

Toward, Around, and Away from Tahrir



Toward, Around, and Away from Tahrir:  
Tracking Emerging Expressions  
of Egyptian Identity

Edited by

Emily Golson, Loubna Youssef  
and Amanda Fields

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## INTRODUCTION

*If something is meant to go elsewhere, it will never come your way,  
but if it is yours by destiny, from you it cannot flee.*

—Umar ibn al-Khattab  
The Second Khalifa of the Muslims  
584-644 CE

Egypt embraces and embodies paradox. It is a place where ancient artifacts and everyday occurrences promote new instances of inexplicable logic. This in itself is not unusual for a country located between east and west. What is unusual, however, are the resident responses to questions about Egypt. Prior to January 25, 2011, when asked about unusual images, sights, or sounds, Cairene responses ranged from a litany of complaints to well-rehearsed, guidebook descriptions of picturesque neighborhoods and magnificent ruins. Occasionally, however, a thoughtful resident would remain silent, leaving visitors and guests to accept the smiles, shrugs, honking horns, blaring loudspeakers, and strings of expletives as background ambience, as sound without meaning and action without purpose. During and after the January 25 Revolution, as a result of the push for freedom of expression, the meaning of the frantic sounds and unusual silences became more coherent. But while the call for democracy resulted in an explosive articulation of Egypt's problems, the demand for change further complicated questions about Egyptian identity.

The goal of this volume is to open and advance conversations about Egyptian identity in order to further understand some of the changes that appear to have altered and strengthened Egyptians' perceptions of themselves. The primary focus is on written expression as viewed through the lenses of rhetoric, language, and communication. The opening essay posits what appears to be an unprecedented shift in the use of rhetoric, *balāgha*, and the Arab language, a shift that allows for the clarity of purpose articulated in the Tahrir revolution. The following essays support and expand upon claims of shifting identities that may or may not have emerged from a growing awareness of the events in Tahrir. Some of the essays, such as those on Malak Hifni Nasif, Imam Mohammad Al-Ghazālī, and Father Daniel Issac, link pre-revolutionary to revolutionary Egypt by suggesting that the 2011 revolution had been written into the culture

before it erupted in Tahrir and elsewhere. Other essays, such as those on the appearance of *Arabizi* and the debate over translation, note problems associated with periods of social or cultural transition as well as periods of revolution. Although each contribution was written without knowledge of the others, the collection creates a trajectory toward larger questions that include but are not limited to the role of language and rhetoric in the formation of personal identity and the role of language and rhetoric in the preservation and transformation of culture and society.

Our study is limited to Cairo and its surroundings. Our contributors are native and non-native, current and ex-residents of the city. As professional scholars and/or teachers of rhetoric and composition, a discipline which cuts across several fields of knowledge and values all modes of expression, they have chosen a variety of approaches to examine their selected subjects, including inquiry through qualitative research, case studies, interaction with expert opinion, and lyrical exploration. The intended audience for the collection includes scholars and/or visitors to Egypt who seek additional insight into a few of the forces that are contributing to the shaping of Egyptian identities and identifications. For scholars, the collection offers examples of rhetorical approaches to objects, events, and concepts that emerge from disciplines other than their own. For students or visitors, the collection offers unique glimpses into potential possibilities of meaning for the sights and sounds that intrigue them. For all, it suggests and supports a complex view of what rhetorician Lester Faigley termed “fragments of rationality,” fragments that suggest rather than assert several possibilities for an ever evolving whole.

In keeping with the above, the volume imagines a conversation among contributors. In order to facilitate comprehension, its editors have divided the essays into six sections that support connections and correlations within and among the pieces. Section one provides a rationale for the organization of the contents of the volume and a justification for the contributors’ use of different genres and styles of writing. Section two offers a framework for the discussions that appear in the remainder of the volume. After examining a brief history of *balāgha* and comparing it to definitions of western rhetoric, Loubna Youssef uses the rhetoric of the Tahrir revolution and the language of a contemporary novel to argue for a paradigm shift in the Egyptian rhetorical tradition. Section three expands upon the ideas expressed in the overview, with essays by Lelania Sperrazza, Lammert Holdijk, Tim Warren, and Belle Gironda extending Youssef’s claim of a paradigm shift through observations on language, literacy, and identity as they appear in selected mediums, purposes, and situations. Elaborating on the ways in which *Arabizi*, when combined with

technology, has encouraged the growth of hybrid languages and lifestyles, Lelania Sperrazza argues that the globalization of English-based technology has not only caused today's generation of western-educated Egyptians to rely on English as the dominant form of electronic communication, but also infiltrated the everyday speech of educated young Egyptian adults, causing them to speak *Arabizi*, a mixture of Arabic and English that reflects conflicting messages about "who they are and what they want to be." Lammert Holdijk extends the globalization dilemma and the search for more effective language by highlighting translator Denys Johnson-Davies's provocative claims about the state of the Arabic language in general and contemporary fiction in particular. Positing that formal Arabic is dead, Johnson-Davies argues for the validity of colloquial Egyptian and the need for more attention to the spoken word as it plays out in fiction. Tim Warren takes up the issue of modes of expression by tracing a trajectory of graffiti from facts, stylized flattery, and declarations of intimate feelings to unprecedented disapprovals of government figures while Belle Gironde analyzes how her video depictions of the unexpected eruptions and changes in Cairo and its environs became, for her, a device through which she could reflect upon her position as an outsider to the language and culture of the city.

