"Art in the Arab Spring"

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**Introduction**

One of the main factors that triggered the series of Arab Spring revolutions is the Arab individual’s incapability of self-expression due to the censorship and freedom of expression issues that exist in the core of the Arab society. This is due to the dictatorial values that the Arab governments are renowned for. Nevertheless, the Arab individual has been implicitly forced to shift their attention into how to express themselves. Although there are various different forms of self-expression such as revolting, writing, boycotting, etc. there is also the rebellious action of making art, in all its forms.

The controversy of art in itself is that it is not an illegal act in most societies, and therefore it has become a powerful tool of expression of visual communication that uses very little words. Its power lies in it being a universal language, as people of different nationalities and ethnicities may speak different languages and that may create a barrier between them. However since the illiteracy rates in the Arab World are very high, visual communication is considered to be the best solution for self-expression. Thus, all individuals of these societies will fully understand and get the visual message while their governments forbid their freedom of expression. Furthermore, as governments began to realize how powerful the visual communication tool is, especially in Middle Eastern countries, some have banned it. To exemplify, graffiti was an illegal act in Egypt, long before the events of the Arab Spring revolutions that took place. Even in Mubarak’s regime, it was used to express not only controversial political messages to the then-reigning regime, but it has also served as a tool of social and cultural changes.

Nevertheless, it is not only graffiti that is an artistic expression and was directly affiliated with the Arab Spring, but other forms of art were also as involved such as: poetry, music and films. Also, it is not only in the Egyptian society in which these various forms of revolutionary self-expressionist art have been implicated in, but also in other Arab countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Morocco and also Bahrain. All these different rebellious artistic and creative acts have predicted the Arab uprisings before anything else did. In our research, we are conducting an in-depth analysis of the different art forms in Egypt and Tunisia, covering everything from graffiti to music to films.

**Egyptian Revolutionary Art**

All forms of art affected the Egyptian revolution, from poetry to movies reflecting the oppression Egypt has come to as well as the different street graffiti, all was vivid and of huge impact for rebels. From Ahmed Fouad Negm to Khaled Youssef, all artists and influencers started revolting in their own forms to the underground bands such as the contemporary X Factor finalists “Young Pharoz” and graffiti artists.

**Egyptian Poetry**

Many poets have had an influence before and after the revolution, the most known poet is the late Ahmed Fouad Negm. He had an exceptional influence on the people, coming from Al Sharkeya, Delta, Ahmed Fouad Negm was named the poet of the people, as he was a major influencer writing poetry that everyone could understand, sophisticated and rich, yet he never used incomprehensible vocabulary for the mass majority of Egypt. Along illiteracy and poor education Negm’s poetry seemed to have impact on everyone for he used to simply write words that reflected the daily hardships seen by him and other common citizens alike. Negm used to write very influential poetry that Al Sheikh Emam reflected upon them in songs and had a considerable impact since the 1967 setback. Negm as a loved poet was chosen by the poor to represent them in the United Nations, was named by President Sadat The Obscene Poet. Negm was imprisoned for 18 years because his art was seen as a threat to the government yet after his release his influence was not affected and was referred to as Egypt’s Revolution Poet. He played a major role in the public’s opinion from 1967 to 25 January protests against Egypt’s ruling elite as he included the ruling family brutally in his poetry that reflected the country’s situation, even after his death,  he still remains influential until this day. Negm is not the only poet that had an impact on the public, but other Egyptian poets like  Abdelrahman Al Abnudi the famous Egyptian poet, Hesham ElGokh a very famous poet also from Southern Egypt, and Tamim Elbarghouti all had an influence before, during, and after the revolution on the public and reflecting the people’s voice.

**Egyptian Graffiti**

Graffiti is street art that is not restrained to drawings but includes writing. Before the revolution graffiti was not abundant, but it existed specially by the Ultras who had a significant role in the revolution against oppression, but during and after the revolution graffiti’s presence was significant as this form of art was used to commemorate events, remember victims, refute the regime, and implicate positive social and cultural change.

