The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 from a Kristevan Perspective: A Pathological Creativity

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes use of Kristeva's concepts of the revolution and the more recent one of revolt. While the first one relates the personal and the aesthetic with the social, the second one focuses solely on the psychic as it is represented in art and psychoanalysis. As the microcosmic leads necessary to the macrocosmic, an amalgamation between the two terms becomes more functional. The Egyptian Revolution is shown here as the perfect model of this aesthetic, political revolution where creativity burst in the form of death drive. The semiotic and the feminine penetrate Tahrir Square and abjection becomes the quality of its tenuous borders. This means that although the Egyptian revolution is artistic, it is destructive and pathological compelling revolutionaries to repudiate their revolution to restore order.

Keywords: Egyptian Revolution, Revolt, Kristeva, Psychoanalysis, Creativity.

Introduction

Readers of Kristeva’s early work, especially “The Ethics of Linguistics” would realize how much she is indebted to Russian formalist theory and futurist practice (1993, p. 283-284). With the formalists, particularly Roman Jakobson, she shares the interest of linguistic aspects of poetic language and with the futurists their revolutionary ambitions. However, from the outset, Kristeva does not separate poetic language from the social, political, or psychoanalytic. By using Freud’s revolutionary idea of the unconscious, she attaches the poetic language to a speaking subject, her desire and pleasure. She also suggests a revolution in poetic language leading to social change based on a sacrifice from the poet’s side. Like Jakobson, she is fascinated by murder and suicide as themes not only in Russian history “on the eve of Stalinism and fascism” but in all time (1980, p. 31). Suicide here is not only literary but literal one as an act of revolution in the face of society: “The poet is put to death because he wants to turn rhythm into a dominant element; because he wants to make language perceive what it doesn’t want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation” (1980, p. 31).

This means that Kristeva fuses life and art and gives the artist the ability of transformation through drives. In this sense, the poet becomes a threat to society and to her mental and physical health. Clare Cavanagh gives a description of this rebel:

This poet is a linguistic daredevil, perched precariously on a tightrope that stretches between sense and nonsense, cosmos and chaos, order and insanity. Or, perhaps more appropriately, he is a linguistic terrorist and his text is a poetic minefield which threatens the psychic, even physical integrity not only of its maker and his audience, but of society itself. (1993, p. 293)

This means that by adopting an avant-garde revolutionary attitude, Kristeva is not only involved in a dangerous business of pathologising creativity that glamorises the suicide of the poet, but also in a social rebellion.

Kristeva’s position has shifted dramatically over the years from this political concept of revolution to a totally...
psychic position. In her two books *Intimate Revolt* and *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, Kristeva explains a new concept of revolt as the substitute of “rebellious ideologies” and political actions (2000, p.7). The modern subject of spectacle, according to her, is incapable anymore of action, let alone political revolt. This is, she argues, because of power vacuum in our contemporary era that is both normalizing and falsifiable and because of the position of the subject as patrimonial individual who is nothing but the owner of her organs (2000, p. 8). And, therefore, she asks: “who can revolt, and against what?” (2000, p. 8). The only way to rebel left to the individual is through art and psychoanalysis. This kind of rebellion focuses on “the restitution of the semiotic functionality of language” and on the attempt “to activate, articulate, and narrate the semiotic- the depository of the unconscious, of sexual fantasies, of oedipal aggression, of incest, of matricide, among other somatic instincts or drives” (2004, p. 196). It is a personal rebellion that releases instinctual drives especially the death drive that violates the symbolic. According to Kristeva, this pre-linguistic, semiotic space is related to the feminine, especially the mother as the mother-child bond is established before entering language. This feminine and maternal space stands for the marginalized other that disrupts the symbolic. However, this concept of revolt seems to suit the elite as it is achieved by means of poetic language or the privileged act of lying on the psychoanalyst’s couch (2004, p. 196). The best way to benefit from this concept though is to reconcile Kristeva’s old concept of revolution to the new one where the aesthetic, psychic, and the social can coincide without denial for the last. For political change, I believe, is based on nothing than a subject on process/ in trial. In other words, any macro change rests on a micro one, on a subject of revolt. As Gana puts it, “should not intimate revolt prepare us for the political rather than deliver us from it?” (2004, p. 201). One should understand though that this kind of creative revolt is not without consequences that can be described in psychoanalysis as pathological and in society as anarchy. The purpose of this article is to show that the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 is not only a political revolution, but also an artistic, poetic, and a feminine revolt that penetrates the patriarchal order. It also aims at pointing at the importance of stopping the revolutionary, feminine, and semiotic act at a certain point before falling into a pathological state of suicidal psychosis that equals chaos in social terms. 

