**The Arab Spring for Women? Representations of Women in Middle East Politics in 2011**

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**SUMMARY.**

**KEYWORDS.**

An article in the April 26, 2011 issue of *The Nation* declared it “the Arab Spring for Women,” suggesting that the mainstream media had “overlooked” the fact that “women have been and often remain at the forefront of these protests” (Cole and Cole 2011). Citing examples from Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, the article contends that women’s “bold gestures” should be the subject of media attention, given that “women could not have been more visible in the big demonstrations” and “this should in itself have been news” (Cole and Cole 2011). Recognizing that “the Arab Spring has proven an epochal period of activism and change for women” where “the sheer numbers of politically active women” is impressive, the article concludes that “before, women could be marginalized at will by the dictators whenever they made demands on the regime. Now, at least, they have a fighting chance” (Cole and Cole 2011).

This and a number of other Western news articles, news programs, and pundits have also described ‘the Arab Spring’ as an "Arab Spring for Women" - praising a wave of gender liberation accompanying the sense of political redress that seems to be advancing across the ‘Arab world.’ These reports suggest that gender equality is a significant issue in the social movements of the Arab Spring, both in the composition of the movements and in the issues they advocate. As women demonstrators took to the streets and women journalists reported on that activism, proliferating accounts told stories of the modernization of the Arab world through the bodies of, and in the lives of, its women.

2003 Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi (2012) published a striking counternarrative in the *Wall Street Journal*, called “A Warning for Women of the Arab Spring.” Ebadi (2012) compares the revolutions of the Arab Spring to the 1979 revolution in Iran, warning that revolutionary men often take advantage of women’s participation during the movements, but then neglect them in constructing post-revolutionary orders. She contends that “the true ‘Arab Spring’ will only dawn when democracy takes root in countries that have ousted their dictatorships, and when women in those countries are allowed to take part in civic life” (Ebadi 2012).

What do these competing discourses signify about women? About ‘the Arab Spring’? What can reading Western[[1]](#endnote-1) media narratives about ‘the Arab Spring’ tell us about Western consumption of ‘the Arab Spring’ revolutions? This article uses feminist theorizing to gain leverage on the question of what Western media narratives of what happens to ‘Arab Spring’ can tell us about how the conflict (and the people engaged in it) are understood by those writing the narratives and portrayed to those reading media accounts.

In so doing, it builds on decades of feminist research that has recognized the importance of discourses about women war-justifying narratives and war histories (e.g., Cooke and Wollacott 1993).[[2]](#endnote-2) In these war narratives, often, strong discourses about the protection of women coexist with fraught cultural contexts, instrumentalization, and mixed results (e.g., Sjoberg 2006). Feminist analysis has suggested that, often, images of women are coopted into public political narratives to achieve political goals or as lenses through which to understand and justify political conflicts. Given this instrumentalization, feminist research has suggested that stories that portray either watershed victories for women or total losses should be critically reevaluated.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It is that spirit which inspires this article’s exploration of the complex, liminal, and difficult space in which the stories of women in ‘the Arab Spring’ are wielded as parts of political narratives of gender, race, class, religion, democracy, and Westernization in Western media. This article examines, using the tools of postcolonial feminism, those stories. It does so not to divine some universal or objective narrative of what happens to women in ‘the Arab Spring’but to examine what the presentation and consumption of information about women in ‘the Arab Spring’ tells us about how ‘the Arab Spring’ specifically and the ‘Arab world’ generally are understood in those narratives. To this end, after briefly describing what is meant by (gender and) the ‘Arab Spring,’ for the purposes of the analysis in this article, we outline a method for evaluating the significations of Western media narratives about women in the ‘Arab Spring.’ We then go on to ask where the women are[[4]](#endnote-4) in Western media narratives about the ‘Arab Spring.’ After finding the two dissonant narratives (gender as emancipatory and gender as problematic in the Arab Spring), the remainder of this article looks at these presented/consumed narratives of ‘the Arab Spring’ (for women) through gender lenses – asking what assumptions about gender (and sex and race and culture) are necessary to make particular representations of the events of ‘the Arab Spring’ of 2011 possible (Peterson and Runyan 2009; Wilcox 2009;). It finds that these narratives, which appear contradictory if one is looking to find out *what happens to women*, otherwise have more in common than not. Both use *what happens to women* as an indicator of *whether or not ‘the Arab Spring’ has ushered in Western, liberal democracy*, and, as such, share many assumptions about gender (and sex and race and culture). The article concludes by exploring the implications of those assumptions for how the Western media consumes and reacts to ‘the Arab Spring’ through gender lenses.

**(Women and) ‘the Arab Spring’**

The term ‘Arab Spring’ has been applied to a series of protests launched by the self-immolation of a fruit vendor name Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. His act of self-immolation has been alternately debated, condemned, and valorized as inspiring the Tunisian Revolt, referred to colloquially in the Western press as the ‘Jasmine Revolution.’ His act sparked 29 days of protest, which effectively deposed Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 15, 2011. After this initial revolution, workers in neighboring Egypt, who had long been striking, escalated their actions on January 25th. Public sites such as Tahrir Square became focal points for the demonstrations, which reverberated around urban Egypt to Port Said and Alexandria. Hosni Mubarak eventually stepped down on February 11, 2011.

From there, the protests become both more scattered and more volatile. The Pearl Square protests in Bahrain claimed the lives of several hundred and were eventually suppressed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Saudi Government in February and March of 2011. In Yemen, the GCC used a similar tactic, but they used it against the Saleh government rather than in support of the protestors. In Libya, demonstrations and assassinations sparked a Civil War, which eventually included North Atlantic Treat Organization (NATO) bombing raids and the vigilante killing of Moamar Gaddaffi on October 20, 2011. The unrest in Syria began in January 2011, and remains, at the time of this writing, quite violent.

