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## Those Awful Tahrir Rapes

Lama Abu-Odeh

*Georgetown University Law Center, la34@law.georgetown.edu*

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## 1. Those Awful *Tahrir* Rapes

Lama Abu Odeh

There is no easy way to talk about the mass rapes of Tahrir<sup>1</sup>: crowds of men surrounding an immobilized woman in waves inside waves of male bodies, random hands ripping her clothes off, poking her with sharp instruments in every hole conceivable, her body moving only by virtue of their own movements as they exchange places to make contact with her nudity, unwilling to let go of her until they have in their collective fever consumed the very last pound of her exposed flesh- It is not just that there is something that is immediately and irremediably shocking and disorienting about them as occurrences, it is also the fact these rapes press on us women especially, as our minds grapple for understanding and safety, to see beyond these rapes' shocking particularity, to explore what is "general" about them, to figure out they mean, what they are expressive of, what they say about us, about our sociality and what has become of it, about the transformations apace, for sometime now in our gendered relations, and I think that *that* makes discussing these rapes particularly hard.

One would like, as first refuge, to dismiss the rapes of Tahrir as exceptional, the act of a sickly perverted few (albeit in the hundreds), the crooks of the streets, the gangs of the underground, the folool of Mubarak or the militias of Morsi (as used to

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the "Women Leaders as Agents of Change: The Role of Women in the Changes Taking Place in the MENA Region" conference that took place in Beirut under the sponsorship of the Women's Studies Institute of the Lebanese American University (LAU), July 27-30, 2015

be the claim), who represent none of us the good men and women of Egypt and the Arab world<sup>2</sup>. But with all their shocking-ness there is something that is naggingly familiar about them, at least for us women, something that insists on staying with us even as we turn our faces away from the unbearable images, echoes of experiences we have had that bear an uncanny resemblance to what we have just witnessed, not equal in severity nor equally condensed in time, experiences that may have made it hard for us to breathe but did not necessarily suffocate us, we were not stripped but sexual contact we did not want was in the works, we felt trapped but managed to get away, we were reduced to our buttocks and breasts, our humanity suspended, but were not consumed as a pound of flesh. It is the fact that Tahrir rapes might be saying something about us *outside of* the square and its horrors, about the violence that frames our bodies and shackles our desires, violence as a nagging quotidian presence, as past memory one cannot quite shake off, as anecdote passed around from woman to woman as warning, and as note to oneself before one steps out of one's house.

If this is the case, then the first task for us analytically I think is to treat those rapes as at par with street harassment, as a mere instance of it (if a shockingly violent version), and I think once we do, something about the overwhelming effect of those

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<sup>2</sup> While many Egyptian feminists see the rapes of Tahrir as an instance of violence committed to prohibit women from political participation in the demonstrations and taking place in the aftermath of the downfall of Mubarak, I interpret the rapes differently. I see them as sitting on a continuum with other forms of street harassment some mild in nature and some quite violent and include groups of harassers. To my mind, the speed with which street harassment can take the form of collective sexual assault as happens on Eid occasions makes the difference of the rapes of Tahrir a difference in degree not kind.

rapes on us ceases to be so overwhelming. Because street harassment we *know*- we have already incorporated it in our lives- it has already picked our wardrobe, locked our step, defined the scope of our vision on the street, deafened our ears, and turned us into fidgety uneasy walkers who alternately walked, leapt, ran, crossed to the other side of the street and walked again. It has taught us that to dress differently from the conventional, even if ever so slightly differently, as the two girls from the city of Aghadeer, Morocco, wearing skirts and walking in a public market learnt only recently the hard way, unleashed on us not only the ire of street harassment, but also the self-righteous moral outrage of the rejected harasser, now turned virtuous, along with the whole apparatus of the state and its criminal legislation. Let's recall for a moment what happened to the girls from Aghadeer. They were attacked by outraged merchants who threw stones at their hairdresser shop for wearing skirts and walking in a public market. Instead of the stone thrower merchants being arrested, the girls themselves were and charged with being in violation of Art. 483 of the Moroccan Criminal Code. Art. 483 provides that "whoever violated public morality by *appearing nude* intentionally or by using vulgar gestures or acts, is punishable with imprisonment from one month to two years and with a fine from one hundred twenty to five hundred Dirhams". The slide from "skirt" to "nudity", in the state's interpretation of what the girls had done, which seems to be very close to the interpretation of the attacking merchants, sent the message to women loud and clear: to try and be "sexy" on the street is to-amounts to- taking off your clothes in public. And if you choose to "take off your clothes" in public then you should expect

your due: street harassment, public moral outrage, arrest and imprisonment by the state.