The Egyptian Revolution shows an example not only of a political “peaceful” revolution, but also of an aesthetic revolution against the murder of poetic language by a fascist regime. It is a revolution of “wasted poets” (1980, p. 32). The many carnivalesque scenes in this revolution break “through the laws of [...] language [...] and, at the same time is a social and political protest” (1980, p. 65). Tahrir Square (Liberation Square) becomes the scene and discourse of the “other” where the semiotic, the rhythmic, and the feminine penetrates the symbolic, the rigid, and the masculine. The orality and the repetition of “Ash-sha’ab yurid Isqat an-nizam” [People want to overthrow the regime] is evidence of a semiotized singing aiming at demolishing a linguistic and a political isomorphic structure. According to Kristeva, the subject learns to speak and fills her mouth with words in order to compensate a lost mother. The link between speaking words and having a relationship with the mother is the appropriation of an oral object. Instead of devouring a mother, one devours words: “Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want” (1982, p. 41). That is, in language one finds the lost mother: “I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother,’ is what the speaking being seems to be saying. ‘But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her, I have not lost her [...] I can recover her in language’” (1989, p. 43). In other words, the language of Tahrir Square, especially the slogan mentioned above, is a subversive maternal language that takes the anger from the body of the revolutionaries and stores it up in language (1984, p. 244). Khaled Al Masaeed posits that: "playing with language could successfully work in challenging oppressive regimes" (2013, p. 6).

Moreover, the amalgamation of a spasmodic crying and laughter in the Square, the swearing at the regime and at the same time cracking jokes, the singing, the dancing, the painting, the calligraphy, all mark the working of drives. Lara Baladi, the cultural curator and director of Radio Tahrir and the organizer of Tahrir Cinema, explains the drastic change that pushed the boundaries of
free and creative expression in Tahrir Square on the 25 January, 2011: "There is a dam that broke so fast and so forcefully that it gave way to a huge cascade of creativity, a massive long-repressed need to express oneself that was finally freed. Young artists have grabbed the revolution's momentum and responded—at the surface of the fast-running water—to the constantly evolving political situation" (Schoene, 2012, p. 3). Farida Makar also hails Egypt's 18 days of revolution that "opened the door to political and artistic forms of expression which enabled the Egyptian population participating in the uprising to actually 'have fun' whilst trying to depose the aging dictator" (2011, p. 307). She talked about the uniqueness of the Egyptian revolution as it was accompanied by an explosion of artistic and musical performances (p. 310). For the first time, she says, Tahrir Square provided "an uncensored space for artistic expression" (p. 310). This is exactly what Iman Mersal explains when she describes the sense of humor, represented in different artistic forms, in the Square (2011). She mainly explains the creative, "new trends in slogans, chanted and written, now emerged, along with new jokes" that helped in resisting the regime (2011, p. 673). Some of these slogans which humiliated the source of oppression have been accumulated by Mersal, especially the ones that ask the Egyptian president to leave. Some of these slogans are as follows (p. 673):