Each of these protests, revolutions, or conflicts differs significantly across national borders. As such, ‘the Arab Spring’ is a problematic concept because it makes the events it describes sound more unified than they have been in reality. The concept becomes all the more difficult to espouse given that Western scholars and pundits have been both quick to declare the outbreak of democracy in the ‘Arab world’ (like the abortive 2005 ‘Arab Spring’ of Egyptian protests and Lebanese emancipation) and quick to express pessimism about the potential for lasting change in the ‘Arab world’ (Benard 2012; Hamzawy and Brown 2007).

The term ‘Arab Spring’ is also deployed in oversimplified ways. The ‘Arab Spring Revolutions’ differ across state borders. Also, none of the movements’ goals map perfectly to the goals that the term ‘Arab Spring’ implies – the toppling of dictatorships is not always meant to, and does not always lead to the establishment of Western, liberal democracies (as some Western consumers hope) (Ebadi 2012). We think of the ‘Arab Spring’ not as one event, but as a signification of a certain perception of the events often contained therein; not as something religiously, politically, or socially easy to capture or understand but as a complex constellation of various positions across all of those dimensions.

Like the term ‘Arab Spring’ is oversimple, it would be oversimple to suggest that there is a singular experience of women in ‘the Arab Spring.’ Instead, as feminist theory has shown, any narrative of ‘women’s experience’ in conflict is necessarily partial, because women play a multiplicity of roles, as peace activists, as domestic or economy-saving labor, as logistical and health care supporters, and/or as active participants in agitating for regime change. In the ‘Arab Spring,’ women were protesters, but they were also martyrs, political candidates, and bloggers serving the cause of seeking democratic change.[[5]](#endnote-5) Women were not only proponents of the ‘Arab Spring’ but also its opponents[[6]](#endnote-6) and its civilian collateral damage (e.g., Arieff 2011; Enloe 2000). For example, Nadje Al-Ali (2012) suggests that “women participated side by side with men in protests across the region” but that some opposed the revolutions as well, reminding readers that “women do not necessarily act in solidarity with each other” (27, 29).

At the very least, like the question of whether there has indeed been an ‘Arab Spring’ and how ‘successful’ it has been, the question of whether ‘the Arab Spring’ is ‘good for women’ (as if there were such a monolithic thing) is far from resolved – it is “too early to tell” (Coleman 2012), the ‘results’ so far are mixed (Sweis 2012), and not only observers but participants disagree (Afkhami 2011). Certainly, research into what happened to women during ‘the Arab Spring’ and the political choices that those women made is valuable and important. It is, however, not this subject of this article. Instead, this article focuses on “zooming in on what happens to and what is going on with femininities, masculinities, and sexualities; to gender norms, ideologies, and discourses; as well as gender roles and relations and the various processes of gendering” (Al-Ali 2012, 31). It has included a brief discussion of the potential dimensions of women’s experiences not for the purpose of knowingwomen’s actions and experiences, but to point out that any streamlinednarrative of women and ‘the Arab Spring’ is just that – a streamlined narrative that obscures the liminalities and complexities both of ‘the Arab Spring’ and women’s lives in its (many) contexts.

**Reading Media Narratives**

Though streamlined narratives of women in ‘the Arab Spring’ are necessarily oversimple, they also dominate Western media portrayals that cover the subject matter. For this article, we performed extensive critical discourse analysis of the Western media portrayals of women’s situation in what is identified in the media as the ‘Arab Spring.’[[7]](#endnote-7) This section discusses how we analyzed those discourses, and the next presents the results of that analysis.

Understanding how the Western media characterizes women in what it identifies as ‘the Arab Spring’ is done in this article in two steps: asking about the significations of the media narratives, and asking about the ‘moral’ of those narratives to find what they are telling their audiences not only about women, but also about the nature of and governance in the ‘world’ it characterizes as Arab. In order to investigate these questions, we follow Annick Wibben (2011) in using a “feminist narrative approach,” wielding narratological tools to understand the meanings of stories, or narratives.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Accomplishing such a task requires an understanding not only of what a narrative is, but also how a narrative functions to transform an object into a sign, or an object of consumption. This is what is meant by “signification” – what a narrative implies about its subject to those who will consume, and be swayed by, that narrative (Baudrillard 2001). In this view, narratives are shortcuts that we use to help us comprehend and consume objects and events, given the infinite information in the world (Bordieu 1991; Khong 1992; Lakoff and Johnson 1980;). In this way, “narrative, if only temporarily, fixes meaning” (Wibben 2011). The meanings that narratives fix are not random, but are often structured by themes that warrant their telling and ‘morals,’ which underscore their importance, “a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer 1995).

It is these sets of symbolic references, or “significations,” that create meaning and enable stories’ acceptance and interpretation by diverse actors with diverse political, social, and economic positions and interests.[[9]](#endnote-9) Objects’ signification provides them with coherence, meaning, and relational value, and ties them to a ‘moral’ of a narrative (Baudrillard 1993, 34). The process of assigning this meaning, however, is not standard or apolitical (Habermas 1968, 62). Instead, as Hajer (1995) explains, “story-lines are political devices that allow the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure.”

