

From Ideology to Dogma? A Discussion about Femen, Aliaa Elmahdy, and Nudity in the Arab World

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Abstract:

Looking at Aliaa Elmahdy's act of protest through posting naked photos of herself on her blog, this paper studies the debates that followed. I complicate the juxtaposing between Femen's tactics and Elmahdy's act of nudity through engaging in questions of feminism/colonialism and feminism/conservatism. By examining articles that were written about Femen, nudity, Muslim women, and body politics, I show that the debates ran the risk of stabilizing feminism within static dogmatic beliefs.

“Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.” – Aliaa Elmahdy

When Femen¹ started its campaign to defend “Arab Muslim” women’s voices, the group created the illusion that the debates around feminism and colonialism never happened. The purported vacuum in their discourse erased the feminism of color discussions, as if Mohanty never wrote “Under Western Eyes,” and as if Crenshaw never theorized intersectionality. In its attempt to liberate Arab women, Femen adopted a framework that reflects a white, racist perspective, instead of taking into consideration theories of intersectionality and realities of social heterogeneity. On the other hand, by linking imperialism to acts of nudity as protest, Femen and its opponents confined Arab woman to categories² with monolithic subjectivities – read oppressed – in need of saving.

In 2011, Aliaa Elmahdy, a young Egyptian woman, posted naked photos of herself on her blog. The act engendered a heated debate in Egypt about nationalism, morality, feminism, and the image of the revolution (Naguib, 2011). In this paper, I intend to complicate the juxtapositions between Femen’s debate and Elmahdy’s act of nudity.

The act of protesting nude for a cause (such as trafficking) within one’s own geopolitical context is a stand that I fully support. Femen’s tactic of fighting patriarchy can be summarized by bare-chested protesting against any social act that they find problematic. Based in Ukraine, their movement initially mobilized against the trafficking of women in their country of origin. However, in recent years, Femen took upon itself the task of “liberating” and saving Arab women from their brown oppressors, with a special emphasis on Islam and the veil.

Through their reductionist methodology in reading oppression, I contend that Femen managed to provoke a certain discomfort in some of the women groups in the Arab world. The discrepancy the European group created led local movements and communities to conflate political acts of nudity with Femen, thus dismissing both. However, the debate about Elmahdy, Femen, and nudity took an alarming turn, since it re-established feminism as a policing dogmatic apparatus. It endangered what I consider the most radical trait of feminism, which is its ongoing critique of itself.

¹ "Nudity is freedom," "topless protests are the battle flags of women's resistance, a symbol of a woman's acquisition of rights over her own body," Femen claims the removal of clothes in public as the key indicator of the realization of women's rights and the most effective type of activism. Everything else is seen as not radical enough and failing anyway.

² Essentialization of the woman category has taken various shapes and forms but is used in specific in order to erase all the other aspects of female oppression, such as class, sexuality, and race.

Methodology

Before getting to the core of the argument, multi-layered questions – such as morality, nationalism, policing, and feminism – need to be addressed. Fleshing them out presents the biggest challenge in writing this paper. Where does one need to interrogate and intervene? Does taking a stand against Femen’s practices necessarily mean that one needs to take a stand against nude protesting? How can the line be drawn between Femen and nudity? What type of history is attached to nudity, and is nudity a Western import? How does this paper view nudity, is it characterized by resistance, liberation, or immorality? How did the conversation between Femen and the women in the Arab world take place? What is at stake if the discourse of discussing feminism becomes dogmatic rather than conversational and opened to critique?

A profound analysis of oppression cannot be achieved without a materialist lens that consolidates class, race, geographical location, gender, nationalism and other factors. I thus attempt to engage with the part of intersectionality theory that encompasses class, gender, and race in analyses.

This paper begins by highlighting the case of Elmahdy and the discussion that took place after her act of nudity. Second, it moves to contextualizing nudity through a brief discussion of its history. Further, it engages in broader questions, such as feminism/colonialism, feminism/conservatism, and the thin line between them, by examining articles that were written about Femen, nudity, Muslim women in the Arab world, and their politics of the body. Finally, through the discursive epistemology present in the discussions between the aforementioned groups, I show that the feminist debate dangerously swayed from an ideological one to static dogmatism.

