

# Those Awful Tahrir Rapes\*

**Lama Abu Odeh**

There is no easy way to talk about the mass rapes of Tahrir: crowds of men surrounding an immobilized woman under waves upon 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 what they mean, what they are an expression of, what they say about us – about our sociality and what has become of it – about the transformations apace: 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 be the claim, who represent none of us, the good men and women of Egypt and the Arab world. 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 on par with street harassment, as a mere instance of it (if a shockingly violent

version). I think once we do, something about the overwhelming effect of those 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, just like the two girls from Aghadir, Morocco. Wearing skirts and walking in a public market they both learned the hard way, and 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 us recall for a moment what happened to the girls from Aghadir. They were attacked by outraged merchants who threw stones at their hairdressing shop for wearing skirts and walking in a public market. Instead of the stone thrower merchants being arrested, the girls themselves were charged with being in violation of Article 483 of the Moroccan Criminal Code. Article 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 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 different 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 may ask herself daily. "Have I missed anything? Maybe the dress is too tight. Maybe the t-shirt is too short. Too much butt? Too much breast? Maybe the scarf is too colorful. Maybe the make-up is too conspicuous." Fiercely suspecting that no matter what she does 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 learned then is that "conventional dress" – that thing that promises deliverance from harassment – has a built-in 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 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, even subsequently, they became morally outraged.

Harassment and moral outrage, the girls from Aghadir found out they were synonymous with each other, 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 deserved 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 will all just go away! There is something else we know. We know that the amount of violence unleashed on us in 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 do not quite do the job (rape defined as insertion of a penis, whereas insertion by a sharp instrument is not 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, it chose not to enforce. It might have 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.), but subsequently relaxed protections after all the attention went away. Or the state randomly enforces enough times to make it appear as though the state was indeed reacting and doing something without leaving any serious impact on the amount of violence unleashed on women's bodies.

It gets worse. The state can even turn our own complaints against us. 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 complaints to them so costly, and 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 from activists who wanted to help enforce laws to protect women, the state refused. We know that the state was more worried about its own reputation, and hesitated to cooperate with such activists for fear of legitimizing them.

But we also know that among those activists, there was trouble. And the trouble revolved around how much women could be involved in rescue operations, as the men thought it was not a great idea for women to put themselves in highly volatile situations and should therefore simply (wo)man the phone instead. They assumed that having women work as rescuers would make their lives even more difficult - now they would 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 newcomers to the scene and that it was women who were first to get organized to help their sisters.

### **Conclusion**

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. The violence is either completely ignored by the state, or the state has designed ambiguous rules to address

violence, but nothing that comprehensively protects women. The state also refuses to enforce these laws and sometimes choose to focus on the wrongdoing of the accuser.

Third, this kind of violence is meant to control 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. 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 for how to understand this phenomenon either blame women for leaving their private spaces, or they see it as a sign of the collapse of the nationalist state, an invasion of the cities by the poor of the slums and the rural areas, 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.

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#### ENDNOTES

\* This paper is available online on Scholarship @ GEORGETOWN LAW <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/1610>  
1. 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 Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU), July 27-30, 2015.

2. 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 happened on various Eid occasions makes the difference of the rapes of Tahrir a difference in degree, not kind.