"Please leave! My hand hurts."
"Evael! Maybe he'll understand it backwards."
"If he were a demon he would have left!"
"If I don’t shower today at home, I’m showering Friday at the Presidential Palace."
"Use Hosni Glue. Sticks for 30 years!"
"The carpenters’ union likes to ask Mr. Mubarak: What kind of glue do you use?"
"Someone wrote on his chest: "We’re out of paper. What else do you want me to do?"
"If he has a Ph.D in stubbornness, we have a Nobel prize in patience."
"Obama: I think you should write a goodbye letter to the people. Mubarak: Why? Where are they going?"
"Report Card. Student: Mohammad Hosni Mubarak. Grade: FAIL"

As these slogans threaten the system, the symbolic and the patriarchal, they are considered part of the semiotic that disrupts language and therefore can be considered artistic.

The famous funny scene of the Zar done in the Square can also be considered a stark example of the explosion of instinctual drives. The Zar, as Clèment and Kristeva point out, is an antidote to fundamental masculinity that excludes the feminine and the porous body of creativity (2001, p. 19, 7). It is a sign of "[l]etting oneself go," of creative rebellion that tries to mobilize language and society and help resurrecting them into life. (2001, p. 7). Or is it a drive towards death? Is it not a revolution against death, social and artistic? Yes, it is. However, this revolution against death paradoxically invokes death (1980, p. 31). It brings evil, incest, and destruction as it is related to the death drive. And thus each funny poster held by the Egyptians or in the square becomes a little destructive weapon. This negativity is anal as much as it is oral, bringing violence no matter how peaceful is the revolution. The resulted effect is not only on the body of the law but also on the physical bodies of the revolutionaries and their psyches. And thus their laughter is horrified and they are, if they continue to face the repressed, is on their way to psychosis and social anarchy.

Tahrir Square, in this sense, is both fascinating and horrifying, producing a language of abjection. This is a poetic language that does not ask any more “who am I?” since the subjects of the revolution have no identity anymore. They are not Egyptians anymore in the patriotic, nationalistic sense. They are more of cosmopolitans, foreigners on the border of their “home.” They ask instead “Where am I?” “Am I inside?” Or “am I outside?” I am inside as I am still in my homeland (1982, p. 8). But I am outside since I am an outsider, a rebel against the state. In this sense, the revolutionary poet is both a victim and a victimizer. She is frightened but at the same time immersed in jouissance, a sexual pleasure that comes to the surface with the return of the repressed.

The solidarity that the Egyptians showed during the Revolution is paradoxically beyond the symbolic, beyond institutional religion and beyond gender. In Tahrir Square, the Egyptians stood together without a division between Muslims and Copts, male and female, and
beyond any political party. Juan Goytisolo describes this scene beautifully as follows:

An agora, a theatrical performance, a point of convergence: an open and plural space, a vast common of ideas... an immediate contact between strangers, a forgetting of social constraints, identification in prayer and laughter, the temporary suspension of hierarchies, the joyous equality of bodies. (2011, p. 382).

Shahin also describes this unique feature of the revolution:

It was inclusive of various social classes, groups, and movements. It transcended ideological differences and focused on a shared list of demands that united the protesters during the eighteen days of the revolution and kept the protest momentum alive and strong. The revolution exhibited remarkable levels of pluralism and tolerance that had been missing in Egyptian society for decades. These values were reified in a new national spirit, which Egyptians called the “Spirit of Tahrir.” (2012, p.68)