We look at narratives’ significations – the ways in which a coherent story with wide acceptability manufactures commonality and produces desired reactions, and look for those significations’ structures (e.g., Geertz 1973). Because the structures of signification of women in ‘the Arab Spring’ are not unified or unidirectional, the sorting out of meanings in this article is not a linear process. As John Hall (1999) argues, “‘[a]ctual inquiries’ depend on *hybrid* practices that involve extra-logical mediations and formative discourses employed *in relation to* one another” (3). These extra-logical mediations include emotion, cultural context, gender perceptions, and other socially constituted actions and reactions. Given this complexity and hybridity of meaning of the story lines around women in the ‘Arab Spring,’ the method by which the story lines are analyzed and deconstructed must also be complex.

We use hermeneutic deconstruction to look for explicit and hidden meanings in story lines about women in ‘the Arab Spring’ and read them through their contexts in local and global politics. This hermeneutic deconstruction is “fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in knowledge” and aspires to “investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized, and so on by language use” (Weiss and Wodak 2002, 15).

This critical investigation, then, emphasizes two parts of the signification process. First, it deals with the characterizations of women in ‘the Arab Spring’ by examining the story lines’ meanings on face. It analyzes their descriptions, predications, and commonly produced themes to broadly address the question: what is a woman in what is characterized as the Arab Spring signified as? Second, it addresses the performance of and reaction to that utterance in a specific personal, cultural, and relational context. This “contextual” view is necessary because the discourses being analyzed are those produced by and/or published by English-language Western media about what they characterize as the Arab world, so it is important to see an element of the gaze of the intended audience in the production of the discourses. Without taking account of that context, “the political conflict is hidden in the question of what definition is given to the problem, which aspects of social reality are included and which are left undiscussed” (Hajer 1995, 43).

**Where are the Women in Media Coverage of ‘the Arab Spring’?**

In our analysis of the Western media significations of women, we find two consistent, streamlined narratives. The first is the narrative of ‘the Arab Spring’ as a watershed moment for women’s and gender rights in places grouped as which that signifies and is signified by the success of (western) liberal democratic transitions. The second is the narrative of ‘the Arab Spring’ as changing little if anything for Arab women, and potentially being a net negative in terms of women’s rights and women’s quality of life. This narrative associates (lack of) progress on women’s rights with incompleteness of an idealized democratic tradition. This section discusses the contents and prevalence of both narratives before analyzing their significations for the presentation and consumption of information about ‘the Arab Spring’ in the United States and Western Europe.

**The Arab Spring as Gender-Emancipatory**

One group of accounts of where women were in ‘the Arab Spring’ saw both women’s visibility in the movements and the multiple roles that women played in those protests as a success story, and often presented women’s participation as not only evidence of the improvements which the revolutions were to usher in for women but also of a general democratization and liberalization that the movement was to produce. For example, one account highlights that women’s presence more than doubled in the Egyptian protests in 2011 compared to past protests:

An unprecedented number of Egyptian women participated in Tuesday’s anti-government protests. Ghada Shahbandar, an activist with the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, estimated the crowd downtown to be 20 percent female. Other estimates were as high as 50 percent. In past protests, the female presence would rarely rise to 10 percent (Krajeski 2012).

Similarly, a *Der Spiegel* report celebrated that “women protested alongside men on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis and on Tahrir Square in Cairo” (von Rohr 2011). The *New York Times* reported that it was many women’s “first chance to take part in public life” (Zoepf 2011).[[10]](#endnote-10) The recognition that women turned out to the demonstrations in large numbers is often accompanied in these news stories by either personal narratives or other demonstrative evidence that the women who were present played an important or at least agential role. For example, an *Economist* article reports the story of (female) Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz, who explains that “there was no difference between men and women” since “ALL of us were there, throwing stones, moving dead bodies” (von Rohr 2011). While Mahfouz noted that “some men told her to get out of the way,” she also saw that “others held up umbrellas to protect her” (cited in von Rohr 2011). This, in Mathieu von Rohr’s (2011) words, “conveyed a new image of Arab youth and Arab women” which resonated in important ways.

Part of this new image characterizes ‘the Arab Spring’ as fought in whole or in part of behalf of women who were suffering before it. For example, in coverage and characterizations of the Libyan uprisings, the question of the Qaddafi regime’s abuse of women became a crucial rally cry against the status quo dictatorship. In an Associated Press (2011) article titled “Hundreds of Women Report Rapes by Qaddafi Forces,” it is alleged that the regime politicized rape, where “the woman I spoke to say they believe they were raped because their husbands and brothers were fighting Qaddafi.” One story became particularly prominent, that of Iman al-Obeidi, who:

burst into a Tripoli hotel full of foreign journalists vociferously declaring that she had been raped by members of Libya's security forces. She had been in a car with her brother-in-law when they were stopped at a checkpoint in the Libyan capital. When her accent betrayed her eastern Libyan roots, security forces demanded to see her identity card. When they learned she was from the city of Tobruk, where antiregime protests helped spark the ongoing rebellion last month, she was detained. “’They even defecated on me and urinated on me,’ she cried as hotel staff and government minders frantically sought to whisk her away. Moussa Ibrahim, a Libyan government spokesman, was quick to dismiss al-Obeidi's story, saying ‘this girl is a prostitute’ (Sotloff 2011)

This story is framed in the media reports as an opportunity to motivate observers to “throw light on what is really happening in Libya and fight to bring justice for these women” (Sotloff 2011). A similar approach was taken when “virginity tests” of protestors in Egypt made the news during the protests, where the military arrested women protestors and performed invasive tests of sexual purity (Mohsen 2012; Parvaz 2012). Outrage about these tests was used in the media as fodder to support the justice of the protesters’ cause against the standing government of Egypt.

