber, 1990; Grabe & Bucy, 2009). In the Middle East, with the rise of the freer, less restricted citizen journalism, images became the site at which battles of truths and counter-truths played out, and episodes of state authority and public power were contested. In *Image Politics in the Middle East*, Khatib (2012)

asserts that “the image has claimed a central place in the processes through which political dynamics are communicated and experienced in the region.”

2.2.1. Politics and Spectacle

The pictorial turn caused an oversaturation in the visual medium and created new ways of seeing and perceiving the world. In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), Johnathan Crary explores how the development of modern technologies such as the camera and the cinema has led to a transformation of human perception. The modern era, according to Crary, is characterized by a constant state of distraction and stimulation. This constant stimulation, argues Crary, has led not only to a weakening of our ability to concentrate and pay attention, but also to the rise of the spectacle.

The spectacle is a form of entertainment used in advertising, politics, and other forms of mass communication to capture and hold the attention of large audiences. It has become a dominant form of cultural expression in modern society that is designed to capture our attention and hold it for a brief period of time (Kellner, 2005). The concept of the spectacle has been explored by numerous scholars—the most prominent of whom, Guy Debord, a member of the Situationist International, is widely regarded as one of the seminal figures in the theory of the spectacle. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that the spectacle represents the alienation of human experience into a realm of commodity and image.

Habermas also laments the rise of the mass media spectacles, expressing concern over its disintegration, or refeudalization of the bourgeois public to a spectacle of the Middle Ages. “Rational critical debate,” writes Habermas, “had a tendency to be

replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode" (1989, p. 163).

While theorists like Debord, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas saw the integration of media spectacle into politics as a breakdown of meaningful deliberation, Simons (2000) provides a thought-provoking critique of the logocentrism behind their polemic. Building on Mitchell's essay "What is an image?" (1984), Simons argues that the denigration of imagology in Hamermas' approach denies the fact that "political images are not simply absorbed by a passive public; rather, they are read, interpreted and reflected on." Furthermore, "images are as amenable to critical interpretation as verbal argument," and therefore, "putting politics into images rather than words may well not demonstrate a trivialization of politics, or the loss of deep discussion replaced by superficial symbols" (Simons, 2000, p. 98).

Collectively, media researchers have been able to prove that the visual medium is able to convey messages faster and at times more efficiently than the textual one. Paivio (1991) demonstrated that the reception of images occurs faster than that of text, after Nelson, Reed, & Walling (1976) put forth the "picture superiority effect" that explains why "named images are better recalled than named words due to the concrete imagery they generate." By conveying messages that cannot be communicated via words or by delivering them more promptly than text, visuals are able to more quickly instigate debate on issues of public concern and can contribute to the formation of more vibrant public spheres (Milner, 2013).

But since its conception, the "public sphere" has been riddled with limitations—the most pertinent of which is its denigration of images and visual communication.

2.2.2. Public Spheres and Iconoclasm

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas coined the groundbreaking concept of the public sphere as a theoretical framework that describes a space of communication and debate where individuals could come together as equals to discuss and debate issues of common concern. According to Habermas, the public sphere emerged in the eighteenth century in Europe as a direct result of the rise of the bourgeois class and the spread of literacy and the printing press. In this way, it served as a counterweight to the power of the state and provided a platform for the formation of public opinion and the development of democratic norms and values (Habermas, 1962). However, as transformative as it was to the fields of politics, communication, and critical social theory, Habermas' public sphere has also received much debate and critique for its different limitations and exclusions (see Calhoun, 1993).

One glaring limitation of Habermas' public sphere is its failure to account for the ways in which social identities such as race, gender, and class shape public discourse and exclude marginalized groups. Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that the Habermasian model is based on a narrow understanding of public deliberation that neglects the role of power and oppression in shaping the public sphere. She suggests that a more inclusive and egalitarian public sphere would require the recognition and validation of a wider range of social identities and perspectives.

In addition to the critiques of androcentrism and class-blindness, the Habermasian public sphere is challenged for its rigid focus on dialogue and rationality as the essence of conducive deliberation. The two concepts are interlinked in a long history of what Barbara Stafford (1996) defines as logocentrism and what Hariman &

Lucaites dub as iconoclasm (2007). Logocentrism, according to Stafford, is the "cultural bias, convinced of the superiority of writing or propositional language, that devalues sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication precisely because they often baffle verbal resolution." It builds on the belief that images exist outside the realms of rational thought and deliberative argument. To this extent, Hariman & Lucaites critique the "privileging of dialogue and fetishization of a procedural rationality at the heart of the public sphere. These flaws produce an exclusionary and impoverished normative ideal that shuns much of the richness and turbulence of the sense-making process" (2007, p. 39).

Another critique of Habermas' public sphere comes from scholars who argue that the model is too idealized and detached from the realities of contemporary political and media systems. Michael Warner (1992), for instance, suggests that the public sphere is no longer a self-contained space of rational debate, but rather a complex network of media and communication technologies that are increasingly controlled by corporate interests. Both the original concept and Warner's critique of it in 1992 were incapable of accounting for what the advent of social media would mean for their respective arguments.

2.3. From Mass to Participatory Media

The proliferation of portable cameras, the internet, and image-sharing apps brought forth an era of unprecedented media production and dissemination. This new type of activism both facilitated and was facilitated by the rise of what Jenkins (2006) calls "participatory media culture"—a culture where media producer and consumer are no longer physically distinct entities. As media users actively engaged in creating and

sharing media culture—rather than just consuming it—visual productions and images quickly became one of the frontrunners of this new wave. The blurring of boundaries between passive media consumption and active production has irrevocably changed the political landscape. Aptly termed produsage, a portmanteau of the words ‘production’ and ‘usage’ by Bruns (2006), the phenomenon was posited at the heart of significant, paradigmatic shifts in political culture and communication.

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), the widespread use of technological devices with documentation facilities, such as portable digital cameras and smartphones, as well as social network platforms like Facebook and Twitter allowed the integration of visual images and internet memes as “new forms of political participation and practices of dissent.” During the Abu Ghraib scandal of 2004, for instance, the reappropriation and online dissemination of the torture photographs first published by CBS News opened the floodgates for large-scale discussions on military interventionism, foreign policy, internet restriction, and public access to information (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008). Another form of visual produsage was established by Milner, who studies the impact of meme culture on global exchanges. Milner writes, “…individual participatory media texts act as strands that intertwine into threads of interaction, eventually forming whole tapestries of public conversation. When everyday members of the public contribute their small conversational strands to the vast cultural tapestry, they are memetically making their world” (2018, p. 2).

Media produsage shook the foundations of the political landscape to the core. During the Occupy Wall Street protests of September 2011, “the production and consumption of images in participatory media [helped] new protest movements, like OWS, to more quickly spread their message and mobilize support, but also

[encouraged] active participation in the public sphere" (Milner, 2013). Images of Tahrir Square and Egypt's Girl in Blue Bra were raised in Zuccotti Park, New York City. Visual media, therefore, are not "mere reflectors of social change; they [are] also themselves mediators and part-creators of social change" (Khatib, 2012) that have the power to travel transnationally. To this extent, Hariman & Lucaites's reflections on the limitations of a logocentric approach to public discourse rings true. "Instead of supposing that the public sphere is only incidentally or unfortunately entangled with visual practices," they write, "images and their circulation are important means for the formation of public opinion and public agency" (2007, p. 295).

In light of the oversaturation of the visual medium of deliberation, public attention is constantly being diverted by a barrage of images and information (Crary, 1999). The answer to this diversion comes from Andre Szasz' study of ecopopulism, where he writes "[the] solution to the requirements of the medium problem and their antidote to the indifferent, distracted audience problem is the same: make political messages ever more simple, vivid, colorful, repetitive. I would like to suggest at this point that the semiological concept of the "icon" can be appropriated to capture and summarize the quality of this change in political communications" (Szasz, 1994, p. 62) He contends, "political communication increasingly relies on the production and display of political icons rather than symbols, iconography rather than rhetoric, both because the means of communication require it stylistically and because it is assumed that displays of spectacular images are the only way to break through the indifference of the intended audience" (p. 63). However, while Szasz considers audiences' state of distraction as a marker of its indifference, several authors (Benjamin, 1968, p. 232; Latham, 1999, p. 463; Abbas, 1996) have argued to see "distraction not as a lack of

attention but as a necessary form of perception when immersed in the technologically induced torrent of images and information that constitutes public discourse in the 20th and 21st centuries" (Deluca & Peeples, 2010, p.135). Nonetheless, what all these circumstances led to was the valorization of iconic imagery and the icon in delivering messages.

2.4. Icons

The concept of the icon has been explored by scholars in a range of disciplines, each with its own unique perspectives and contributions. In semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce's work on the iconic sign has been foundational, emphasizing the role of images in communicating meaning (Peirce, 1931-1958). According to Peirce, an icon is a sign that resembles its object in some way. In other words, it is a representation of its object that shares some similarity or resemblance with that object. In religious studies, the concept of the "icon" is used to refer to religious images or symbols, particularly in the context of Christianity and other religions. Mircea Eliade has examined the role of religious symbols and myths in human culture, including the use of iconic images in religious practice (Eliade, 1959). In art history, an icon is often used to refer to religious images or symbols. Ernst Kitzinger's work on Byzantine art and its use of icons has been significant (Kitzinger, 1988). Hans Belting has explored the significance of the "iconic turn" in contemporary art, examining the ways in which artists have incorporated and subverted iconic images and symbols (Belting, 2013).

More pertinently to the object of this study, the concept of the icon has had some overlap in the fields of media, cultural, and political studies. In political science, an icon is a political symbol or figure that holds significant political meaning. Benedict

Anderson has written extensively on the role of national icons in the construction of nationalism (Anderson, 1983). Michael Billig has examined the use of political icons in contemporary politics, emphasizing the ways in which they are used to construct and reinforce political identities (Billig, 1995). In media and cultural studies, the icon is similarly used to refer to widely recognized symbols or figures that hold significant cultural meaning. Marshall McLuhan's work on the role of media technologies in creating new cultural icons has been influential (McLuhan, 1964), while Stuart Hall explored the ways in which media representations construct and reinforce social identities, including the use of iconic images and symbols (Hall, 1997).

For the purpose of this research, I employ contemporary theorizations on the concept that view iconic images as visuals that undergo several processes of signification. Roland Barthes, whose theorization on 'the image' constitutes some of the most foundational work in the field, addressed such questions as "how does meaning get into the image? Where does it end? And if it ends, what is there beyond?" (2003, p. 270). Concerned with the beyond, researchers venturing into the field turned to the 'iconic.' An iconic image, according to Alexander, Bartmanski, and Giesen (2012), is an image that acquires additional layers of meaning following its conception. Through a quick layering process, these images are loaded with additional connotations that gradually increase their symbolic power (Robertson, 2018). Griffin (1999) proffers that when viewing iconic imagery, we undergo a dual mental process that mixes phenomenological experience (absorbing the material surface) with a metaphysical one (unpacking the invisible depth). Iconicity, in this sense, is an interplay of the surface with the depth. The amalgamation of the two gives rise to what Gottfried Boehm (2007) calls "iconic difference." The more complex the iconic difference generated by the

juxta-positioning of sensual surface and discursive depth; the greater the cultural impact of the iconic image, and the greater the cultural impact; the more powerful its subversive potential. So, what is it exactly about iconic imagery that demands so much attention?

In *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, Alexander, Bartmanski, and Giesen (2012) that an image's iconic appeal lies in the interaction of its aesthetic component (as experienced through the senses) with its 'discursive depth'—or the obscure, laden meanings it comes to acquire. When additional meanings are embedded, photographs lose their mooring to the spatio-temporal setting of whence they emerged (Griffin, 1999), enabling them to traverse and transcend borders. The farther these images circulate, writes Zelizer (1998), the more compelling their iconicity. Iconic photographs, therefore, are aesthetically captivating photographs that can imply "culturally shared ideas, emotions, issues, or circumstances beyond the moment captured on film" (Lisiak, 2014). Iconicity is asserted in Mitchell's sense of the word, as "an image that that does not require a caption" (Mitchell, 1994).

Furthermore, iconic images are strong visuals that become shorthand for complex ideas or events and have the ability to evoke strong emotional responses in viewers. Looking at iconic photographs from over sixty-five years of public culture, Hariman and Lucaites define photojournalistic icons as "those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics" (2007, p. 27).

However, the iconic image, as all images, is a product of selection, a process of abstraction and generalization that reduces a plurality of events, situations, and persons into a singular and easily recognizable composition. Looking at the relation of photography and politics, Levi-Strauss writes, “the iconic image stands in for a more complex reality, but also replaces it, effacing its complexity and ambiguity” (Levi-Strauss, 2013). Similarly, Rosler avers, “The very character of the iconic image is its reduction to an easily recognizable, often simplified, and schematic image” (2004, p. 199). Therefore, while they can be powerful tools of persuasion, iconic images also collapse complex issues into a single image or symbol.

By spotlighting one side of the equation and obscuring others, iconic images can reinforce existing power structures and perpetuate inequalities by reflecting dominant cultures and ignoring the perspectives of marginalized groups.

2.4.1. Iconic images in Times of Revolution

Icons evoke powerful responses with viewers that are especially relevant in the context of social and political movements. In her comprehensive work on the iconicity of black figures in American media and popular culture, Nicole Fleetwood writes, “Racial icons, especially in the realm of social and political movements, make us want to do something. These images can impact us with such emotional force that we are compelled: to do, to feel, to see” (2015, p. 4). Similarly, while leading a project to organize and disseminate research about racialization, privilege, and power, Safiya Noble (2014) indicates the galvanizing effect media spectacles can instigate. Reflecting on the media spectacle surrounding the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, she writes, “The paradox of the spectacle is that it creates both markets of consumption and

audiences of resistance, like our project and the many efforts still being organized and imagined" (p. 14). Hence, the icon, as a precursor to the spectacle, can very well develop a burgeoning political potential.

There is a rich body of work on the impact of visual language and imagery on politics, social movements, and repertoires of protest (see DeLuca et al., 2012; Doerr et al., 2013; Philipps, 2012). Visuals, specifically photographs, can be linked to major social uprisings as far back as the 1871 Paris Commune (Przyblyski, 2001). More recently, academics have suggested that "contemporary social movements and new activisms use images and symbols to express their goals and identity, to mobilize new participants, to attract and shape media coverage and to win the support of a range of publics" (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017).

With the internet, globally mediated publics and their interconnectedness increased, proving the visual field most promising as the future language of global communication. This is mostly because, "without language in common," as Susan Buck-Morss explains, "the global public sphere [has] to rely heavily on images" (2002, p. 339). In the context of social uprising, visual culture—rather than spoken or written language—has become protesters' lingua franca (Azoulay, 2011; Lisiak, 2014). The clenched fist, for example, is a globally recognized symbol of dissent and radicalization: although it had been popularized by the Black Panthers Party in 1966, it makes numerous other appearances in Russia, Latin America, Iran, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

The world seems to be on an accelerated path of social uprisings and revolts. From Cairo and Beirut to Chile, Warsaw and Hong Kong, people are taking to the streets to protest numerous grievances and injustices. Although stemming from different social and economic conditions, these mobilizations often hold a number of things in

common: they generate a compendium of text and media for dissipation; they adopt specific revolutionary imagery to convey their ideals, goals, or demands; and, in the words of Azoulay (2011), they speak the "universal language of revolution." It should be understood that no revolution can ever be reduced to a single image or gesture, but during the events of the 21st century, iconic visuals, like that of the China's tankman or the 8-minute clip of George Floyd's murder, manage to instill and incite transnational feelings of togetherness. They transcend geopolitical boundaries and signify "a global form of relation that is not subject to national regimes." Photography, in this sense, becomes untethered from "traditional nationalistic dictates and editorial constraints, and assumes instead a practice of engaged civics," reflecting what Azoulay calls, "the citizenry of photography" (2005). Furthermore, as "internet penetration" (Armbrust, 2012) and communication technologies evolve, the authoritarian power of state regimes and censorship bureau are in decline, leaving pathways ajar for the production and dissemination of subversive and revolutionary content. The iconic image, as a universal language of expression, spearheads this type of content. Revolutionary iconography, therefore, epitomize the premise that, "once photographs are spoken of... they are spoken of among many, in regard to many, and obtain the power to remind citizens that what brings them together, what motivates them to look at photographs, is the common interest, the res publica" (Azoulay, 2011, p. 129).

2.4.2. The Rise of the 'Everybody'

For decades, bird's-eye-views of crowded squares and congested rallies were the epitome of media coverage of mass protests. In *The Romance of Public Space*, American philosopher Marshall Berman claims that "an open public square occupied by

the people, reclaimed from the regime, [is] both an ideal of a modern-day agora and a strategy for reimagining public space" (2012, p.197). Similarly, Mitchell (2012) asserts that the "infectious mimicry between Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park" lies in their reclamation of a public space "that is supposed to be res nullius, not owned by anyone, not private property" (p. 10). For Mitchell, "iconic moments, the images that promise to become monuments, of the global revolution of 2011 are not those of face but of space; not figures."

In more recent mobilizations, however, images of individuals standing against the establishment are replacing imagery of public spaces. Representing a singular dissenting voice or symbolic challenge to the established order, they invite people to join a larger political struggle. In Particular Faces with Universal Appeal, Schober (2019) introduces the term *everybodies* as "figures who have been singled out from the people, but are simultaneously shown as being connected to it, thus creating presence and persistence for the myth of the people as a powerful agent transforming society." According to Jasper (1998), the common man or woman in an act of protest or resistance invokes celebrations of accessible heroism. *Everybodies*, therefore, are characters capable of traversing a variety of contexts because they stand in lieu of different revolutionary collectives while still maintaining a degree of relatability to them all.

While these studies attributed the appeal of the *everybody* to their relatability and the accessible bravery they present, other bodies of work direct us to consider affect. If we were to consider those images of protesters in danger or potential danger, one may turn to Judith Butler's notion of precarity, or "the recognition of a shared human vulnerability when faced with the suffering of others" (Butler, 2009). Analyzing images

of Afghani women in suffering Kozol (2014), for instance, argues that we "need to understand more fully how affects operate in a visual reportage of conflict zones." Moreover, in the context of social movement, Jasper (1998) calls on researchers to heed the emotions and affective labor involved in protest and activism. As such, one may consider photographs of *everybodies* in protest as stills that immortalize the pinnacle of emotional labor by a protester. Therefore, by contemplating the emotional reactions an image may elicit, we can unpack the appeal of the *everybody* and the iconicity of their photographs.

Images of *everybody* figures are among the first to become iconic in the context of uprisings. By representing the collective's revolutionary spirit in action, *everybodies* serve as pars pro toto for the rebellious public... But while anybody has the potential to be transformed into an *everybody*, women have been especially prominent in this regard.

2.4.3. Women as Revolutionary Icons

There has been a long infatuation with images of women in protest. In the SWANA region, there is a growing body of work celebrating images of female activists and guerilla fighters from local media and visual culture. Algeria's female resistance fighters, for instance, have been heavily studied on the big screen[1] and in academic circles (Crone, 2019). Gordon (2016) offers a rich historical study on the iconography of revolutionary and militant women in Iran. Dean (2019) and others explore the framing of female Kurdish YPJ in Western media.

[1] Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), highlights the women's crucial participation in the anticolonial struggle.

In the context of the mobilizations studied in this thesis, Hafez (2014), Salime (2016) and Mourad (2014) are among a number of scholars that have looked into the visual lexicon of Egypt's 2011 revolution. Steffey (2013), Mcleod (2016), Demiryol (2018), Carney and Marcella (2017) are among the scholars to study various aspects of the visual culture of Turkey's Gezi uprising. In Sudan, Malik (2019), Engeler et. al (2020), Sara Abbas (2022), and Grabska & Abdel Azziz (2022) analyzed the different roles female protesters and their iconization played in the 2018 revolution. Recent publications on Lebanon's 2019 uprising include el Rahi's (2022) and Sfeir's (2022) work on the feminist dimensions of protestor demands. In Iran, as the events of uprising unfold scholarship on the topic continues to get produced and reviewed by the day.

Scarce research takes a phenomenological look at the iconicity of women in protest iconography from the region. In his 2012 article "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," W.J.T. Mitchell compounds the revolutionary images of Egypt's girl in the blue bra and Occupy Wall Street's ballerina and suggests categorizing in two groups: positive and negative. In her 2014 essay, Agata Lisiak refutes Mitchell's categorization and argues instead to analyze the iconic images of women via two other "major tropes prevalent in revolutionary iconography: woman as a symbol of revolutionary ideals and woman as a symbol of the failure of revolution" (p. 5). No research, however, puts the iconic images of women from all of the above mobilizations together to look at their iconicity as a whole.

Debates around the visibility and iconicity of protesters reveal many gaps in the fields of visual culture and media studies. Research on political movements and mobilizations in the region has often been tainted by exaggerated counts of technological optimism and/or Western political opportunism. On the other hand,

research on female dissidents and political activists in the SWANA region has been steadily growing. While globally celebrated and featured across a range of revolutionary visuals, these women had not enjoyed much attention in the scholarly field. Furthermore, existing research on the topic has so far failed to produce nuanced explorations of the women's iconicities that do not lump them under one umbrella. It prevents us from gaining deeper insight into the social circumstances and gender dynamics that drive the women's activism. By giving room for the dissection of each case, we can put the women's activism and iconicity in conversation without perpetuating the notion of a single, universal (Middle Eastern) woman.

Most of the present body of work also tends to address the visual and/or aesthetic component of the images and not their modes of production and dissemination. Images are conditioned by "an ongoing blurring of the boundaries between news and entertainment, between professional and amateur journalism, and between modes and genres of photographic representation" (Kennedy & Patrick, 2020). As such, studies of contemporary protest images and 'photographs of conflict' that fail to consider the rapidly changing backdrops of social media and photojournalism, where many of these images are first created and circulated, remain inadequate for future research on visual culture and iconic imagery of revolution.