In section four, Maha Hassan, Loubna Youssef, and Michael Gibson address the need for social and moral models by reexamining the words of three important Egyptian figures: Malak Hifni Nasif, a late twentieth century Egyptian feminist, Sheikh Mohammad Al-Ghazāli, a mid-twentieth century imam, and Father Daniel, a contemporary Coptic priest. Recognizing that Nasif's attempts to advance women's rights may seem surprisingly western, Maha Hassan carefully links Nasif's restrained call for better education for women to those of several other late nineteenth century reformers, such as Jaml El-Din Al Afghani, who drew upon the Islamic principle of *shuraa*, of putting an end to despotic rule, to call for radical social change. Emphasizing Malak Nasif's rhetorical skills, Hassan then proceeds to compare Nasif's restrained approach to reform to that of the protestors in Tahrir. In a similar fashion, Loubna Youssef compares the rhetoric, and oratory in Sheikh Mohammad Al-Ghazāli's "To the Masjid" with the language and intent of the protestors in Tahrir to suggest that Ghazāli's values, eloquence, and well-structured *khotāb* provide a good model of oratory and leadership for future leaders of Egypt. Adding to Hassan and Youssef's claims, Michael Gibson's examination of Father Daniel Isaac's improvisation on traditional Coptic sermons and rituals offers tentative, yet persuasive insights into why Daniel's leadership and innovative sermons appeal to many Egyptians.

Section five explores the identity dilemmas of young Egyptian adults, some of whom were in Tahrir on the first day of the revolution. Arguing that Tahrir provided the perfect moment for an accelerated transition to adulthood, Ghada el Shimi introduces a psychosocial theory that isolates specific stages of identity development in order to link those stages to moments when, as Chickering and Reisser describe it, “behavior becomes congruent with belief,” when competing forces that obscured identity merge into one, and when, according to witnesses and participants, a diverse population united to support one cause. Expanding on identity issues, Noelle Houssney Ehab follows with a personal narrative that demonstrates how language expectations have shaped her perception of self. Quoting Amin Maalouf, who writes that, “Identity cannot be compartmentalized,” Houssney Ehab isolates some of the identity problems that arise in Egyptians with “mixed” backgrounds who must identify with both a globalized and a nationalized world.

Moving away from Tahrir and offering a different perspective on shaping identity, James P. Austin constructs a concept of memory as identity by synthesizing contemporary western discussions of how creative nonfiction writers shape life-changing events. Recalling an exchange between an experienced American writer and a novice Egyptian writer about a detail that appeared in the young writer’s narrative of a personal memory, Austin shifts the focus of the conversation from the young Egyptian’s question about the accuracy of memory, to the role of memory and representation in writing, to the different ways in which genres, cultures (and cultures of writing) privilege the recitation of factual truth over articulation of feeling, imagination, emotional truth, and critical truth. The conversation not only recalls what was once a crucial difference between Egyptian and western learning (memorization versus critical thinking), but continues to be a subject of interest to those who pursue cross cultural comparisons of written expression.

Finally, in section six, poet Melanie Carter’s lyrical epilogue echoes some of Austin’s interest in impressions, thoughts, and emotional and critical truth while adding one last perspective to the conversation. Emphasizing the limitations and possibilities of words, the frailty of memory, and the inherent transformational properties of time and space, Carter locates thought and imagination in a seemingly isolated physical landscape that could pass for any of the massive construction sites outside or inside of the city. While a barrage of images evokes the thoughtless energy that accompanies the rapid transformation of the physical environment, the speaker’s fragmented thoughts expose diverse realizations that appear to be byproducts produced by constant exposure to

a collective, changing identity. The poem provides a fitting conclusion to the volume because it not only captures the energy of transformation, but also locates identity in the interplay of isolated moments and countless images, an approach that supports the diverse, interconnected insights articulated by the contributors to the book.

Our collection was drafted before the January 25 revolution, revised during the period prior to Mohammed Morsi's election, and revised once more when several entities and forces in Egyptian society, including thirty-three million civilians, the judiciary, Al-Azhar, the Egyptian Church, the army, the police, and various political parties initiated a call for President Morsi's removal. As a new constitution takes shape, it is now clear that the democracy initially called for in Tahrir will draw upon forces peculiar to Egypt, and that it will take time to understand the meanings and identities that are to become a part of Egypt's democratic transformation. This volume attempts to gain insight into these emerging meanings and identities through a process that allows informed knowledge and thoughtful observations to enter, transform, and occasionally emerge at unexpected moments to form a network of insights that provide partial responses to expressions of identity located throughout the work. It is our hope that our readers will find value in this approach as Egypt's revolution continues.

Emily Golson  
Loubna Youssef  
Amanda Fields



# **PART I**

## **OVERVIEW: WHEN BI-LINGUAL BECOMES BI-RHETORICAL**



*BALĀGHA* OR RHETORIC?  
THE LANGUAGE OF THE TAHRIR SQUARE  
REVOLUTION

LOUBNA A. YOUSSEF

الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام

(The People Want to Bring Down the Regime)  
Street Chant Heard Throughout Cairo  
During January 25, 2011 Revolution

The spectacular live scenes of the revolution of 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 in Medan El-Tahrir (Liberation Square) caught the attention of the world. Faces and voices of men, women, and children, the colors of the Egyptian flag, the slogans, chants, songs, artwork and humorous placards and sketches persuaded poets, politicians, reporters, and tourists to visit the Square. Portraits of the young martyrs that were seen in Egypt in every shape and size (on post cards and tee shirts, and on larger than life posters) honored courageous young Egyptian role models who lost their lives during the revolution. The resulting collage has inspired not only Egyptians, but millions elsewhere.