Some accounts go so far as to characterize it not as ‘the Arab Spring’ *for* women, but as ‘the Arab Spring’ *of* women, contending that women’s participation actually galvanized the movements to have the far-reaching effects that they ultimately did. One account suggests that “people here [in Egypt] are not afraid anymore – and it may just be a woman who broke that barrier of fear” (El-Naggar 2011). Another account frames women as central to each of the major Arab Spring movements:

None of the uprisings in the Arab countries would have been possible without the participation of women. They were among the first to protest at the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain, they organized women's protests in Syria, they were part of the Libyan uprising from the start, and a Yemeni activist was one of the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize this year (von Rohr 2011).

Even Shirin Ebadi, whose view of women’s gains in ‘the Arab Spring’ is mixed at best, suggests that “in the popular uprisings in these countries, women played a prominent role, and without the presence of women, victory would not have been possible” (quoted in Esfandiari 2012).

Soon after the beginning of the protests, images of women as activists and as protestors proliferated on the Internet, particularly on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and in places easily consumed by Western observers. This was at least in part because showing gender diversity in the protesters is a signification of likeness with Western societies, which perceive themselves as gender equal. Newspapers and other traditional media followed suit, where “the many photographers in Cairo and Tunis sent their editorial offices images of attractive women taking part in the revolution” (von Rohr 2011). As Mathieu von Rohr (2011) accounts, that identification produced (as it was meant to) Western popular sympathy for protest movements:

People in the West recognized themselves in the faces of the young female protesters, and they were pleased that people in these countries were not as different as many had previously believed. The certainty that Arabs were incompatible with democracy was destroyed, as well as the cliché of the Arab woman as a passive, oppressed being.

In fact, a number of accounts explicitly emphasized how the women in the protests “were nothing like” the “prevalent Western stereotypes” of “doe-eyed, veiled, and submissive, exotically silent” Muslim women, characterizing women’s participation in the protests as “cultural evolution” “throughout the Arab world” (Wolf 2011). Accounts like this associate women’s rights with democracy and Western-ness, and therefore with people who are to be identified with and treated as equals. Rather than erasing the Orientalism of the Western gaze towards the ‘Arab world,’ these narratives effectively ‘solve’ the differences between the Western and Arab worlds by showing that the Arab world has come around to the Western world’s ways of treating women (see Said 1979). Many of the stories that celebrate women’s agency in ‘the Arab Spring’ juxtapose accounts of women’s agency in the protests with explanations about the gender troubles of the Arab world in recent times. *The Economist*, for example, juxtaposes Mahfouz’s victory with an implied reminder of the ‘bad old days,’ where “in 2002, the first Arab Human Development Report cited the lack of women’s rights as one of three factors that most hampered the region’s progress” (*Economist* 2011). Another account notes that “the combined effects of social media and youthful optimism” have “given women a prominence in the Arab uprisings that they haven’t had in the past” *because* “traditional Arab leadership is a male affair” (Shanahan 2011). Michael Rubin’s (2011) account of gender progressivism in the Libyan revolution identifies Libya as an extreme case, arguing that “it is perhaps in Libya where the West should be most concerned about the plight of women” because of a treacherous history of women’s rights, where:

Infused through the late Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi’s political theory was both racism and misogyny. Libyan teachers have indoctrinated two generations of Libyan youth with quotations from *The Green Book* which referred to women as “the feebler sex” *(Economist* 2011).

Such accounts simultaneously celebrate the victory of women’s roles in the protests while condemning the previous sex oppression in the ‘Arab world.’ They play into progressivist narratives of the modernization of the ‘Arab world,’ in part on the women’s bodies and through women’s lives (e.g., Fukuyama 1992).[[11]](#endnote-11)

A crucial part of those progressivist narratives is the suggestion that women’s participation in ‘the Arab Spring’ protests is a signifier of greater gains to be had and consolidated. Accordingly, a number of news accounts and activists have suggested that it might be relatively simple or straightforward to translate the gains that women experienced by being allowed to participate in (and actually participating in) ‘the Arab Spring’ movement. For example, Reuters quoted Abdelwahad Radi (the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union) as suggesting that “countries in transition can very effectively take advantage of reforms to guarantee strong participation of women in politics” (Reuters 2012).

Some accounts take these gains as something that can be easily obtained, while others see them as more difficult and even potentially requiring the assistance of outside actors, such as Western governments and NGOs. *The Economist* (2011) accounts for women’s rights protests as largely motivated by actors outside of the “Arab Spring,” explaining that “those clamouring for change in Egypt and Tunisia today are mostly NGO workers, campaigners, lawyers, academics, and politicians” but that “to their voices have been added those of women protesters who came out in their tens of thousands and demanded an end to the old way of life.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Instead of talking about domestic motivation to include women in politics, some of these accounts use terms like making sure that “the new governments of Egypt and Tunisia are made aware of women at the outset,” implying that the inclusion of women specifically (and perhaps democratization generally) are likely reliant on states and organizations with positive gender practices serving to demonstrate those practices to new, Arab “democracies” *(Economist* 2011). Other accounts credit NGOs for the progress that has been made for women tied to democratization movements, suggesting that the motivation for gender equity in protests cannot be local. In Moushira Khattab’s words (former Egyptian minister of family and population) “women's NGOs played a critical role in pushing the Tunisian government to lift key reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)--the first country in the region to do so” (Coleman 2012). This narrative at once suggests that ‘the Arab Spring’ is positive for women and that its positivity comes from (and reinforces) the success of the movements, particularly in replicating Western, liberal democracy in their new governments.