Finally, this investigation is not intended to add to the large body of work already romanticizing/exoticizing the idea of SWANA women's political activism. For too long, female protesters from the region have been treated to shallow interpretations that fetishize their activism and popularize the narrative of a subjugated woman finally claiming her autonomy. Instead, it aims to debunk such notions by amending present

misconceptions and showcasing some of the historical context behind the recent iconicity of female protesters.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The following thesis analyzes a set of viral images and their circulation to explore the iconicity of female protesters in recent mobilizations across the SWANA region. It employs image critique as a method of analyzing and evaluating the visual representation of female protesters, as well as discourse and reception analysis to shed light on the effect and affect these iconic images help induce. “Image critique” is a term used in the field of visual culture to refer to a critical analysis of the ways in which images function in society. As described by Sunil Manghani in his book *Image Critique and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, image critique involves examining the ways in which images shape our understanding of the world and how they contribute to the production and reproduction of cultural and social values. It is concerned with analyzing the various contexts in which images are produced, circulated, and consumed, as well as the power dynamics that shape their meaning and interpretation (Manghani, 2019). The following methodology outlines the steps that will be taken to conduct this study.

3.1. Selection of Images

The analysis covers five visual representations from recent protests in the region. Moving past Hariman and Lucaites’ focus on photojournalistic icons, this thesis engages not merely with the photographs or stills of the moment but also include the artwork, reproductions, and byproducts the photos engendered in the many-to-many model of media dissemination. These are the image complexes of Egypt’s Girl in the Blue Bra, Turkey’s Woman in Red, and Sudan’s Kandaka, the graphic illustration of

Lebanon’s Kick-Queen, and the visuals of hair-cutting rituals from Iran’s ongoing uprising studied as a whole. These aforementioned are chosen based on their historical significance, their cultural impact, and their ability to convey powerful messages about the role of women in social and political movements. Furthermore, the image complexes I have selected are not only widely recognized but are also thought to have had a distinct influence on public opinion.

3.2. Visual Analysis

The selected images will be subjected to a detailed visual analysis using image critique. This analysis will involve examining the visual elements of the image, such as composition, and framing, and considering how these elements contribute to the image's meaning.

3.3. Historical Context

The historical context in which the image was created will be considered. This will involve a review of the political and social circumstances that gave rise to the event being depicted in the image, as well as an examination of the broader historical and cultural context in which the image was produced.

3.4. Power Dynamics

The power dynamics that are present in the image will be analyzed, including the relationship between the subject and the viewer, and the ways in which the image reinforces or challenges dominant narratives about women's roles in social and political movements.

3.5. Critical Reflection

The findings of the image critique analysis will be subject to critical reflection. This will involve a consideration of the pros and cons of the images' iconicity, as well as a reflection on the broader implications of the findings for our understanding of the role of women in social and political movements.

Furthermore, while this study follows Hariman and Lucaites' analysis of iconic images in their book *No Caption Needed* (2007), it complicates their approach to iconicity by moving beyond the one-to-many model of media dissemination employed in their study of photojournalistic icons. Iconicity, in this research, is as much a product of public appropriation and reproduction as it is of image production and reception. The imbrication of meaning is more extensive and diversified in the many-to-many model of dissemination in the information age, and this necessitates a broader approach to unpacking iconicity and different stages of the iconization process. Overall, this methodology will provide a variegated and nuanced analysis of the visual representation of women protesters in iconic images, using image critique and circulation analysis to uncover common threads and underlying narratives that inform our interpretations of iconic images of women in protest. The following chapter deals with the first set of image complexes considered in this study.

CHAPTER 4

EGYPT & TURKEY

Figure 4. The Blue Bra Girl: Egyptian army soldiers drag a female protester while another stomps her abdomen during clashes at Tahrir Square in Cairo on Dec. 17th, 2011. (Stringer/Reuters)

Figure 5. The Lady in the Red Dress: Turkish riot police tear gas a lady in a red dress, later identified as Ceyda Sungur, as other protesters turn away at the Gezi Park Protests in Istanbul on May 28th, 2013. (Reuters/ Osman Orsal)

On December 17th, 2011, and almost a year into nationwide protests that toppled Mubarak's thirty-year long autocracy, a group of protesters would organize a sit-in to protest the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) violent ascension to power. As armed forces, unironically deployed to clear the scene, release a wave of ferocity on

the people present, a minute-long clip of protesters attempting to flee the violence is recorded[2]. The grainy footage, captured by an unidentified source, offers an elevated viewpoint of an unknown street off Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square. Extrapolated from that clip is a single image of a female protester, dubbed "the girl in the blue bra," (Figure 4) that would make its way across territories, engendering outcry and debate that would change academic and activist circles forever.

Less than two years after the girl in the blue bra become an icon of state brutality and violent suppression of protest, the image of yet another female demonstrator, this time at Turkey's Gezi Park protests, would similarly traverse circles and become a rallying cry for hundreds marching in opposition to Erdogan's invasive gentrification of the city (Figure 5). That the woman in question is a research assistant from the urban planning department of Istanbul's Technical University, or that the sit-in was one of many protests symptomatic of broiling resentment towards the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s neoliberal and exclusionary approach to politics, was not what immediately caught attention. Indeed, what captured the hearts and headlines of thousands seemed to be that she was a "woman" and "in a red dress," becoming to many "The Woman in The Red Dress."

Both pictures captured violence enacted upon seemingly helpless women; both images went viral in the immediate days following their capture; both were reproduced and immortalized in various forms; both incited outcry and galvanized further protest; and both women, regardless of their respective identities and the political motives of their activism, were turned into icons of the collective people's resilience, determination and power in the face of oppression and police brutality.

[2] Video can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIFffdHWH-Y.

What elements of these images supported their iconicity? How were they, and by extension the women within them, framed in local and international contexts? And what processes were involved in their inauguration into the visual lexicon of revolution?

Through examining the terms of production and distribution of the images and their appropriations, we can begin to understand how an image becomes iconic, and why these two images engendered debates that roiled Egyptian, Turkish, and international circles alike.

4.1.Textual Analysis

Any inquiry into the iconicity of the images that have since become known as the photo of the Blue Bra Girl and the photo of the Woman in Red necessitates an analysis of the visual and linguistic connotations that accompany them.[3] In the case of the Blue Bra Girl, the composition in study is that of the viral still extracted from the initial video (Figure 6). In the instance of the "Woman in Red," the composition in question is the second photograph out of a four-part series of images shot by Reuters photographer Osman Orsal, although all four images necessitate "reading" (Figures 5 and 6). Both images garnered lengthy coverage from local and international media that, in turn, transcribe different narratives upon the women and the images themselves. The following section examines some of the most salient signifiers embedded both within

[3] The terms 'girl' and 'woman' hold different connotations in Arabic, Turkish, and English for that matter. In Egypt, the identity of the protester in question remains undivulged, and because her incentives became a topic of contentious debate in local circles, dubbing her 'girl' by sympathizers served to undermine claims on her morality (*more ahead*). Furthermore, while there has been compelling research on the "girlification" of women in contemporary revolutionary imagery (Lisiak, 2019), the argument does not extend to the Turkish case where Ceyda Sungur, the subject of the photograph, was dubbed *kırmızılı kadın*, or woman in red. As such, I will be proceeding with the titles bestowed upon the two women by local supporters and the media: "the blue bra girl" and "the woman in red."

the visual composition of the photographs and the linguistic connotations of the discourse surrounding them.

4.1.2. The Blue Bra Girl

The video of the Blue Bra Girl begins with a far-off wide shot of protesters attempting to flee the onslaught of dozens of SCAF officers. Two male protesters tug on a third—one clad in an oversized black garment, or *abaya*, worn by some religious women— as officers swoop down with their clubs and face masks. One male manages to escape the carnage just as the other is thrown onto the ground, and for a moment, the lady in the *abaya* is lost under the vicious swinging of clubs and stomping of legs. Both male and female are subject to a brutal beating before a group of three officers drag the female protester away by her garment. A fourth follows the group and kicks repeatedly at the woman's abdomen, causing her *abaya* to tear open and pull over her head. The woman, at this point believed unconscious, lies on the ground with her exposed chest and midriff until an officer pulls it down over her middle. Extracted from the extended sequence in which the brutality against both protesters is documented, is the still image shown in Figure 6. In it, the bright white of the woman's abdomen and the striking blue of her bra contrast sharply with the dullness of the grey concrete around her. Her arms are held over her head by the security officers, and the *abaya*, also pulled over her head, obscures her face and identity. The still captures the two officers in the act of dragging her while a third appears in the process of lodging his boot in her abdomen.

Visual cues invite the viewer to reconstruct the aggression the photo has frozen in time. A single female body, rendered limp and bare, stretches across the bottom center of the shot. If the men's positioning over it is not enough to cement it as the main

character, the high saturation of a blue bra beckons attention and affirms its bearer's centrality to the scene. The body is both outnumbered and overpowered by the male figures towering over it. The ones not directly implicated with the scene gaze upon it with indifference, accentuating the disparaging voyeurism involved. The specter of the *abaya* haunts the space it no longer occupies, reminding the viewer of the forced exposition of what was once shielded. Suspended midair, the assaulting officer's leg portends the inevitable moment boot meets flesh, while creating an equally sickening climactic moment that raises the stake for the viewer and makes it difficult to look away.

Even frozen, the woman's figure offers much for interpretation. Her pale torso, limp against the black abaya, establishes the focal point of the image. Juxtaposed against a sea of greys, the blue jeans and bra set the woman apart from the officers and serve as a visual reminder of her civilian-ness. Her running shoes and denim stand out from the camo pants and combat boots of the officers, further accentuating her nonmilitary status. Furthermore, the soft curves of her midriff posit her in starker opposition to the straight lines and sharp angles created by the men encircling her. Torn open by the attack, the black *abaya* fans out beneath her and conjures up a semblance to a pool of black blood. These elements converge to construct a striking image with a clear narrative of the woman's victimhood.

Other elements begin to establish the image's iconicity. The picture's distant point of view, layout on a grid of universal signs, contrast between the unencumbered individual and the militant state are highly symbolic elements of a disciplined public sphere and the layman's struggle against power. In many ways, the image of the girl in the blue bra is not subtly reminiscent of the image of the man in Tiananmen Square.

4.1.3. The Woman in the Red Dress

Each photo in the four-part series that includes the image of the woman in red are all striking in composition (Figure 8). The first photograph introduces an imbalanced scene and sets the stage for the inevitable action unfolding. A woman in a red summer dress and flats, later identified as Ceyda Sungur, stares down a line of over two dozen riot policemen clad in helmets and riot gear in the background of the shot. Armed with a white shoulder tote and a defiant stance, Sungur appears rooted to the spot while others around her flee. Sungur's red dress establishes her as the main character even as she stands off-center—its color shines bright and saturated against the green backdrop of the field and in sharp contrast to the looming dark cloud that is the riot police in their black uniforms across her. Two women on the left of the shot—one in a caramel scarf standing closer to the foreground and another shielding her face—turn away from the scene possibly in anticipation of the tear gas. Because both their eyes are downcast, the women allow the "woman in red" to retain her central status even from where she stands in the background. Furthermore, the angst/discomfort evident in their postures foreshadows the danger of the situation unfolding, while also emphasizing the brazenness of "the woman in red" in facing it head-on. From then on, only one question emerges: what is to happen to this woman in red? A line-up of no less than two dozen officers stretches from the lower left to the upper right corner, creating a visual perspective that leads the viewer's gaze straight to the "woman in red." They seep off-screen, overwhelming the space and exerting an overpowering presence both physically and symbolically. The police officers are fitted with dark riot gear, gas masks, and transparent body shields, further emphasizing the 'bareness' of the woman across from them in her airy, short-sleeved dress. In the second photograph, the officer

closest to Sungur seems to have sprung up in sudden attack. A stream of pepper spray blasts from the nozzle in his hands and leads our attention to its target, Sungur's face, now visible to the camera. The white jet of liquid slices through the darkness and launch Sungur's dark curls straight up—making clear to anyone viewing the intensity of the blast. Yet, besides a slight turn of head that bares her face and shuttered eyes to the camera, little has changed in Sungur's posture. The third image reveals the policemen advancing and more people fleeing the scene while Sungur's legs remain rooted to the ground, perhaps not unlike the trees she has marched down to defend. In the fourth and final image, we are treated to Sungur centerstage, now completely turned away from the relentless onslaught of spray from the advancing officer. Clutched in her arm, the white tote rests in stark contrast against the red of the dress and reinstates Sungur as the central figure even as another character—a man with a camera—descends upon the scene. Her dress flares with her movement, and she appears larger than life, framed by the men on either side of her, not locked in by them.

Figure 6. Four-part series of "Woman in red" (Reuters/Osman Orsal)

Perhaps the most arresting quality of the shot is the visual discrepancy of its components. At first glance, the brightness of Sungur's dress beckons the viewer and sets her apart. Further inspection, however, deems Sungur more befitting the greenery around her than her counterparts. With her billowing cotton dress and bag, she might have been "making her way to a summer picnic or garden party" (Reuters & Hudson, 2013), while the policemen, with their harsh black attire appear alien to it. She belongs, and they do not.

While all four pictures capture the sequence of events that exposed state brutality in the face of peaceful protest, the second picture received the most widespread attention and virality. Similar to the still of Blue Bra Girl, the photograph captures the transgression mid-action. The photograph arrests a slice of time, but the narrative

speaks to what precedes that moment and what is to follow. Even if the viewer is ignorant of the political and cultural context, it is a dynamic and compelling image. Elements in the construction and reception of the Woman in red photograph imbue it with multiple connotations. Barthes (1977) argues that a photograph's meaning is first constructed by the photographer's choices, such as framing and editing, which convey a connotative message. In the case of the "woman in red," the absence of male protesters in Orsal's composition of the scene creates the impression that she is acting alone, even when other coverage of the incident reveals tens of protesters, both men and women, engaged in similar activities as Sungur. The woman in red's apparent solitude evokes an affective engagement that renders the photo more emotionally compelling.

The extraction of meaning, however, is not complete with the interpretation of a composition's denotative and connotative messages. A third level of signification occurs during reception. Barthes (1977) contends that the audience participates in 'making meaning' by "reading," or interpreting, an image through context-specific cultural codes and symbols. The images of both the "blue bra girl" and the "woman in red" are interpreted through this backdrop, and to understand their respective iconicity, one must first examine the symbolic and cultural signifiers encoded within them.

4.1.4. Appearing in Color

The most salient component of the images' iconicity is deduced not necessarily from their visual composition, but from the titles with which they were integrated into public discourse. The images in both cases became known to the wider public not as images of the women themselves, but rather, of women in specific attire. Implicit in the

iconicity of both images, therefore, is the iconicity of two items within them: a *blue* bra and a *red* dress.

4.1.4.1. A Blue Bra

Although not imbued with cultural meanings specific to the Egyptian context, the blueness of the woman's undergarment took up a significant portion of the ensuing discourse. Almost immediately after the image's release, the woman was dubbed "the girl in the blue bra" or the "blue bra girl." On the one hand, the grimness of the paved asphalt sets the brightly colored undergarment apart and ripe for picking out. On the other, the blueness of the bra, coupled with the paleness of the woman's abdomen, create a visual anchor of sorts that renders them pivotal to the scene. But what connotations does this color hold?

The blue color's interplay with the elements around it helps posit it as a signifier of 'goodness.' Investigating the affective connotations of colors, Clarke & Costall concluded that light and bright colors are universally positively perceived. Blues, particularly of relatively warm hues like that of the bra, are most associated with "calm" and "peace," while black, unsurprisingly, was connotated negatively and as "a symbol of evil, malice and death" (2008). In the sharply contrasting composition of the image of the blue bra girl, 'bright' is posited as the antithesis to 'dark,' as 'soft' is to 'harsh' and victim is to aggressor. Serving not only as a visual demarcation, the blue bra then extracts its bearer from their vile surroundings and imbues them with 'goodness.' Furthermore, culturally coded as "masculine" within most gendered norms, the blueness of the bra offers a secondary connotation that serves the woman's iconicity by bolstering her 'authenticity.' The political upheaval of the Egyptian revolution laid the

seeds for the propagation of dubious interpretations and conspiracy theories. Against this polarized backdrop, the girl in the blue bra was treated to numerous interpretations that questioned her motives.[4] Some commentators went as far as accusing her of performativity and/or staging her own unveiling for either political or exhibitionist incentives. As a less 'feminized' color, the blueness of the undergarment helps undermine the woman's perceived sexuality, and, in turn, the accusations of performativity that accompanied it. Had the brassiere been red,[5] for instance, the connotations of the image would have been differently decoded, and public reception of the image would have been fraught with even more suspicion/indictment of the girl within.

Even without historical and cultural connotations associated with womanhood or protest, the color of the brassiere engendered much deliberation and debate that cemented its place the global lexicon of revolution. The iconicity of the blue bra reached such heights that invited scholars to "wonder whether the original image would have resonated as powerfully had it not been for the bright color of the young woman's bra" (Lisiak, 2014). Yet, the danger of such arguments lies in their reduction of the scene's significance, as well as the provocativeness of the woman's unveiling to a mere color. Indeed, another, perhaps more substantial, element behind the image's iconicity was its ability to reckon with patriarchal values and gendered norms of conduct.

[4] More on smearing campaign in section 1.2.1.

[5] More on the cultural connotations of red in the following section.

4.1.4.2. The Codification of the "Red Dress"

The color red has a long history of engendering strong reactions and interpretations from viewers. Associated with such things as life-giving, blood, and sacrifice, "few colors have been so heavily freighted with symbolic resonances as red" (Gage, 2000). From a gendered perspective, red has been historically and systematically employed to signify women and femininity. As opposed to pink, which is often used to signify 'girl,' youth, innocence, etc, "red" is reserved for the woman—mature, passionate, seductive.

There exists a corpus of literature on the "lady/woman in red" motif. Women in red have appeared in various contexts evoking sacrifice and revolution, as well as tropes of heightened sexuality/sexual desire (Steffey, 2013). In Orsal's photograph, the red of Sungur's dress screams for attention and invites these various readings. The overall style and demeaner of Sungur, however, work to undermine the potentially sexual undertones of the color. With a conservative hemline that lands just past her knees, the dress leans more quotidian than provocative. Her shoes are flat and practical, giving her the image of a working woman. She thus resembles her European counterparts: a woman who is conforming to gender expectations, yet not overtly sexual (Mcleod, 2016). This analogy holds particular salience in the context of Turkish politics under Erdogan, whose policies have often been seen as an attack on secular ideals and the autonomy of secular women.[6] Furthermore, with her shoulders squared up in

[6] Increasingly, leading up to the protests, Erdogan had made comments about women's roles in Turkish society, especially in relationship to reproductive freedoms. He has made statements against the use of daycare centers in favor of women caring for their children themselves. In 2011, Erdogan changed the name of the Ministry for Women and Family to the Ministry of Family and Social Policies amidst protests from women's rights groups who said the change reflected the government's view of women not as individuals, but as wives and mothers (Kazem 2014). Furthermore, Erdogan has called abortion "murder" and "unpatriotic" and has supported restrictions that make it more difficult for poorer women to have access to abortions. This polemic, along with Erdogan's neoliberal Islamist policies, create the

determination, Sungur challenges the viewer without being sexually charged. Through her dress and defiance, she is "read" as a visual representation of the woman Erdogan finds threatening.[7]

4.1.4.2.1. Reading "Red" in the Turkish Context

Figure 7. Painting: Artistic rendering of Ceyda Sungur with her hair and red dress morphing into Turkey's national flag. (Source unknown).

The red of the dress holds special significance in the Turkish context. Placed on her right shoulder and against the red backdrop of her dress, the white shoulder bag carries distinct resemblance to the white crescent moon and star on the Turkish flag. Occupying the left portion of the red, the two elements' interplay creates a composition that is proportional to the Turkish flag's red and white design. By evoking parallels to the national flag, this visual signifier inadvertently aligns the "woman in red" with the ideals and values of 'the nation' and supplants her identity with that of 'the people.' In the days following the incident, this symbolism was further accentuated in viral

backdrop for Sungur's figure becoming a stand in not only for secular women, but Erdogan's dissidents more generally.

[7] More in Conclusion.

illustrations that depict women in red dresses transformed into the Turkish flag. One rendering posits the woman in red facing the nozzles of teargas encroaching from the left. The dress seems to ripple in a manner reminiscent of a raised flag fluttering in the wind, and the white star and crescent of the actual flag are embedded into the red (Figure 7).

4.1.5. Commonalities

While the signification of the "woman in red" as a mnemonic of the Turkish flag may register with only some viewers, other visual markers make her photo ripe with symbolic associations readily available to a broader audience. The imbalance of power conveyed in the image, for one, is a universal leitmotif that epitomizes the human pursuit of justice. From images of Tiananmen to Tahrir Square, the juxtaposition of the disarmed citizen in the face of repressive state apparatuses has been a key visual emphasized in protest photography throughout history. The apparent defenselessness of the Woman in red, as that of the Blue Bra Girl, elicits a sense of injustice and victimhood from the audience.[8] Seemingly solitary in their protest, both women evoke notions of a heroic sacrifice of the body in the face of danger. And while they do not pose physical threats to the regime, they can become ideological ones. As newly constituted icons, these images build a "distinctive sense of agency" through the use of a rhetorical figure Hariman and Lucaites (2007) call the "individuated aggregate." These iconized "individuals are used to depict collective experience in a manner that fulfills the need for collective action…"

[8] More in section 1.4

Furthermore, because neither woman makes eye contact with the camera/viewer—the Blue Bra Girl's face is cloaked by her *abaya* and the Woman in red shields her eyes from the pepper spray—both women are perceived as spontaneous. The photographic composition of the images appears un-staged, even if the essence of photography is just that—to compose. The women are stationary, not staged, and their victimhood in the moment is therefore deemed authentic, not performative.

4.2. Discourse Analysis

The images of the women and the public discourse they inspired provide abundant material for rich analysis of meaning. The following picks up on the common tropes and patterns employed around the women, and how these may have serviced their iconicity.

