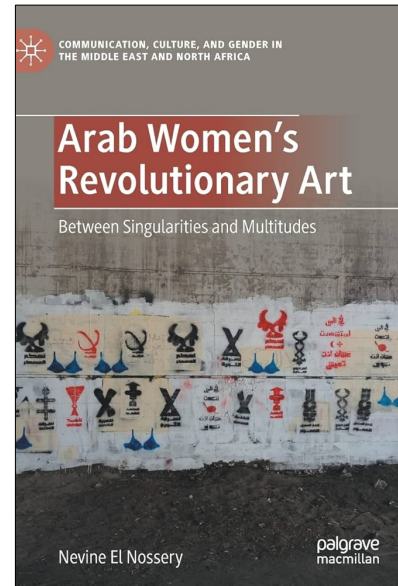


Nevine El Nossery, **Arab Women’s Revolutionary Art: Between Singularities and Multitudes**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 253 pp., \$86.08 (hardcover).

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Nevine El Nossery’s **Arab Women’s Revolutionary Art: Between Singularities and Multitudes** examines the impact of Arab uprisings on Arab women’s creative expression. It delves into how female artists articulate their experiences and how their expressions differ from those of their male counterparts. The author asserts that these women artists function as artist-citizens, actively engaging and mobilizing their communities. Her primary goal is to illustrate that women’s involvement in the Arab uprisings through art effectively challenges long-standing and widely held misconceptions about women in the Arab world, which often portray women as passive and vulnerable beings in need of protection from Arab men. Thus, by showcasing this artistic participation, the book aims to transcend colonial and orientalist narratives and imagery (p. 2).



The book contends that Arab women artists have been instrumental in shaping and expressing revolutionary consciousness during and after the Arab uprisings. It underscores how their creative practices transcend traditional artistic boundaries by integrating visual art, performance, literature, and digital activism to confront patriarchal, authoritarian, and colonial structures. A central theme of the analysis is the tension between individual artistic expression (“singularities”) and collective revolutionary movements (“multitudes”). El Nossery illustrates how these women navigate this duality to amplify marginalized voices, challenge gender norms, and reclaim public spaces.

El Nossery expresses a cautious outlook on the outcomes of the 2011 uprisings, noting that “if the Arab uprisings did not bring about substantive socio-political changes, they nevertheless created an environment that is increasingly favorable to women’s participation in collective action and the public sphere” (p. 3). In her conclusion, she adopts an optimistic view, arguing that

art, as a complex ongoing process, is capable of preserving the revolutionary spirit that was ignited in 2011 throughout the Arab world. Art will always be oriented toward an open future, serving as a catalyst for social resistance and a vehicle for documenting what has happened and the stories that will be told. (p. 232).

El Nossery’s book contributes to a growing body of literature that examines the artistic expressions that emerged during the uprisings in the Arab region, illustrating how creativity empowers artists to articulate a compelling counternarrative that challenges established norms and ideologies.

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Indeed, Arab artists have been instrumental in exposing the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of those in authority, inspiring a politically engaged public, and cultivating a vibrant culture rooted in defiance and the pursuit of liberation. In the wake of the uprisings, artists often find themselves navigating a complex landscape where social and political expectations can impose significant constraints on their creative endeavors (Tripp, 2013). These forms of artistic resistance effectively challenge the complacency often displayed by those in power, serving as a powerful reminder that authority is not an absolute construct but rather one that relies on the awareness of the populace (Tripp, 2013). Recent scholarship exploring themes related to this form of activism, revolutionary art, and creative resistance includes Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso's 2024 study, which investigates the role of art in Egypt's revolutionary movements, particularly during and after the 2011 revolution. Adly Riyadh Bseiso (2024) delves into visual art, theater, and digital media as tools of dissent, asserting that art serves as a bridge between individual expression and collective political action. Unlike El Nossery's work, Bseiso's focus is more geographically concentrated, shedding light on Egyptian local cultural norms and artistic practices. Another significant contribution is Shilton's 2021 study, which analyzes artistic production during the Arab Spring, evaluating the creative strategies employed by artists to confront state violence and envision alternative futures. Shilton (2021) also posits that art is a medium for documenting and critiquing authoritarianism and a space for fostering collective healing and solidarity. Finally, Stephan and Charrad's (2020) research highlights the roles Arab women played during the Arab Spring, emphasizing their use of cultural and artistic forms of resistance through case studies from Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. They argue that women's creative resistance was instrumental in reimagining political futures, although systemic gender inequities continue to impede the pursuit of true liberation.