**The Arab Spring as Gender-Problematic**

Though narratives celebrating women’s successes in ‘the Arab Spring’ dominated early media accounts of gender and participation in the movements, more skeptical accounts have been a constant feature of the coverage of ‘the Arab Spring’ and have proliferated as the movements have showed mixed results. These skeptical accounts talk about the revolutionary movements as representing either limited gains for women or potential risks compared to women’s status previous to the rebellions and regime changes. Mirroring discourses about the potential gender-based fears about Saddam Hussein’s replacements in Iraq (e.g, Dahlerup and Norland 2004), these accounts wonder if the new, ‘democratic’ governments will be more conservative on gender issues than the dictatorships that they are replacing. They express concerns for the violence and exclusivity that is often a feature of installing and supporting new governments, as well as the nature of the governments that are being installed.

For example, significant attention has been paid to the potentially negative implications for women of the electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, emphasizing the (relative) gender-liberalness of the Mubarak regime (*Agence France Press* 2012). The Mubarak regime had a National Council of Women, headed by the former first lady, Suzanne Mubarak. That council was tasked with looking out for women’s needs and women’s rights in evolving Egyptian society. At the same time that it had some impact on women’s lives, the National Council of Women was associated with the Mubarak regime as well as with a set of values to which most Egyptians did not ascribe (*Agence France Press* 2012). In Amina al-Bendary’s (women’s rights activist and college professor) words, “the old regime appropriated the issue of women’s rights” which created a bias against affirmative work for women’s issues after that regime was overthrown, where “women’s rights …suffer because of their perceived association with president Hosni Mubarak’s regime” (*Agence France Press* 2012). This bias has, according to gender-pessimistic narratives of the revolutions, translated to significant problems for women, perhaps even more severe than under the Mubarak dictatorship, since “legislative victories by the Council have been attacked, although they were the achievements of decades-long struggle by feminists” (*Agence France Press* 2012). Particularly at risk, according to this account, are so-called “personal status laws,” such as laws permitting women to file for divorce (*Agence France Press* 2012). This and other accounts are concerned with the potential for the return of more conservative notions of gender in post-‘Arab Spring’ countries, where “at times of great change and as conservative forces appear to be growing in strength, it is vital that steps are taken to establish and protect equal rights between men and women” (Federation Internationale de Human Rights, FIDH, 2012).

For example, the FIDH (2012) suggests that “recent history painfully reminds us that the massive occupation of public space by women during revolutions, in no way guarantees their role in the political bodies of the regimes that follow*.*” Instead, the FIDH (2012) continues, “although the situation of women varies across the region, threats to their human rights converge …[where] women are confronting attempts to exclude them from public life*.”* Along those same lines, in a speech, then-United States Secretary of State Hilary Clinton condemned the developments in Egypt, contending that “women are being beaten and humiliated in the same streets where they risked their lives for the revolution” (*Al Jazeera English* 2011). Amnesty International (2012) has “expressed concerns about the little positive improvement that the uprisings in the Middle East has brought to women.” Evidence of the exclusion of women from the political workings of new regimes is used to support this point in a press release by FIDH published widely in Western media outlets:

In Egypt, there were no women in the two committees appointed to draft the new constitution. A new law abolished measures guaranteeing women minimum representation in parliament and women gained only 2% of seats in the recent elections. In Libya, the electoral law adopted by the National Transitional Council in January 2012 contains no quota for the representation of women in elected bodies. In Morocco, a law adopted in October 2011 established a quota of only 15% and in Tunisia the 41-member government nominated in December 2011 contains only 3 women (FIDH 2012).

Coverage of the results of the 2012 Egyptian election counted Egyptian women as “unlucky,” where they “saw the parliamentary quota system from the Hosni Mubarak era abolished and female representation reduced from 64 seats to just five” meaning that “Egypt stands above other Arab Spring countries in implementing regressive measures that hamper women’s representation in government” (Wagner 2012). A Reuters report (2012) suggests that “opportunities from the Arab Spring to boost the low numbers of women in parliaments are being missed.”

In fact, several accounts talk about ‘the Arab Spring’ as net harmful for women. Widney Brown (2012), a representative of Amnesty international, suggests that “women in Egypt had to face discrimination and stronger pressure economic wise during and after the revolution” which is only getting worse, given that “as new governments extend their grip, we can see that, as citizens, women remain firmly in the second class.” According to Moushira Katteb being quoted in *The Atlantic,* “the train of change has not only left them [women] behind, but has in fact turned against them …dormant conservative value systems are being manipulated by a religious discourse that denies women their rights” (quoted in Coleman 2012). A *New York Times* story quotes the head of the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women in Egypt as saying that “the product after the revolution is against women” (Sweis 2012).

Others talk about ‘the Arab Spring’ movements as themselves causing or being responsible directly for the abuse of women. For example, controversial feminist figure Robin Morgan[[13]](#endnote-13) in *Ms. Magazine* tells a story of ‘the Arab Spring’ as just another site of violence against women. She suggests gender inequality among participants at every step of the protests, from lines to cross checkpoints to arrests and bail-outs. She contends that “men – protesters as well as police – sexually harassed women so severely during the protests that few women demonstrated” (Morgan 2011). Along with Morgan, a *Christian Science Monitor* account of the Tahrir Square protests on International Women’s Day in 2011 describes the democratic protesters as hostile towards women, suggesting that:

almost immediately, they were outnumbered and beset upon by men who gathered. Some of the men were from the protesters' encampment in the middle of the square. Dozens of women engaged in arguments with the men, who said that women had enough rights already … Some of the men were polite; many were aggressive. ….“Go home, go wash clothes,” yelled some of the men….Suddenly, the men decided the women had been there long enough. Yelling, they rushed aggressively upon the protest, pushing violently through the rows of women (Chick 2011).