4.2.1. Reckoning with Gender Norms

By simply being and "appearing" in public, the blue bra girl resulted in a public reckoning of gender codes within Egyptian political and social life. To reestablish their hegemony and to counter the ongoing protests in Tahrir, SCAF utilized family values and moral codes that legitimize their rule and undermine the protesters right to appear. Media coverage perpetuated patriarchal conventions and joined in by passing judgments upon the woman's body and activism. Pundits concerned themselves not with the political motives of female protest and repression, but with the scandal of unveiling. A state-sponsored smearing campaign sought to discredit the blue bra girl by painting her as a hoax.

4.2.1.1. Patriarchal Tropes

A popular trope with critics and state-aligned media was to question the woman's attire and her decision to protest. On December 18th, 2011, a famous presenter on Al Faraeen TV decided that the bra was, in fact, a bikini and demanded answers from the girl in the blue bra.

> "She was wearing a bikini and not a bra… Why, my dear, were you wearing your bikini to Tahrir? Did you think you were going for a swim?"

Whereas the bra is conceived of as functional—an undergarment with private purpose, the bikini is considered flashy—worn to show off. The accusation naturally implicit in his statement is the exhibisionist intent, and thereby performativity, of the woman's protest. Furthermore, the anchor seeks to belittle the girl in the blue bra with the questions he poses. He disparagingly addresses her with "my dear," –the oldest trick in the patriarchal playbook with which he purports himself as 'knowing better.' The questions he asks, while sardonic, are entirely rhetorical (Neither was the girl in the blue bra present to answer them, nor was her identity confirmed). With the second question, the anchor undermines not only the woman's intellect, but also her knowledge of protest etiquette. By doing so, he paints her as an 'unworthy' protester—ditzy at best, and 'a fake' at worst.

Other commentary sought to shift the blame of the unveiling onto the victim herself. Similarly addressing the unidentified protester, a media figure asks:

> "Truthfully, what were you thinking wearing that abaya with nothing underneath it? And an abaya with snaps? Come on. Couldn't you find one with buttons?"

At first glance, the line of questioning may read like an infuriating case of mansplaining a female article of clothing to a female, but deeper inspection extracts deeper implications. The use of words and phrases like “Truthfully” and “come on” alludes to dishonesty in the girl’s choices.

In both cases, the commentary undermines the girl in the blue bra and her political activism. Through questioning her in absentia, the woman is denied the right to answer and reflect on her own act of appearance, effectively ridding her of agency. But with her effervescing iconicity in Egypt, the blue bra girl came to signify not just her person, but that of all female protesters. As such, the above-mentioned polemic is read as a disparage against all political activists that are women.

At the other end of the spectrum, the incident and the slander campaign that followed inspired thousands of people to take to their streets and screens with the slogan “Egypt’s Daughters Are a Red Line.” The slogan, echoed in chants and hashtags, denounced the violence meted against female protesters while also refuting the defamation of their character. By evoking the nation’s daughters with pictures of the girl in the blue bra on posters, the protest cemented her iconicity as a stand in for all the nation’s daughters.[9] Furthermore, even as the blue of the bra is made visible with the posters, another color—'red’ this time— is evoked to signify the criticalness of the issue. Sympathizers of the blue bra girl sought to restore her dignity by labelling her the “best of girls,” or *sitt el banat*—literally translated to “the lady among girls.”

[9] The slogan reiterates patriarchal gender tropes even as the protesters attempt to denounce them (Hafez, 2014). The ladies are posited as the “daughters” of the nation,[9] and hence, worthy of protection.

Figure 8. Graffiti from the streets of Cairo depicting a woman in a black mask. The text in red reads *sitt el banat*, the popular moniker for the girl in the blue bra. (Source Unknown).

The commentary in both cases draws attention away from the beating and places it on the unveiling—making clear where the primary concern lies.

4.2.1.2.Visibility and Unveiling

Public discourse in the days following the event of the "Blue Bra Girl" was fraught with the task of dissecting the unidentified woman and the circumstances of her attack. The graphic nature of the image discredited the state's claims of exercising restraint in its response to protests and upended its patriarchal claims to safeguarding women's modesty. Ultimately, SCAF responded to the public debate by once again denying and diverting accusations to maintain hegemony over the Egyptian public (El-Hennawy, 2011). The Egyptian public, however, is not nearly as parochial and was able to receive, perceive, and reimagine the image of the blue bra girl in more diversified manners.

During times of crisis, public morality and patriarchal customs can be powerful means for the state to reinvent itself and maintain its hegemony. The image had significant impact because it challenged gender-based norms and exposed the absurdity

of the patriarchal claim to chivalry: women's bodies will be protected… so long as they don't appear in public.

That she was accused of being provocative for not wearing more clothes under her *abaya* shows that the issue in question is not that she had been beaten or undressed, but that she had allowed herself to be '*seen'* becoming undressed.[10] This could be described as a manifestation of 'biopower', evident through all aspects of society. Biopower, according to Foucault, is "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (1978, p. 140). As a concept, biopower reveals how women's bodies are faced with becoming subjects of collective concern and interest evident through tireless regulation (Miller, 2007, p. 351). This highlights how these gendered notions are not limited to the public sphere and in fact carry weight in all spaces.

Furthermore, the rhetoric that suggests that the blue bra girl "tarnished the nation's image, because her photo spread overseas" indicates that the nation's image is constructed through practices of dominance and hegemony over the gendered bodies of its citizens, and that the right photo's virality can pose a real threat to that image and, by extension, that hegemony.[11]

4.2.2. The Making of a Myth

In the case of the "woman in red," the significance of the red dress is evident not only in the widespread reproduction and circulation of the photo, but also in the various

[10] That the beating meted out by the officers metonymic for 'the state') disrobes the girl in the blue bra adds another layer to the transgression, replete with its own symbolic significance in a country where processes of veiling and unveiling have had loaded connotations during the building of a national identity and the subsequent years of visible desecularization/Islamization of public spheres.

[11] More in section 1.3

texts and news headlines that feature her red dress. Locally, journalistic coverage of the day's events focused on Sungur's clothing and physical appearance—signifiers of her femininity—while contextualizing the underlying causes of the protests. Internationally, the woman's stoic stance and red dress served as a window into deeper discussion of the underlying reasons behind the protests. The image, and by extension Sungur herself, is treated to a highly gendered narrative that sets Sungur's physical appearance up for iconicity, lends an otherworldly element to her presence/participation in the protest, and holds her womanhood prisoner to male patterns of viewing.

Immediately after the image's circulation, several outlets picked up the story with the words "woman (or lady) in red" in their headlines. Not only do these titles highlight Sungur's femininity, but they also lay the bricks for her physical appearance to become the symbolic ideal for other female protests. On June 4th, 2013, Reuters republishes Ceyda Sungur's image under the headline: "Woman in red becomes leitmotif for Istanbul's female protesters." The use of "woman in red," rather than "a woman in red," and the word "leitmotif" build Sungur's iconicity (at the expense of her individuality) and assert her ascension to symbolic stature. Moreover, the title posits her as a stand in for "Istanbul's female protesters," unifying the protests under a banner of being women centric.

Coverage of the woman in red also often paints Sungur in an unreal, almost mystical light that makes it easier for the construction of allegorical themes of good vs evil. For example, under the same Reuters article mentioned above, the image is captioned:

> "In her red cotton summer dress, necklace and white bag slung over her shoulder, she might have been floating across the lawn at a garden party; but before her crouches a masked policeman firing teargas spray that sends her long hair billowing upwards." (Reuters & Hudson, 2013)

The verb “floating” presents Sungur as a woman with angelic or heavenlike grace. She is, by virtue of this description, connoted as ethereal—a creature of lore. By comparison, the policeman is described in villainous, but concrete, terms: He “crouches.” He is “masked.” The two central figures in the photo are polarized as good and bad, and their status as such is fixed in the reflection of the other. Yet, he is represented as the actor. He is “firing,” while she is being fired upon. Whereas he is corporeal, she is more ethereal. Similarly, an article run in The Telegraph (2013) is headlined: “Lady in the Red Dress and her dream of a Turkish rebirth.” The capitalization of “Red Dress,” typically reserved for the first letter of the first word and proper names in the title, not adjectives and common nouns, sets her attire up for iconicity and further pushes the mythical analogy being drawn.

Finally, none of the headlines, nor coverage of the events, allows Sungur to escape gendered patterns of viewing that reaffirm masculine hegemony. In the aforementioned articles, as well as several others, Sungur is constructed as a damsel in distress, even while she is exalted as the protagonist of the story. In the Guardian article (2013) titled “Turkey’s resistance image formed as pepper spray burns woman in red dress,” for instance, Sungur is described as having “dashed out,” as if unexpectedly, of her place of work to join a political protest. The phrasing of the headline posits her as the object of the officers’ action and never her own subject. On the rare occasion she is awarded the privilege of action, it is to confine her in the same encasings of popular feminine tropes. Inexorably, the color of her dress, her hair, jewelry, and shoulder bag are evoked—trapping her within the gender signifiers she does not seem to exist beyond.

While the recurrence of these tropes could be attributed to the tendency of mass media to capitalize on trendy news in similar ways, it must be noted that these modes of signification come together to ascribe the iconicity of Sungur's image not merely to her victimhood (or better yet, the political struggle involved) but to her victimhood specifically as a woman. "Turkey's resistance image formed as pepper spray burns woman in red dress," reads the headline. Just as martyrdom molds the layman into the martyr, the victimhood of the woman in red, as well as the Blue Bra Girl, is what transforms them to "resistance image," but even then, not without the baggage of their gendered signifiers "blue bra", "red dress."

4.3. The Body and the State

The rhetorical framings of media and online discourse reveal that the iconicity of the visuals in both cases revolves around their subjects appearing female (read vulnerable), distinctly (un)dressed, and on the receiving end of authoritarian violence (read victim). The first common denominator, the subjects' gender, is assigned by a social-semiotic lens through bodily attributes (physique) and commodity codes (dress) of the "Blue Bra Girl" and the "Woman in Red." Any room for ambiguity was then made obsolete through the denotation of the subjects as *sitt el banat* (the 'best of girls' or 'the lady among girls' for the girl in the blue bra in Arabic)[12] and *kırmızılı kadın* (woman in red in Turkish). The following section probes the interplay between victimhood, state repression, and the graphic allure in the making of these two icons.

[12] *Sitt el banat* was a title used specifically by sympathizers to her cause. Other members of Egyptian polity referred to her either as *fatat el-Tahreer* (the girl of Tahrir) or simply as *el-mutazahra* (the protester, in feminine form).

4.3.1. Policing the body's right to appear

Although the iconicity of the images in question is built around what the women are wearing, its "punctum" lies in the victimhood of their female subjects at the hands of apparently arbitrary state violence.[13]

A fundamental basis of state power is its endeavor to police the public sphere. "Policing," according to Ranciere (2006), is not merely the "repression or the disciplining of bodies," it is "a logic of identification" in which different apparatuses— not solely the state— "define who is at his place and who is not, what can be done in a place and what cannot," (Ranciere, 2006, p. 561). Put simply, a police order operates by establishing a clear division between those who are authorized to act and those who are not, and by defining what is considered legitimate action. Policing, according to Coleman (2011), "is not simply about enforcing the law or maintaining public order, but rather it is a political act that serves to reinforce existing power structures and limit the possibilities for democratic action.

In Egypt, the mere existence of an active women's movement causes anxiety to the patriarchal state in profound ways (Moghadam, 1998); this anxiety is then expressed through a frantic attack on civic space. The state, media, patriarchal structures, and different disciplining apparatuses colluded to deem the girl in the blue bra—and by extension all female protesters on the street—as illegitimate. Women who conform to

[13] I evoke "punctum" with a Barthian sense of the word. In "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography," Barthes (1980) identifies two elements that make a photograph incredibly powerful: the punctum and the studium. The studium refers to the cultural, historical, and political context of a photograph, while the punctum is a detail or element in the photograph that pierces through the studium and directly addresses the viewer. The punctum is what makes a photograph truly memorable and emotionally powerful. I use the word in relation to the overall iconicity of the images and not their photographic composition.

this policing order by refraining from protesting on the street are then embraced within the realms of legitimacy and gendered as (respectable) women, [14] whereas women who engage in politics are seen as breaking the rules and are subjected to spectacular diciplining similar to what the woman in the blue bra experienced. As such, the beating and the disrobing are a corporeal enactment of that attempt at policing 'transgressive' women's bodies, and the slander campaigns that followed serve as a discoursive dimension of the same process that was made possible because of the image's iconicity.

In Turkey, Erdogan's labelling of protesters as "*çapulcular*," a derogatory term that can translate to "looters" or "thugs," is a similar method of policing. By linking the dissidents to unruliness and lack of control, Erdogan constructs "the other, the revolutionary protester as the antithesis of the rational modern progressive and civilized subject, disciplined and obedient." Employing Foucault's (1977) conception of the disciplined body as bodies that respond favorably to a strong and dominant government which seeks to impose order on chaos, the *capulcular,* by contrast, is deemed "transgressive, out of control and associated with lack of rationality and lack of civilization."

The incidents captured in these images, therefore, are not merely cases of assault against female protesters. They are visual representation of the policing order's attempt to relieve the public sphere of people it has deemed *un*belonging.

[14] Deb Basuli (2016) expands on this with the provoking idea that stripping the blue bra girl "of her abaya literally 'un-genders' her, foregrounding the message that abayas are meant only for women who accept the status quo of patriarchal sanctions for women with respect to the public order."

4.3.2. The Graphic Allure

Depiction of violence or conflict takes a prime spot in the production of iconic images. Such images often evoke strong emotions and create a sense of urgency that can lead to widespread circulation of the image. In photojournalism, the popular news adage "if it bleeds, it leads" (Kerbel, 2000) succinctly summarizes the crucial role of violence in garnering time on the public screen. However, in cases where an iconic photograph represents conflict or atrocity, scholars have identified several more shared traits: they often depict women and children, reveal physical vulnerability, and are difficult to forget (Batchen, Gidley, & Miller, 2012, p. 15). These characteristics aptly apply to the photograph of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in the red dress. The factors that contribute to the photograph's iconicity—gender, violence, public space, and vulnerability—also render it relevant to the discourse of photographic representations of Middle Eastern women.[15]

Furthermore, while images of authoritarian violence can carve themselves indelibly into collective memory, the images of the blue bra girl and woman in red offer a multilayered affront to the viewer's palate that make them even more memorable. They encode the absurdly disproportionate and/or altogether unwarranted force used by the SCAF and the gas spraying policemen on unarmed civilians who these officers' sworn duty should be to serve and protect, and, more pertinently, the protesters in both cases are women. Influenced by societal codes of gender decorum and patriarchal legacies that revere idealizations of 'male chivalry' and revile "men who hit girls," the images exposing overt punishment meted out at the hands of the male officers to the girl

[15] Considering the image of the girl in the blue bra, Linssen (2018) suggests that "the subject's vulnerable position and exposed torso recalls a visual history perpetuated by various colonial powers in the Middle East that portray Middle Eastern women as nameless icons of orientalist fantasies."

in the blue bra and woman in red scratches public morale and provokes strong emotional responses with viewers. They also expose the fallacies of both regime's rebuttal of accusations of violence against protesters.

In both cases, the women's bodies invert disciplinary power and destabilize the system of policing even as they are policed and disciplined by them. As Foucault (1977) sets forth, the same processes of power that constitute the disciplined body inspire resistance against them. The images' iconicity, therefore, paradoxically allows for resistance even as it constitutes its victimized subjects. In the case of the girl in the blue bra, in which the body of a woman is rendered vulnerable, debilitated, feminized, objectified, and sexualized, resistance is exercised by the various discourse and reappropriations the image engendered. As for the woman in red, resistance is produced by the different graffiti and participatory art used to transform Sungur's image from an attack on an 'undisciplined' body's right to appear into a moment of appearance for even more dissenting bodies.

Delving deeper into the implications of the images' iconicity, it becomes apparent that photographs not only hold significance in the discourse of photojournalism, but also bear relevance to gender and the sanctity of female bodies in the Middle East. An iconic photograph is one that operates on a cultural level to convey shared ideas, emotions, issues, or circumstances beyond the moment captured on film. This accrual of meaning occurs during the repeated dissemination and reproduction processes the images underwent on media platforms. The following section explores the ways the images traversed different realms of dissemination and were involved in what Deluca and Peeples term "imagefare" (2002).

4.4. Imagefare

While both images were produced during the attempted occupation of physical space—Tahrir Square and the Gezi Park respectively—they would claim their iconicity on the virtual one first. Almost immediately after their production, the images of the blue bra girl and the woman in red would circulate through satellite television, YouTube, and social media, expanding a physical "space of appearance" to a digital one. From an Arendtian perspective, "a space of appearance is where the common visibility of actors generates power, which is understood as the potential for collective action" (2013, p. 198). As the images of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red made their way back and forth through these spaces, "place becomes less contextually important through the landscape of media," and dissent was performed simultaneously in "shifting spatialities" of the digital and analogue (Tawil-Souri, 2012).

The iconicity of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red both make a clear case for the use of "imagefare" in the Egyptian and Turkish mobilizations. "Imagefare" is a term coined by Deluca and Peeples (1999) to describe how visual images are used by politicians, advertisers, and other powerful actors to shape public opinion and promote their agendas. In their presentation, Deluca and Peeples argue that images are a powerful form of communication that can be used to convey complex ideas and emotions quickly and effectively, and iconic images are particularly powerful, because "they become embedded in our cultural consciousness." The following section explores some of the ways the iconicity of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red was "used strategically by political and social movements to mobilize public support and promote their agendas" (2019).

4.4.1. From Streets to Screens

Several studies have indicated the indispensable role the internet, social media, and citizen journalism played during the Egypt and Turkey uprisings. In the Egyptian context, scholars have noted the transformation of the medium of amateur photography in public spaces from a shy practice—largely seen as suspect, if not altogether prohibited by government forces, to a powerful tool of political expression and participation. During the Tahrir Square uprising, photography became "a political act, equal in importance to demonstrating, constituting civil disobedience and defiance" (Baladi, 2014). To this extent, Linssen (2018) writes, "the role of photography and social media have been seen as pivotal to the Egyptian political uprisings of 2011 where icons of the revolution circulated widely, helped galvanize protesters, and documented key events against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting discourse of photojournalism." Furthermore, a study on social media activism concluded that Egypt makes an excellent case for the idea that "the internet has placed new tools and resources in the hands of the political opposition" (Faris, 2013, p. 20).

While they stem from real-life social grievances and injustices, Egypt's 2011 revolution was popularized to through social media (see Logan, 2011; BBC World Service, 2011; Ahram Online, 2012). Social media's ability to mass-distribute images of protest and injustice mounted resentment towards the state's authoritarian apparatuses and acted as a mobilizing agent for dissenting protesters. This spark marked a "reversal that transformed the citizen from a passive visual object into an empowered agent" (Khatib, 2012).

Similarly, citizen journalism and social media in Turkey were the primary mediums through which people compiled footage, rallied dissent, and called for action during the Gezi Uprising. According to one study, the number of Twitter users in Turkey increased from just around 2 million on May 28th to 8 million users on June 10th, and the average number of tweets jumped five times in the first five days of the protests (Babaoglan & Banko, 2013). Given the reluctance, and at times outright refusal[16], of mainstream channels to cover the events of the protests, activists turned to a space in which images are able to transcend the restrictions of traditional media practice and politics.

In the case of the girl in the blue bra, the internet not only facilitated the image's widespread dissemination by shielding it from the state-sponsored strategies of censorship that would have constrained or banned it in print, but also allowed its reappropriation outside Egypt. One rendering, from Lebanese blogger Beirut Spring, drew a chilling parallel between the girl in the blue bra and Hypatia[17] (Figure 9). Juxtaposing the still of the blue girl in the image they titled "Egypt Now" with the tale of Hypatia in the painting titled "Egypt Then," the artist drew attention to the brutality of authoritarian violence on dissenting women, the public humiliation of forced stripping, and the sacrifice often involved in free-thinking/speaking truth to power. By

[16] An example would be the infamous incident in which mainstream Turkish TV stations such CNN Turk failed to report on the escalation of the crackdown on ongoing protests and instead aired a documentary on penguins.

[17] Hypatia was a Greek philosopher in Roman Egypt persecuted for her dissenting views. She was stripped and murdered—her body brutalized and burned, by an angry Christian mob in fifth-century Alexandria.

titling the pieces “Egypt Then” and “Egypt Now,” the artist references the spatial commonality of the two incidents, while satirizing the temporal element.

Figure 9. An analogy between the famous Egyptian female demonstrator and Pharaonic Egypt’s Hypatia published on December 22, 2011, in Beirut Spring.

The internet facilitated the blue bra girl’s iconicity in another capacity. Due to its graphic substance and the evasion of government censorship and traditional media restrictions involved in its proliferation, the image “lends itself to radical readings and reactions” (Mortensen, 2011). In other words, the violent nature of its composition and the emotional allure of offering the viewer something they should not be in on, makes the image more ‘radical’ and, in turn, helps establish it as ‘iconic.’

With fewer restrictions and corporeal threats, cyber space has become the go-to medium to engage in and perform mediatized conflict. In both the Egyptian revolution and Gezi Park protests, dissidents utilized the space in unprecedented manner. The internet allowed protesters to work not only as citizen journalists and grassroots organizers, but also by creating a space for the creative appropriation and re-articulation of the images for mass distribution in light of state restrictions. Hashtags affixed to the images, such as #ست_البنات (*sitt el banat*), and #*direngezi* (Gezi resistance) situate the images as part of larger movements by making it easy for users to rally around and engage with the incidents. Nonetheless, it is important to note the role cellphones and social media played in propagating the images without falling prey to arguments of technological determinism in the people's political struggles. To attribute the images' significance purely to the digital realm would be to disregard the corporeal danger the bodies within them took up in the physical one. Furthermore, reducing the images' impact to the online activism they inspired is easily refuted by the massive protests they galvanized, as well as the countless physical renderings and reappropriations they inspired.