Aliaa Elmahdy: Nudity, Nationalism, and Resistance

On October 23, 2011, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, an Egyptian woman, posted naked photos of herself on her blog “Diary of a Rebel.” Her pictures noted: “then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression” (Elmahdy, 2011). During that period, the Egyptian state was under the reign of the army following the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. At that time of the revolution, national sentiment reached its peak in Egypt. Upon publishing her nude photographs, Elmahdy’s blog was viewed by hundreds of thousands of people within hours, with almost everyone condemning Elmahdy for her act: the liberals denounced her, the fundamentalists wanted to kill her, and the state wanted to bring her into custody (Naguib, 2011). Elmahdy’s quote anchors her views of nudity in a celebration of a body that belongs to one’s self and not to society. Thus, the scope through which I perceive nudity encompasses the act of reclaiming one’s body. But in order to complicate this view, I choose to base my analysis on the reaction of the “nation” to Elmahdy’s act of nudity.

Bora argues that the ideal citizen of the nation-state is recognized through a certain criteria³ determined by the state; any national deviating from the preset criteria would be marked as an incomplete citizen (Bora, 2004). Incomplete citizenship in Elmahdy's case made it possible for the state and the "ideal" national subjects to condemn and categorize her as a shame to the nation. In a way, they justified the abuses and the subsequent calls for her death. In fact, the nudity act by Elmahdy was viewed as a public breach of the Egyptian morality; it was considered a distortion of the image of the virtuous Egyptian woman – the nation, the mother, the daughter, the sister, the mother-to-be. In other words, Elmahdy's nudity was seen as ruining the reputation of the revolution specifically and the nation in general, thus tainting the honor of its men.

The nationalist fraternity, as Najmabadi argues, performing a hegemonic masculinity, feels entitled to possess and protect the nations' honor and sovereignty. Hence, it is built on excluding women (Najmabadi, 1997). Therefore, when Elmahdy posed naked, she became a shameful embodiment of Egypt, as "mother Egypt" breached the honor of its nation's men and the "good" women who stand behind them. The weight of Elmahdy's performative protest lied in its rupture of the masculinist fraternity. By undressing, Elmahdy took action outside the fraternity's consent, acting as an agent of her own body. Women's bodies cannot be separated from the way they are perceived (as honorable), a dichotomy reinforced during revolutions with the private sphere overflowing into the public arena. Harcourt and Escobar state that "women's bodies are the first place where women are engaged in political struggle" (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005) and where their bodies are still perceived as belonging to the private. Modes of dressing are still used worldwide as a way to blame women for being raped and harassed, and Elmahdy's blatant nudity was framed as a justification for her public marginalization from Tahrir Square, and from the Egyptian and Arab world in general. Thus, I contend that the act of being nude in objection to a certain social structure carries the possibility of rupturing the male-dominated public space that women have limited access to even today (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005) and may infiltrate by breaking the spatial binary between the public and the private. It can therefore be framed as resistance.

A minority of groups and activists in Egypt and around the Arab world were supportive of Elmahdy's act, but their scope of action was limited by moral policing. On social media like Twitter and Facebook, the most "progressive" commentators stated that they did not have a problem with nudity *per se*, but considered that it was not the right time for such an act, which, I suggest, is conservatism disguised as liberalism. As Mikdashi argues, "Alia's picture does not play by the rules, and this is why both liberals and Islamists have condemned her. She is not "waiting" for the "right moment" to bring up bodily rights and sexual rights in post-Mubarak Egypt" (Mikdashi, 2011). Thus, Elmahdy disturbed the rebuttal of feminists and minorities who push for their rights, as she did not subscribe to the "this is not the right time" alibi.

³ These criteria could be the set of rules and morality apparatus by which the state defines who is a good citizen and who is not. In other words, the state recognizes "good citizens" according to its own parameters of what good citizenship is, and citizens that fall outside the preset criteria are perceived as bad or incomplete.