The scene is one of catharsis and purification. And although technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, ignited the revolution, it was not until the bodies lined in rows, sweating, chanting, shivering, that the Revolution became a sweeping creative force. This is the solidarity of the brothers that toppled down the father of the primal horde in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. Their solidarity was essential for killing and devouring the despotic father who possessed the desired women to himself, depriving his sons from pleasure (1987, p. 61). This cannibalistic act is formulated by Lee Sterrenburg in a revolutionary manner as follows: “First the ancient regime devours the people, then the Revolution devours the ancient regime, then the Revolution devours itself” (1975, p. 250). The famous poster of Hosni Mubarak as vampire held by some Egyptians during the Revolution is evidence of the regime’s engulfing characteristic, which has to be faced in the same way in return. It is only the killing or banishing of the father that will establish a new order. Related to this is the cleaning of Tahrir Square during the revolution. The Egyptians tried to cleanse the abject that stuck to them psychologically and physically for years. Giving the toilets and the rubbish pile of the revolution the name of the “National Democratic Party Headquarters” is very indicative in this context. The regime, represented by its leader-father, is the abject pharmakos that should be jettisoned in order for the Egyptians to enter the symbolic again. And thus one can venture to ask, is the continuation of chaos in Egypt until now is a result of an unfinished task? Is it because the scapegoat is still in? Or is it because the revolutionary poet went far in the expulsion of her impulse and in her way to psychosis? Freud narrates how the end of the story of rebellion should be:

It is a reasonable surmise that after the killing of the father a time followed when the brothers quarreled among themselves for the succession, which each of them wanted to obtain for himself alone. They came to see that these fights were as dangerous as they were futile. This hard-won understanding – as well as the memory of the deed of liberation they had achieved together and the attachment that had grown up among them during the time of their exile-led at last to a union among them, a sort of social contract. Thus there came into being the first form of a social organization accompanied by a renunciation of instinctual gratification; recognition of mutual Obligations; institutions declared sacred, which could not be broken-In short, the beginning of morality and law. (1949, p. 129)

This means that the domination that is abandoned for the sake of freedom will eventually end in reaffirmation of domination (1987, p. 65). The brothers have to regain union after the revolution in order for the civilization to be established. They have to come back from their “exile” to become citizens of a new state instead of being foreigners. And finally they have to regain their “sanity” after being borderline patients. However, by all means, Tahrir Squar, unlike Kristeva’s expectations, has proved that revolt on all levels is possible after all, and that “the society of the spectacle” can still achieve freedom for
“true freedom is not mastery but rather creativity itself” (2007, p. 10-11).

As can be seen above, political revolutions are possible in modern society, and that does not cancel their artistic achievement. The Egyptian revolution is stark evidence of the possibility of the combination of the political and the aesthetic. Tahrir Square of the 2011 was a creative, artistic place, the place of the discourse of the other, the semiotic and the feminine. The activities done and the language used in the Square are expressions of the death drive that dissolves identities and resist oppression. The language used is a language of abjection on the border between sanity and insanity. In this sense, the revolutionaries with their poetic language become marginalized and suicidal. This indicates that revolutions, in spite of their bursting of creativity, are, after all, pathological, leading to death and chaos. Order thus must be restored soon after releasing negativity to establish life again.

REFERENCES


الثورة المصرية عام 2011 من منظور كريستيقي: إبداع مرضي

أرين غازي خليفة

ملخص

هذا المقال يستخدم مفهومي كريستيقي: الثورة و المفهوم الأكثر حداثة الثورة النفسية، وبينما يربط الأول ما هو شخصي وجمالي بما هو اجتماعي، فإن الثاني يركز فقط على ما هو نسبي كما هو ممثل في الفن و في التحليل النفسي، بما أن المايكروزمي بالضرورة يعود إلى المايكروزمي، يصبح دمج المفهومين ببعضهما أكثر فاعلية. تعرض الثورة المصرية هنا كنموذج مثالي لهذه الثورة السياسية الجمالية حيث ينفجر الإبداع على شكل غريزة الموت، السيميائية و الأنثولوجية تختبر ميدان التحرير و الفن يصبح سمة حدوده الضيقة. هذا يعني أنه على الرغم من أن الثورة المصرية فضية إلا أنها أيضا مدمرة و مرضية تستوجب استعادة النظام.

الكلمات الدالة: الثورة المصرية، الثورة النفسية، كريستيقي، التحليل النفسي، الإبداع.