We know of course that things are much much worse than that. They are worse in that the amount of street violence is such that not only dressing marginally differently from the conventional is fiercely discouraged, but conventional dress itself, in so far as it promises deliverance from harassment, is the object of endless interpretive obsession by women who find themselves trying to second guess the harasser's mind. "How can I fix my appearance to elude the harasser?" a woman asks herself daily. "Have I missed anything? Maybe the dress is too tight. Maybe the Tshirt is too short. Too much butt? Too much breasts? Maybe the scarf is too colored. Maybe the make-up is too conspicuous". Fiercely suspecting that no matter what she did she will be harassed, she tries anyway hoping for reprieve if only this time around. In other words, conventional dress itself undergoes daily revision by women themselves, who by trying to avoid harassment lean towards dressing more conservatively; they become coy, risk averse, paranoid and panicked in their interpretation of how they should appear in public. What we have learnt then is that "conventional dress"-that thing that promises deliverance from harassment- has an inbuilt orientation, under circumstances of prolific street harassment sanctioned by the state that drives it to become more and more conservative.

It gets worse. We know that the more parts of our bodies we cover and hide the more those very parts come to acquire an erotic charge and the more erotic charge

our covered bodies trigger, the easier it becomes for us to run afoul of the terms of that thing called “conventional dress” (which remember is the thing that promises us deliverance from harassment.)

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Decades after we covered the hair on our heads, we discovered that it had come to acquire the same erotic charge as our pubic hair. Decades after covering our arms, we discovered they had to come to acquire the same erotic charge as our thighs, and decades after covering our legs we discovered that they had acquired the same erotic charge as our genitals. A few hairs peeking out of a sliding scarf on the head, or a calf suddenly exposed from underneath a skirt trapped in the locked door of a car, or an arm revealed by the pulling up of the sleeve under the weight of the summer heat, not only made us feel suddenly “naked” – as if indeed we have taken off our clothes, as the Moroccan criminal authorities would have it- but the exposure of these otherwise safely hidden parts seemed to immediately register with our curious public as if they had looked into a peephole and caught us in the privacy of our bodies . We know that's how they felt because they rushed to tell us as soon as they caught a glimpse- they threw a reference to our genital parts or reached out with their hands to touch our “nudity”- or alternatively, or even consecutively, they became morally outraged.

Harassment or moral outrage, the girls from Aghadeer found out they were synonymous with each other, the one exchangeable with the other, "Let me have your "sex", I am entitled to it" or "Why did you let me want to have your "sex"? It is your fault. You are a bad woman!"

There is something else we know. We know to be just as careful with those who are outraged by what is happening to us as with those who offer excuses for what is happening to us. We know there are those who think that harassing us is outrageous because the harasser, a stranger from nowhere, is competing for control over our bodies by more entitled men – the men we are married to, the men we love, to whom we are daughters or siblings, or cousins. We know there are those who think of our harassment as a sign of fallen times: collapse of the nationalist state and its own version of public morality. Those new loathsome times when the men from the slums took over the streets, appearing as if roaches from underneath the ground, came along and imposed a new regime of power pushing back "our men" the rightful symbolic or actual protectors of the volatility of our bodies. We know that there are those who think that our harassment was a sign of collapse in religious morality, primarily our own, but also our harasser's. Why did we wear our Jeans too tight? Why did we not cover our hair properly? Why did we have to appear in public in the first place? Why did we seduce by our very public presence the fragile sexual desires of men? But really what did we expect? Isn't harassment, as religiously reprehensible as it is, nothing but just dessert for our wayward ways, for our failure to be segregated away from male sight?

And we know that there are those who think that our harassment is symptomatic of the hard times of those less fortunate. That we are nothing but the punching bag of the homeless, the poor, the disenfranchised, and les misérables. That our bodies just happened to be in the way of those victims, at the wrong time and in the wrong place so to speak, that it had little to do with us really, with the kind of bodies we had and the kind of bodies they had. And that if we just fixed the problem of wealth redistribution, high unemployment, state corruption, etc, it's all just going to go away!