A question that has been raised time and again is: how will all this contribute to the good of Egypt? The range of answers is vast and unpredictable, but there is a positive spirit of change. Though it is impossible to fathom the impact and repercussions of the revolution on the future of Egypt, it is possible to sift through the variety of Arabics employed on the Medan during the eighteen days that led to the fall of the Mubarak regime to fathom how language contributed to the relatively peaceful unfolding of the event. This paper argues that the language of Tahrir was made possible by a paradigm shift that featured a merge of Arabic *balāgha* and western rhetoric to create a form of communication that appealed to Egyptians and to audiences throughout the world. The challenging question that this paper attempts to answer is: what made the merge of two different fields of knowledge, *balāgha* and rhetoric, possible?

### A Brief Comparison

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to distinguish between *balāgha* and rhetoric, which have occasionally been viewed as synonymous. These are two different disciplines that actually have different origins, uses, and goals. Whereas in pre-Islamic times, *balāgha* was linked to poetry, poetics and oration, post-Islam established a bond between *balāgha* and religion, politics, philosophy, literature, and criticism. During Plato's time, rhetoric started as the art of persuasion in the realm of public speaking (politics and law), but is now viewed as the scholarly evaluation and production of "all forms of communication: scientific, philosophical, historical, political, legal, and even poetic" (Berlin 769). Contemporary western rhetoric attempts to understand the psychological as well as philosophical and political implications of specific language use, while contemporary *balāgha* studies the eloquence of the Qur'an and all forms of Arabic writing. Both support effective communication, but unlike western rhetoric, which tends to isolate both strong and weak uses of language, *balāgha* foregoes the study of "all forms of communication," and the discussions of the strong, weak, and unusual that accompany these analyses in order to present the *best* form of communication, with the Qur'an as the model. When writers like Philip Halldén use the term rhetoric to refer to *balāgha* and/or *khatāba* (oration), this implies that the western and Arabic terms are synonymous, which is far from being true. Each term has its own sources and history and each refers to a discipline that developed in different contexts. Scholars who write in English about Arabic *balāgha* need to ask themselves: what is meant by the term rhetoric when it is used with reference to the writings of Arabs? Does it refer to the field of knowledge that was founded by Plato and Aristotle, or is it used to refer to the discipline known as *balāgha*? In this case, the term rhetoric is used for convenience, but it is not accurate. My contention is that rhetoric in western literature is only loosely and conveniently equated with Arabic *balāgha*. In fact, the Arabic term has implications that are sometimes quite different from the western concept. Logically, of course, because the message of a speech or text will be differently perceived when heard or read by a different audience in a different time period, what constitutes eloquence is different in pre-Islamic Arabia, post-Islam, classical western rhetoric, and in the world we live in today.

Nowadays, it is important to acknowledge two broad sets of facts with respect to Arabic as a language and *balāgha* as a field of knowledge. First, for Muslim Arabs today, the classical Arabic language represented in the

*balāgha* of the Qur'an is inimitable, and learning, interpreting, and reciting the Qur'an became the life-long mission of many Muslim scholars in Al-Azhar and other similar institutions around the world. Second, there are two other models/forms that are altogether different for writers and speakers of Arabic in modern times: one is both written and oral and is understood by all Arabs, namely Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), while the other is basically oral and constitutes distinct vernaculars being used in different countries in the Arab world. Both forms have undergone change and are evolving through the interaction between users of Arabic who are involved in contexts that are new and different, such as interactions with users of other languages and interaction with concepts that emerged with the development of modern technology. MSA is distinct in being more formal and codified, and is therefore used in writing, but also in the media (radio, TV, newspapers, films) and literary texts. Professor of Arabic philology, El-Said Badawi, convincingly argues that Egyptian Arabic is a version of both classical and MSA. The Arabic Language Academy, established in Egypt in 1934 (others were founded elsewhere in the Arab world) to preserve the sacred language of the Qur'an, limits borrowing from foreign tongues while maintaining the compatibility of Arabic with progress in different branches of knowledge by adding new terms that do not exist in Arabic, such as radio TV, and computer. In 1996, in *Comparative Moments*, Enani explains that Egyptian Arabic

...is not as yet recognized as the language of the 'canon'. 'Serious' writers shun it like the 'plague' (to quote Naguib Mahfouz) either because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that it is less capable of capturing the minute and subtle thoughts and feelings dealt with in the 'canon' than classical Arabic or even MSA, or because they associate it (after Auerbach) with 'low' style (43).

This is changing, and during the revolution, this change has become a reality. The roots of this change started in the middle of the twentieth century when, for example, famous Egyptian poets like Ibrahim Nagi (1898-1953) wrote poetry in which he merges classical and MSA with skill. Lines from his well-known poem *Al-Atīl* (The Ruins), with a title that echoes the theme of pre-Islamic poetry, were sung by Egypt's best known singer in the twentieth century, Om Kolthoum,

أعطني حريتي أطلق يديا      انني أعطيت ما استيقيت شيئاً  
اه من قيديك أدمي معصمي      لم أبقيه وما أبقى عليا

Give me my freedom! Set my hands free!  
I have given all, keeping nothing back!  
Your manacles have caused my wrists to bleed;

Why should I keep them when they have caused me to wilt away!  
(Enani. *On Translating Arabic* 40)

The reference to freedom is a modern theme, and although this is a love poem, such a reference alludes to the political conditions at a time when Egypt was under colonial rule.