4.4.2. From Screen to Street

The images' social currency was bolstered by the impact they had both online and offline. Only three days after the police crackdown that resulted in the image of the blue bra girl, thousands of men and women gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the brutality. Similarly, the very night of the incident, people across Turkey took to the streets in droves to express their support for both the woman in red and the park's

conservation. In both instances, visual representations and reimaginations of the women were abundantly ubiquitous.

4.4.2.1. An Inversion of Rhetoric

On Dec. 20th, 2011, a sea of blue bra girls undulated from the raised fists of Egyptian men and women marching in the streets of Tahrir Square. Thousands of protesters took to the streets with prints, newspaper cutouts, and homemade posters plastered with the image of the girl in the blue bra. Female protesters utilized national signifiers as a space for feminist resistance by carrying signs that were adorned with the colors of the Egyptian flag but featuring the blue bra in the stead of the flag's golden hawk. Commenting on the event, W.J.T. Mitchell (2012) stated that copies of the still were used not merely as a symbol of police brutality against women; rather, they served as a visual representation of “a flesh-and-blood human being who becomes virtual and goes viral, returning within a few days to haunt the real space of Tahrir Square as the banner of the Egyptian women’s movement.”

Just as pervasive as the image itself were the different reimaginations of the original photo. Appearing in artistic renderings and stenciled graffiti across the city, the iconicity of the blue bra was extrapolated from its photographic context and reappropriated into different symbols of resistance. One artist that goes by El-Tenneen, transposed the blue bra onto the figure of a female superhero in comic-strip style and incorporated the Arabic letter "ث" *[tha]* in lieu of thawra, the Arabic word for "revolution" on her chest (Figure 10). The Arabic text for “it continues,” also in reference to the revolution, is attached below. Subverting the rhetoric of victimhood in the original photo, the rendering features the heroine midflight with her torso, and,

indeed, her angry face, bare for viewing. Her arms are raised not by the security men around her, but as a clear consequence of her own will. Conversely, another artist, Bahia Shehab, removes the blue bra from the female body altogether and transforms it into an element of a graphic tag she spread around the city (Figure 11). The tag includes a stencil of a blue bra, the phrase “NO to the stripping of the people,” with the Arabic word signifying “no” visually mirroring the contours of a bra, as well as the words "long live a peaceful revolution" styled in the shape of a shoeprint, in clear reference to the climactic moment captured in the original photograph when the officer was moments away from embedding his boot in the girl's abdomen. By transforming the original subject of victimhood into an iconic, multivalent symbol of resistance, these imaginative renderings help revoke the voyeurism involved with consuming the original photograph. Furthermore, they reject the parochial interpretations of the incident in mainstream media. The graffiti is able to “testify to events that have been simplified or reduced to spectacle when they are represented in the electronic [or mainstream] media” (Elias, 2014). The return of the image of the blue bra girl to the streets of Cairo in its various forms immortalized its iconicity and cemented her as a figure of resistance in the Egyptian, and global, struggle for justice.

Figure 10. Supergirl Blue Bra by El Teneen, Heliopolis, Cairo, 2011. (Source Unknown).

Figure 11. "No to Stripping the People," stenciled graffiti by Bahia Shehab, 2011. (Source Unknown)

4.4.2.2. 'Standing in' for the Nation

In a manner similar to what transpired on the streets of Cairo, Sungur's image was treated to various representations and appropriations in the material realm. From murals and Lego installations to carnival cutouts and street art, the figure of the woman in red became a symbolic of the people's struggle during the days of anti-government protest. Three common motifs underly many of these public renderings: i) they mythicize the scene and lend a larger-than-life quality to her struggle, ii) they were created with the specific intent of citizen participation and reintroducing them into the digital realm, and iii) they efface Sungur's personhood with that of the nation.

One of the more ubiquitous depictions of the woman in red features her towering over a miniscule rendering of the assaulting officer. The depiction was turned into a stencil that quickly found its home on the walls and streets of major cities across the country. For an extended period of time, these walls featured a stenciled woman in

red, nearly double the size of the crouching policeman spraying her, accompanied by the words “the more you spray, the larger we become” in either Turkish or English. By shrinking the figure of the policeman relative to the woman, the stencil amplifies her narrative and lends a mythical, larger-than-life quality to her character. Furthermore, the wording of the enclosed text addresses the officer(s), and by association the state, in direct warning of the results of his/its transgression. Phrased conditionality, “the more you…the more we,” the sentence subverts the passivity of the original photo by stating the consequence of the state’s brutality—"we grow larger.” If that is not enough, the magnified lady facing the spray is a visual representation of the realization of that threat, as if to say: “we have *already* become larger.” Furthermore, while the parallel sentence structure implies a proportional consequence to the act of “spraying,” the wording of the resulting (re)action promises the contrary. Further raising the stakes, the protasis features an offensive “you” that more or less translates to Erdogan,[18] while the apodosis employs a more obscure “we.” The “we” pronoun clouds the identity of the people behind the stencil and posits it as an expression of the larger collective. Moreover, by taking the individual out of the equation, the “we” adopts the omnipresent, larger-than-life quality afforded to the figure of the woman in red.

The same stencil was transformed into life-sized “cutouts” or “stand-ins” that invite solidarity through participation. In Izmir, a white tarp featuring a life-sized portrait of a "woman in red" with the space of her head cut out invited people to express their solidarity with by supplanting her face with theirs (Figure 12). The words “*direnis hatirasi*,” which translates to "resistance souvenir," feature above the beam of pepper spray, turned yellow to stand out against the white, while the spraying officer crouches

[18] The gentrification of Gezi Park was Erdogan’s pet project, and the security’s crackdown on protesters was an extension of him doubling down on promises to complete it.

small and low on the ground. The lady's shoulder bag, necklace, and blasted hair are all present—they are, after all, the gendered signifiers that were part of her iconicity.

The tarp's design inspired countless replicas and homemade versions that used everything from cardboard to bedsheets. The common denominator in all is the obscuration of Ceyda Sungur, the individual, in favor of (re)creating the "woman in red," the icon. Effacing Sungur makes room for the 'average' person to stand in, and the interchangeability offered engages the collective in an act of accessible heroism. The promise implicit in their participation is, "You, too, can be a 'woman in red'." By supplanting her face with theirs, participants get to 'become' the icon, even if for a moment, or photo-op. This same process that aims to popularize her act or make it seem more accessible/commonplace, ends up doing the opposite. As Sungur is effaced, the "woman in red" is immortalized and paradoxically constructed as both icon and metonym for the average citizen.

While not necessarily construed as art, the collaborative nature of these pieces and their public propagation likens them to what has been denoted "participatory art." Often installed in public spaces like streets and squares, participatory art blurs the boundaries between production and consumption by involving viewers in the process of creation. By inviting the Turkish citizen to take part, the woman in red cut-outs constitute *kamusal alanda sanat* or *katılımcı sanat,* literally translated to 'art in the public sphere' or 'participatory art.' Effectively, these pieces "energize ordinary citizens to play a more active role in expressing their feelings and creating artistic sentiments that help heal an injured community or even trigger socio-political consciousness" (Karimi, 2016).

Furthermore, although created *for* (and *in*) the physical realm, these renderings of the "woman in red" were designed with the purpose of online dissemination in mind. The cut-outs were more or less photo-opportunities for sympathizers to take pictures and share them on social media platforms to be liked, shared, and retweeted. The result of this process of media produsage allows participants to simultaneously consume and reproduce the iconicity.

Figure 12. "Direnis Hatirasi," or "Memories of Resistance": Enlarged banner of the 'woman in red' where people are invited to put their faces in a cutout above a drawing of Sungur's body. Via twitpic.com

The resurgence of either image in the streets of Cairo and Istanbul highlights the shifting spatialities of revolution. Having made their way back to the physical realm after days of online circulation, the images underscore Arendt's postulation that a "space of appearance" is not necessarily a physical location but can emerge anywhere and anytime if a plurality of humans creates space between them through action and speech. Furthermore, the power generated by this visibility reproduces horizontal relationships of equality among the citizens they inspire and highlights the importance of being visible in public spaces. The people's participation in the processes of

viewership, reproduction, and dissemination that iconicize these images causes a "reversal that transform[s] the citizen from a passive visual object into an empowered agent" (Khatib, 2012).

4.5. Conclusion

The images of the woman in the red dress and the girl in the blue bra became imprinted in the visual archives of the protest because they evoked a decisive moment in the ongoing struggles between activists/ordinary citizens, and the state. When protests started, both SCAF forces and the Erdogan government had responded to criticisms and claims of police brutality by stating that protesters were aggressors, looters—*çapulcular*. In light of this claim, the photos of the unarmed women—shared, posted, recast and widely distributed—highlighted the authorities' deception. Conflict can "become a crisis of legitimacy; more accurately, such crises emerge when events reveal how the political structure inhibits fulfillment of the social contract" (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007 p. 36). Similarly, Solaroli notes, "A conflict can become a crisis in terms of moral legitimacy at the moment in which a peculiar, mediatized event reveals that the political elites did not fulfill their social contract" (Solaroli 2011, 248). An unarmed woman facing a gathering of armed men in riot gear represents an imbalance of power, an injustice between a government and its people, and autocratic versus democratic rule. By visually representing not only the regimes' failure to serve and protect their citizens, but also the fallacy of their claims, the images of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red instigated a crisis of legitimacy between the states and their citizens.

Lightly clad and unarmored bodies of dissident women in the face of hyper-masculine militarized state structures resisting popular dissent can be interpreted as a political statement that the people refuse to be cowed by the physicality of state power (Coleman, 2011). By breaking apart from the dominant code imposed on women in public spaces, the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red defy policing. By visually presenting this refusal to be policed, both images become imbued with the recognizable connotations of a universal struggle of the individual in the face of a repressive state. It is through the accrual of these symbolic meanings that resonate with people across different cultures that the images become iconic outside their respective contexts.

Furthermore, one would be remiss to study the images' inauguration into the global language of revolutionary visuals without taking into account the tools and modes people employed to facilitate that move. Graffitti, stencils, and participatory art on the streets all served to ingrain the iconicity of the women's photos. Whereas this chapter provided an overview of the ways an image accrues meanings that render it iconic, the next chapter uses the image of Sudan's Nubian Queen to showcase some of the downsides of iconicity and how it can serve to perpetuate inequalities in the contexts it emerges from.

CHAPTER 5

SUDAN

Figure 13 "The Kandaka," or Nubian Queen, image of Alaa Salah leading chants in anti-government protests in the capital of Sudan, Khartoum. (Photo by Lara Haroun)

In December 2018, massive protests broke out in the historically charged city of Atbara[19] over newly announced austerity measures that resulted in a steep increase in the prices of basic commodities such as bread and fuel. The protests quickly spread through the country and escalated into broader demonstrations against the economic policies, corruption, and human rights abuses of Omar al-Bashir's 30-year-long regime. Four months into the massive mobilization that would ultimately topple al-Bashir's military rule, the photograph of a young Sudanese woman reciting revolutionary chants

[19] Atbara holds political and historical significance as it was the birthplace of Sudan's largest labor movement, the union of railway workers who played a pivotal role in Sudan's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. It remains an important center of political and social activism in Sudan, but also one that has been marginalized by the state.

at a large-scale sit-in in Khartoum went viral (Figure 13). The woman in question, later identified as Alaa Salah, was nicknamed “The Nubian Queen” and The *Kandaka.*[20] Her image quickly gained widespread attention, efflorescing in international headlines as an icon of Sudan’s female-led revolution. But the problem with iconization is that it can simplify a complicated story. As it reproduces and reinforces dominant cultural narratives, the iconic photo distorts or erases the experiences and perspectives of those who are excluded from the dominant discourse. While the powerful message conveyed by Salah's image is undeniable, it is crucial to critically examine the implications of her iconization as the embodiment of “progress” for Sudanese women. The following chapter explores socio-cultural markers encoded within the image to reveal how iconicity overshadows the complex and contested histories and identities that help create it.

5.1. Analysis

On an elevated platform among throngs of protesters, a woman in white stands. She raises her right arm, index finger pointing skyward, while her left holds her white *thobe* in place.[21] The bright disk of her earring draws attention to her face, where her mouth is captured in the act of vocalizing to the people around her. The protesters look up to the woman in apparent joy and deference. The woman’s figure is multiplied in the

[20] The word "*Kandaka*" has its origins in the Meroitic language and was used to refer to the warrior queen of the Kingdom of Kush (modern-day Sudan). In modern times, “*Kandaka*" has been reclaimed by some African communities as a term of pride and empowerment, particularly in reference to strong and influential women.

[21] The *thobe* is a traditional Sudanese dress made from a single long garment in color variations that women wrap around their bodies. The position of Salah’s hand is a common move by which older and traditional women lay their hands on their midriff to preserve their modesty with the unfastened fabric.

scores of mobile screens around her, reiterating the notion that what she is saying or what they are witnessing, is significant.

Other visual cues in the photograph's composition can be picked up by those well-versed in the Sudanese context. The open space and the building complexes in the background elucidate the location of the shot as the public square in front of the General Military Command in Khartoum. This location holds particular significance as it also clarifies when the image was taken: the square was one of the major spaces reclaimed in the last few days before the ousting of al-Bashir on April 11th.

As for the woman herself, a significant portion of the symbolism conveyed in the shot is derived from the visual cues on Salah's person. Her earrings are part of traditional wedding jewelry meant to celebrate femininity. The color and quality of her dress have particular significance.

Situating the image of "The Nubian Queen" among the likes of the "woman in a sundress" who faced down the riot police in Baton Rouge during the 2016 protests against the shooting of Alton Sterling, the "woman in a red dress" of Gezi Park, and the young man in shirt-sleeves facing the tanks that were rolling into Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, New York Times critic Vanessa Friedman (2019) wrote, "In each case, the images derive their power in part from the sheer quotidian nature of the individual, armored not in defensive gear or in depersonalizing military garb but in the clothes of the everyday." What escaped Friedman's analysis, however, is that Salah's white *thobe* is not, in fact, "quotidian" nor "the clothes of the everyday." In a critical analysis of the image's iconicity, Sara Abbas (2022) suggests that Salah's *thobe* is neither the color nor the fabric of everyday use. The way it lays on Salah's figure, Abbas contends, is

indicative of the type of fabric reserved for special occasions and worn by a particular class of women that can afford it. The color, moreover, denotes an array of meanings explored ahead.

5.2. The White *Thobe*

In March 2019, a private women's university in Khartoum circulated an initiative on social media calling on female protesters to wear a white *thobe* during the following day's demonstrations to commemorate their accomplishments for International Women's Day. Sudanese women, after all, had played indispensable roles in the spark and continuity of the revolution (Badri, 2020; Engeler, Braghieri, & Manzur, 2020). The call was widely shared on social media and sparked heated debates among proponents and opponents. A deeper look into the history of the white *thobe* and how it became subsumed into Sudanese identity and culture elucidates the aspects of the controversy and sheds light on the various meanings and symbolisms embedded within Salah's iconicity.

5.2.1. As Resistance

By heeding the call, Salah was not only honoring traditional Sudanese dress, but also partaking in a collective act of resistance female protesters were encouraging with their bodies. When al-Bashir's Islamist regime came into power in 1989, the *thobe*—with its colorful variations and the slack way it covers the head and body (prone to slipping with movement)—was deemed unfavorable. The black Saudi *abaya* was then introduced and popularized in Sudanese culture as more "appropriate" public attire for women. During the uprising, female dissidents evoked the white *thobe* as an antithesis

to the imported black *abaya* and a symbol of overt rejection of al-Bashir's intrusion on women's bodies and the way they appear in public. Yet, by donning the white *thobe*, Salah and her comrades were not simply rejecting the regime's conceptions of how women should dress, they evoked a piece of clothing that symbolizes the prioritization of a very particular group of Sudanese women over others.[22]

5.2.2. As Exclusion

The white *thobe* encapsulates a complex history of ethnic and class dichotomies in Sudan. The white *thobe* first started gaining symbolic meaning, beyond its traditional denotation of "purity" and "mourning" in the late fifties,[23] when the country began expelling the remnants of European colonialism that had introduced a rigid separation of gender to Sudan's matrilineal and more egalitarian communities.[24] One of the first places women were permitted into the public sphere was in the line of civil service. The white *thobe* was used by female civil servants, namely teachers and nurses, to distinguish themselves from other working-class women. Due to different marginalization processes, women who were permitted into civil service and

[22] Salah's image portrays another act of resistance not explored in this chapter: women's singing and the public recitation of poetry are both practices deeply entrenched within Sudanese history and culture, but heavily stigmatized during El-Bashir's Islamist regime. *For more, see* "Kandakas and Meheiras": The Emergence of Creative Citizenship and Belonging Through Women's Music in Sudan" (Grabska, & Abdel Aziz, 2019).

[23] Throughout history and in many cultures, white dresses have been associated with "pureness" and "virginity," and thus, worn by brides in weddings (Micklo, 2017). In many African cultures, white *thobes* were worn by widows as a symbol of mourning (Klopper, 2012).

[24] According to El-Bakri et al., British colonial rule in Sudan "regarded those areas where relations between the sexes were relatively egalitarian as 'uncivilized'," and restructured them to promote a more severe public/private dichotomy. In this, British colonial rule codified patrilineal and patriarchal practices into Sudanese culture, establishing a gender hierarchy that reflected British chauvinism and "the colonial male bourgeois mentality" (post-1987, p. 175).

"professional life" were predominantly from northern Sudan,[25] and the white *thobe* was used by "professional" women to distinguish themselves from lower caste women who worked as farmers, homemakers, and street vendors. As women entered the workplace at ministries and local governments, the white *thobe* came to codify a certain class of women who are educated, wage-earning, mostly North Sudanese, and whose profession afforded them the privilege of keeping their dresses pristine throughout the day. Furthermore, within the racial matrix of the country, this assignment of North Sudanese also denotes Arab and Nubian.[26]

Salah's image therefore depicts not only a visual rejection of the regime's intrusive policies, but also a multi-layered symbol of the ethnic and classed structures of Sudanese society. It should be noted that Salah, herself, does not necessarily evoke these assignments. In other versions of this performance, she is seen with the original tricolor Sudanese flag (in blue, yellow and green) painted on her hand. [27] Although Salah's evocation of the original flag can be interpreted as a nod to unity and harmonious living before Bashir's Arabization and Islamization project, it does not make an appearance in the iconic image. Nonetheless, recognizing how the white *thobe*

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[25] Fewer numbers of Southern Sudanese women had access to formal education and careers than their Northern counterparts for a plethora of reasons including the South's agricultural practices and women's heavy participation in it, colonial legacies that privileged the urban North at the expense of the rural South, as well as different ethnic and cultural hierarchies reinforced by the state's Islamization process and the country's civil war. For more, see *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism and the State* by Hale (1996).

[26] Discussed ahead.

[27] Sudan's original flag, adopted upon its independence from Egypt and the United Kingdom, has since been replaced by its current red, white, black, and green flag in 1970. The new colors are heavily employed in the flags of most Arab countries and include connotations of Arab and Islamic identification.

connotes different women's admittance to and exclusion from the public sphere offers a deeper understanding of the exclusions and erasures implicit in Salah's iconicity.

5.2.3. As a Site for Conflicting Narratives

While the revolution was getting hailed in regional and international media for its feminist rhetoric and the prominence of women in its ranks, a third dimension of the exclusion of marginalized groups made itself evident also through the medium of the white *thobe*.

On March 4th, 2019, a gay and gender-fluid Sudanese artist by the name of Ahmed Umar participated in the Sudanese revolution from the confines of his Norwegian home. Umar posted on Facebook an image of himself donning a white *thobe* while adorned with traditional accessories, braids, and tribal marks in support of Sudan's revolutionary women (Figure 14). The picture went viral across social media and sparked weeks-long discussions on LGBTQ+ Sudanese and the relevance of queer causes to the ongoing revolution. Although the publicity of Umar's 'white *thobe*' picture influenced some queer Sudanese to anonymously[28] come out on social media (Diab, 2019), it also highlighted an ideological chasm among protesters. Overall, the disparaging discourse around the image in online and offline forums communicated a strict adherence to cis-gender identification and a rejection of adopting queer issues into the revolution's demands. Therefore, while used to celebrate the feminist accomplishments of the revolution, the white *thobe* was also a site for the contestation and triumph of a strictly binary understanding of gender.

[28] Queerness remains severely stigmatized in Sudan, and homosexuality is a moral offense punishable by flogging and at times by death.

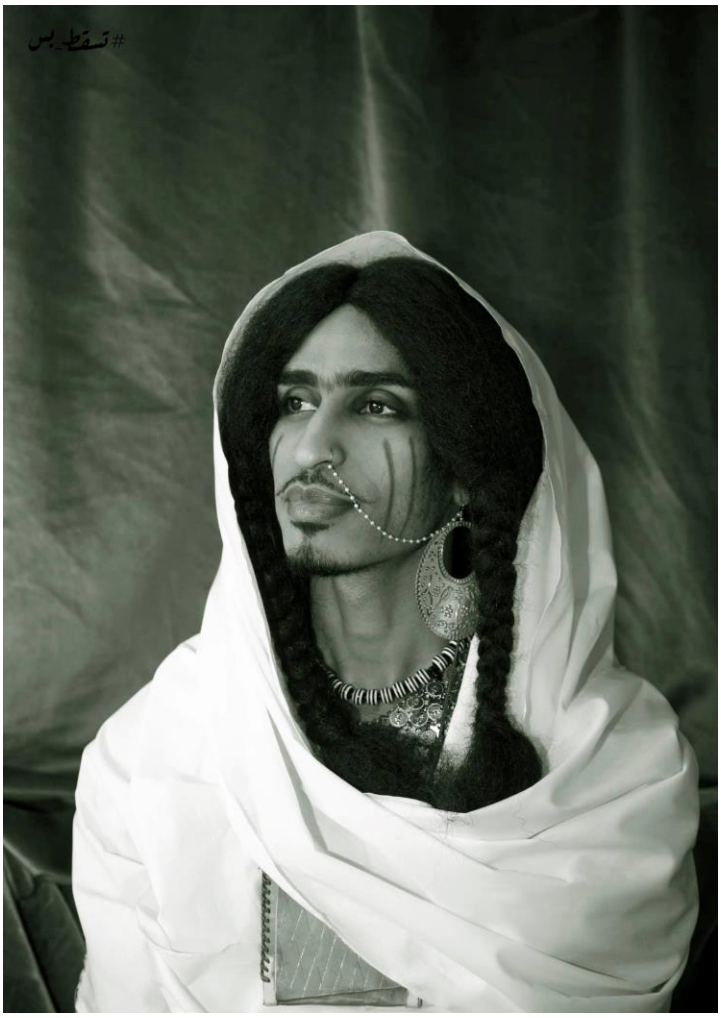

Figure 14. “White March” image of gender-fluid Ahmed Umar in a white *thobe* and traditionally female jewelry posted to Facebook on 3 March 2019. (Source Facebook Ahmed Umar)

5.3. Metapicturing and Technological Exclusion

Other aspects of the image’s construction problematize its iconicity. As a self-referential metapicture that uses different technologies before and during its capture, Salah’s photograph is a reflexive image that ironically overshadows the circumstances of its own construction even as it showcases them in frame. The following explores these dynamics in light of the technological biases Salah’s iconicity entailed.

