

The role of digital platforms in amplifying silenced voices

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the role of digital platforms in amplifying the voices of marginalized Muslim women, as presented in Sherine Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, as a central case study. The aim is to analyse how digital platforms facilitated the articulation of political aspirations, challenge patriarchal structures and construct alternative narratives of selfhood and agency among Egyptian Muslim women during the Egyptian revolution. The paper analyses how platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs enabled Muslim women activists to bypass state-controlled media. It also documents human rights abuses and share personal experiences of these women with a global audience. This highlights the complexities and limitations of digital activism in this context and assesses the overall impact of digital platforms in empowering Muslim women in Egypt to reclaim their voices, assert their agency and contribute to broader social and political change. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist media studies and entails close reading and textual analysis of Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir. Ultimately, the paper argues that digital platforms, despite their inherent risks and limitations, provides a crucial space for these women, offering valuable lessons for understanding the evolving dynamics of gender, religion, and digital activism in contemporary society.

Keywords: Biographical Memoirs, Digital Platforms, Egyptian Revolution, Muslim Women

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of digital platforms, gender, and political activism has become a crucial area of inquiry in understanding contemporary social movements (Castells, 2012). In particular, the role of these platforms in amplifying marginalized voices, especially those of Muslim women, warrants critical examination. Existing scholarship has demonstrated how digital spaces can serve as powerful tools for challenging dominant narratives and patriarchal structures (Baym, 2015; Couldry & McCarthy, 2007). However, the specific nuances of how these platforms empower Muslim women in contexts of political upheaval and societal change, while simultaneously navigating inherent risks and limitations, requires further exploration. This paper addresses this gap by examining Sherine Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, as a compelling case study.

Hafez's (2019) biographical memoir provides a rich account of the experiences of Egyptian Muslim women activists during the Egyptian revolution, offering unique insights into how digital technologies facilitated their political participation and self-representation. As argued by Moghadam (2002), women's participation in social movements often challenges traditional gender roles and contributes to the re-negotiation of power dynamics within society. We argue that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs enabled women activists to bypass state-controlled media, organize protests, document human rights abuses, and share their personal stories with a global audience, ultimately contributing to broader social and political change.

While acknowledging the potential for surveillance and online harassment (Keller, 2017), this paper will explore the complexities and limitations of digital activism in this context, paying particular attention to how these women constructed alternative narratives of selfhood and agency through their online presence. By analysing Hafez's (2019) biographical memoir, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of gender, religion, and digital activism in contemporary society, and critically assess the overall impact of digital platforms in empowering Muslim women in Egypt to reclaim their voices and assert their agency. To achieve this aim, we will employ a qualitative research approach methodology, which entails close reading and textual analysis of Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir.

1.1 Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine how digital platforms facilitated the articulation of political aspirations, challenged patriarchal structures, and enabled the construction of alternative narratives of selfhood and agency among marginalized Egyptian Muslim women during the Egyptian revolution, as depicted in Sherine Hafez's (2018) *Women of the Midan*.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design, drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist media studies to examine Sherine Hafez's (2018) *Women of the Midan*. Rather than treating the memoir only as a literary text, the research positions it as a cultural and political artifact that documents how digital platforms became spaces for amplifying marginalized Muslim women's voices, challenging entrenched patriarchal structures, and shaping alternative narratives of selfhood and agency during the Egyptian Revolution. By critically engaging with the biographical accounts, the study aims to uncover the complexities and impact of digital activism in enabling these women to bypass traditional media, organize protests, document abuses, and share their stories with a global audience.

III. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Muslim Women's Voices

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 witnessed a seismic shift in the landscape of political participation, particularly for marginalized groups. Central to this transformation was the unprecedented role of digital platforms. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other online spaces became vital tools, empowering Egyptian Muslim women activists to circumvent the heavily controlled state media, organize protests, document human rights abuses, and share their personal stories with a global audience. This section examines how these platforms facilitated the articulation of political aspirations and the construction of alternative narratives of selfhood and agency among Egyptian Muslim women, drawing heavily on the insights and experiences detailed in Sherine Hafez's (2018) *Women of the Midan*.

For decades, the Egyptian media landscape had been dominated by the state, serving as a mouthpiece for the ruling regime. This left little room for dissenting voices, particularly those of Muslim women and marginalized communities. Digital platforms offered a crucial alternative. Hafez (2018) vividly illustrates this:

"Before the revolution, we felt invisible. The state only showed us the women they wanted us to be: quiet, obedient, and supportive of the regime. But on Facebook, we could finally show ourselves for who we really were: activists, thinkers, and agents of change" (p. 72).