Femen: Orientalism and White Savior Feminism

After fleeing the death threats in Egypt, that Elmhady decided to join the European feminist group Femen is an unsurprising, if not an understandable move. Ostracized by most of the women's rights groups in Egypt and condemned by countless voices in Arab-speaking countries (Naguib, 2011), Femen might have been the only platform that she could relate her nude act of resistance to.

On their website, Femen identify themselves as "an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers" (Femen, 2013). Femen's universalized feminism has been criticized by many feminist writers and thinkers. In "Neo-liberalism and its Discontents," Sara Salem draws the parallels with the Eurocentric first wave of feminism, as this type of feminism could only conceive the world through its own lens, struggles, and experiences (2013). Guilty of the same predicament, Femen's approach to the veil in Islam created a binary that opposed the scarf to nudity. Salem also denounces the Western feminist positionalities that attempt "to 'civilize' and 'modernize' women in Arab and African countries. For these women, feminism was about becoming like them" (2013).

Mohanty argues that colonialism exacerbates political, economic, and cultural hierarchies in which third world women get produced as oppressed (Mohanty, 1984). By forcing upon Muslim women the oppressive connotations of the veil in Western contexts, Femen embodies the historical ideologies of a white savior. Through their slogan "Muslim women let's get naked" (Femen, 2013), Femen uses the same colonial feminist rhetoric that depicts all Muslim women as veiled (read: as oppressed). The tactic of hegemony of discourse is not new to women of color, as they are often excluded from "mainstream feminist discourse, unless it is by means of humanitarian imperialism channels where they are simply tokenized" (Chamseddine, 2013). On the other hand, Femen imposes their own vision of freedom on those women, best expressed in their statement "nudity is freedom." But is nudity freedom? Is it resistance? Is it political, moral, or immoral? Is it the only freedom that exists, and how dangerous is it to gloss over and marginalize race and class in the debate about freedom and in analyzing oppression?

Nudity: Liberation, Resistance, or Western import?

The act of nudity initiated by Elmahdy, in parallel with Femen's mobilization and nude protests, started a huge debate about nudity, women's bodies, colonialism, and Islam. In order to better understand why Femen's approach to "save" the Muslim women from oppression – embodied by Islamic religion – through nudity is problematic, one needs to scrutinize movements through a gendered lens. Scott argues that any movement should at least ground itself in understanding "inequalities of power" with an examination of race, gender, and class (Scott, 1986). An examination of geographical location and political temporality is also crucial. To put it briefly, through their slogan "nudity is liberation," Femen reduced liberation to nude protest alone. Not only did they not take into consideration other possible forms of dissent and liberation, but they also reduced liberation to monolithic and homogenizing aspect – getting naked. It can be assumed under certain contexts that nudity is liberating indeed. Yet such slogans, I contend, are discursively blind to – and disregard – the

importance of intersectionality in discussing feminist issues that should take into account gender, class, race, capitalism, globalization, colonialism, homophobia and Islamophobia when talking about the Arab world. This need for intersectional feminist analysis is especially true given how Islam gets globally portrayed as the “terrorist religion,” particularly after the declaration of the war on terror.⁴

After her act of nudity, Elmahdy was blamed and categorized as “westernized.” Her act of nudity as resistance was dismissed because it was considered to be “imitating the experience of Western feminist movements by using protest methods ‘alien’ to the Arab world and its cultural sensitivities” (Mourad, 2013). The idea of relating nude protesting to Western civilization is not only historically inaccurate, but is also a tool used especially in the Global South and specifically the Middle East to dismiss such forms of protest and negate their political value. Therefore, I question, is nudity really a “Western import?”

First, it needs to be clear that nudity as resistance is not something exclusive to the West. As historically argued, Europeans were the ones who imposed clothing on their colonies (Levine, 2008). Moreover, the act of nude protesting has been popular in the Global South throughout history, long before Femen was established. For example, in 2004, women in Northeastern India protested nude against the army raping women (Bora, 2004). Nudity was used by Western African women in order to protest colonialism back in 1929 (Kazeem, 2013). Therefore, this attribution of nudity as an immoral export from the West needs to be revised, rethought, and grounded in a historical analysis beyond ahistorization and decontextualization of the act itself, and beyond the attribution of openness to the West and conservatism to the Global South. These ideas of the Arab World as conservative (only) surfaces in the discursive way in which Elmahdy’s nudity was discussed. Therefore, anything that is conservative is “us” (Arab) and anything that is nude is “them” (West). The “us” and the “them” functioned to reduce the feminist political conversation to a binary of power only.