Adding to this body of literature, El Nossery's study explores various artistic forms, including graffiti, performance, and literature, emphasizing how women use these mediums to resist oppression and foster solidarity. The work features case studies of selected notable artists: street artist Bahia Shehab from Egypt; photographer H la Ammar from Tunisia; and writers and performers such as Heba Sharobeem from Egypt, Zainab Fasiki from Morocco, Kaouther Adimi from Algeria and France, and Dora Latiri from Tunisia. Each chapter is dedicated to one of these artists. For instance, chapter 2 highlights Bahia Shehab's street graffiti as a political tool for challenging gender norms and authoritarian regimes in Egypt. Chapter 3 delves into H la Ammar's photography and embroidery, addressing themes of memory, identity, and oppression in Tunisia. Chapter 4 looks at how street performances by women in Egypt and Tunisia articulate dissent and reclaim public spaces, allowing them to engage in acts of resistance that disrupt conventional gender roles and challenge systemic oppression. Chapter 5 focuses on Zainab Fasiki's "Hshouma" series, which tackles taboo topics such as gender and sexuality in Morocco. Chapter 6 examines Kaouther Adimi's novel, reflecting on Algeria's Hirak movement and its broader legacy of resistance. Finally, chapter 7 centers on Tunisian artist Dora Latiri's phototexts, which intertwine personal and collective experiences of revolution. The book concludes by emphasizing how Arab women artists have emerged as "artist-citizens," merging activism with creativity to confront oppression and advocate for justice. A key argument presented is the transformative power of art to disrupt dominant narratives, offering alternative perspectives on revolutions. It underscores that women's art is deeply situated within sociopolitical contexts, often responding to issues such as gender-based violence, censorship, and state repression. Overall, the study champions women's art as a crucial site of resistance and cultural production within the evolving dynamics of revolution.

Further, the book's exploration of the duality between "singularities" and "multitudes" offers a nuanced lens that deepens the analysis of activism, focusing on both the content of revolutionary art and its structural and relational dimensions. This positions El Nossery's work as a vital contribution to interdisciplinary discussions regarding the role of activism in transitional and revolutionary societies, particularly within the Global South. However, although the framework of singularities and multitudes is compelling, it occasionally appears overly abstract, and the argument would benefit from including practical examples illustrating how these concepts manifest in specific artistic works or movements. Also, there is an overall absence of a comparative perspective that could contextualize these practices within the broader landscape of global feminist or revolutionary art movements.

Moreover, El Nossery's book has a few limitations. One notable shortcoming is that, as a region-specific study, the book invites additional comparative research to investigate the parallels and divergences between Arab women's revolutionary art and activism across the Arab region. For instance, while the book showcases significant examples from Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, it remains unclear whether similar artistic expressions are emerging in less-explored regions of the Arab world, particularly in war-torn countries such as Syria or Yemen. Also, it lacks the historical contextualization of the selected cases within the diverse contributions of Arab women artists. Furthermore, the book offers limited insight into how these artistic works are perceived by diverse audiences, both within the Arab world and on the international stage. It also does not delve deeply into the complexities of digital gatekeeping, algorithmic biases, or the potential for co-opting revolutionary narratives in online environments. Finally, the author could have expanded the discussion by considering how intersecting identities—such as class, ethnicity, or religion—further shape the production and reception of revolutionary art.

Having said that, El Nossery's work makes a valuable contribution to the study of activism and the creative resistance of Arab women and makes a welcome contribution by focusing specifically on Arab women artists who encounter distinct, often overlooked sociopolitical challenges. She highlights the complexities of their experiences, shedding light on how cultural, political, and social dynamics in the region shape their artistic expressions. This perspective enriches the discourse surrounding Arab activism and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing women's voices within this movement. In sum, El Nossery amplifies the narratives of those who are often marginalized, making her work an essential addition to the broader discussion of contemporary Arab art and activism.

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