5.3.1. Hall of Mirrors

From an elevated vantagepoint, the photograph of the *Kandaka* captures the multiplication of Salah's figure in the numerous mobile screens of the people around her. This visual element does not go unnoticed by consumers and reproducers of the photograph, as the various artwork inspired by the image reflect some form of this multiplication (Figures 15 and 16).

As an image with multiple reiterations of itself set within its frame, Salah's picture constitutes a "self-referential metapicture." In simple terms, the metapicture is an image "that contains itself in a smaller picture." As an image with replicas of itself embedded within itself, the self-referential metapicture is a "representation representing [its] own representation, that is, [it] depicts a picture of what [it] depicts, how [it] depicts, or under which circumstances [it] came to depict" (Nöth & Bishara, 2007, p. 64). Through the screens of the smartphones around her, the circumstances of Salah's documentation are made evident in Haroun's composition. More importantly, the image calls "into question the basic issues of reference that determine what a picture is about and constitute the "selves" referred to in its structure of self-reference" (Mitchell, 1994).

Although evoked to explain the concept of mise en abyme in Western art, Mitchell's explanation of the interplay between spectator and producer in the metapicture lends itself to Salah's photo. As a record of protesters recording Salah, the image succeeds in blurring the lines of viewer, consumer, and partaker (protester). It "deploys its self-knowledge of representation to activate the beholder self-knowledge by questioning the identity of the spectator position" (1994, p. 152). Moreover, it reiterates the audiences' involvement with the making of Salah's iconicity.

The metapicturing imbedded within Lara Haroun's photograph of Salah signifies explicitly the audiences' awareness of the recital's digital appeal. Salah's performance is not the first nor last of its kind. At that point of the uprising, Salah had grown a local prominence from donning her white *thobe* and reciting her chant at different sites of protest (AJPlus, 2019). If we were to take the metapicturing as a visual representation of an infinite remediation process, Susan Sontag's observations on photography are also illuminating with respect to the ceaseless circulation of images in our media matrix: "Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies. . .. turn experience itself into a way of seeing. . .. an event has come to mean, precisely, something worth photographing," something that has appeared on the public screen (1977, pp. 24). The photograph's composition therefore implies that Salah's performance was not merely received by audiences as a corporeal event to be 'experienced' in the present, so much as an allegorical one to be digitally 'circulated' in the future. In this sense, the image can be studied differently from not only other photographs of 'experienced' acts of protests that are not primed for media consumption, but also from other acts of protest that evade a camera's lens altogether.

Additionally, little has been said about how the technique of metapicturing can create an echo chamber effect, where the artist and viewers become trapped in a kind of visual feedback loop. The very technique of metapicturing involves an act of 'naval gazing' that uses reflexivity to engage the viewer. However, as the viewer looks at the multiple versions of the image, their interpretation of the image runs the risk of becoming more limited, as they focus solely on the different representations of the image and fail to engage with alternative interpretations or broader social and political issues. In this sense, Haroun's metapicture of Salah can become not just a "picture *of*

pictures” (Nöth & Bishara, 2007, p. 65), but also constitute Mitchell’s sense of the word as “a picture *about* pictures” (1994).

Nonetheless, while reflexivity can sometimes come across as self-indulgent and distract from the subject matter or even undermine the authenticity of the image by making it seem contrived or staged, it is that same act of reflexivity in Haroun’s framing that builds Salah’s iconicity and engages critical thinking. Iconicity, as the previous chapter demonstrates, can be a useful tool to raise awareness of the circumstances around the moments it canonizes.

Figure 15. Artwork depicting Alaa Saleh as "The Nubian Queen" (Artist Unknown)

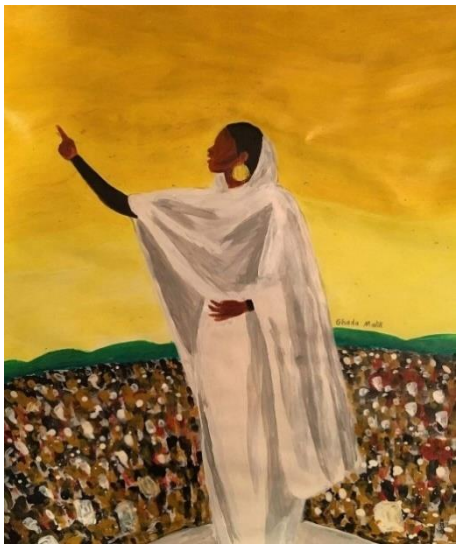

Figure 16. "The *Kandaka*" preaching to the masses by Ghada Malik.

5.3.2 Technological Superiority

Following its capture, Salah's image quickly became the focal point of discussions on various social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, with many interpreting the image as an icon for Sudanese women. However, a sizable portion of these women were left outside these conversations due to the same circumstances that allowed the image’s production and propagation.

On March 2nd, 2019, students at a private women's-only university staged a musical sit-in within their campus as part of the ongoing anti-government protests in Sudan. The initiative was first contained within the relative safety of the institution's walls and limited to the privileged students within. As pictures of the female students dressed in white *teyab*, plural of *thobe*, got shared in certain circles on social media, other women with access to these circles in Sudan and abroad were inspired to share their pictures in white *teyab*, using the hashtag #التوب الابيض, which translates to *'#thewhitethobe'*. Subsequently, March, as it is National Women's History Month, was celebrated as "White March." While this elucidates the shifting spatialities of the revolution (from corporeal to cyberspace), it highlights one much-studied problem of new communication technologies: do they expand or collapse the public sphere?

In "Communication Power" (2009), Manuel Castells contends, "Those who have access to, and are skilled in using, new communication technologies are better positioned to participate in public life than those who do not." The problem with the online trend of the *#whitethobe* is that the same tools that enable its widespread propagation prevented on-the-street participation. The circles in which the trends circulated are gatekept not only by access to smartphones and the cybersphere, but also by language, since the hashtags were circulated in Arabic, while a significant portion of Sudanese women are either not connected to these circles or not Arab, and/or have not received a formal education that allows them access to these circles. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the calls, as well as Salah's image, were first shared on Twitter, a notably underused and connotationally elitist platform in Sudan at the time.

5.4. The *Kandaka*

The *Kandaka*'s iconicity and the hypervisibility of her image in media coverage overshadowed the participation of other groups, such as youth, labor unions, and marginalized communities (Abdul Hameed, 2020; Hamid, 2019). Even as it brings attention to women's active participation in the Sudanese revolution, the image has the potential of obscuring the collective efforts of the movement as well as the demands and vulnerability of other groups involved. As it depicts a Northern and ethnically "dominant" culture, the image of the *Kandaka* reinforces the iconization of a particular type and class of Sudanese woman as the face of the movement. The following contextualizes the image in a country where the exclusionary formation of citizenship has taken place through ethnic, gendered and classist provisions.

5.4.1. As Erasure

Iconic photos can be seductive, but they often reinforce dominant cultural narratives and erase the voices and experiences of marginalized and subaltern groups. They can also mask the power relations and historical contingencies that shape the visual representation of social reality. With their focus on aesthetic and emotional impact, iconic images can obscure the power relations and historical contingencies that shape the visual representation of social reality and prevent us from engaging critically with the complex and contested meanings of these images. By considering the histories of ethnic and tribal hierarchies in the formation of the Sudanese state, a closer analysis of the image reveals how its iconicity eclipses important discussions of erasure and marginalization in Sudan.

The formation of the Sudanese nation-state is deeply intertwined with histories of marginalization and the legacies of colonialism, Arabism, and Islamism, but also geographical and gender hierarchism. Following its independence from British colonialism in 1956, the Sudanese political elite sought a unifying identity to forge the nation state around, and Arabism was conjured up as the answer (Sharkey, 2008). Indigenous groups were forced to adopt an “Arab” identity, leading to a loss of cultural heritage and status, as well as access to the public sphere. The Arabization process was supplemented in 1989 with a “Civilization Project,” *Al-Mashru Al-Hadari*, spearheaded by former president Omar al-Bashir (Badri & Tripp, 2017, p. 143). Echoing the cultural homogenization tactics of the “civilizing projects” initiated by the colonial British decades before, al-Bashir’s plans purported to "civilize" the population, this time through his lens of Islamism. This involved imposing cultural homogeneity, with a strong marginalization of non-Arab and non-Muslim identities. As with its British predecessor, the civilizing project continued the tradition of under-developing the peripheries in favor of Khartoum and the center. The policies extended a class dimension to the marginalization, as groups existing on the outskirts of the state’s purview, as well as those that did not embrace its pan-Arab and pan-Islamic rhetoric, were denied the tools of social mobility, and slowly got relegated to the lower castes of Sudanese society.

The government also institutionalized the Islamization of public behavior through public order laws that were put in place in 1996. These laws aimed to regulate personal conduct and gender relations in public. While purported to apply to all equally, the public morality laws constituted a legal framework that monitored and penalized specifically women’s presence in public space (Nugdalla, 2020). It allowed what is

known as the public order police to patrol the city and harass women for what is perceived as being in the wrong place, mixing with men, and wearing “inappropriate” attire. However, because women of upper classes enjoy the privilege of maneuvering the city in private transportation and are employed in private institutions, the brunt of these laws were borne by the women who have no choice but to work and be present in these public spaces for their daily survival (Nageeb, 2004). This effectively highlights how working-class women are the most vulnerable to the violence perpetuated by these laws. Moreover, because of al-Bashir’s “civilization projects,” these laws disproportionately affected poorer women of ethnic and religious minorities. In the 90s and 2000s, women would be picked up off the streets and detained or flogged for violating these codes. As with the “policing” order (Ranciere, 2006), the laws were designed to distinguish between morally “good” and “deviant” behavior, with hierarchies of gender, class, and ethnicity playing a significant role in their implementation. This process produced stereotypes that facilitated the exclusion of women outside of the Northern, Arab, Muslim category, regarding them as ill-fitting to the constructed moral Muslim woman citizen.

Although all women are exposed to the law, particular groups such as alcohol brewers, and vendors, and tea and coffee sellers are rendered the most affected (SIHA, 2017, p. 5). Due to the nature of their work and by being in direct confrontation with these laws, these women had to become politically conscious and engage in political activism (Abbas, 2022). Throughout the 90s and 2000s, these women were attempting to unionize, organize protests, and lay the foundations for the 2018 uprising that they would be a huge part of. This underlines the multidimensional experiences of oppression directed at women activists from marginalized regions of Sudan.

Because representation is always “broken,” that is, always incapable of reproducing the social totality, any political discourse or image necessarily fails to meet all needs while it cannot avoid signifying biases, exclusions, and denials” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p.33). By highlighting Salah as “the face of the revolution,” the image excludes the countless faceless and nameless women who have labored and negotiated their lives and livelihoods on the street, as well highlighting the bias to give exceptional recognition and fame to certain segments of society—"the bourgeoisie, the educated, and the photogenic,” as noted by Malik (2019). Ironically, the image's iconization of a member of a particular group reinforces the very hierarchies that its circumstances aimed to break down.

5.4.2. As Cultural Appropriation

As with the symbolism of the white *thobe*, the evocation of the “*Kandaka”* entails interesting nuances at the local level. As a title given to queens of ancient Nubia, the term denotes a pre-Arab and a pre-Muslim identity. While some Sudanese Nubians have adopted some aspects of Arab culture, particularly through centuries of trade and interaction but also through forced Arabization, others maintain their distinct Nubian language and cultural traditions. Many Nubians also identify strongly with their African heritage and reject being labeled as Arabs, particularly given the long history of discrimination and marginalization that Nubians have faced in many Arab-dominated societies.

The labelling of Salah and other female protesters as *Kandaka,* even though she is both Arab and Muslim, adds another layer to the erasure of the activism of other

specifically non-Arab and non-Muslim protestors through the co-opting of a term by a dominant group. Sudanese writer Jamal Moujib (2019) notes:

> At the edge of the Arab world, the country has always sought recognition. Its character is unique. Historical links tie us, ethnically and culturally, to our African neighbors to the South and West. During the 1960s and 1970s, there were several attempts to define, via poetry, the singular cultural heritage, by drawing together these African and Arab elements. But this was generally forgotten in later times. Islam was always part of the culture, but only partially. The symbolism that emerged from the revolution has shown this clearly, making explicit reference to the country's pre-Islamic history and the matriarchal Nubian culture, personified by the figure of "*Kandaka*," the Queen Mother. All of this was incarnated in the image that went viral of a young woman, Alaa Salah, perched on a car and leading the chants at a protest."

Therefore, the appropriation of the *Kandaka* and the discourse surrounding it perpetuates a long history of the exploitation of non-Arab and non-Muslim cultures in Sudan and effectively reproduces the same policies that the revolution rose up against in the first place. It is worth noting that although not clear through the medium of photography that delivers her image, Salah—herself, an Arab Muslim woman—also evokes the *Kandaka* when she chants, "*habboubati kandaka, jaddi terhaka"* (my grandmother is a *kandaka*, my grandfather is a *terhaka).*[29]

5.4.3. Overshadowing Violence

Captured in Khartoum and at a newly reclaimed site of protest, the image can supplant other more confrontational instances of the revolution. Since the image was captured in the final few days before al-Bashir's ousting, the regime's repressive apparatuses were in full swing, and hundreds of men and women, not captured in the

[29] *Terhaka*, also spelled *taharka*, is a Qore (king) of the Kingdom of Kush (present day Sudan) and one of the "Kushite Pharaohs" who ruled over Egypt for nearly a century.

image, were in direct and violent confrontation with the regime's final stand. By emphasizing the jovial and celebratory atmosphere at the site's center, the *Kandaka's* iconicity overshadowed the violence occurring simultaneously at the site's peripheries, as well as in other cities.

The continued iconicity of the image of the *Kandaka* can overshadow a second, perhaps more poignant image—that of the slain bodies of demonstrators lined up on the banks of the Nile. On June 3rd, the military moved to clear the main protest site outside the military headquarters in Khartoum—the same one depicted in Salah's iconic image. Security forces used live ammunition, tear gas, and batons to disperse the protesters, resulting in the ruthless massacre of at least 128 people and the injuring of hundreds more. Thousands of still and video images captured by witnesses at the scene documented heinous acts of violence against the anti-military protesters—including "extrajudicial killings and torture, excessive use of force, sexual and gender-based violence, and the forced disappearance of detained protesters" (ACJPS & IRRI, 2019).

Furthermore, while the image undoubtedly raises awareness of Sudanese women's political activism and role in the revolution, it also raises the stakes of romanticizing their experiences when the reality of any revolutionary experience is seldom as rosy. In their article "From White Teyab to Pink Kandakat," Engeler, Braghieri, and Manzur (2020) demonstrate the ways state forces' used gender-specific strategies and sexual violence to intimidate protesters—all of which rarely get attention in media's celebration of the Kandaka. Moreover, the state's gender-specific oppression is only one aspect of female protesters' struggle on the streets. The other, which

involves the sexist and patriarchal practices of fellow protesters towards 'Kandakas,' is explored ahead.

5.4.4. Obscuring and Challenging Sexist Stereotypes

The image's iconicity overshadows other aspects of the popular uprising by romanticizing women's apparent triumph in the public sphere. In "The Radical Imaginations of Sudanese Women: A Gendered Revolution," Kadoda and Hale (2020) analyze the language used in slogans, chants, statements, and documents from the uprising to better understand the trajectory of the uprising's pro-women rhetoric and whether it was emblematic of a true "social revolution," as al-Nagar and Tønnessen (2019) argued. The study found several examples of patriarchal or sexist language used, such as chants of "[the regime] will fall and we will marry a *kandaka*," and "[the regime] falls twice and we will marry two *kandaka*," statements referring to *kandaka*s as the most "keen and able cleaners," as well as insulting the police and military with the title of "women" when they ran away from the protestors implying that being a woman is weak or cowardly. While some protesters were hesitant to rebuke patriarchal language in fear of jeopardizing the revolution's momentum and even trended the *#ma_wagto* (#nowisnotthetime), thousands of protesters challenged this discourse with the *#wagto_wonus* (#thetimeisnow) as a rallying cry to confront such patriarchal language and what it embodies.

What these negotiations serve to highlight is how the iconicity of the *Kandaka's* image and its celebration of an idealized moment of the revolution can both mask and spotlight the lived experiences of women who partook in the mobilizations. Depending on where one looks and what conversations are being evoked with the Kandaka's

image, both cases can be argued as neither is mutually exclusive. Iconicity demands attention. Even while it dominates a prime spot in global coverage of the Sudanese uprising, the image of the Kandaka brings attention to the Sudanese uprising and women. However, by spotlighting a single, euphoric moment in the revolution's months-long course, I have shown how the iconicity of the Kandaka can also draw attention away from the struggles and plights that precede and succeed it.

5.5. Conclusion

The iconization of one entails the erasure of another. Deeper analysis of Salah's image and the narratives constructed around it reveals how it can obfuscate the roles of various marginalized group in the Sudanese uprising. Exploring the image's connotations reveals how the labelling of Salah as *Kandaka*, "The Nubian Queen," and the icon of the revolution is deeply entangled with the ethnic and classed structures of Sudanese society, and thus idealizes a single representation of women in the movement or Sudan at large. Its salience also serves to undermine the lived experiences of different protesters both on the streets and off, and paints a rosy, idealized image of the protests at their peak. Even now, as of the completion of this thesis, Sudan is descending into violent clashes following the hijacking of the 2018 revolution by military junta and foreign intervention.

Two objectives of al-Bashir's regime were the forced Arabization of Sudan's diverse population and the promotion of his version of Islamic conduct through the tacit and violent suppression of those who did not fit his ethnically or religiously defined narrative. Depending on how you approach it, therefore, the image featuring Salah in her white *thobe*, either presents a cogent rejection of the state's hegemony over

women’s bodies and aspects of Bashir’s Islamist rhetoric, or a salute to a symbol of the exclusion of different non-Arab, lower class, and marginalized members of Sudanese society. Nevertheless, the image with the white *thobe* played a significant role in creating one of the most iconic images of the revolution that gained recognition both locally and internationally. Malik (2019) writes, “At times the details, history and spontaneous goodwill of a revolution need to be collapsed into one overarching narrative that people can understand.” A critical engagement with the discourse surrounding Salah's image and other iconic images can challenge the erasure of feminist histories by shedding light on the complex and contested meanings of women's participation in social and political movements in Sudan and beyond.

This chapter explored some of the historical context behind elements of an iconic image to demonstrate how iconicity can simplify the complex narratives it comes to canonize and reinforce dynamics of inequality by reflecting a dominant group at the expense of marginalized others. Simultaneously, the iconicity of the image in question brought unprecedented media attention to the Sudanese revolution and the plights of the Sudanese public. Moreover, it demonstrated to a global audience the political agency of women and their active involvement with the events unfolding on the streets. The next chapter uses the case of Lebanon’s Kick-Queen to explore an iconic image’s material impact on the context it arises from, as well as the different messages it can communicate at the time of its production and later on.

CHAPTER 6

LEBANON

Figure 17. Still from the viral video captured in Beirut on October 17, 2019. Source YouTube.

On October 17th, 2019, massive protests erupted in Beirut and quickly spread through the country. Initially triggered by government plans to impose new taxes on tobacco, petrol, and WhatsApp messaging services, the demonstrations quickly turned into a broader movement that shook the foundations of Lebanese polity and demanded an end to the sectarian political system running the country. Despite a violent crackdown by security forces and the political establishment, the protests would carry on for several months and herald a new era of Lebanese politics known as post-October 17 uprising. On the eve of the uprising, the image of a woman kicking an armed man rose from the fray of protest photography inundating digital spheres and signaled to

people across the country, and the region for that matter, a visual transformation in the roles women play in revolutionary times. By appearing when it did, Malak Alawiyye's image and her kick not only facilitated the establishment of the night's mobilizations as those of a "national uprising," but also augured the appropriation of masculinized *realms* and *modes* of public protest.

6.1. Textual Analysis

As with the wave of protests that preceded it across the region, Lebanon's October 17 uprising was heavily mediated. Thousands of images featuring men and women in protest inundated screens. At the forefront of the images that gained local and international virality the first night of protest was that of Malak Alawiyye kicking an armed man on the streets of Beirut (Figure 17). The moment was captured when a convoy carrying long-time politician and MP Akram Shehayeb attempted to force its way through crowds protesting on the streets. Against the civilian pushback, two armed bodyguards exit the vehicle and open fire on the protesters. A short clip of the incident shows Alawiyye in her blue tank top and ripped jeans, breaking through throngs of men to grab the Kalashnikov-wielding guard and plant her foot in his groin.[30] Within hours, the clip would circulate online platforms and immortalize Alawiyye's figure and "the kick."

6.1.1. Of Still

Unlike the images of the blue bra girl and the woman in red, the scene in the still depicts the woman as both protagonist and *actor*—with the man in the picture acted

[30] Video can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgCMgnUvnbM&t=5s

upon. The image's composition captures the exact moment Alawiyye's leg reaches its target. With her right leg planted firmly in the ground, Alawiyye wedges her left in the man's crotch. Her right arm curls back with the inertia of the action, just as her left pulls the offender towards her to inflict upon him the full brunt of the kick. It appears to work: the man bends at the waist and raises his arms in surrender even as he wields his Kalashnikov in the air.