Concerns about the ways that protesters treated women have been sustained as critiques of the new governments that are being built in the wake of the success of the protest. For example, then-Secretary Clinton suggested that women “were harassed, arrested, tortured, and otherwise ill-treated in gender-specific ways” which included police harassment and being turned over to relatives for “control,” torture, and sometimes execution during the protests (*International Herald Tribune* 2012). In the face of the apparent occurrence of these atrocities, then-Secretary Clinton condemned the new government of Egypt because of the deterioration of women’s situation, arguing that “this systematic degradation of Egyptian women dishonors the revolution, disgraces the state and its uniform, and is not worthy of a great people” (quoted in *International Herald Tribune* 2012).

Abuse of women in and related to in ‘the Arab Spring’ revolutions have garnered a fair amount of Western media attention. For example, in 2012, a court of the new government of Egypt acquitted the doctor who performed the ‘virginity tests,’ siding with military officials who “said that the tests were conducted to preclude accusations that soldiers had violated women in their custody” (Michael 2012). The plaintiff in the civil lawsuit against the military suggested that it was “Egypt’s honor that was violated,” but several accounts argue that this is but one of many harbingers that the new governments of ‘Arab Spring’ countries might be as dangerous to women’s rights as the old dictatorships, if not more so (Kirkpatrick 2012).

Gender-pessimistic accounts of ‘the Arab Spring’ are not limited to stories focused on Egypt. In a *Der Spiegel* story about Tunisia, a Tunisian female blogger who has “fought for women’s rights and against censorship since 2007” saw “little hope” after the revolution, and was quoted as saying “today, we have a new battle [for women’s rights] …and its not going the right way” (Reimann 2012). In many accounts, Tunisia (not unlike Iraq a decade ago) is described as a state with a tradition of gender progressivism that is being threatened. While “Habib Bourguiba, the founding father of the modern Tunisian state … outlawed polygamy, granted women equal divorce rights, and legalized abortions” and “Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia’s toppled dictator, continued Bourguiba’s work,” many Western news accounts describe the future as bleak in comparison (e.g., Reimann 2012).

Concerns about the bleakness of women’s futures are often linked to question of whether or not ‘the Arab Spring’ has succeeded in its (imagined or actual) democratizing goals in these narratives that are more pessimistic about women’s situation after the revolutions. For example, activists like Shirin Ebadi tie potential advances in women’s rights that have not materialized to progress for democracy in the ‘Arab world’ (Esfandiari 2011). Ebadi is quoted in *The Atlantic* suggesting that “only when women achieve their rights can we say that ‘the Arab Spring’ has commenced” such that “Arab women will not allow a culture of patriarchy to once again trample their rights” (Esfandiari 2011). Immanuel Wallerstein (2011) suggests in an *Al-Jazeera English* article that women are the “forgotten peoples” of ‘the Arab Spring’ who are “told that their concerns, their complaints, and their demands were secondary and had to be postponed until some other primary concerns were resolved.” While Wallerstein describes the Arab Spring in terms of greater social dynamics, a story in *The Economist* talks about this as a failing of democracy, where “women’s rights have yet to become an issue that moves the general public” (*Economist* 2011). Other accounts describe the stalling on women’s rights of these new regimes as less apathy and more insidiousness, characterizing the subordination of women as intentional on the part of the new regimes (Ebadi 2012).

**Discourses of Women and ‘the Arab Spring’ through Gender Lenses**

These narratives appear to be exactly the opposite – one group of media characterizations reports that women benefit from ‘the Arab Spring,’ while the other group suggests either no progress or net harm coming from the same events. While some reports contained elements of both narratives, most stuck to one or the other, either declaring ‘the Arab Spring’ generally good for women or generally bad for women. While the positive reports were more popular earlier in the timeframe under examination and the negative ones more popular later, both can be found throughout the period of news coverage. These two dominant narratives differ both on their accounts of what happened to women in ‘the Arab Spring’ and on the implications of those events for women.

We suggest that the similarities between these two (empirically opposite) streamlined narratives run deeper than their differences. This is because understanding what is going on in these two narratives is more complicated than their verdicts on how women were and/or will be treated. Reading the two narratives of ‘the Arab Spring’ as gender-emancipatory and as potentially gender-oppressive next to each other using feminist narratological tools inspires asking questions like what those narratives signify and where they diverge, *but also* where they agree.

Narrative analysis reveals that one of the political conditions of the formation of both narratives is the association of women’s rights progressiveness (or backwardness) with state regime type and state government, where the form of government of a state and the status of government of that state is seen as a signifier of the state’s likelihood to treat women well, and the good treatment of women is seen as an indicator of the existence and success of other progressive (Western, liberal, democratic) political institutions or values. Particularly, what both narratives share is the association between secularism (particularly secular separation of Islamic religion and state), (liberal) democracy, and women’s emancipation, where gender rights serve as a barometer for the genuineness of both democratic and secularist efforts.

A signification of the narrative of ‘the Arab Spring’ as gender-emancipatory is that the ‘old Arab world’ of dictators without democratic process was backwards and of less value (generally or for women) than democratic regimes would be. It further signifies that protecting women means protecting them from Islamic governance and Islamic governments, implying that liberal, secularist models of democratic regimes are better for women. Many of the accounts that constitute the narrative of ‘the Arab Spring’ as gender-emancipatory also strongly imply a model where the ‘Arab world’ follows the West to secularism, democracy, and women’s rights. Then, the woman-as-protestor becomes an object and a sign, where the objectification is a female body demonstrably having crossed the (presumed Islamic-only) public/private divide perceived to be built on sex lines and the signification of women’s presence is the victory of a set of political values associated with gender equality (if not, or if secondarily, gender equality itself).