Quotations from Arabic poetry are relevant in discussing the development of Arabic as a language leading to the rhetoric of protest during the revolution. Since pre-Islamic times, the Arabs have had a long interest in the recitation of poetry that served as *diwān al-Arab*, as a social, economic, religious, and cultural record of their lives. It is in this context that Arab people, believing that “the pen is mightier than the sword”, organize regular poetry festivals as one of the major sources of entertainment. Many scholars have established that the Arab poet has been regarded as a historian and a literary figure who plays a cultural role. With reference to the changes that have occurred in the use of the Arabic language in poetry, citing the late poet and well-known caricaturist Salah Jaheen (1930-1986) will help in showing that in the twentieth century colloquial Egyptian Arabic became an appropriate medium in writing verse that is recognized as poetry with literary merit. Enani translates the following extract by Salah Jaheen in *Comparative Moments* (45),

اللحم طين والعروق دود من ديدان الطين  
ادم وحواء علي أرض العدم حاطين  
عاقبهم الرب. أخرجهم من الجنة  
ادم عمل حضان حواء جنته وغني  
والناس بتتهنى...مهما يكونوا منحطين.

With flesh of clay, with veins no better than  
Clay-bred worms, Adam and Eve are sinking  
To mortal earth, descending,  
Punished, expelled by the Lord from heaven,  
In Eve's embrace Adam found a new heaven,  
And to her kept singing!  
People find happiness, through sinking low  
Though hopelessly descending!

Jaheen's ability to create a scene that juxtaposes the story of creation with Adam and Eve's disobedience, life after the fall, and life in modern times not only attests to the dexterity of the poet, but also to the flexibility of Egyptian colloquial Arabic in conveying complex themes and imagery. The fact that the Arabic stanza here is composed of five lines while the English has eight, shows that in order to translate the imagery into English, Enani needed more space. He includes a note that the translation

will “lay no claim to utter faithfulness; it does, however, approximate the ‘sense’ “ (45). The popularity of Ibrahim Nagi and Salah Jaheen as poets who used radically different forms of Arabic proves that the audience/reader is receptive in both cases, and that the tools of *balāgha* are flexible so long as the writer/speaker communicates a message effectively and eloquently. The well-known Arabic proverb لكل مقام مقال, which means words ought to fit the context, suggests that the rules of propriety in Arab culture must be observed.

Although some claim that as disciplines, *balāgha* and rhetoric have a similar focus, given the different histories of the two terms, substituting one term for the other can be tricky and confusing: to find one term in the target language that is equivalent in meaning to a term in the source language is sometimes impossible. Another case in point is *shari‘a* and Islamic law. Because of their awareness that Aristotle was writing about a concept different than their own, Arab translators coined the term *rituriqa* when they translated Aristotle. What misleads Halldén is that he consults scholars like Merlin Swatz (whose biography on the website of Boston University, College of Arts and Science, Department of Religion, states that his “research and teaching focus primarily on the religious and intellectual history of medieval Islam” <http://www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/bios/swartz/>) and Herbjorn Jensen, who also associates the adjective “medieval,” which immediately brings to mind the Middle Ages in Europe, with Islam. What is “medieval Islam”? Bringing the terms Islam and medieval together shows a misunderstanding of the history of Islamic thought. Halldén’s use of the term “medieval Muslim philosophy” (20) when he discusses philosophers like Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rush is inappropriate because it infers a western concept of the Dark Ages, backwardness, and the domination of the Church. In other words, the term “medieval” has negative connotations that are in sharp contrast with the golden age of enlightenment that these philosophers contributed to.

When comparing *balāgha* and rhetoric, it becomes clear that they are similar in being problematic terms, and in laying an emphasis on how a speaker/writer effectively uses language to address an audience/reader in a specific context. *Balāgha* in the Arab culture since pre-Islamic time and rhetoric in the western world since Plato and Aristotle are two disciplines that study the “art” of communicating effectively orally and in writing. Both *balāgha* and rhetoric developed in time and the process involved the efforts of scholars in different fields of knowledge. Each has become a discipline in its own right, affecting other disciplines, but each is studied and applied differently. It is true that there are grounds where they overlap,

but the two terms cannot be used as synonyms. The stages through which they developed are categorically different. While in English the concept of rhetoric is directly related to its classical provenance, in Arabic there have been many sources for the definition of *balāgha*, not necessarily consonant with one another or related to one another. In pre-Islamic times, the Arabs were interested in embellishment, which they never believed to be the special domain of poetry, but a common vehicle for articulation and eloquence. So much so, in fact, that Arabic, contrary to modern European languages, has come to be largely figurative. It is true that both *balāgha* and rhetoric started as oral activities with the ultimate goal of persuading an audience, but each developed differently: *balāgha*, which initially was associated with the decorative use of language in poetry and oration, developed into the study of the inimitable language of the Qur'an, and eventually matured to become the field of knowledge that embraces three main branches, namely *علم البيان وعلم البيان وعلم البديع* 'ilm ma'ani (the science of meanings), 'ilm bayān (the science of articulation, good style, and clarity of ideas and speech), and 'ilm badee' (the science of beauty/ornamentation/invention). Rhetoric, which was initially associated with the theoretical foundation that supported Greek conceptions of the art of discovery and/or persuasion, became associated with poetics, on the one hand, and religion, on the other, during the late Classical through Renaissance periods, was stripped of its poetic and philosophical underpinnings during the post Renaissance, and now, has emerged as the discipline that cuts across both humanities and social sciences to examine oral and written texts in order to encourage effective communication.

In the early stages of their development, both *balāgha* and rhetoric stressed the role of a good orator, but in the Arab tradition, the orator had to be well versed in the use of language, while in classical rhetoric, the orator provided convincing evidence to his listeners along with a claim to discovering the truth for all time, or, in the case of the Sophists, the "truth" of the moment. *Balāgha*, at this early stage, stood for the linguistic virtuosity and mental alertness of the speaker in narration and/or persuasion rather than in content. Rhetoric, however, valued imparting knowledge by integrating *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. It is ultimately the use of words to persuade an audience. Both *balāgha* and rhetoric highlight the context within which the speaker/writer is communicating with the audience/reader. The context in which each is used is different, and since contexts are different, the message and ways of conveying it are different as well. Both *balāgha* and rhetoric developed through their interaction with other fields of knowledge: *balāgha* was studied in relation to literature, linguistics, Qur'anic studies, philosophy and logic; and rhetoric

developed in relation to philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science and linguistics. Both *balāgha* and rhetoric stressed language as an important tool of communication, but their emphasis on content is different.