Several elements support the image's charm. With a firm and unwavering posture, Alawiyye is the epitome of gutsy heroism. Her kick is not only a direct hit from a civilian woman to an armed male. It also connotes a clear refusal to be intimidated by both the men and the machinegun present. She is denoted as remarkably bold among the passive men in the scene. On a more technical level, the perfect right angle of the kick reinforces its visual appeal. The angle is less clear in the original shaky video than in the images that were drawn afterwards, including the stylized illustration discussed ahead. Furthermore, that the scene unfolds beneath a sign reading "Bank Audi, General Management" holds unique irony perhaps reserved to those familiar with the Lebanese context and the events of the days that followed.[31]

Different visual cues accentuate the spontaneity of the action caught in the scene. The dim glow of streetlight coupled with the still's grainy quality lends the scene a dynamism not extended to other more stable footage of the night. Alawiyye's apparent indifference with the camera interpreted through her lack of interaction with it implies her unawareness of being recorded. The positionality of the men around her reinforces the unpredictability of the situation. Three men are captured reacting to the kick: one, behind the bodyguard, raises his arms in anticipation of the turmoil hurling towards

[31] As a main constituent of the debilitating financial collapse Lebanon has since experienced, banks quickly became the sites of much confrontation between protesters and the regime.

him; another man watches the scene unfold from the background; a third man appears to hold the bodyguard's arm in check while Alawiyye delivers her kick. Ultimately, these elements coalesce to reiterate the impulsive dynamism of the situation.

6.1.2. Of Graphic Rendering

Even more viral than the original image is a stylized graphic of the moment created by visual designer Rami Kanso (Figure 18). The graphic depicts the figures of Malak and the bodyguard photoshopped against a bright blue background and concentric circles. The Arabic word *'alehum,* which translates to "get them" or "on them," is superimposed in a textured white across the bottom half of the figures. A white speech bubble with a heart is placed over Alawiyye's silhouette.

Figure 18. ‘*Alehum* graphic by Rami Kanso (from Twitter @ramikanso_png)

Kanso’s artwork establishes the scene’s iconicity. Plucked from the chaos of the moment and effaced of their spatiality, Malak and the bodyguard are rendered as the sole visual elements of the scene—decontextualized and iconic. The setting is erased, as are all the other characters in the scene. Everything is deemed negligeable in light of the action taking place.

Photoshopped in a bright sepia tone, Malak is highlighted as the central figure of the action taking place. The orange wash contrasts with both the blue background and the darker bodyguard— creating a visual anchor of sorts. The outline of her attacking figure and the contours of her arm shine bright and set her apart from her shadowed

counterpart. The concentric circles serve more purpose than to create visual texture. Whether converging at or emanating from Alawiyye's raised thigh, the circles beckon the eye directly to the center of the scene.

Everything in the artwork glorifies Malak. The bright orange lends her an otherworldly glow—something akin to divinity. Awash in this light, her figure casts no shadow. The concentric circles accentuate this ethereality by creating a halo-like effect around her. She is extracted from the corporeal, and her only tether to the world is the man she is punishing.

The word overlaying both figures is especially significant. *'Alehum* is a compound word consisting of the Arabic preposition *'ala*, meaning 'on,' and the plural pronoun for 'they/them,' *hum*. The text exalts the kick by signifying its symbolism. More than a mere kick to a bodyguard, it is an act taking place by an unidentified subject upon an undefined and collective 'they.' As an image with no context, the pronoun is stripped of a clear antecedent. Deciphering who 'they' are is up to the recipient of the image.[32]

Finally, the social media 'Like' impression attached over Alawiyye's figure serves not only to align Kanso (and the sharers of the image) with Alawiyye's action, but also extends a hypermediated and/or reflexive quality to the graphic. It is meant to be received, 'Liked,' and shared online. The graphic is created with viral appeal in mind.

[32] More on this in section 3.4.

6.2. Realms

There exists a corpus of literature on the masculinization of public spheres and spaces of protest. Since its inception, Habermas's "public sphere" (1962) has been marked by the distinct exclusion of women from political and public life both in theory and in practice. Feminist scholarship has since explicated how women and other groups are systematically excluded from public discourse through processes of marginalization and violence (Tronto, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Butler, 1990). As moments of "pure potentiality" (Turner, 1969, p. 41) and upheaval, uprisings open up opportunities for the restructuring of the public sphere. During the events of the Lebanese uprising, women's ubiquitous participation in online and offline spaces of appearance helped demasculinize the realm of public politics and, by extension, the public sphere. The propagation of Alawiyye's image on public squares and the internet are two spaces where this restructuring is made most evident.

6.2.1. Online Sphere

As a digital space of appearance, the internet acts as a public sphere for exercising political life and agency. On the eve of the uprising, the internet served as the initial site for the construction of Alawiyye's iconicity. The discourse with which her image propagated shows how this iconicity not only gendered the uprising as 'female'—but effectively, and more importantly, helped demasculinize the cyber realm of Lebanese politics.

As it started circulating, Alawiyye's image, or rather Kanso's reinterpretation of it, was used metonymically with the protests taking place. The graphic was affixed captions like "our revolution in one image" and hashtags like #عليهم (#get them),

#لبنان_ينتفض (#Lebanon rises), and #الشعب_يريد_اسقاط_النظام (#the people want the downfall of the regime). While the latter slogan is appropriated from the popular chant that emerged during the Arab uprisings of 2011, the former two are new and specific to the Lebanese context. Along with comments like “a woman’s revolution,” this discourse indicates the chord Alawiyye’s image immediately struck with viewers. The image being coded is not just of a kick or regular protests, but of an “uprising” or a “revolution”—and a “female” one at that.

This interpretation was elaborated in local and international headlines. More than a spur of the moment reaction by an enraged protester to a physical threat, the kick was framed by media outlets as a symbol of the nation rising to bring down the regime. This weighted symbolism/iconicity was not lost upon international media that hopped the trend with headlines like “Lebanese protesters want to *kick* out the regime,” (ByTheEast, 2019), “Lebanon ‘kick queen’ hits government where it hurts” (France24, 2019), and L’Orient le Jour’s in-depth piece “The icon of the Lebanese revolution” (Chahine, 2019).

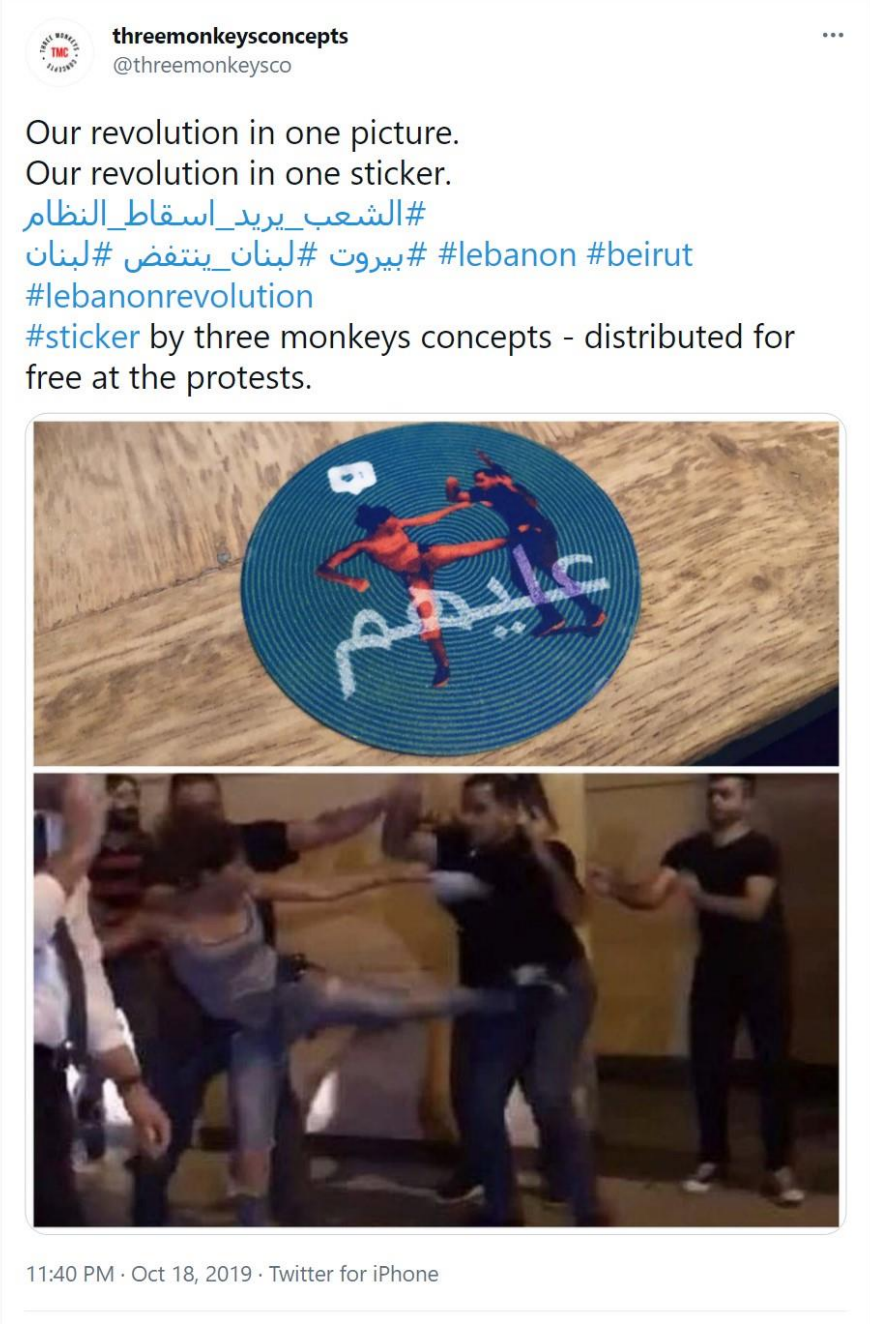

Figure 19. *'Alehum* sticker created by Three Monkeys Concept (From Twitter @threemonkeysco)

Subsequently, the imagery resulting from more women joining the ranks of the uprising was accompanied by the use of slogans like “ثورتنا نسوية” (“our revolution is a feminist one”) and hashtags like #الثورة_أنثى (#the revolution is female).

6.2.2. Squares

Public spaces like streets and squares have been treated to analyses that explore the ways these spaces are constructed as masculine to better serve their masculine subjects (Crenshaw, 1991; Kimmel, 1996; Rose, 1993; Walby, 1990). Scholarship on gender and social movements has since expounded the ways “women’s participation in public protests and encampments challenges traditional gender norms about women’s relationship with public space” by reclaiming these spaces traditionally relegated to men (Kern, 2017). In "Gender, Protest and Political Transition in North Africa and the Middle East," for instance, Valentine Moghadam (2013) asserts that women's presence in the streets during the Arab Spring protests “helped break down the divide between public and private spheres and challenge the notion that women's place is exclusively in the home.” In Lebanon, the events that fashioned Alawiyye’s iconicity awarded women the long-awaited opportunity “to reinvent themselves and remodel their relationship with their country, and with politics, which had left the closed rooms and poured into the squares and streets” (el Rahi, 2022). “By their mere presence in protests across the country,” Mourad (2022) asserts, “women laid claim to public space and to the male-dominated sphere of national politics from which they have been historically excluded and largely sidelined.” As one of the first images to come out of the uprising and make its way back to the streets, Alawiyye’s silhouette communicated to protesters the feminization of spaces long associated with men’s contestation of politics.

Since the outset of the civil war, the streets of Lebanon have been a site for the expression and contestation of political militancy and ideology. As a space of convergence of material and symbolic elements, Lebanon's urban spaces are "closely associated to collective action and to social movements, as they allow contention to take shape physically and to be amplified" (Harb, 2022). Several scholars have analyzed the ways militancy and masculinization intersect with the urban lived dimension and the ways in which gender shapes political mobilization and resistance (Patton, 2015; Shehadeh, 2011). Dallal (2016) provides an ethnographic study of the ways in which "masculinity is constructed and deployed by militias and political parties" in Lebanon's public spaces. Hanafi (2012) similarly theorized on the relationship between masculinity, militarization, and street protests in Lebanon, and how these dynamics shape political mobilization and resistance. In "Battles over Public Space: Women and Street Politics in Beirut," Carol Underwood (2014) offers valuable insight on the ways in which women participate in street politics in Beirut, and the challenges they face in navigating masculinized public spaces.

Alawiyye's figure, and its subsequent return to corporeal public spaces via posters, stickers, and graffiti facilitated the de-masculinization of these spaces and helped set the tone for the feminized mobilizations to come. In a country where militancy and masculinized mobilization meets state institutions and security forces that are often direct extensions of the political elite, male-on-male violence becomes expected, the norm even, during political expression on the streets.[33] By appearing as a woman in direct action on the street, Alawiyye is received by the general public as a

[33] It is common knowledge that Lebanon's political elite has long perfected common infiltration tactics of mass mobilizations. And since the consociational structure of the country's power system affiliates different security apparatuses with specific parties,' clashes between security forces and male protesters are often (and at times unjustly) associated with a party-on-party contestation of space.

citizen acting outside these confines. Moreover, the iconicity of her kick not only breaks male hegemony over the masculinized sphere of political expression, but also on masculinized modes of enacting dissent.

6.3. Modes

6.3.1. Subverting the "Female" and the "Feminine"

Women in public spaces are often acknowledged within the scopes of either their 'femininity' or 'femaleness.' Pulling from the works of Weber and Foucault, Ferguson (1994) draws a distinction between "femininity" and "femaleness" that I find useful in analyzing the roles patriarchal organizations assign to women on the streets. The complexity of women's experience in a masculinized space, as per Ferguson, can be summarized within two frames: women "as subordinates (the site of production of 'femininity') and as caregivers (the site of production of 'femaleness')."[34]

Similarly, female protesters on the streets are assigned the roles of either subordinates or caregivers. In most organizational matter but especially when things hold the potentiality of turning violent, women are either gendered as 'mothers', 'protectors', and caregivers that inhibit an escalation of violence between security forces and protesters—here automatically gendered as 'men', or as second-class protesters that are relegated to the rear to be protected and shielded by the men in the

[34] A necessary caveat is required in this section. The following analysis does not seek to romanticize one form of protest over the other. Nor does it aim to invalidate the worthiness of women's participation within these traditional tropes. Indeed, these roles were often exactly what was needed during heightened militancy and escalations of violence, as was the case of the mother's marches in Chiyyah and Ain el Remmaneh, for example. The following section aims to show how Alawiyye's kick communicated to a female public diverse ways of appearing and participating on the streets previously made unavailable to them by the patriarchal appropriation of space and conduct.

front. These tactics plays on stereotypes that female participation is either always peaceful or hindersome.

In the first case, “femaleness” is employed to deter state violence and disciplinary power by building on assumptions that law enforcement personnel will refrain from exercising force against women. A report issued by UN Women 58 days after the events of the night asserts that “since the onset of event, women have been widely recognized for their persistence in serving as physical buffers between *protesters* and security forces in moments of tension” (Wilson et. al, 2019, emphasis added). This statement not only reinforces the assumption of women receiving special treatment during clashes, but also sets women apart from the rest of “protesters” who are here automatically gendered as male. The report goes on to cite the caregiving duties women have taken up on the street such as “cooking for protestors, collecting and distributing winterization needs, [and] setting up psychosocial first aid services” (2019). These notions reinforce stereotypes of the ‘noncombative’ female protester and undermine the numerous historical and contemporary instances ‘special treatment’ was proven false the moment top-down orders are issued and women on the forefront bear the brunt of the crackdown (Chapter 1 being case in point).

In the second case, female protesters are gendered in terms of their “femininity” as more fragile and less threatening than their male counterparts. Femininity is evoked to justify sidelining women and relegating their protest to what Asef Bayat would describe as “quiet encroachments,” or passive and fragmented forms of pushback, as opposed to “the rapid, total, and violent political revolutions that have radically altered countries” (2013).

Alawiyye's image severed ties with both tropes by featuring a woman enacting combatant behavior. Neither there to cower nor to protect, Alawiyye's presence is a blow to the traditional roles assigned to women in male-led mobilization.

6.3.2. Subverting the Sexualization

Another way the image of Malak Alawiyye inverts traditional tropes is with its subversion of the image of the Lebanese woman. As Lebanese women inundated the streets and protest photography, they were treated to a panoply of objectifying coverage in local and regional media. Stereotypes of fetishizing and objectifying Lebanese women reduce their political activism to spectacle. Public headlines like "Lebanese Babes: All the beautiful women are 'revolutionary'"[35] and comments from figures of the Arab political elite[36] create an echo chamber for the sexualizing discourse spreading online. These stereotypes paint a parochialized view of the Lebanese female protester in terms of their sexuality and looks rather than their political grievances. Rising from the pabulum of objectifying media that constitutes women *through* and *for* the male gaze, the image of Malak kicking the bodyguard popularized a transformation in the role women play in hyper-masculinized public spaces.[37] Following Turner's theorization on rupture and liminality, Alawiyye's kick served as a "symbolic behavior [that] signified the detachment of the individual or the group from either an earlier fixed point and the

[35] Article run in the Saudi daily *Okaz* on Oct. 21, 2019.

[36] One example is the meme shared by the son of toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Alaa. The post depicted female protesters from Lebanon and was captioned: "If people like these had come out here on 25 January, Alaa and Gamal themselves would have gone to the square and chanted against their own father." The date referred to the events of January 2011, during which violent protest overthrew the Mubarak regime.

[37] This does not nullify Alawiyye's subjection to androcentric descriptions like "*ekht rjel*" (a sister of men).

social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions" (Turner 1969, p. 96). The artwork immortalizing it amplified that into a communal segregation from the status quo.

Seen not as an object of fantasy, nor a subordinate or a human shield, Alawiyye's visibility triggered a shift in the popular discourse surrounding female protesters in general, and Lebanese ones in particular. Although subsequent discourse and events saw women reprising more traditional roles, Alawiyye's image served as an initial break from the old norm of male-centric spheres of mobilization and helped question the merit of hyper-masculinized modes of protest.

6.4. Notes on the Ubiquitous 'They'

The text in the image that went on to become an icon of the uprising is, in one sense, symptomatic of what some claim ultimately caused its downfall. Since the inception of the Lebanese nation-state, Lebanon's polity has been fraught with contestations on statehood, identity, and belonging.[38] The October 17 Uprising was a place where these contestations converged, were negotiated, and ultimately clashed. The ubiquitous 'they' in Kanso's graphic is a clear indication of the failure to resolve these contestations. 'They' could be the bodyguards, the state, the henchmen of corrupt politicians, the crooked elite—but even then, 'they' is not explicated.

As it was in part a response to the political class's inability to provide basic services and address widespread economic hardship, the uprising brought people from

[38] Since its inception as a safe haven for the minorities of the area, Lebanon has been ruled via consociational political system that was intended to promote communal harmony and protect minority rights, but over time it has become a source of tension and conflict. More in the works of Joseph (2008), Majed (2017), Cammett & Issar (2010), and Mikdashi (2011), among others.

the different ends of the spectrum together into the rapid and everchanging arena of a budding revolution that posited the people in direct confrontation with the regime. Yet, who 'the people' were and what 'the regime' entails were all still up for debate. During the first few days of protest, a deeper exploration of these debates was backgrounded with the adoption of slogans like *"kellon ya'ni kellon*," or "all means all." The mantra was used to assert the protesters' awareness of the interconnectedness of the various ends of the political establishment, and their understanding of the caveat that the fall of the regime entails not the toppling of a dictator but rather the destabilization of all the figures governing Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. However, it was also used to circumvent the negotiation of who these figures are, in part to appease and appeal to protesters with affiliations from different ends of the spectrum. Eventually, when the time came to expound on the 'all,' the once rallying chant became a divisive one. One example is seen in the withdrawal of loyalist components of the uprising after chants of "all means all, and Nasrallah is one of them" began. [39] On this regard, Al-Amine (2022) writes, "chants singling out politicians—running the sectarian gamut from Gebran Bassil and Nabih Berri to Saad Hariri, Walid Joumblatt, and Samir Geagea—brought out growing defensiveness within party ranks."[40]

The 'all' in the now infamous chant was evoked in a manner identical to the 'they' in Kanso's illustration. Who 'they' are was left undefined, and ultimately, was

[39] Nasrallah is the prime minister of the Hezballah party and has been a key figure of the Lebanese political establishment for the past 18 years.

[40] The aforementioned are the leaders of five of the most influential parties in the political milieu of Lebanon.

the main reason different groups of protesters could not organize more potently.[41] To retrospectively analyze the implications of Kanso's graphic of Alawiyye would be to recognize how its visual components paradoxically serve as signifiers of both an initial strength and later shortcoming of the 2019 uprising. "The study of iconic images makes it very clear that "What they 'mean'. . . is not necessarily fixed or stable over time!"" (Orvell, 2003; as cited in Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 28), Alawiyye's iconicity, therefore, can be read as a harbinger of both the spark and a major pitfall (if not downfall) of the 2019 uprising an uprising.

6.5. Conclusion

By becoming a visual icon of a national uprising, Alawiyye was told her kick is no longer hers alone: "it belongs, now, to all the Lebanese who, just like her, believe in change" (Chahine, 2019). The iconicity of her kick served as a separation from the extant status quo that had left many citizens—namely women and vulnerable groups—outside the realm of public discourse, and indeed, the state's interest. As a "kickback," Alawiyye's transgression not only defied the disenfranchisement, but also served as a wake-up call to both the people and the authorities that these voices will no longer be relegated to the rear. Yet, Alawiyye's image is only one of many images featuring women putting their lives and bodies on the line. Images of thousands of women confronting state's violence and contesting the masculinization of protest flooded streets and screens alike, creating a visual archive of the feminization of an uprising.