Furthermore, it appropriated such modes of resistance to the West, and dismissed any act outside as an imperial import. The problematic assumption of imperial import is that it is usually faced with hostility and usually attributed to behaviors such as “ruining” our traditions and society. To put it briefly, nudity as a political practice should be contextualized with regards to its temporality and historicity; one that cannot be rigid as a fact but can be as flexible as an ideology. The nudity debate transcended Aliaa’s body as “naked Egyptian female body” to encompass “the naked body of an Arab Muslim woman” (Mourad, 2013) in all its signifiers.

The discussion on nudity can take various shapes and forms. Therefore, it is important to note here that nudity has a lot of history attached to it: from the taming of so-called “savage” natives in colonies by dressing them into modernity, where nakedness in colonial eras “signified rather an absence of civilization” (Levine, 2008, p.190), to the objectification of women’s bodies as used in advertisement to sell products (Kherrberr,

⁴ This argument does not take a biased stand with or against Islam as a religion. As the author of this paper, I view all religions as equally oppressive, especially to women. However, it is a fallacy to perceive Islam as the only oppressive religion in the US and Europe. In fact, the colonial act of saving women from the Islamic religion within the war on terror – as it was the case with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan for example – entails certain instigation of this issue in order to contextualize it within the Western perception of Islam.

2010). Taking that into consideration, one cannot reduce nudity to good and bad, moral and immoral, political and erotic, emancipatory or oppressive, thus diminishing its complexity and political weight.

The Feminist Debate: Nuancing the Struggle

There is a fine line between radical feminism and conservatism, and some political stands against Femen mixed up the two. Dismissing nudity, especially in the case of Elmahdy, intensified when it became directly correlated with Femen. Consequently, the discussion about nudity and women's bodies shifted from a very political one, to a reactionary conversation with only two sides that believe they have answers for far more complicated questions. The discussion was narrowed down to standing with or against Femen, and they became, as mentioned before, directly linked to nudity. Thus, standing with Femen in a broader sense became supportive to nudity, and opposing them was equated to being against nudity. The dichotomous stroke also applied to Elmhady, but it was complicated by the notion of "Western import." However, Mourad reminds us that "the Western gaze is not the only gaze," especially when it comes to the mediation of naked female bodies, and warns against the reification of "difference as one between East and West" (Mourad, 2013). The *difference* in discourse can be located in the reactions to Elmahdy's participation in Femen protests, and to Femen's orientalism in general. For instance, the "Muslima Pride"⁵ was created. At the same time, articles written by Western writers, Femen activists, and Arab women circulated in conversation with one another. However, not only do the rigid dichotomies obscure pressing issues related to women's bodies and agency, but they also quantify the struggles, considering that some demands are more valuable than others.

Quantifying gendered struggles is a fertile terrain for body policing. However, in women policing other women's bodies, there's a mere reiteration of a patriarchal discourse that reproduces policing as a tool of oppressing women's bodies. As Mourad argues, "not all (Arab or Muslim) women wish to unveil or undress to express a political opinion or signify their emancipation; however, we must retain a critical space for women such as Alia who wish to do so" (Mourad, 2013).

Writing for *Foreign Policy*, Naheed Mustafa feels entitled to validate certain feminist strategies that she considers honorable and of value, and bashes others that do not correspond to her perception of feminism and resistance – namely, nudity. Mustafa writes: "Basically, ladies, keep your tits out of my fight. **And put your shirts back on**" (Mustafa, 2013, *emph. mine*). Despite the derogatory language used in this quote, the imperative sentence "put your shirts back" on is the one I find most problematic. Butler argues that policing is a patriarchal tool in which subversive acts are regulated back to normative, i.e. what is perceived by society as "normal" vis-à-vis policing (Butler, 1990). Therefore, when one woman tells other women how to dress, and polices their performance – whether she asks them to put their "shirts back on" (as Naheed Mustafa does in her article) or to "liberate themselves from the hijab" (as Femen does in their Naked Jihad), both

⁵ Using #MuslimahPride, many Muslim women began voicing their disapproval of Femen. One such woman was Zarah Sultana who posted a photo on her public Twitter page that said "I am a proud Muslimah. I don't need 'liberating.' I don't appreciate being used to reinforce Western imperialism. You do not represent me!"

discourses function within the patriarchal heteronormative nexus. In other words, the same patriarchal system of oppression gets implemented and reproduced, even when the policing woman identifies as a feminist.