## The Paradigm Shift

But what is the purpose of this comparison? The first answer is an attempt at mutual understanding. The second is that, although these two disciplines have similarities and differences that ought to be discussed at more length and in depth, during the 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution, the boundaries of *balāgha* and rhetoric dissolved. The protestors in Tahrir Square were not only addressing Egyptians to send one message to the ruling power and another that is altogether different to their fellow Egyptians, but they were also communicating with the world. The choice of the word سلمية, that is peaceful, for example, is effective in making two announcements, one to one another and the other to the world. The fact that the protestors had a hold on Tahrir Square gave rise to the possibility of armed conflict with the police, as represented by the pro-Mubarak powers on the one hand and members of the Armed Forces on the other. To the world, the protestors were revealing the true nonviolent nature of the Egyptian. They put their Blackberries and iPhones to good use, and when the Ministry of Interior turned off the Internet and mobile connections, those resourceful young Egyptians were ingenious in establishing a podium on the Square. Though Arabic, naturally, was the dominant language they used, it was a form of Egyptian Arabic that seemed universal. Despite the possibility for miscommunication between individuals and between governments, and because of the radical development of instant means of communication, this was not the case in what became known as “The Republic of Tahrir”. Even though misunderstandings could have occurred, during the 18 days that led to the stepping down of former President Mubarak, the *balāgha*/rhetoric of protest exhibited clarity of vision that was unbeatable. Somehow, the protestors had mastered the “art” of communicating effectively with spoken chants and written slogans. With a sense of humor, their main demand that Mubarak leave (إرحل i.e. leave) became a witty combination of a slogan in both Arabic and English when they said, “Go إرحل يعني” (Leave means Go). This demand, which starts with the Arabic imperative “Leave”, soon became a chant when they added to

Go” إرحل يعني  
فاهم والا No”؟

This clearly orders Mubarak to leave and humorously asks him whether he understands or not. One placard read: “Mubarak: shift – delete” and another, “Mubarak: Game Over”.

It is important to note that the protestors were not simply gifted with the right language at the right time. They managed to convey their message clearly and succinctly. The well-known proverb “brevity is the soul of wit” is a basic rhetorical concept in English that did not exist in the Arabic of the past. The “soul of wit” in Arabic is *expatiation*, a use of speech that demonstrates a powerful command of language and idea via an emphasis in form over content and linguistic virtuosity over meaning. The protestors in “The Republic of Tahrir” knew better than to revert to this tradition. Young and well educated, they demonstrated that their use of language had gone through a paradigm shift. Skillfully employing the most up-to-date technology, they acknowledged that *expatiation* was inappropriate by shrewdly substituting foreign terms and concepts. I believe they made it clear that, in Arabic, the old rhetoric, which resides in language, is dead and buried. These protestors were selective, and made sure that the words they used conveyed a clear, straightforward message. If this transformation is real, what is the process that led to this?

Many claimed that a “revolution of the hungry” was bound to happen in Egypt because of the dire conditions in which a large segment of the Egyptian population lived. What happened, however, was a revolution by a group that was criticized as living in a bubble: educated young men and women who had the basic comforts of life and more. Because of their extensive exposure to western culture, they had absorbed some of the premises that underlie western rhetoric and the western use of technology without realizing its implications. Much has already been said about how Facebook brought these young men and women together, about the martyrs, the withdrawal of the police from Egyptian streets, the invasion of the Medan by camels and horses, the freeing of prisoners, the burning of police stations and other sites, the bullets and tear gas, the lack of street security, the mass looting, the National Democratic Party thugs, the curfew, the imprisonment of x-ministers and business men, the different agendas of the protestors, the counter-revolution, the role of the Armed Forces, the problem of the media, the tension between Muslims and Christians, the Muslim Brotherhood, the amending of specific Constitutional articles, the Egyptian sense of humor, the corruption and injustice that prevailed for thirty years, and the list can go on. The fact remains that a variety of social and economic factors have been at play in Egypt throughout the past three or four decades leading to cultural changes that were reflected in the way the rhetoric of protest in Arabic became effective.

A few months after Mubarak stepped down, more has become evident about the profile of the protesters in Tahrir and the identity of the martyrs. They are mostly the sons and daughters of middle class Egyptian parents who invested in giving their children an education. Using the most up-to-date technology, these young adults agreed to meet in Tahrir to speak to the myriads of Cairenes that take nightly strolls along an adjacent section of the Nile. When it became evident that the protest was more than young adults criticizing the problems of Egypt, many parents rushed to support their children. As parents, extended family, friends and neighbors lined up to enter “The Republic of Tahrir” from Kasr Al-Nile Bridge, young men and women who helped the flow of the screening process warmly greeted them. Egyptians are known to be warm and hospitable, but since when have they started standing in line? Since when have the Egyptians become so organized? No one huffed and puffed or shook their fists and shouted. When it was my turn to go through the screening process, one polite, well-dressed young lady in jeans and a headscarf checked my ID, and apologetically searched my bag. When asked why she was so rigorous, she said they have to do the job efficiently, but still make sure there are no weapons on the Medan. Once in the Medan, even before 11<sup>th</sup> February, the spirit of jubilation that swept the place was energizing. Touring the Medan, one encountered friends, Egyptian and foreign colleagues students, and unfamiliar faces, many of which soon became familiar. Joining the members of the various economic and social classes were representatives of the three migrations that had occurred in the last four decades: migrants from rural areas to cities, migrants from Egypt to Arab or western countries, and migrants from the crowded Cairo and Giza to the new gated communities.