[41] Groups' failure to rally and organize around ideas of common interest is a key, but not exclusive, cause for the uprising's ultimate withering out. Such a simplistic analysis does not take into account the violent state crackdown, aggressive counterrevolutionary campaigns orchestrated by benefactors of the regime, the onset of the Covid pandemic, economic collapse and the sudden breakdown of social and economic structures of welfare, as well as various diversionary tactics employed by the political elite to contain the movement's explosivity.

Lebanon's October 17 Uprising was a watershed moment in the way women's political livelihoods and participation in public dissent has been understood.[42] Within the broader scope of social movements in the region, the rise of intersectionality as an approach to politics in Lebanon's feminized uprising can also be read a precursor of its full-blown adoption in Iran's subsequent and ongoing feminist uprising. The following chapter goes beyond the study of *an* iconic image to consider a set of images that capture an action that is iconic in its own right.

[42] Women's participation in street mobilizations is largely credited with the uprising's departure from parochialized approaches to protest and agency in favor of a more intersectional understanding of collective struggles. More can be found in the works of Sfeir (2022) and Majed & Salman (2019).

CHAPTER 7

IRAN

Figure 20. An undated picture of Jina (Mahsa) Amini provided by her family to the media (Source Iran Wire)

On the 13th of September 2022, a 22-year-old woman named Jina (Mahsa) Amini from Iran's Kurdistan region is detained by 'morality police' while on a visit to Tehran for allegedly failing to wear her headscarf 'properly'. Three days later, she dies in a hospital while still in police custody. On the fourth day, hundreds of women remove their headscarves and chant against mandatory *hijab*s at Amini's funeral in her hometown of Saqqez. Overnight, the protests would spread to other regions of the Kurdish province and reach the Iranian capital, where university students would pick up the torch and march out against the compulsory *hijab* and the oppressive policies of the

Islamic Republic. As dissent mounted, thousands would take to the streets in what would become "the longest running anti-government protests in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution" (BBC, 2022).

The protests have since evolved into a nationwide feminist[43] uprising that generated a barrage of visuals for consumption, dissemination, and discussion. Images permeated public screens with evocations of revolution, under *#MahsaAmini* and alongside the now renowned slogan *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* or "Women, Life, Freedom."[44] Among the most salient images of the uprising are that of women *en masse* cutting their hair in streets and on camera, as well as of schoolgirls shedding their headscarves and flipping off photographs of the Ayatollah in classrooms (Figure 21).

Amini became a household name for anyone following world news or interested in the study of social movements. She became a symbol for the Islamic Republic's oppression of its female subjects and the first person to be posthumously included into *Forbes*' list of "The World's 100 Most Powerful Women 2022" (Forbes, 2022). Her death, as per the *New York Times* headline, "became Iran's 'George Floyd moment'" (Miller, 2022). For the course of this chapter, however, I do not analyze the connotations of Amini's most viral image (Figure 20). Rather, I explore a prominent set of images her death engendered—those of women protesting through public ceremonies of cutting their hair. In cinematography, the physical transformation of the body is used

[43] Because they challenge a patriarchal structure that oppress women and other minorities as a window to dismantle broader systems of oppression, the mass mobilizations bear the markers of a feminist uprising, through and through. I will be referring to them as such.

[44] While not the subject matter of this chapter, it should be noted that both the hashtag and the slogan that became associated with Amini's iconicity efface her Kurdish identity and the nuances of her struggle as a woman of an ethnic minority in the Islamic Republic. 'Mahsa' is a Persian name forced upon Amini by the state, as all Kurdish Iranians are required to take up Persian names for easier inscription into Farsi (Hassane, 2022). Moreover, the slogan *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* is the Farsi iteration of the original Kurdish motto *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*, that came into play during the Kurdish Women's Movement of the late twentieth century (Dean, 2019).

to allude to an internal one, and cutting one's hair in film has often been used to signify a pivotal moment in a character's development—an evolution that sends the protagonist beyond the point of return. This idea guided this chapter and inspired my focus on the visuals of women cutting their hair during the #MahsaAmini movement. I use the concepts of "image events" and "ritual" to argue that these images signal a "moment of rupture" in the social structure of Iran, which can be used to theorize on the potential of the 2022 uprising turning into a cultural revolution. While previous chapters explore the images that capture singular women in different moments of protest, this chapter looks at a set of images of multiple women performing a unified act of protest. By looking at the images as a whole, I go beyond the iconic image and into what could be described as iconic action, to argue that in transforming their bodies the women are not only upheaving the politics of visuality that govern them in public, but also causing a breakdown in the (un)civil order that oppresses them..

Figure 21. A viral image of Iranian schoolgirls, having removed their headscarves, raising their middle fingers at a framed photo of Supreme Leaders Khomeini and Khamenei (Source: Twitter @Amir Kassaei). [45]

[45] Can be found at https://twitter.com/AmirKassaei/status/1579981599659417601/photo/1

7.1. Pre-Uprising Context

While Amini's image depicts her in a tacit form of resistance that the government constitutes as "bad *hijab*," the viral images of women that came out to protest her death herald a new age of dissent not content with simply negotiating with the regime on its terms. The following section presents a brief history of the forced veiling, unveiling, and acts of resistance to them in Iran prior to Amini's death.

7.1.1. Hijab[46] from Shah to Ayatollah

There have been lengthy discussions on Muslim women's veil and the associated political agenda in Muslim nations (Bilge, 2010; Gökarıksel, 2009; Macdonald, 2006; Shirazi, 2010). The multifaceted nature of the different types of *hijab*, as well as the plethora of political and cultural meanings and functions it has been evoked with, demonstrate the complexity of restricting it to an outward act of religiosity (Shirazi, 2003). Moreover, as a multivalent symbol that has been used to connote different things in different settings, the *hijab* has been fraught with histories of imposition, exposition, and contestation. It has at times served as a means of providing stability and moral protection for women in public spaces (Hessini, 1994), a way of exhibiting ethnic identity (Nagata, 1995), a token of democratic resistance against Western powers (Charrad, 1998; Macdonald, 2006), a tool of colonial subjugation (Fanon, 1967), and a symbol of patriarchal ideology among others.

In Iran, the *hijab* was used as a cultural and political statement by different political actors at different times of the nation's formation. In 1936, Shah Reza Pahlavi

[46] *Hijab* refers to the attire and attitude of faithful male and female Muslims, despite the tendency to limit *hijab* policy and practices to female Muslims. For the purpose of this chapter, I will be using the word as it has been appropriated in most contexts, to refer to a Muslim woman's headscarf or veil.

was inspired by the Westernization process he witnessed in Turkey and set out to create a uniform body politic with a "modern" appearance (Ansari, 2007). "Modernizing," however, meant following the codes set by the arbiters of the "modern," and in his attempts to homogenize the body politic, Reza Shah imposed a Europeanized dress code upon the Iranian public, both male and female.[47] In 1936, he issued a decree known as "*kashf-e hijab*," or "unveiling," that banned all forms of headcovering and instructed the police to forcefully remove women's *hijab* when worn in public (El Guindi, 1999; Paidar, 1995; Zahedi, 2007). The events of the violent unveiling of 1936 not only left a large, unforgettable mark on the psyche of the Iranian nation (Gordon, 2016)[48] but also made clear that Iran's newly centralized state would have a monopoly on the bodies of its citizens.[49] Subsequently, during the 1979 revolution that saw different factions of women—secular, religious, communist, and liberal—participating massively, some ethnic and religious women reclaimed the veil not simply as an outward expression of modesty, religiosity, or cultural attachment, but as an exercise of self-autonomy. By 1981, fundamental Islamist rhetoric had officially supplanted the diverse voices of the 1979 revolution, and Iran's cultural revolution had completed its transition into an Islamic one. Unironically, however, the epochal revolution that toppled the shah went on to reproduce his fixation on appearance and entrench the extension of state hegemony onto female bodies introduced by his policies. The post-revolution authorities mandated the compulsory use of *hijab* by all women, despite strong

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[47] For more, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in ed. Deniz Kandiyoti's *Women, Islam and the State* (1991).

[48] For more, see *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran* (Baraheni, 1977).

[49] The notion that the body was at the center of the modernized state was central to Pahlavi allegories of nationalism. The Pahlavi regime's national anthem was "*Cho iran nabashad tan-e man mabad*" meaning, "Without Iran, my body would not exist" (Moallem, 2005).

opposition from the Iranian women who participated in it (Moghadam, 1993; Paidar, 1995). Since the shah's unveiling was elicited for the forced Europeanization of the country, the veil was constructed as a form of resistance to Western ideology and secularism (Najmabadi, 2005), as well as an ideological and political symbol of the Islamic Republic itself (Paidar, 1995, pp. 341-344). Whether they approved of it or did not, women's bodies became the site of cementing the newfound Republic's anti-Western and anti-secular identity.

Feminist scholarship has established that the male gaze controls the boundaries demarcating the space of the public (Brook, 1999). Non-masculine bodies are admitted into this space according to a set of rules and regulations that are never fixed or static. In Iran, the *hijab* was used by different arbiters of the state to regulate and discipline how and why women can appear in public. The Islamic Republic's mandatory *hijab* operates through a politics of visuality that purports to shield its female subjects from the male gaze but ends up reinforcing it. These same politics of visuality constitute women as second-class citizens and aim to neutralize their agency. Far from being apolitical, however, Iranian women resorted to different methods for resisting the transgression on their liberties.[50] Public unveilings served as bold and spectacular rejection of the mandate, but such actions were sporadic, unable to sustain meaningful deliberation, and ultimately incapable of generating collective action. [51] Furthermore,

[50] For more, see "A Women's Non-Movement: What It Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State" (Bayat, 2007); "The History of Anti-*Hijab* Protests and the Fight for Women's Rights in Iran" (Han, 2022); and "The Woman with a Gun" (Gordon, 2016), among others.

[51] One such example occurred in December 2017, when a woman named Vida Movahed removed her *hijab* on top of a platform on Tehran's Enghelab Street (Figure 22). She was arrested on the spot. Although pictures and video of "the Girl of Enghelab Street" went viral and sparked a wave of similar acts of protest under the hashtag #GirlsofRevolutionStreet (*Enghelab*, or *enqilab*, means 'revolution' in Farsi). However, the movement quickly died down.

faced with the threats of fining and imprisonment, women began to voice their dissent *through* the *hijab* rather than against it.

Figure 22. Vida Movahed, known as "the Girl of *Enghelab*/Revolution Street," protests compulsory veiling by removing her white scarf and raising it on a pole in December 2017 (Source Abaca Press).

7.1.2. Green, White, and "Bad"

Various forms and iterations of the mandatory *hijab* have been appropriated by Iranian women to express different political statements. The *hijab* began to assume its place as a political tool for resisting the government during the 2009 presidential elections. A massive oppositional movement spearheaded by Mir-Hussein Mussavi, the reformist candidate, garnered significant support from 20–30-year-old urban women, against then-incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Green was the color of the Mussavi campaign, and his supporters began wearing green clothing or green straps on their wrists to show their support. Women extended the "Green Movement" to their *hijab* by wearing green scarves, manteaux, and headbands (Figure 23). The use of green clothing and *hijab* gained more visibility than any other electoral tool and became a

powerful signal of political identity to all (Koo, 2014). Ultimately, the green *hijab* became a symbol of political protest against the regime and a metaphor for citizens' aspirations for change (Fischer, 2010, p. 52; Koo, 2012).

In 2017, the nonprofit organization My Stealthy Freedom started the White Wednesday movement, a campaign that invites men and women to wear white veils, scarves, or bracelets on Wednesdays to show their opposition to the mandatory veiling code. The campaign was accompanied by the circulation of participants' images under the #WhiteWednesday. In the words of Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist and activist who launched the movement, "this campaign is addressed to women who willingly wear the veil, but who remain opposed to the idea of imposing it on others. Many veiled women in Iran also find the compulsory imposition of the veil to be an insult. By taking videos of themselves wearing white, these women can also show their disagreement with compulsion" (Han, 2022).

Figure 23. Women draped in green raise their fists in support of Iranian reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi before the presidential election of 2009. Source: Ben Curtis/AP.

Another way women resist is through the employment of "bad *hijab*"—the offense Amini was detained for. "Bad *hijab*" refers to the practice of wearing the *hijab* in a way that does not conform to the Islamic Republic of Iran's guidelines for proper

hijab.[52] Iranian women have used “bad *hijab*” for different reasons: to express dissatisfaction with the restrictive dress code (Kar, 2011), to challenge the government's authority and descriptions of ‘immoral’ (Ashraf, 2012), to circumvent state persecution (Zangeneh, 2002), as a means of dissociating themselves from the politico-religious meanings communicated by ‘good’ *hijab*, as well as an expression of individuality and to satisfy personal appearance goals despite the law (Bayat & Hodges, 2022). In “A Women's Non-Movement: What It Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State,” Asef Bayat (2007) argues that the practice of “bad *hijab*” offers a form of instantaneous and unspoken communication between nonconformist women with similar "improper" outfits who might not even know one another. “By tacit recognition of commonalities expressed in style, behavior, or concerns,” women, simply by gazing in public spaces, are able to feel spontaneous empathy and affinity as they would have in common the threat of the moral police.

Overall, the different iterations of veiling in Iran serve as a multivalent sign that reveals different religious and political identities or affinities. It is a potent political tool used both by the Islamic Republic to exert control over individuals and by Iranian women as a means of resisting different identities and regimes (Zahedi, 2007, p. 95). The power of the 2022 uprising, however, lies in its outright rejection of all symbols and extensions of the regime’s hegemony.

[52] “Bad *hijab*” takes many forms, including wearing a headscarf that does not cover the entirety of a woman’s hair and wearing tight or revealing clothes.

7.2. Protest, Performance, & Passage

Among the most striking images coming out of the Iranian uprising are those of women burning their headscarves and cutting their hair in public. This public ceremony started on the streets of Saqez, Amini's hometown, early during the uprising and spread through the country like wildfire (Figure 24). Feminist activists and Iranian diaspora intercepted the symbolism of the ceremony, reenacting it in front of Iranian embassies and consulates around the globe (Figure 25). Recordings of these mediated performances spread through the internet, and hundreds of women began expressing their solidarity on the cybersphere by uploading clips of themselves trimming their hair on social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok under *#MahsaAmini*, *#IranRevolution2022*, and *#WomenLifeFreedom*.

Figure 24. An Iranian woman chopping off her hair in public to protest the death of 22-year-old Amini. (Source: Twitter)

Figure 25. (From left-to-right) Women in Venice, Seoul, New York City, and Zagreb chop off their hair during demonstrations. (Source Getty Images)

7.2.1. Hair Cutting Ceremonies

Hair is a particularly fertile and powerful bearer of meaning. Historically, hair has been imbricated with countless meanings—the least obscure of which is its association with femininity and femaleness (Mauss, 1934; Rubin, 1975; Weitz, 2004).

The ceremonious act of cutting one's hair, therefore, came to signify different things in different places and times in history.

Across cultures, mourning has been an occasion in which the treatment of hair is particularly important. Bartlett (1993) avers that tearing or shaving of head or facial hair were extremely ancient and widespread expressions of distress in medieval times that have carried on to some contexts today. In Southwest Asia and pre-Islamic Arabia, cutting hair has been used as a ceremony of protest and mourning that dates back at least a thousand years (Daryaee & Malekzadeh, 2014). The practice is cited in the *Shahnameh*,[53] a 1,000-year-old Persian epic written by Persia's most celebrated poet Ferdowsi (Ebrahim & Alkhaldi, 2022). Throughout the epic, hair is seen as a recurring motif and is often torn or cut to signify mourning, loss, or anger.[54] During the uprising that followed Amini's death, videos started circulating online of mourning women slashing their hair at the gravesites of their slain relatives as the death toll of the regime's crackdown on protesters piled up.[55]

The cutting of hair likely involves another form of protest in Iran. As a site where the Republic's hegemony over female bodies is made most apparent, hair is a not simply a marker of women's gender, but also of their gendered oppression. In the public sphere, women's bodies are regulated and disciplined by the male gaze, which ensures that the masculinity of the public domain remains protected from the potential chaos introduced by non-masculine, transgressive bodies (Hafez, 2014). Non-conformist

[53] Made of nearly 60,000 verses, the *Shahnameh* is a cultural mainstay in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan that chronicles the creation of the world and the Muslim conquest in the seventh century.

[54] When one of the major protagonists in the *Shahnameh*, Prince Siyavash, is executed, his wife Farangis and the girls accompanying her cut their hair to protest injustice.

[55] One such video can be found at https://bit.ly/3zXZ7zm

bodies are disciplined by means of certain requirements of the public domain, such as "prescriptive dress and body regulations intended to deemphasize female sexuality and submerge it into the general erasure or denial of body perceived as 'neutral' but in fact gendered masculine" (Brook, 1999, p. 113). To this extent, before the 2022 protests, women in the Islamic Republic had at times taken to cutting their hair as a means of "ungendering" their bodies to obscure the femininity the state oppresses (Saul, 2016).[56] Since a primary justification for veiling in the state's rhetoric is to undermine the 'moral threat' of female sexuality and femininity to the public, women have resorted to these practices of disguise and self-censorship on their bodies (along with the exercise of "bad *hijab*" discussed above) as a means of survival. The reappropriation of the act of hair-cutting in public and mediated performance during the 2022 uprising, on the other hand, became a tool of subversion that incapacitates the male-centric gender ideology that oppresses women's bodies. [57]

Public performance holds much potential for transformation for women who are otherwise construed as belonging to the private sphere and who, more often than not, are perceived as disruptive and unruly. In *Staging Politics and Gender: French Women's Drama, 1880-1923*, Cecilia Beach (1999) examines the way feminist activists in early 20th-century France utilized theatrical performances and other forms of public spectacle to challenge traditional gender roles and political power structures. She concludes that protests through staged enactment are not mere

[56] A prominent example is the tragic case of Sahar Khodayari, who disguised herself as a man to attend a football match in 2019. (Iranian women are prohibited from attending sports events.) After she was arrested by morality police and handed a two-year prison sentence, Khodayari immolated herself in front of a Tehran courtroom and died in September 2019.

[57] One such example is elucidated in a video testimony of a female protester cutting her hair. It can be found at https://twitter.com/bbcworldservice/status/1580590993841491969

forms of entertainment or political propaganda but elaborate and multifaceted performances that have the capacity to engender novel meanings and social realities. Since women's hair holds much significance in patriarchal ideology, the public performance of cutting hair can take on symbolic meaning as an enactment of a woman's refusal to be defined by markers of her gender and sexuality. Bordo (1993) has argued that re-envisioning new spaces or alternative bodily comportments can make a fissure in what is otherwise an impermeable system of power that undergirds society. By transforming and 'doing' their bodies differently in the hair cutting performances,[58] women in Iran are articulating new meanings and re-inscribing new understandings of how a woman's body in public space can appear.

7.2.2. Passage

Another dimension can be deduced from the study of hair-cutting ceremonies. As symbolic performances that create a rupture in the extant order to bring participants together in collective identity and solidarity, they are *rituals* that generate *communitas*. The two terms are explored ahead.

7.2.2.1. Rituals

Rituals are complex and multifaceted public performances characterized by "staged actions, words, images, sounds, and other sensory forms" that convey social, cultural, and religious meanings (Grimes, 2014, p. 11) and often involve "symbolic

[58] The phrase "doing" body is borrowed from Daphne Brooks' book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), in which she discusses how African American entertainers and performers in the early twentieth century engaged in "bodily insurgency" by reconstituting their bodies in ways that defied hegemonic notions of blackness. Their performances created a powerful counter-discourse to dominant narratives of race relations, showcasing the insurgent power of imaging cultural identity in grand and polyvalent terms.

transformations of the actors through their immersion in a culturally constructed system of meaning," (Bell, 1992, p. 17). Phrased succinctly by Geertz, a ritual is "a system of symbolic action in which words and other forms of symbolic expression are systematically coordinated and unified in the course of the enactment of a sacred drama" (1973, p. 44). Moreover, they are designed to communicate important cultural, religious, or social values.

As they involve multiple symbolisms in the Iranian context and adhere to the above descriptions, the events of hair cutting takes on ritualistic quality. Women coordinate and unify symbolic expressions of grief and rage within the act itself, as well as in the rhetoric of the digital images that it generated. Through "symbolically transforming" their bodies in staged actions, they partake in the enactment of a "sacred drama." The term "sacred drama" refers to the idea that the ritual is a performance that conveys a sense of meaning or significance that goes beyond the immediate actions taking place. This is evident in the way the events involved a scripted and structured series of actions intended to evoke a particular set of emotions, beliefs, or values well after their enactment in streets and homes. With their ability to create a sense of shared meaning or identity among its participants, rituals have a long history of application in social and political movements.

Several authors have theorized on the use of rituals in the social and political spheres. Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm (1992) explored how public rituals, such as parades and commemorations, are used in the contexts of nation building to foster a sense of national identity and belonging that mobilizes subjects into action. Foucault (1977) proposed the dominant structure's use of rituals to discipline and control masses through spectacle. Others examined the roles of rituals and symbols in resistance

movements (Scott, 1985), and, more pertinently, in social and political transformation (Turner, 1982; Jasper, 1997).

Jasper (1997) argues that rituals play a key role in social movements, as they help to create a sense of collective identity and mobilize support for a particular cause. Jasper's work also highlights the importance of emotions in social movements. He argues that emotions such as anger and solidarity—both of which are present in the haircutting images—are essential to mobilizing collective action, and that emotions are often communicated through symbols and rituals. The ritual of hair cutting plays a vital role in the Iranian uprising by creating a sense of shared identity and fostering emotional resonance among the women. These help develop what Turner refers to as "*communitas*" (Turner, 1969).

7.2.2.2. Communitas

C*ommunitas*, according to Turner, arises during certain ritual or liminal moments, when individuals experience a temporary suspension of social norms and hierarchies. Rather than the social stratifications, hierarchies, and divisions of labor that characterize everyday social structure, in *communitas*, there is a sense of common purpose and mutual support that transcends individual differences and social distinctions. As they shed their headscarves and come together for the ritual, the women "are stripped of their usual social roles and are brought into close contact with each other, creating a sense of unity and equality" (*ibid.*). *Communitas* thus describes a type of social experience that is characterized by a sense of collective identity, solidarity, and equality among individuals who are undergoing a shared transformative experience (*ibid.*).