There is something else we know. We know that the amount of violence unleashed on us on the streets as we go about claiming public spaces for ourselves, is state sanctioned. It is state sanctioned in the sense that the state seems either uninterested in criminalizing the type of violence we experience, or when it does, it articulates it in legal rules that don't quite do the job (rape defined as insertion of a penis, insertion by a sharp instrument is no rape; or rules of evidence that are premised on individual culpability and are not modified to accommodate the phenomenon of a mass rape). It is also state sanctioned in the sense that even if the state got the rules right, they chose to be slack in their enforcement. They either hyped up the enforcement under certain circumstances (at times of international exposure, following a particularly terrible rape during the celebration of a special national occasion, etc) and then relaxed it after all the attention went away; or they chose a policy of random enforcement, enough times to make them look like they



were doing something but without making a serious dent in the amount of violence unleashed on our bodies, or they didn't even bother in the first place.

It gets worse. Not only does the state often get the rules wrong or lacks the appetite to enforce the ones it has in the books, it actually, i.e. the state, has up its sleeve laws that turn our complaints against us as did the Moroccan authorities with the girls in the skirts. Laws about acts "violating public morality" can easily turn the wrong of male aggression against our sexiness into the wrong of our sexiness itself: we started it. In the same vein, our complaints to the police about our harassment can turn to us back as a problem of "our dress", our malevolence: "why are we spoiling men's fun time during the Eid", our fundamental misunderstanding: "and what's the matter with you, you should feel flattered?" and our lies: "Why are you lying? You enjoyed it, didn't you?" We know that they made complaint to them so costly, we dragged our feet to the police station, "You don't want to bring shame to your family, do you?" and that they acted like brutes in every other respect we had no confidence they would treat our harassers, as just that, harassers!

We also know that when the state was offered help in enforcement by activists who worked hard and long on rescuing women from situations of mass rape entrapment or collective street harassment, activists who have accumulated experiences in this type of rescue operations, who developed an elaborate set of measures addressing a variety of public set ups and every kind of emergency they could think of, who have designed instructions that speak to women on how to avoid certain situations and

how to reach out for help when they feel trapped by harassment, who by training women to be rescuers have given them the power to imagine themselves as something other than victims under these circumstances, we know that the state hesitates to cooperate with these anti-harassment enforcers for fear of giving them legitimacy as activists on the left- by either giving them rule enforcement capacity on the street, or forming a consultative committee that can be approached for advice on how to design police enforcement programs, etc.

But we also know that among those activist enforcers, there was trouble. And the trouble revolved around how much involvement by women there should be in rescue operations, with the men among these activists thinking it was not a great idea for women to jeopardize themselves in highly volatile situations of violence in this manner and should therefore simply (wo)man the phone instead, that they would make the rescuer men's lives even more difficult because now they have to worry about the victims and the rescuers alike! We also know that the minute women conceded as much to the men, that the men had a tendency to take over the operations speaking with authority and knowledge even though in fact they had been the new comers to the scene and that it was women who were first to organize to help their sisters.

Let me recap the points I made above:

First, there is an unusual amount of street violence unleashed on the bodies of women in almost every city in the Arab world.

Second, this violence has to be understood as state sanctioned. It is state sanctioned in the sense that it is either ignored by the state, or the state has designed rules to address it but not ones that either on a substantive or a procedural level quite capture the kind of violence women suffer, or even if the state did pass such rules it was very lax in enforcing them by punishing the aggressors. It is also state sanctioned in that the state designed rules that negated the first set of rules that were meant to punish violence by punishing sex/sexuality instead and used them to either side with the harasser or punish the complainant or dissuade her from complaining in the first place.

Another way to put this is that the violence we witness is an expression of the residue of violence that remains after the state has enforced the law along with the violence implicit in the rules the state has either threatened to enforce or actually did.

Third, that this kind of violence is highly disciplinary of women's bodies and effectively shuts down any kind of human interaction by men and women in public in so far as it makes willful subtle erotic communication close to impossible by them. Instead it infuses gendered relations with a sense of emergency, terror and panic on women's part, and aggression, rage and moral authority on men's part.

Fourth, most of the explanations of how to understand this phenomenon either veer towards explaining it as either women's due because they leave their private spaces, or a sign of the collapse of the nationalist state, or invasion of the cities by the poor

of the slums and the rural areas displacing older more rightful male authorities, or an expression of injustice to the poor and disenfranchised. None of these explanations address the gendered aspect of the phenomenon which it should be our task as feminists to point out.