Various graffiti artists have created strong entities and social groups that stand for social values and norms that the Egyptian society lacked in all the years of oppression. For example, “Rabetat Fanany Al Thawra”, which translates to “Revolution Artists Union”, gave the world insights of the revolution through their art that was present in Tahrir Square during and after January 2011 protests, some of their art is still found on the American University in Cairo’s walls in the downtown campus at the Mohamed Mahmoud gate, but others were removed by the government. The union had world witness their famous Mubarak KFC graffiti on the restaurant’s walls and proceeded in all fields of art to show the whole world that Egypt will remain the capital of culture in all times and to assure that the 25th revolution is still continuous in all aspects of the Egyptians’ lives as cultural revolution, this is according to their Facebook page. Also, one of the most famous graffitis after the 25th of January revolution is one by art historian Bahia Shehab, which is titled ‘No and Thousand Times No’ translated from the arabic proverb ‘La w Alf La’. She created a thousand ‘no’s in arabic script and started spraying some of them on the walls of Cairo, adding messages such as ‘no to military rule’, ‘no to violence’ and ‘no to a new pharaoh’ just to name a few. Her sprayed graffiti reflected hugely the feelings of all the people in Cairo and that is why it became a success.

Graffiti in the streets of Egypt erupted in January 2011 and was of great importance and presence that several books and different media sources portrayed it and talked about it. From the very famous individuals whose work had a great influence and shaped them as artists were Aya Tarek, Ganzeer, The Sad Panda, and Shank among several other graffiti artists that brought their work to the streets as a form of liberation against the oppression they have witnessed from the regime. These graffiti pieces had and still have an impact and some artists still draw in the streets to express themselves but after the revolution, it is prohibited and always painted over them as it is considered vandalizing public property.

**Egyptian Music**

As all forms of art, music had a role in affecting the public’s opinion as previously mentioned Sheikh Emam in 1967 setback to modern day young artists and bands. As young people do best, musicians started expressing their feelings in what they could do, thus the oppression and constrains they went through translate into music, some bold enough to name the regime and point figures, other addressing problems. These bands emerged addressing both social and political problems from the youth point of view, a lot of youth relating to them, the bands became so famous and brought to the news, some of these bands are Masar Egbary from Alexandria, Like Jelly in Cairo, Abo w Elshabab in Cairo, Young Pharoz, and the individual singer Yousra Al hawary; these artists have addressed a range of social, political, and economic problems that got to thousands if no millions of youth and were and still are demanded at the time by the people who will not settle except for the original demands of the revolution.

Music also dated back to deep-rooted events as the settlement of Port Said more than 150 years back. The Port Saidy band El Tanbura that was fromed in 1978 was present in the original revolution days from the 25th of January to 11th of February where they performed several nationalists songs some of them dates back to the first settlement of Port Said, another that dated back to the tripartite aggression, and multiple songs that affected the protestors and charged them with power and will to stand up for the oppression and not go home until they reach the change they deserve after being through a lot of oppression from the colonial powers to the dictatorial regime and that left them with undefeated power to resist.

**Egyptian Movies**

Before the revolution, many directors and actors were worried about the situation the country is going for, as cinema and television are not only for entertaining but also for reflecting the reality of different societies. Some movies played a role in reflecting the unacceptable oppression the country have come to specially within slums, rural areas, and lower classes; others were portraying the abundant wealth of the ruling families, business men, and the upper class that triggered the poor to speak up for their needs and the middle and upper classes to stand up for a regime that did not defend and deliver the citizens humane life conditions in which they can live with dignity.

“Heya Fawda” or “Chaos” by Khaled Youssef was one of the most controversial movies before the revolution as it portrayed oppression on several levels, from the police misusing their authorities to the poor who cannot defend themselves provide shelter, food, or security just because they are poor. Portraying unimaginable imagery to the elite, directing hand in hand with Youssef Chahine for the very last time, this movie have created unlimited controversy that people started denying the facts portrayed in the movie and say that this country does not have these extremes, yet it was key factor in shaping the public’s opinion about the police abusing their authorities and killing people in the prisons without anyone knowing about it until the famous incident of Khaled Said.

**Tunisian Revolutionary Art**

Just as the revolutionary art movements have evolved in all the Arab countries in which uprisings took place, Tunisian revolutionary art has evolved just as much, if not more. All sorts of revolutionary art have been used to express the feelings of the Tunisian people, from graffiti to rap to cartoon and caricature, dedicated to different topics concerning the events and sentiments reflected on the people pre, during and post the revolution; such as: the martyrs who died in clashes with the government, Bouazizi, drug abuse, etc.