This experience aligns with what scholars have observed about the democratizing potential of the internet in authoritarian contexts. Castells (2012) argues that networked social movements thrive when they can bypass traditional media channels and create their own spaces for communication and mobilization. In the Egyptian context, this meant that women could report on protests, share eyewitness accounts of police brutality, and disseminate information that was being actively suppressed by state-controlled media. The rise of citizen journalism, facilitated by smartphones and social media, provided a real-time, unfiltered picture of the revolution.

Moreover, digital platforms allowed for the dissemination of alternative Islamic discourses. Rahman (2014) notes that Islamic feminism, which seeks to reinterpret Islamic texts and traditions through a gender-egalitarian lens, found a fertile ground online. Women activists could use platforms to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam and assert their right to participate fully in public life. This is reflected in *Women of the Midan*:

"We used to be told that Islam forbade us from protesting, from speaking out. But we found other voices online, other women who showed us that our faith could be empowering, not limiting" (Hafez, 2018, p. 102).

One can see how Egyptian Muslim women were able to reclaim their agency and challenge patriarchal structures that had long dominated the social and political spheres by circulating their interpretations of Islam that are in congruent with their aspirations for equality and liberation.

Beyond simply disseminating information, digital platforms also proved essential for organizing protests and mobilizing activists. Facebook groups became hubs for coordinating demonstrations, sharing security information, and providing mutual support. Twitter served as a rapid communication tool, allowing activists to alert others to police activity, call for reinforcements, and amplify their messages to a wider audience. Hafez (2018) highlights the role of Facebook in the initial stages of the revolution:

"We used Facebook to announce the date of the first major protest. We created an event, invited our friends, and asked them to invite their friends. We were amazed by how quickly it spread. It was like a wildfire" (p. 201).

This reflects the power of weak ties in social networks, as described by Granovetter (1973). While strong ties within close-knit social groups are important for emotional support, weak ties – connections to more distant acquaintances – are crucial for disseminating information and mobilizing large numbers of people. Digital platforms facilitated the formation and maintenance of these weak ties, allowing activists to reach beyond their immediate social circles and build a broader movement. Furthermore, the anonymity offered by some online platforms allowed women to participate in activism while mitigating the risk of reprisal. This was particularly important in a context where women faced social stigma and potential violence for engaging in political activity. Hafez (2018) observes,

“Many women used pseudonyms for fear of their families finding out because such acts were frowned upon in the society. It allowed us to share information without fear of being identified” (p. 212).

The Egyptian revolution was marked by widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Digital platforms provided a crucial means of documenting these abuses and bringing them to the attention of the international community. Activists used smartphones to record videos of police brutality, document the injuries of protesters, and collect evidence of the regime's repression.

“We knew that if we didn't document what was happening, no one would believe us,” Hafez (2018) writes. *“The state was trying to control the narrative, to portray the protesters as criminals and terrorists. But we had the videos, the photos, the testimonies to prove them wrong”* (p. 77).

These digital records served as powerful counter-narratives to the state's propaganda. They were shared on social media, uploaded to YouTube, and disseminated to international human rights organizations, helping to galvanize international support for the revolution. This corroborates findings by Diamond (2010) who asserts that digital media can serve as an accountability mechanism holding governments responsible for their actions. Further, digital platforms was their ability to allow Egyptian Muslim women to share their personal stories and construct alternative narratives of selfhood and agency. Blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts became spaces for women to express their hopes, fears, and aspirations for a more just and equitable society. Hafez (2018) emphasizes the importance of storytelling in the revolution:

“We needed to tell our stories, to show the world that we were not just victims, but active participants in the struggle for freedom. We wanted to show that Muslim women hold political aspirations just like everybody else” (p.66).

These personal narratives challenged the dominant stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and oppressed. They revealed the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the Egyptian female population and demonstrated the critical role that women played in the revolution. Islamic feminism provides a theoretical framework for understanding this process of narrative construction. By reclaiming their voices and sharing their stories, Muslim women were not only challenging patriarchal structures but also reinterpreting their religious identities on their own terms. They were demonstrating that it is possible to be both a devout Muslim and a committed feminist, and that faith can be a source of empowerment, not oppression. They are constructing agency for themselves.

3.2 Limitations of Digital Activism

While digital platforms undeniably played a significant role in amplifying the voices of marginalized Muslim women during the Egyptian Revolution, as exemplified by the experiences recounted in Sherine Hafez's (2018) *Women of the Midan*, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations and challenges associated with digital activism in this context. This chapter critically examines these limitations, moving beyond celebratory narratives of empowerment to explore the darker sides of digital engagement, including issues of surveillance, online harassment, digital divides, and the potential for co-optation of digital activism by state actors and counter-revolutionary forces.