Many of the same objectifications and significations can be found in the narrative of ‘the Arab Spring’ as a risk to women. In this narrative, ‘the Arab Spring’ is less successful because it has not translated gains in democracy to secularism and/or women’s rights, and is therefore not actually, genuinely, or meaningfully more democratic. In addition to this general association of the backwardness of the abuse of women and the backwardness of politics, there is a strong a differentiation between the ‘good old boy’ Arab dictators, perceived to have bestowed rights on women voluntarily if instrumentally, and the new, hypermasculine, conservative revolutionaries, who are framed to have a principled objection to the fair and equal treatment of women. Age, sexuality, and mystery go into the building of the new Arab democrat as scarier than the old Arab dictator, though neither meet the criteria implicit in the idealized state that provides the idealized treatment of women.

Therefore both ‘sides’ of the debate about women’s status in ‘the Arab Spring’ have in common an implicit endorsement of the privileging of Western, liberal models of democracy and (in Edward Said’s [1979] terms) an Orientalist gaze towards the Arab “other.” They also share an understanding that *what happens to women* is an harbinger of the (potential) successes of (Western, liberal) democracy, and the progress of/towards such a democracy in the ‘Arab world’ can be measured by the liberalization of women’s situation. Each inscribes regime type and place in history on the images, discourses, and bodies of the women who live through the ‘Arab Spring.’

In April of 2011, Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) observed that “the new grand narrative of ‘Arab Awakening’ [is] appropriating, interpreting, and representing the recent events along the same pillars of othering and, romanticization [as the old grand narrative of ‘Arab exceptionalism’], while casting universalistic-Eurocentric judgments.” Surveying news reports about the role of women in, and the situation of women after, the “Arab Spring,” shows that gender narratives play a key role in those Orientalizing discourses. Looking at how the image of ‘the Arab Spring’ Western media outlets presented the woman protester, both at the time of the revolutions and as those victorious in those revolutions look to participate in normal social and political life, shows the many ways in which narratives about women are maps for narratives about particular values and rules that dominate (imperial) political discourses among states.

In this context, gender equality as a signifier of (Westernized) liberal democracy is necessary to make statements about (gender and) ‘the Arab Spring’ meaningful. Some understanding of gender equality and women’s liberation becomes a power relation between the evaluator and the evaluated, whether the ‘verdict’ is positive or critical. As such, it is necessary to understand both gender relations and gender significations to understand not only ‘the Arab Spring’ but Western policy and media reactions to it. Reading what the two (apparently opposite) gender narratives have in common shows that assumptions about the relationships between gender, (Western, liberal) democracy, and the (Arab, Islamic) ‘other’ are essential to creating and sustaining a (new but the familiar) Orientalizing discourse of the ‘Arab world’ as either progressing past its essential otherness or stuck in its perennial (perceived) backwardness. While this matrix of narrative significations provides more options than the discourses the Said (1979) originally identified as Orientalist, their roads ultimately lead to a similar place – (using gender stereotypes to perpetuate the) ‘othering’ of the ‘Oriental’ in the ‘Western’ gaze.

In this way, gendered significations of women in ‘the Arab Spring’ map onto raced, colonizing readings of the ‘Arab’ other, where the perceived ‘Arab’ subject is “contained and stabilized through narrative” in a way that is dominating but not totalizing; instead, “fractured, fluid, and contradictory” (Nayak 2006, 45; Schick 1999, 12). Meghana Nayak (2006), reads this move as one that not only results from and constitutes a problematic perception of the Other, but “*in effect reflects insecurity about the Other becoming an actor rather than an object in international hierarchy*” (emphasis in the original, 45). In other words, the narratives that appear to be *about* how similar the ‘Arab world’ is becoming to ‘the West’ and/or how different they remain as the ‘Arab world’ lags behind *both* cater to a fear of the potential for agency of that Other world, and serve to exclude the possibility of such agency from Western narrative discourses. In this way, Western narratives about ‘the Arab Spring’ serve not only to protect ‘the West’ from the agency of ‘the Arab world,’ but also to preserve the ontological distinction between them*,* preserving what ‘the West’ knows *about itself* (in Nayak’s [2006] words, “i.e. that Self is good, normal, enlightened, progressive, and right and Other is backwards, barbaric, primitive, and dangerous”) as well as what it knows about the ‘Arab world’ insofar as it is [not] ‘progressing’ to resemble ‘the West.’

This reading has its roots in postcolonial feminisms (e.g., Chowdhry and Nair 2002; Mohanty 1991; Narayan 1997;), which put forth the argument that non-Western women are often used to make culturally and racially demeaning characterizations of non-Western Others, where it is assumed that “the *only* reason a woman may die in a nonwestern country is because of the monolithically oppressive, static Culture,” and therefore the only solution to that Culture is to change it (Narayan 1997; Nayak 2006, 48). This assumption multiplies the violence of the Self/Other distinction in global politics (e.g., Agathangelou and Ling 2004) with the violence of racialized Othering and Orientalizing discourses – all in two narratives that appear to be nothing but celebration of (or concern for) women’s in ‘the Arab Spring.’