## **The Protest Community and Popular Culture**

It would be interesting to study how each of these waves of migrants play a different role in the way many Arabics merge when Egyptians talk and write today, but this is beyond the scope of this essay. What is important is that in the Medan, the protestors spoke in the same voice, and the different forms of Arabic, namely classical Arabic, Qur’anic quotations, Modern Standard Arabic, and the Egyptian dialect, seemed to merge. Statements in classical Arabic like الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام (The Egyptian people want to bring down the regime), and الشعب يريد إسقاط الرئيس (The Egyptian people want to bring down the President), and later الشعب يريد أخلاق الميدان (The Egyptian people want the code of ethics of the Medan), reverberated in Tahrir Square and in the world on every TV channel, in

every newspaper, and on Internet sites like youtube.com and Twitter. National songs from the 1960s by Om Kolthoum and Abdel Halim Hafez were heard and sung, and the following classical lines of poetry by Tunisian poet Aboul Qassem Al Shabi (1909-1934) were recited everywhere,

إذا الشعب يوماً أراد الحياة      فلا بد أن يستجيب القدر  
ولا بد لليل أن ينجلي      ولا بد للقيد أن ينكس

Should the people, one day, desire to live, fate will have to answer their call;

The darkness of night will have to fade, and the chains will have to break.

These lines, which most if not all Egyptian children memorize in school, became the title of a Facebook group during the January revolution. The emphasis on the “people” as the agent of change, and the transformation that is inevitable when their will is mobilized, are themes that the protestors needed to convey. The images of light replacing the previous pervading darkness and of a sense of freedom after breaking the chains of bondage and fear were transmitted to spread and dominate the Medan.

The youth who chanted the lines quoted above started the uprising that became a revolution of the people. These protestors were the residents of Greater Cairo, joined by members of the first group of migrants who originally lived in the capital, but moved recently to gated communities in satellite cities like New Cairo and New Giza. Some maintain that this class of Egyptians, who have gardens and swimming pools, try to seclude and detach themselves from what is going on in the country. The January revolution has revealed that this is not true. It is acknowledged that many of the youth who spent days and even nights in Tahrir Square belong to this class. These youngsters, as it has now become clear, are a force to be reckoned with. They are well educated, skilled in using technology, and have experience in the job market. TV talk shows have hosted their parents, who told stories about how they were summoned by their children to Tahrir to bring medical supplies, food, and blankets. Professor of surgery at the Kasr Al-Einy University Hospital, Tarek Helmy appeared on the well-known Mona Al Shazly talk show to narrate the details of how his daughter, who was among the young protestors, helped in establishing a hospital on the Square. He confessed that his attempts to detach himself from what was going on failed when his daughter cried for help when the protestors were attacked with live bullets; and, then, once he got to the Medan, he was impressed by how the youngsters managed the Medan, and stayed on until Mubarak stepped down.

The second group constitutes migrants who have either gone to earn a living in one of the Arab countries or in the west. They have close inextricable ties with their hometowns and visit Egypt often. Talk shows have invited many who came to Cairo to especially take part in the revolution. The most well-known is Wael Ghonim, the thirty year old Egyptian computer engineer who was the head of marketing, Middle East and North Africa at Google in the United Arab Emirates. Because of his activism on Facebook and in Tahrir Square, he became a celebrity overnight, occupying the top position of *Time* magazine's list of the world's hundred most influential people. Other more prominent Egyptians who belong to this group and have become inspiring icons that are familiar to Egyptians everywhere, especially since they all received their basic education in Egypt, are the Nobel Laureate Ahmed Zewail, Mohammad Al Baradei who was the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery at Imperial College London, Magdy Yaqoub. Because they appear on Egyptian talk shows often, and their pictures are published in newspapers, their faces, voices, and achievements are public knowledge. They have a credibility that gives the young hope. Although they have spent most of their lives abroad, they are often visible in Egypt, and each in his own way took part in demonstrating that reform and development are possible. When they are interviewed on TV, they express their willingness to support Egypt's renaissance" by stressing the value of teamwork and research while highlighting the names of prominent Egyptians in all walks of life who live in Egypt and support reform. They publicly convey admiration for institutions like the Library of Alexandria, and for the efforts of figures like renowned professor of urology Mohammad Ghoniem and the pioneer in critical care medicine Sherif Mokhtar for establishing and running The Mansoura Urology and Nephrology Center and The Critical Care Center of Kasr Al-Einy University Hospital respectively. Such heroic accomplishments in hard times prove that excellence is achievable. The novels of Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz and of less famous but equally revolutionary writers like Alaa Al-Aswany and Essam Youssef convey the message that change and progress are both vital and feasible. Films like *حين ميسره* (When it is Convenient) and *حسن ومرقص* (Hassan and Marcos), and miniseries like *رأفت الهجان* (Raafat Al Haggan) and *التاريخ كما يجب أن يكون* (History as it Ought to be Written), to give but a few examples, sparked a deep concern in national problems and shaped the consciousness of Egyptian youngsters.

