

**WOMEN'S MEMOIRS OF THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION:
MONA PRINCE'S *ISMI THAWRA* AND AHDAF SOUEIF'S *CAIRO:
MY CITY, OUR REVOLUTION***

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Egyptian women's increasingly active presence in the public sphere, throughout the 20th century, has recently reflected itself in their active involvement and visible participation in the Egyptian revolution, since as Ahdaf Soueif states in an interview: "women have always been part of national and social movements and of politics. This revolution has been about everybody claiming agency and women have been very much part of that" ("Finding the Words" 63). It is in the light of women's agency, as both participants in and narrators of the revolution, that this paper attempts to study two women's literary texts, with particular emphasis on self-representations of women's activism in the Egyptian revolution: Mona Prince's *Ismi Thawra* (My Name Is Revolution 2011) and Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2011). I wish, however, to point out that this study takes women's participation for granted, as being spectacular yet by no means extraordinary. Moreover, the focus is directed to women's literary personal narratives of this experience, with particular interest in autobiographical writing. This study, thus, addresses self-representation in terms of genre and experience in two of the earliest women's accounts of the Egyptian revolution, and concretely of the 18 days that mark the first wave of the revolution.

My reading of the two texts is informed by autobiography theory and feminist literary criticism, in addition to my own personal experience as witness and supporter of the revolution. The study, therefore, attempts particularly to address the following questions: How do the authors' uses of genre serve women's self-representation? How do the two texts deal with the intersections of history, memory, experience and difference? What similarities and differences can be identified between the two texts in terms of narrative structure and sources? How do the two texts contribute to narratives of the Egyptian revolution? Thus, the paper is developed around two main sections: narratives of the revolution and autobiographical

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intersections. The conclusion, however, brings together the metaphors of the revolution within the two texts as represented in their titles.

Narratives of the Revolution

In an article published (in Arabic) in *Jadaliyya* under the title “*Riwayat al-ghadab wal-thawra*” (Narratives of Anger and Revolution), Dina Heshmat states that one of the mainstream discourses adopted by politicians and media analysts tends to confine the Egyptian revolution within the virtual world of facebook that materialised in the first 18 days of the revolution at Tahrir square. The author criticises this tendency as it implies that the revolution came as an unexpected extension of the virtual world created by mostly middle class young people, dismissing the long years of peasants’ and working class struggles throughout at least the past two decades of Egyptian contemporary history. Apart from concrete forms of political acts of protest listed in her article, Dina Heshmat focuses on fictional representations of this period of “anger and revolution” reflected in contemporary Egyptian fiction, that portrayed corruption, economic deprivation and police violence. The writer gives examples of Egyptian novels pertaining to this mode, the traces of which go back to Sunallah Ibrahim’s *Zat* (1992). The list includes the following: Alaa Al-Aswany’s *Jacobian Building* (2006), Ahmed Khaled Towfik’s dystopian *Utopia* (2009), Khairy Shalaby’s *Astassia* (2010), and Khaled Ismail’s *Zahret Al-Bostan* (2010).

Two years now since the beginning of the revolution the most prominent work of fiction is Ezz El-Din Shoukry Fishere’s revolution dystopia *Bab el-Khuroug* (Exit Door) published in 2012; whereas most of revolution writing appeared in non-fictional genres, such as Wael Ghoneim’s *Revolution 2.0* (2011), Mohamed Fathi’s *Kan Fi Marra Thawra* (Once Upon a Time There Was a Revolution, 2011), Ezzat Amin’s *Hizb el-Kanaba* (The Sofa Party, 2011), Mohamed al-Shamma’s *Ayam al-Horreya* (Freedom Days, 2011), Ahmed Zaghoul al-Shiti’s *Mi’at khutwa Min al-Thawra* (A Hundred Steps of the Revolution, 2012), Saad al-Kirsh’s *Al-Thawra al-Aan* (Revolution Now 2012), in addition to the volume of collected blogs by 6 bloggers and alternative media journalists *Muthakkirat al-Tahrir* (Tahrir Memos 2012).¹

This paper focuses on Mona Prince's *Ismi Thawra* (2012) and Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012) based on concrete selection criteria: First, unlike most of the revolution narratives, these two texts represent women's personal narratives of the revolution; second, both writers have and continue to be active participants in the revolution, reflected in their texts which are based on personal experience and first hand information as Egyptian citizens participating in the revolution – which can be traced in Mona Prince's facebook entries and Ahdaf Soueif's regular contribution to the Egyptian press; third, the narratives are structured around the first 18 days of the revolution, presenting factual accounts intertwined with personal commentaries written in a literary style; fourth, each of the two texts addresses a different readership: in Mona Prince's case, the book's main source is her own facebook entries and commentaries that she published in Arabic on her facebook page prior to its publication in book-form. Ahdaf Soueif's narrative, however, is published in English, to a mostly English-speaking readership, and relies on her journalistic reporting on the revolution.

Ismi Thawra (My Name is Revolution), published at the beginning of 2012, is among the earliest narratives published in a book portraying the first eighteen days of the revolution. It is a personal narrative authored by Mona Prince, an Egyptian academic and writer. The narrative foregrounds places, at the centre of which figures Tahrir Square, as well as people and events recounted in a diary-like structure beginning with 25th January and ending with 11th February. Similarly, Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, opens with an entry from the first days of the revolution and concludes with Mubarak's ouster on 11th February. It is, however, a personal narrative of the self living in Cairo, reporting on the present while remembering the past and reflecting on the future. Both texts, thus, are the only, so far, published full-length books, representing women's narratives of the first 18 days of the revolution. The two texts follow a diary-like structure where the authors figure as narrators and revolutionary subjects at the same time. The narratives include eye-witness accounts of events, and incorporate slogans, poems, newspaper headlines, facebook and twitter entries as well as photos, in addition to descriptions of TV transmissions and youtube clips.