**Conclusion**

Looking for women in ‘the Arab Spring’ is likely to find an overwhelming multiplicity of potential roles as well as potential gender-differential or gender-based impacts. Perhaps oddly, though, looking for women in Western media accounts of ‘the Arab Spring’ finds two streamlined narratives: one that characterizes ‘the Arab Spring’ as a source of gender emancipation, and one that is pessimistic about the gender impacts of the same events. These narratives seem to tell *opposite* stories, both about women and about the potential legacy and future of the ‘Arab Spring,’ drawing lines between those who see ‘the Arab Spring’ as being (perhaps in Fukuyama’s [1992] terms) nearer to the ideal-typical Western liberal democratic model (and thereby the “end of history”) and those who see it as a (group of) fundamentally politically backwards movement(s).

Looking closer, though, shows that the narratives have more significations in common than disagreements about how the world works. Both see women’s rights as a symbol of whether or not ‘the Arab Spring’ has succeeded in particular Western, liberal terms – if women are enjoying more rights, the movements have succeeded; if women are being more oppressed, the movements have failed. Likewise, women’s rights can be seen as an indicator of success – if the movements have succeeded, women will be playing a more prominent role in politics; if they have failed, women will continue to struggle. These readings of both ‘women’s rights’ and success and failure, though, are externally read and externally narrativized. Additionally, using gender rights as a litmus test for a certain view of ‘success’ of ‘the Arab Spring’ is a double-edged sword at best, where women are used as a proxy for other values, and one’s view on the implementation of those other values affects how one reads the situation of women. Still, this Western media trend of narrativizing women’s rights as a central feature of success and progress seems to be being replicated elsewhere (e.g., al-Natour’s [2012] discussion of contemporary Egyptian fiction), and have some staying power across media coverage of the revolutions and their aftermath. This staying power makes critical rereadings all the more crucial to understanding not only the politics of, but the politics of the representations of, the events that will irrevocably be characterized as ‘the Arab Spring.’

It also demonstrates the gendered nature of the instrumentalization of narratives of women’s rights in service of the political purposes of those doing the instrumentalizing. Here, Western media outlets are instrumentalizing narratives of how women fare in the ‘Arab Spring’ to incorporate into (often raced) judgments of the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of the ‘Arab Spring.’ Others in the feminist literature have identified women as signifiers of state, nation, and environment – in these narratives, women are signifiers of Westernization and modernization. The instrumentalization of women in these narratives, like in many others throughout history, both trades off with and corrupts *both* pure attention to women and hopes to deconstruct the complexities of gender subordination.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Not meaning to either entrench or essentialize the ‘Western,’ but to use it as an identifier for the consumption of the narratives talked about in this article. We mean the word ‘Western’ to refer to a particular gaze (and its attendant politics) towards the ‘Arab world’ that it has constructed, and constituted as Other. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In recent years, feminist work has talked about the salience of saving Afghan women from Afghan men in United States (and even global) discourses about the invasion of and then military stabilization of Afghanistan (e.g., Cooke 2002; Nayak 2006; Shepherd 2006), critiquing work that uses that narrative (e.g., Elshtain 2003). Feminist research has also revealed the crucial role that saving Jessica Lynch played in the American military operation in Iraq ([reference to author’s previous work omitted ADD SOURCE]; Lobasz 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some interesting feminist work has been done on the instrumentalization of gender *within* explicitly feminist revolutionary organizations (Allison 2009; [reference to author’s previous work omitted]ADD SOURCE). ‘The Arab Spring’ movements, though, are neither unitary or explicitly feminist, and this analysis is interested in looking not at the movements’ gender behaviors but at the gendered consumption of the movements in Western media. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In the vein of Cynthia Enloe’s (1990) inspiration that feminist research start by asking the question “where are the women?” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Concerning martyrdom, see Newslook (2011); blogging, see Flock (2012); public office candidacy, see Montemurri (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, a number of “conservative” women have expressed concern that a gender rights liberalization that might happen as a result of or concurrent with democratization is a problem, arguing that “being granted ‘too many’ rights contravene religion and social norms.” These women, arguing that “work cannot interfere with women’s mission, which is first to raise children and take care of the home,” object to gender-liberal policies and celebrate some of the returns to traditionalism that have come with some of the post-revolutionary governments in the Arab world (*Agence France Presse* 2012). See discussion in Farag (2012; 233) about the many powerful women who initially opposed Mubarak’s gender laws, and played a role in post-Mubarak repeal of many of them. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A “Google News” search for “women” and “the Arab Spring,” (permuted) filtering out where either word appeared only in advertisement or other headlines and/or where the article was not actually about the relationship between women and “the Arab Spring,” December 1, 2010 to March 31, 2012. We limited the publications to the United States and Western Europe’s major newspapers and newsmagazines in English, limited to the top 20 each place based on circulation data as reported by Wikipedia (you should include the URL). There are 109 total articles in the dataset. Dataset available on request at (author information redacted). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This narrative analysis is both a scholarly tool and a political one, “intended as an intervention that challenges the politics of security and the meanings for security legitimized in existing practices” (Wibben 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. They produce signs, which some organize into text (medium), story (presentation), and fabula (content) (Baudrillard 1993; Derrida 1980; Foucault 1982; Geertz 1973; Morris 1964). For more detailed discussion of text, media, and fabula, see Wibben (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. A claim that many Middle East specialists have pointed out to me could not be further from the truth (e.g, Brand 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is worth noting that Fukuyama in part abandoned the progressivist narrative in *The End of History* because he recognized the continuing tensions between the ‘Western’ and ‘Arab’ worlds. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Note that this coverage implies that women are *not* NGO workers, campaigners, lawyers, academics, or politicians. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (identifying information redacted) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)