**Tunisian Graffiti**

The incident of Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire, committing suicide, because of the humiliation, lack of respect, oppression, and the lack of freedom of expression that he and many others like him go through in Tunisia, was the trigger of not only the Tunisian revolution, but the rest of the Arab Uprisings. His face is used in Tunisia from then on as a symbol of resistance and the undefeatable values of the revolution. Stenciled on murals all over Tunisia, the image of Bouazizi gives hope to people and reminds them that the fight is not over, and the reason why he has committed suicide has not been yet entirely diminished.

Tunisian graffiti mostly reflects on the losses the people have been through during their revolution against Bin Ali’s autocratic regime. Another famous Tunisian graffiti is the one in remembrance of the martyrs who died in clashes with the police and the government.

**Tunisian Music**

Rap in Tunisia has been very popular for a very long time, even at the time where Bin Ali was still reigning the country. Nevertheless, then it was very hard for Tunisian rappers to rap freely or write their lyrics expressing their opinions freely, they were limited back then to writing about unemployment and social injustice without referring to the regime. After overthrowing his autocratic system, there became a great liberty for rap artists in communicating their ideas and ideologies freely, with no barriers of certain topics or censorship. Tunisian musicians say that they are not people who can express themselves on usual or orthodox platforms offered by their government, such as the media or the press, and so music with all its genres, is one of their untraditional means of expressing their ideologies on the past regime and on the current one, and it will definitely still be their case for the future ruling powers of Tunisia.

Nonetheless, complete freedom of expression is something that is far from being fully implemented in Tunisia, as it is in the rest of the Arab countries, as one of the most famous rappers named “Weld El 15” has been arrested for “violating public morals” by singing a song where he addresses policemen as dogs. He has however gained public support from all the nation, as controversial as Tunisian rap is, people admire it as it presents to them the long lost voice of the Tunisian streets that has long been oppressed by autocratic regimes.

**Tunisian Movies**

As the Egyptian movies initiating the public’s opinion and shape a stronger view of the political sphere and autocratic regime increased, many Tunisian movies like Egyptian’s have discussed the growing problems citizens specially youth are facing due to the oppression and the economic state the people are suffering from. Many of these movies are like “The Silences of The Palace”, “Man of Ashes”, and “The TV Is Coming” but these movies all took place before the 21st century, yet they discuss social and political problems and are thought of as most sees post revolution as it makes the perceptive of the revolution clear and the revolts justified as they change the perspective of the viewer after the revolution.

A lot of movies were done after the revolution that shaped the public’s views and reminded them of the causes they stood for that helped bring the Muslim Brotherhood down. Furthermore, documentary movies thrived since the revolution, and their presence could not be neglected. As the effect of the revolution boosted the cinema and here it is obvious that art was part of the public’s opinion and the civilians starting expressing more as being liberated, politically, from the oppression. Some of these documentaries have come to festivals like “Bastardo” for the director Najib Belkhadi and the demand on directing increased.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, it is clear that all these different forms of art have lately become of great importance to the Arabs, as they go hand-in-hand with the rebellious actions of revolting, writing, and boycotting, just to name a few. As this universal visual language of communication and self-expression is becoming more and more popular in the Arab World, it is slowly becoming a substitute for the media and the press, as the censorship on these is becoming greater and greater. And as the governments are becoming to a greater extent fearful of any means of expression as they know by now, after the Arab Spring, that it “threatens” their national security, in the sense that no Arab leader is now unalarmed by the fact that he could be overthrown at any second by the people.

Art became a weapon for the people, and is becoming widespread and popular among the youth, as they are realizing its strong political effect. The role of the artist in the Arab revolutions is to raise more awareness through visuals, as it is a universal language understood not only nationally but also internationally, from the west. Graffiti covering Arab countries’ walls that is written about by the Huffington post and the CNN and the most famous news worldwide, and Egyptian movies such as “The Chaos” by Youssef Chahine that has won several international film festival awards, and has been featured in others such as the Toronto Film Festival in 2007; are all examples of how art is one of the most powerful tools to not only address the internal and local corruption but to also transmit messages to the west on who we are and what we do. Art is the best tool of communication as it is effective and understood by the world, it is a universal language that the Arabs should not give up on.

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