Although first conceived in the context of rites of passage, *communitas* has since been developed by other anthropologists, and to a certain extent by Turner himself, to the study of social movements. Turner saw *communitas* as a potential source of social change, as it offers a glimpse of a more egalitarian and cooperative way of being. He argued that the experience of *communitas* can have a transformative effect on individuals and can lead to new forms of social organization and political action. The hair-cutting protests, therefore, are periods in which *communitas* is most felt because they create moments for otherwise separate individuals to "start to feel and act like a collective body with a sense of shared aims and goals, even worldviews, and become something much more than a social aggregate" (Thomassen, 2019, p. 691). For instance, while completing the ritual of cutting hair the woman would chant Mahsa Amini's name along the slogan of "you kill one, you kill all." Iranian and Kurdish political exiles, refugees, and diaspora participating in the ritual overseas would note feeling a connection, a sense of sisterhood, and/or the rekindling of belonging to the nation. Video footage and artistic reimaginations of the ritual have been accompanied with captions like "I stand with my sisters," "We are Mahsa," and "We Are Countless, We Are United, We Are Victorious," among other.[59] What this *communitas* has achieved seems to be a rupture in the social structure and cultural norms of Iran.

7.2.3. Image Event

As dramatic events performed in public and cyber spaces for widespread dissemination, the rituals of hair cutting are not only expressions of rage and grief

[59] Examples can be found at
https://twitter.com/ranarahimpour/status/1575264919666233348?s=46&t=7suoFB-Yyb_DZFRYPAi3Sw
https://twitter.com/Terrence_STR/status/1590073813169209344?s=20
https://twitter.com/nasle_soukhte/status/1650349228542275585?s=46&t=7suoFB-Yyb_DZFRYPAi3Sw

or affirmations of body autonomy but also a prime example of "image events." An image event is "a publicized act or episode that produces a visual rupture within the flow of representation, a scene that demands to be interpreted and negotiated in a cultural context" (Mitchell, 1994). In the context of social movements, they are public actions or events designed to draw attention to a cause or issue (Delicath & Deluca, 2003). These events often involve dramatic visuals and can be used to create a powerful message that resonates with the public. The idea of the image event can be extended to other kinds of demonstrations and public presentations, such as rallies, performances, and other types of collective action. Iranian and Kurdish women, as well as sympathizers abroad, have turned to the use of "image events" to promote their message and gain attention in the public sphere/screen. Delicath and Deluca (2003) identify three significant functions of image events: 1) they animate and widen the possibilities for public debate; 2) they expand the opportunities for participation in the public sphere; and 3) they challenge popular discourse by generating new lines of argument. The following subsections examine how the image event of women's hair-cutting performances have been able to utilize all three.

7.2.3.1. Animating Public Debate

Image events produce moments of "generative argument" (Delicath and Deluca, 2003, p.324) and open up opportunities for debate by delivering argument in powerful and creative ways. As provocative gestures that involve public unveiling and a reconstitution of the way women's bodies have appeared and performed in public, the hair-cutting events serve as opportunities to fuel the

debate and argumentation Amini's death had already generated in Iran. Public debate is a key constituent of political life. In Iran, the Islamic Republic has a long tradition of invoking dialogue among conflicting components of its public through televised debates, public deliberation forums, and student debate tournaments. Unsurprisingly, these calls to dialogue are especially pronounced after unrest and during periods of contentious collective action. In "Iranians are Done Debating," Eshraghi (2022) demonstrates how these debates are unevenly constructed, somewhat diversionary, and ultimately fruitless in the processes of policymaking within the republic. The windows of argumentation opened up by the hair-cutting image events, however, transcend the ameliorative dialogue proffered by the regime in multiple ways.

The image events argue via their *format* (as visuals), as much as they do via their *form* (as nondeliberative contestation). As striking visuals that disrupt the deluge of words, the image events of women cutting their hair sidestep the logocentrism of the Republic's approach. By heavily featuring women, they overstep the androcentrism that dominates public discourse. Finally, by delivering the women's arguments through the act of protest itself, the image events "do not merely attract attention for a more traditional form of argument," but altogether skips the discursive digestion of argumentation the regime employs to absorb meaningful dissent. In this sense, the image events "constitute the site and substance of the argument" (Delicath & Deluca, 2003, p. 325). Whether these arguments are 'we shall mourn and rage in public', 'only we have the right to do with our bodies what we please', or 'watch us do away with these objects of your

fixation and ideology' is not the vital question, as the image event eventually allows, or rather invites, the exposition of all.[60]

7.2.3.2. Creating Broader Publics

The second key function of image events is their ability to broaden the scope of participation in the public sphere to include subaltern counter-publics. Put simply, subaltern counter-publics are groups that have been excluded from the forums of the public sphere by the rules of reason and the protocols of decorum (Fraser, 1990, p. 123). As mentioned in the previous sections, in Iran, groups and individuals—especially, but not only women—who are not supportive of the mandatory *hijab* and the Republic's rhetoric are forced to assume quieter ways to exist and resist. Dissent, even mild dissent expressed in public debates or through practices like "bad *hijab*," sets the individual apart from the domineering public and its acceptable logos. To this extent, the image events of haircutting subsume the rhetoric of the suppressed counter-publics by visually representing the women in overt resistance. Within Iran, the image events "challenge what is deemed appropriate, acceptable, and legitimate acts of participation, and extend the margins of the public sphere to include counter-publics who employ dramatic acts of protest to perform critique through spectacle" (Deluca, 1999, as cited in Delicath & Deluca, 2003). Outside Iran, the widespread circulation and reproduction of these image events both allowed for and was facilitated by the extension of this protest from the public sphere to the public screen.

[60] More in section 4.2.3.3.

The public screen is an adaptation of Habermas' public sphere that accounts for the various media platforms and technologies that shape and influence public discourse and communication. Originally coined by Deluca and Peeples (2002) in their analysis of mass media coverage of the 1999 anti-WTO protests, the concept was used to herald the emergence of new forms of participatory democracy via media. Scholars have since expanded on the original concept by examining how new media evolve the public screen through the proliferation of multiple nodes and screens for dissemination. The advent of social media, with its many-to-many model for spreading information, brings about significant transformations in the way publics both send and receive news, as well as how they participate in political discourse. Using the case of the Gezi Park protests, Carney and Marcella (2017) adopt the concept of a public screen to show how a movement in the technological era is built through the interplay of physical and mediated domains of protest. They conclude that the public screen has become a construct "that unites the canvas of the streets, mass media, and the mobile screens in our hands, and that mediates the formation of a public as well" (Carney and Marcella, 2017, p.164). In the era of smartphones and social media, therefore, Deluca and Peeple's public screen becomes a less figurative concept that holds even more valence.

Image events, as striking visuals that engender generative arguments, occupy prime real estate in the landscape of social media. The hair-cutting events, first performed on the streets of Iran, quickly found their way to the public screen through the images. The image events, therefore, capitalized on the relative freedoms afforded by social media, as well as its propensity to ocularcentric communication, to disseminate the topic. As they began traversing cyberspheres

with hashtag *#MahsaAmini* and headlines that situated them within a "revolution" (McGrath, 2022), the images not only communicated what was happening to other Iranians, but also initiated supporters into the newly expanded public sphere/screen. As the images travelled within Iran and abroad, the participatory nature of new media allowed supporters to align themselves with the women—whether through dissemination, reproduction, or both. The public's expansion was only augmented when the public image events were followed with the trend of women cutting their hair on camera from their homes. With their ability to penetrate all three— "the canvas of the streets, mass media, and the mobile screens in our hands," the image events of ceremonious haircutting expanded the public sphere of deliberation and mediated the formation of a movement (*ibid.*).

7.2.3.3. Presenting New Arguments

The third function of image events lies in their ability to generate new lines of argument that enhance public discussion and "expand the range of relevant rhetorics in social controversies" (Delicath & Deluca, 2003, p. 326). This is because they can implicitly advance alternatives to the conditions they are protesting, create room for disidentification with extant structures, and open up possibilities for new modes of thinking in the future.

Firstly, the image events of women unveiling and cutting their hair advance alternatives to the mandatory *hijab* and the persecution of women who do not adhere to the Republic's version of it. Both the *hijab* and the persecution are refuted within the act of protest present in the images. To draw upon Delicath & Deluca's example, the image events of public unveiling and haircutting argue

against the reduction of women's personhoods and vitality to labels of "good" or "bad" (*hijab*), the same way image events of Greenpeace activists spray painting the fur of baby seals argues against reducing the animals to economic resources. Secondly, the image events question the assumptions of the established order, and therefore refute not only the Republic's rhetoric, but also create opportunities for new identifications. The assumption that gets negated is the state's supposition that Amini's death will pass like others before it and that women will silently revert to their assigned public roles and norms of appearance. As for identification, the image events serve as a means for Iranian and Kurdish women to disassociate themselves from the political, religious, and non-agential identities ascribed to them within the Islamic Republic, as well as the complacent, subdued, or apolitical descriptions ascribed to them in dominant discourse abroad.

Finally, the image events of public unveiling and cutting hair imbed themselves in Iranians' public memory to "serve as inventional resources for future argumentation and deliberation" (Delicath & Deluca, 2003, p. 328). As they are born from and engender trauma, the hair-cutting images have taken up a central spot in public memory and the visual archive of the mobilizations. This will undoubtedly engage future audiences and make room for the construction of new arguments. Although presented by Delicath & Deluca in the context of televisual media, this argument is especially relevant in the era of social media, where visual archives are generally more expansive, accessible and, thus, in some ways more democratic.

The hair-cutting rituals were able to travel and rally support through the images they generated. French actresses, Turkish pop singers, and Swedish politicians were

seen taking scissors to their hair on social media above captions of Mahsa Amini. From photos and videos in TikTok reels and YouTube shorts, to artistic reproductions in various artworks, the visuals of these spectacular acts of protest were able to bestow new meanings both within Iran and without.

7.2.4. On Transition and Liminality

The hair-cutting performances, both as rituals and image events, have moved the country into a liminal state of being. With their ritualistic quality, they build a *communitas* that challenges the status quo and reminds the masses of "pure potentiality" (Tuner, 1969). As image events, they create a "rupture" not only in the visual "flow of representation" (Mitchell, 1994), but also in the fabric of societal life. Rupture, in this sense, can be interpreted as separation, or *segregation*, from the dominant structure—or the way things were. It is a permanent break from the old with the potential of bringing forth a new set of codes and rules. From Turnerian perspective, what comes next is a period of liminality.

Liminality refers to a state of in-betweenness, where the existing social order is suspended and new possibilities for social structure and meaning are created. Revolutionary times, more than any other period in modern history, represent those instants of "liminality" that Turner evoked. They occur within liminal temporalities where given hierarchies, social norms, and sacred values are brought into question and new possibilities emerge (Turner, 1969; Scott, 2002; Piven, 2006; Selbin, 2010; Bayat, 2010). As women in Iran unveil and transform their bodies in deliberate and collective action, they suspend the patriarchal norms and rules that govern society and open up hope for a feminist revolution.

7.3. Conclusion

Since the dawn of the #MahsaAminiMovement, hair-cutting rituals in the streets of Iran have been initiating participants into the *communitas*, while the visual and material permanence of these rituals—possible through their construction as image events—has been inviting spectators into that experience. Visuals of women and young girls in organized unveiling, hair cutting rituals, and acts of iconoclasm, altogether, signal a rejection not only of the mandatory *hijab*, but also of any effort at reconciliation or compromise on the issue. When Iranian athletes remove their headscarves and cover the national emblem on their uniforms in televised international sports events, they are not only heeding the call of the women who have been putting their lives on the line since September, but also fomenting the markers of a cultural transformation women have been communicating with their bodies. In the *Anthropology of Political Revolutions*, Thomassen (2012) argues that revolutions are not merely political events but also social and cultural ones, involving shifts in values, identities, and norms. Whether this feminist uprising evolves into a full-blown revolution that succeeds in achieving the protesters' goals is yet to be seen. However, with four confirmed executions, tens of thousands detained or arrested, and a humble estimate of five hundred casualties to the regime's violent crackdown, the popular uprising has entered its eighth month with no ebb in momentum. Dissidents—male, female, and everything in between—converge under the rallying cry of "Women, Life, Freedom." The slogan, along with the potpourri of demands coming forward, indicates the protesters' understanding of the interconnectedness of all three concepts, and that one cannot (continue to) exist without the other.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Women have long captivated the fields of imagery and visual imagination. They have been the subject of tireless symbolic associations through millennia. Iconic female figures have been hailed as the epitome of beauty, the embodiment of hedonistic desire, the harbingers of peace and the goddesses of war. From *Judith Slaying Holofernes* to *Liberty Leading the People* (Figures 26 and 27), women have been painted in everything from omens of destruction to the trope of "the heroic woman leading the comrades to victory" (Gordon, 2016). In revolutionary times, the figure of the female protester—whether as a revolutionary aspiration or victim, to borrow Lisiak's terms—has also been treated to a tirade of iconographic depiction (Figures 28—30).[61]

Figure 26. *Judith Beheading Holofernes* painting of the biblical episode by Caravaggio

Figure 27. *Liberty Leading the People* painting by Eugène Delacroix commemorating the July Revolution of 1830, which toppled King Charles

[61] For more, visit https://www.boredpanda.com/powerful-women-protesters/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic

Figure 28 Protester Ieshia Evans is detained by law enforcement during a BlackLivesMatter demonstration against the killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 9 July 2016

Figure 29 Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst is arrested at a demonstration outside Buckingham Palace, January 1914

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Figure 30 Occupy Wall Street poster by Adbusters.

The chapters on the female protesters from Egypt, Turkey, and Sudan explored the images of three women that became iconic via elements of their appearance. The chapter on Egypt's blue bra girl and Turkey's woman in red provided an overview of how the women's iconicity came into being, and what roles violence and the violation of the sanctity of female bodies serve in that. The chapter titled Sudan recounted some of the inequalities and exclusions involved in the production, composition, and afterlife

of an iconic image to show how iconicity can both instigate and overshadow meaningful conversations within the context it emerges from. The following chapter presented an argument for how the iconic image of a now-iconic kick signaled a change in the ways of doing things and helped feminize a national uprising, while the seventh chapter abandoned focus on an iconic image altogether in favor of analyzing the iconic action different women are partaking in through visuality.

The initial objective of this thesis was to weave a single thread through the iconic images that would mark a change in the visual representation of women in protest in the region. In keeping with the binary opposition Mitchell (2011) and Lisiak (2014) draw in their analyses of women in revolutionary iconography, I anticipated seeing my analysis flow from what I assumed were images of women in passive (in)action to images depicting women in more active and agential roles. The images of the women, it seemed to me, depicted women as objects being enacted upon to women as subjects enacting their own action. A deeper look, however, reveals the problematics of such an approach. To consider the images of the girl in the blue bra and the woman in red as passive would be to discredit the potency and agency involved in their protest. It would capitalize on the helplessness of the girl in the blue bra in the image at the expense of the different choices and decisions that brought her to the moment. For the woman in red, that would efface the bravery of Sungur's decision to stand her ground. Furthermore, by considering what the images depict an evolution in the representation of women's political participation would glamorize and validate one form of protest over the other. Instead of following in the European footsteps of categorizing things in binary oppositions, I reached the conclusion that reducing the women's iconcities

within two tropes—or four for that matter—would be a diminution in the conversations that can be had with and through them.

One of these conversations lies in the implied but not expanded theme that unites the iconic images of this study—their affective capacity. Iconic images engender powerful emotional responses that hold the capacity for affective engagement. Regarding the affective dimension of iconic images, Hariman and Lucaites write,

> "Iconic photographs concentrate and direct emotions. They are described as especially emotional images, and by their public character they channel affective response to animate roles and relationships. The emotions captured in the iconic image acquire additional significance because they become political emotions. Some images activate emotional responses such as civic pride or outrage that are overtly political, while others communicate feelings of pleasure or pain that become complexly political as they are folded into historical tableaus" (2007, p. 36).

At the risk of projecting a universal emotional response onto viewers of the images, it is more than likely that each of the iconic images engaged in this thesis was able to convey powerful messages and elicit visceral reactions, even without accompanying text or context. The affective power of these images was seen not only in their ability to become iconic and widely recognized symbols, but also in the lasting impact they had on the mobilizations and collective memory, serving as touchstones for respective publics' shared experiences and emotions.

Moreover, the images in this work all invite deeper engagement with multiple layers of analyses from a feminist studies point of view. From the photograph of the blue bra girl to the videos of hair-cutting, all of the protest visuals included (and perhaps overlooked) in this thesis offer rich grounds for exploring different aspects of the female experience and activism in the political commune. For instance, feminist inquiry into these visuals and their impact allows the investigation of not only female protesters'

relationship with the state, but also with public spaces, and their bodies. Furthermore, while each of these dimensions is ripe material for scrutiny in its own right, using the iconic images to unpack the entanglement of the above three can be a valuable tool for gaining insight on the muted experience of female activists in the region. Such examination would undoubtedly shed light on the diverse ways of being, appearing, and resisting women from SWANA employ while navigating life as female political subjects.

Over the course of writing this thesis, I grew disillusioned—as Hariman and Lucaites had while completing their book on photojournalistic icons—with the lasting impact visual icons can have on revolutionary discourse. What I have not grown disillusioned with, however, is the many ways these iconic images immortalize a history long relegated to the backburner: that of women butting their foreheads against the odds. Visual archives, be digital or physical, serve as, "platforms on which different versions of history do battle daily" (Barsalou, 2012). The importance of iconic images of female protesters, therefore, is not merely that they depict women at the forefront of revolutionary movements and mobilizations, but that they carve a space for writing history differently (figure 31). Expounding on the lasting impact of the viral images of female protesters during the Egyptian revolution, Salime (2016) concludes,

> "We are currently facing, reconstructing, and discussing new forms of memory that open up an access to the past that is distinct from and complementary to that which is provided by historical scholarship. Living

> memory gives way to a cultural memory that is underpinned by media–material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives."

The iconic images of women in protest are persistently initiating, negotiating, and reconstructing new forms of memory that unlock windows to a past that has been unjust in its treatment of female activists.

Figure 31. Image of the blue bra in Bahia Shehab's book A Thousand Times No. Caption reads: "Because writing history is resistance. Because telling a story over and over again so that it is not forgotten is resistance. Because I don't want to forget how it felt on the streets." (Source Instagram @Bahia Shehab)

However, "all memory is limited, of course, and no medium of representation can avoid exclusion" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 288). The digital sphere "confronts us with the paradoxical connection of unprecedented medial storage capabilities and the looming danger of cultural amnesia. Choosing and appropriating that which is worth remembering, however, becomes ever more difficult in the face of the sheer mass of digital information," writes Astrid Erli (2011). Thus, even while this thesis aspires to add to the bodies of work on the visual legacies of the region's mobilizations, it does so at the expense of obscuring the plights and experiences of countless named and unnamed female protesters, dissidents, and troublemakers who have not been treated to

moments of iconicity. The mobilizations of the past thirteen years saw tens of thousands of women in active protests on the streets. Due to the fast-paced nature of revolutionary movements and the barrage of visuals it engenders for proliferation and consumption, some, like Egypt's Alia el Mahdi or Algeria's "Broomstick Lady" received short-lived media attention that did not evolve to iconicity, while many others went by completely unnoticed. However, what I hope to have offered with this thesis is an academic stepping stool or extension for the archival projects underway to preserve the region's accounts of female activism that are constantly being lost to androcentric accounts of history. In the SWANA region, women have a long history and present of political activism and agency that has not yet been, nor is currently being adequately explored. Women's participation in matters of public debate and concern is neither new nor exceptional, and research that denies or overlooks their political activism is, at best, lacking, at worst, Orientalizing. The prominence female protesters have been recently receiving in media and public discourse only brings into focus what has historically been relegated to the sidelines.

Furthermore, while iconicity can and will often overshadow that which makes it possible, the very existence of this thesis is testament to the retrospection and reflection it invites. The iconic images of female protesters, I would argue, help create spaces and opportunities for the commemoration and engagement of other female activists and moments that evade the ephemeral spotlight. I have, for instance, been reminded of the different moments of transnational solidarity the iconic images invited to happen (Figures 32—36). From an Egyptian protester evoking the figure Turkey's woman in red to a spray painting of a blue bra popping up on the streets of Beirut, the thread I had missed was there. It only needed picking up.

Figure 32 Women in Beirut hold a banner that reads "A Salute to Sudan's revolutionary women," April 2019 (Source Twitter).

Figure 33 Sudanese protesters raise a banner that reads "From Sudan: A Salute to the Revolutionary women of Lebanon," Oct 2019 (Source Twitter).

Figure 34 Women in Beirut raise a photo of Jina Amini with the slogan "Woman is Life, Life cannot be killed!" (Source Associated Press)

Figure 35 "Freedom in Arabic, Kurdish, and Farsi" image from text by Leila Sh. for *Khateera* (Instagram @khateera)

Figure 36 Graffiti, a ballerina twirls over the Arabic word for 'revolt' (in feminine, singular, imperative form), Beirut, Lebanon. The figure of a revolutionary ballerina was made popular in New York during the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011. [Source Unknown]

"Didn't we Syrian women take to the streets because of the courage of Palestinian, Egyptian, Tunisian, and Libyan women?
Didn't Lebanese women come out because of the courage of Sudanese women?
Didn't Iranian women come out because of the courage of Syrian women, Lebanese women, Palestinian women, Algerian women, Yemeni women, Egyptian women, Tunisian women, Libyan women, Sudanese women, Iraqi women, and so on and so on?
Won't more women come out after the Iranian women? And isn't the common/unifying word for us in Arabic, Kurdish and Persian: freedom?"

Figure 37 Excerpt from text titled "Freedom in Arabic, Kurdish, and Farsi" by Leila Sh. posted on Khateera, October 26, 2022.

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