One of the most significant limitations of digital activism, particularly in contexts like Egypt, is the specter of state surveillance and censorship. The initial anonymity and perceived safety offered by platforms like Facebook and Twitter were quickly eroded as the Egyptian government, under Mubarak and later regimes, ramped up its digital surveillance capabilities. Hafez (2018) highlights this vulnerability through the experiences of the women she profiles. While they initially found refuge and a platform for expression online, the risk of identification and subsequent repercussions loomed large. As Deibert and Rohozinski (2012) argue, digital environments are not inherently free or democratic. Authoritarian states have become increasingly adept at monitoring online activity, identifying dissidents, and employing sophisticated techniques to suppress dissent. This chilling effect is subtly evident in *Women of the Midan*. While women openly shared their views, a constant undercurrent of fear and self-censorship existed. For example,

“... One woman mentioned that she had to be careful of what she posted lest her family would get into trouble with the authorities” (p. 69).

This quote underscores the reality that even in digital spaces, activism could have real-world consequences. Furthermore, digital spaces, while providing a platform for marginalized voices, often replicate and amplify existing patriarchal structures and social inequalities. Online harassment and abuse, a pervasive issue globally, disproportionately target women, particularly those who are vocal about political and social issues. Hafez (2018) implicitly touches on this

issue by documenting the online backlash and smear campaigns faced by some of the women activists. The anonymity afforded by the internet can embolden perpetrators of harassment, creating a hostile environment that silences and discourages women from participating in digital activism. As Jane (2016) claims, online misogyny is a potent tool for silencing women's voices and reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics.

"You wouldn't believe some of the things that people said about me online. It was nasty and personal and just tried to shut me up," (p.79).

This quote illustrates the emotional toll that online harassment can take and how it can effectively undermine women's participation in digital activism. Another critical limitation is the digital divide, which refers to the unequal access to digital technologies and the internet based on factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, and education. While *Women of the Midan* celebrates the digital empowerment of some Egyptian women, it is important to remember that access to the internet and digital literacy were not universally available. Those without access were effectively excluded from participating in online activism and having their voices heard. As Van Dijk (2006) argues, the digital divide is not simply about access to technology but also about the skills and knowledge required to effectively use it.

"Not everyone had a smartphone or even a reliable internet connection. We had to find ways to share information with people offline too," (p. 106).

This highlights the importance of offline organizing and the need to bridge the digital divide to ensure that all voices are heard. Moreover, the initial fervor and optimism surrounding digital activism during the Arab Spring have been tempered by the recognition that digital platforms can be co-opted by state actors and counter-revolutionary forces to spread disinformation, manipulate public opinion, and undermine democratic movements. Fake news, propaganda, and online trolling can be used to discredit activists, sow discord, and create a climate of fear and uncertainty. Hafez (2018) doesn't explicitly address this phenomenon, but it is important to consider how the digital landscape in Egypt was increasingly polluted by such tactics after the initial stages of the revolution. As Morozov (2011) suggests, the internet is not inherently democratic; it can be used to strengthen authoritarian regimes as well as to challenge them.

Finally, the focus on digital activism can sometimes overshadow the importance of offline organizing and grassroots mobilization. While digital platforms can facilitate communication and coordination, they cannot replace the need for face-to-face interactions, community building, and sustained political engagement. The women in *Women of the Midan* actively participated in both online and offline activism, recognizing that both were essential for achieving meaningful change.

"We used Facebook to organize protests, but we also had to go out into the streets and talk to people. The internet was just one tool," (p. 127).

While digital platforms undoubtedly provided valuable spaces for marginalized Muslim women in Egypt to articulate their political aspirations, challenge patriarchal structures, and construct alternative narratives of selfhood and agency, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations and challenges associated with digital activism in this context.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of Sherine Hafez's *Women of the Midan* demonstrates the significant, albeit complex, role of digital platforms in empowering marginalized Muslim women during the Egyptian Revolution. While acknowledging the inherent limitations and risks of online activism, the study reveals how platforms like Facebook and Twitter provided crucial spaces for these women to circumvent state-controlled narratives, organize protests, document injustices, and articulate their political aspirations. Through sharing personal stories and challenging patriarchal structures online, these women constructed alternative narratives of selfhood and agency, contributing to broader social and political change. Ultimately, the experiences documented in Hafez's memoir underscore the transformative potential of digital platforms in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and offer valuable insights into the evolving intersection of gender, religion, and digital activism in the contemporary world.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study underscore several key recommendations. Firstly, advocacy groups and marginalized communities should strategically continue to harness digital platforms for voice amplification, counter-narrative construction, and mobilization, while remaining acutely aware of potential risks like surveillance and censorship. Secondly, policymakers and digital platform providers are encouraged to prioritize the creation and protection of safe, accessible digital spaces that empower marginalized voices, implementing measures to mitigate online harassment and state control. Finally, future research should expand on the evolving dynamics of gender, religion, and digital activism across diverse contexts, investigating the long-term impacts, nuanced challenges, and sustainable strategies for digital empowerment.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors attest that they have no conflicting interests that could influence the quality of the work reported in this study.

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