The third group is the largest in terms of numbers, and has consequently affected the population density and everyday life in Greater Cairo and

other cities, like Alexandria, that have received tides of rural migrants who left their land in rural areas to find blue-collar jobs. These individuals and families wanted nothing more than a job for a breadwinner and a roof over their heads. In the process of obtaining their goals, they were able to retain the same close ties with their extended families and start new patterns of social relations. The parents of these families are often illiterate, but their children go to public schools that allow them to be semi-literate. They enjoy movies, lyrics, and music specifically created for them, written in a Egyptian colloquial dialect (generally known to be the easiest form of Modern Standard Arabic) used in their villages. This is why it became possible for Sha'aban Abdel Reheem, a man who ironed clothes for a living, to emerge as the voice of the people and become a superstar almost overnight. His songs can be heard in buses, taxis, weddings, and on cell phones. Movie sequels like the "Al-Limby" series, with the name of the protagonist echoing the name of Edmund Allenby, a commander who led the British army in Egypt, starring the comedian Muhammad Saad, address this audience. They have made him a box office hit. Unlike Saad, who is regarded by the middle class as rather vulgar, Adel Emam, another comedian who attracts a similarly large audience, plays the leading role in movies that appeal to a wider public.

For 18 days in the "Republic of Tahrir" representatives of these three groups coexisted and cooperated in harmony; and the discrepancy between rich and poor, Muslim and Christian did not exist. In time, investigations will determine who was responsible for the thugs, the use of live ammunition, the freeing of prisoners, the burning of churches and police stations, the withdrawal of the police force, and more. What is remarkable from my point of view is the form of Arabic used in the Medan. The question is: why was it effective in mobilizing the Egyptian masses, toppling the regime, and appealing to the world at large? These young adults understand the value of both form and content to get a message across. The short answer to this question lies in the fact that the intensely rich and complex cultural life of Egypt has equipped the young Egyptians with the various necessary skills to persistently and successfully challenge a most stubborn regime. Another dimension of the answer comes in the form of an analogy between Egyptian life in general and the chaotic life of Cairene traffic. Although the streets of Cairo are often congested, and there are no lanes and stop signs, somehow Egyptian drivers miraculously manage; to the surprise of many, the city boasts a surprisingly low accident rate. Like the driver of a car in the heart of Cairo, the individual in Egypt has to cope with an array of variables. Whereas the variables in the case of the driver are vehicles of different sizes, pedestrians, donkey

carts, and the risks of being on the road during traffic jams, the challenges the individual faces are socio-economic and demographic. This is all summed up in the simple lyrics of a popular song by the Egyptian pop singer Ahmed Adaweya, in which he describes life in Cairo saying,

Crowded, oh, it's all very crowded,	زحمه يا دنيا زحمه
Crowded, and I lost sight of those I love,	زحمه وتاهوا الحبايب
Crowded and there's no mercy,	زحمه وما عايش رحمه
Crowded like a Moulid, a birthday, without a host.	مولد وصاحبه غايب

The incremental repetition and the symmetrical structures in this colloquial Egyptian Arabic extract are adorned with rhyme, exhibiting all the balance required both in meaning and in tension, as well as the typical rhetorical antithesis. The message here is obvious: life in Egypt is unbearable and there must be a way out. The image of the crowds that overwhelms these lines can be seen everywhere in Cairo, often referred to in Arabic as *Misr*, a term that alludes to the entire country. There appears to be a series of complaints here: the crowds, the sense of estrangement and isolation, the lack of mercy, the assumption that there should be a Moulid, a birthday celebration, but there is no birthday. There is only a sharp and disturbing sense of vacancy brought on by the absence of the host, the central figure, or leader, whose anniversary is being commemorated. The suggestion here is that a savior is needed.

## Shifts in Literature

Just as the streets reflect a shift in the use of rhetoric and language, contemporary novels, written in local Cairene dialect, are also focusing on content that is quite revolutionary for Egyptians. In his novel *Rob3 Gram* (*A ¼ Gram*), which gives the drug addict a voice for the first time in Arabic literature, Essam Youssef tells the story of a charismatic central character, Salah, who slips into addiction. Salah speaks in the first person, and the shift in the novel from the narrative mode in Modern Standard Arabic to dialogue using colloquial language is cleverly employed. Youssef's text is culture specific and the culture thus transmitted is class and age specific. It addresses a stratum of the upper middle class young men and women in Egypt who are mostly teenagers. Unlike his predecessors, he does not use formal adult language to express dialogue among teenagers, even in Egypt, even among characters from the same social class. Although it is well known that the common Egyptian is not a reader, and that the Arab culture is oral rather than literary, the book sales of *Rob3 Gram* confirm that the number of readers is growing. Youssef

targets the middle class young adults, uses their language, and seems to have hit a chord with them.

At the beginning of the novel that covers a span of about ten years, when Youssef draws a portrait of the members of Salah's "gang", he said the following about one of them,

We all liked Hussein, but the one closest to him was Mido despite their arguments about the Ahly and Zamalek teams. He was generous within his means; because of his father's death, he had very little pocket money. He was kind and witty. He loved beer and hashish, of course. After having a couple of puffs, he would say,

- Man! I'm stoned! I think I just smoked hashish!
- Good morning sunshine. Cut the stuff and share it.

His love of history surfaced after he smoked a joint. He would go on and on,

- What are the causes of the "Delican" war?
- Who is the leader of the "Delcanian" movement? Is it Tamer Bey Delcan, Haytham *pasha*, or Mido, the Ahly fan?
- Give reasons for what has led to the inner conflict among the members of the Delcan group.
- Explain clearly: why did Mido, the Ahly fan, betray Tamer Bey Delcan? (9)

When young Egyptians read this, they easily identify with Hussein, hear his voice, and are attracted to his humor. The rivalry between the Ahly and Zamalek soccer teams, the financial difficulties that result from the loss of a father, the value of kindness, and the thrill of smoking secretly are all too familiar. What is also funny is the list of questions that are typical exam questions with a twist. The incongruity of using typical history exam questions in classical Arabic like "What are the causes of", "Who is the leader of", "Give reasons for", and "Explain clearly", with reference to an imaginary war and a fictitious movement, is comical. When he replaces the names of historical figures with those of members of the "gang" and precedes these names with colloquial titles like *pasha* and *bey*, this incongruity is highlighted. Hussein is naughty, but bright and can make use of his learning in cracking jokes. His interest in history and knowledge of both Arabic and English enable him to integrate a term he fabricated, Delican. In this list of questions, he describes someone delicate, weak or fragile, that is a "Pansy". This kind of humor was obvious in Tahrir and the inclusion of studies of history was also mentioned in a banner carried by a small girl. It said: "Mubarak: Go quickly: I will have to study all these details in the history course next year."