Women's policing of each other's bodies simplifies the debate of discussing patriarchy to one that is reactionary, with all sides engaging in a circumscribed fight. The reproduction of the heteronormative nexus in feminist conversations creates an illusion that there is a "good" and a "bad" way of doing feminism and liberating women. Emancipation, I suggest, is not about freeing women from men *per se*; gender is not only confined to women (Scott, 1986). I consider emancipation to be a process of living in a society that is aware of its power hierarchies and perpetually deconstructs them. Therefore, emancipation is imagining liberation from a system of oppression that constantly regulates all gender expressions on various levels by policing them.

Murphy suggests that "There is a wrong way to do feminism. And Femen is doing it wrong" (Murphy, 2012). On the other hand, writing about feminism and Femen, Nagarajan claims that her problem does not lie with nudity, but with Femen's tactics. According to her, "they have no point. Apart from taking off their tops, I actually have no idea what they're trying to question... It's very interesting to call them radical, because they're actually not radical" (Nagarajan, 2013). It seems that both writers have a presumed rigid definition of what feminism is, and, I contend, they treat feminism as a static, well-defined paradigm that is highly regulatory, preset, and stable. Not only is this treatment unable to be open to critique or change, but it also uses feminism as a tool of othering. The problem here is not about how any side views feminism: feminism does not exist in a vacuum; it is a product of various factors and contexts that constitute it. Along with Femen's positioning, these dismissive statements pose a threat to the feminist debate. The regulatory and static discourse disregards the constant flux of these conversations, which are historically ever-changing and always subjected to critique and evolution. When feminism becomes static, it becomes similar to social paradigms that function as institutional ones – thus, it shifts from ideology to dogma. In that case, it reproduces again the same system of oppression that all sides are presumably fighting against. Feminism itself here becomes dangerous, since it becomes riddled with rules, crippling with it any hope for mobilization and emancipation.

Conclusion

Many articles were written about Femen and Elmahdy. Most of them reflect the constant hunger to gaze at naked Arab women bodies, whether physically or virtually. However, many other stances, such as Mourad's and Mikdashi's, supported Elmahdy's act of nudity based on a feminist approach that does not dismiss her act for its chosen moment in time. Defining "wrong" and "right" times to act does not only resonate conceptually in methodologies of oppression, but it is also entrenched in the daily lives of large amounts of feminists globally who are trying to change the patriarchal reality we live under.

In this article, I tried to deconstruct the multiple aspects of the debate that took place around Femen and Aliaa's act of nude protesting. Grasping the complicated convolutions of nudity as resistance requires a

deeper discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I attempted to ask the more urgent questions and suggest a more intersectional and nuanced approach in the way nudity is debated. Feminists in different time periods and across various locations have strived for a feminism that is not singular in its analytical approaches to social struggles. Feminism's multiplicity has been at the core of its constant evolution, which is why the feminist policing debate was so alarming. What I find most productive about feminism is its ability to encompass conflicting perspectives rather than be defined by a set of dogmatic values and beliefs. This does not mean that feminism is above critique. On the contrary, critique is what keeps feminist debates ongoing, and keeps in a healthy process of constant becoming.

Similarly, the debates in the Arab world that were sparked by Elmahdy's act of nudity allowed for back and forth conversations about women's bodies and the politics around them. Thus, they released feminism from the powers that attempt to stabilize it, and that end up crippling it – whether intentionally or unintentionally. Finally, and especially at the height of revolutionary acts, one needs to keep writing about women's voices in revolutions in order to prevent history from repeating its pattern of forgetting women.

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