The previous comparison may seem farfetched since the protestors are

serious, well educated, and patriotic, and the characters in *A ¼ Gram* are spoilt, carefree, and irresponsible. Such a reading of the novel, however would be ignoring many characters like Salah's father and mother, brother, and twin sister, his female friends Mariam and Hala, and male friends Mostafa and Fat-hy, who are all models of propriety, efficiency, and integrity. Salah's friends, who steal and lie, do so to provide themselves with money for their addiction not because they are evil. They have a sense of humor and are always polite and respectful when they address adults. Like the protestors, Salah is articulate when he expresses his demands in serious situations and like the protestors, he is successful: he manages to get the Head of the Criminal Investigation Department to free his friend 'Atef who was arrested for drug use (86-9) and he also manages to convince the Major to write a 24 hour permit to go home from the camp when he was drafted (166-170). On both occasions, he achieves his purpose through a straightforward expression of his purpose, without fear, but also without arrogance. Despite the fact that Salah becomes an addict who hits rock bottom, and the readers live through detailed accounts of these experiences, he also demonstrate that he can be serious, faithful friend with a good heart, and a hard-working, conscientious employee. When Salah is outraged because his honest, diligent classmate and sincere friend, Fat-hy has to join the Egyptian Armed Forces in the war between Iraq and Kuwait, he writes a letter to Mubarak, concluding his argument by saying, "Mr. President, the responsibility of Fat-hy's life rests in your hands." (188) Just as Salah eventually managed to take control of his life so the young adults in Tahrir were fighting to take control of their lives.

The other group of characters that are well bred and worthy of respect are the recovering addicts Salah encounters when he attends the Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Amgad, Shady, Seleem, Tawfeeq, Khaled, and Hatem are addicts who are sober, presentable, reliable, and could have very well been among the protestors of Tahrir Square. In one of the meetings, Hatem, who volunteers to be Salah's sponsor, shares by saying,

What's going on? Are we the ones who are addicts and sick, or are people mad? Frankly, I don't understand. The behavior of the people on the streets is out of control. On the way I saw two car drivers fighting. One of them cut off the other; how dare he?! They were both wrong: one of them was in the left lane and wanted to go right and the other was in the right lane and wanted to go left. I was driving behind them watching a circus. Each stepped out of his car and I said: "Here's a fight." I too stepped out of my car to find two men, one was at least 60 and the other was 65. I stood between them trying to calm them down. For a quarter of an hour I kept repeating: "It's alright, Sir; nothing happened, Sir;" all in vain. What's going on? What's wrong with these people? They are both weak

and helpless. One of them could have had a heart attack had he shouted a little. The people on the street have to follow the Program. That would teach them how to respect each other and they should follow Steps and attend 500 meetings in 500 days. These people will drive me crazy. (484)

With no illusions about himself, Hatem reflects on his condition as an addict and makes a general statement about Egyptians that is funny and wise. In addition to being witty, this extract is critical of the streets of Cairo, the tension people are suffering from, and the need for a solution, namely to subject the Egyptians to a rehabilitation Program. The imagery of madness, of a circus and a war are apt in alluding to the many layers of problems that prevail. The protestors in Tahrir exhibit a similar kind of humor and wisdom.

During all the phases of the revolution, what was most evident in Tahrir was humor and wisdom. The imagery of madness, a circus and war are ones that can easily be applied to challenges the Egyptians have been living through, the eighteen days in Tahrir and elsewhere in Egypt, and the struggle ahead. On many occasions these images overlap. For the past two decades, rebels from all walks of life have complained openly about corruption and the need for reform, and have consequently been imprisoned. The real nature of the harm that has been incurred is unfathomable, bordering on the ridiculous. The eighteen days in Tahrir have already been depicted as a utopia, *moulid*, carnival, and/or circus, but as involving a battle as well. Like a *moulid*, the revolution was born on 25<sup>th</sup> January in Tahrir, a site that has symbolic associations, being embraced by the governmental administrative complex of the Mogamma, the Omar Makram Mosque, the Arab League headquarters, the Nile Hilton/Ritz Carlton Hotel, the National Democratic Party headquarters (Arab Socialist Union headquarters at the time of Nasser), the Egyptian Museum, a few blocks of residential buildings, and the American University in Cairo, which overlooks the National Geographic Society and the Shura Council. This focal space was claimed by the protestors, lost in a battle with the police and state security forces, and reclaimed after the people forced the police to retreat in the battle of Kasr Al-Nile Bridge. These events ushered in a new culture of freedom and bravery that was shared by millions of men, women and children who later engaged in entertaining spectacles that included eating, singing, acting, folk music, and mimicry of figures who were in power.

The slogans and placards in this Tahrir reveal ingenuity. One placard said: “Job Opening: A President for a Country Overlooking Two Seas, with a River, Five Lakes, Three Pyramids, and a Square that Accommodates 5 Million”; and others said: “Go, my arm hurts”, “Go. I got married 20