Mona Prince's *Ismi Thawra* begins with an introduction entitled "An Inevitable Introduction" which opens with her 'facebook status' dated 14th January, followed by her commentary upon hearing the news of the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution:²

"The Tunisians did it .. Bravo .. It's a proper lesson for the people who want to live, and who really love life .. not those people preoccupied with the afterlife, hell, and grave-torture upon death. I salute the Tunisian people and send them my appreciation and respect" (Facebook 14 January 2011).

This was my comment on the success of the Tunisian people in getting rid of their president.

I called my family and friends, exchanging congratulations as though the Tunisian revolution were ours. We felt deeply happy for them. I was in my Fayoum house in a village called Tunis, watching live on air, for the first time in my life, a revolution bringing down an Arab ruler. Of course we wondered: Is it possible for the Egyptian people to revolt? Not in our life-time. (Prince 6)

These lines are followed by the author's sarcastic use of an Egyptian state-owned newspaper headline juxtaposing news of the Tunisian president fleeing his country with statements about the Egyptian president's economic achievements. The author comments on the headlines by quoting Egyptian jokes in relation to the act of self-burning that triggered the Tunisian revolution. The following pages of the introduction indirectly present the general socio-political and economic context, since the blatant rigging of parliamentary elections in 2005 till the murder of Khaled Said by the police in 2010 – the act of police brutality that triggered the revolution by calling for anti-police demonstrations on the national occasion of Police Day (25 January). Still, prior to 25 January, the author herself was unsure of whether the Egyptian people would start a revolution, though the answers to her question "Are we going to revolt on 25 January?" develop from "I don't know" to "It's possible." (Prince 10, 12, 14).

The book is divided into 14 chapters, beginning with the first day of massive demonstrations on 25 January and ending with Mubarak's decision to step down on 11 February 2011. Each of the chapters is devoted to one day of the first 18 days of the revolution, particularly marked by the occupation of Tahrir Square; except for chapter 3 which comes as an interruption titled "Suez," in which the author reflects on her personal connection to Suez through her appointment as an academic at Suez University. The author separates her dissatisfaction with her personal experience of Suez from the Suez people's resilience throughout the wars of 1956 and 1973, and then their heroic resistance since 25 January. Here, for the first time in the narrative, the personal intersects with the political as the author speaks of the political scene of rebellion and protest juxtaposed to the total oblivion of the people in power as the author includes her telephone conversation with the Faculty of Arts' official who urges her to come to work despite the turmoil:

- "How are things at your end?"
- "Things are going on very well .. All's fine .. Why haven't you come to the Faculty?"
- "How can I come with all this turmoil?"
- "No, there's just a bit of demonstration in Al-Arba'een Square."
- "A bit of demonstration! The whole country is in a state."
- "Yes .. but we're working. It's none of our business." (Prince 2011, 57)

The people of Suez were the first to succeed in conquering the police forces on Thursday night, giving force to the Egyptian people's marches of Friday of Anger (28 January) that marked the actual countdown of Mubarak's days in power. The author, thus, concludes this chapter giving tribute to the courageous people of Suez City.

Chapter 13 marks another interruption in the structure of the book, as instead of following the day-by-day structure of the memoir, this chapter covers a whole week in the history of the Tahrir sit-in. The chapter is given the title of what was commonly known as "The Week of Persistence" (Prince 2011, 191), follows the one dated 4 February which marks the failure of the two-day violent attempt to end the Tahrir sit-in (the attempt known as the Battle of the Camel). Consequently, Mubarak's regime was losing control by

the day. The general call then was to persist and continue the revolution until Mubarak steps down. The author's narrative within this chapter does not follow a strictly chronological sequence but includes scenes from the square, as well as her brief visit home for some rest in preparation for another period of camping downtown. The chapter concludes with quotes from Mubarak's last speech with the peoples' angry responses to the TV transmission watched by the masses in Tahrir via a big screen set at one side of the square. The frustration and anger materialised in the next day's massive marches that brought Mubarak's end.

Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* is divided into three parts, preceded by a preface and followed by an epilogue. In her brief "Preface", the author describes how the revolution triggered her delayed project of writing a personal narrative about Cairo. Thus her book does not claim to be a straightforward account of the revolution as much as a memoir of her hometown at a particular historical moment:

Many years ago I signed a contract to write a book about Cairo; my Cairo. But the years passed, and I could not write it. When I tried it read like an elegy; and I would not write an elegy for my city.

Then, in February 2011, I was in Tahrir, taking part in the revolution, and reporting on it. Alexandra Pringle, my friend and publisher, called me; this, she said, must be the moment for your Cairo book. I fought it. But I feared she was right.

I say "feared" because I wanted more to act the revolution than to write it. And because I was afraid of the responsibility. ... This story is told in my own chosen order, but it is very much the story of *our* revolution." (Soueif 2012, xxiii)

Ahdaf Soueif here highlights her fear from being crippled by writing about the revolution from actively participating in it. Yet the narrative that follows is not one of reporting as much as recounting the revolution in a day-to-day diary-like structure; and particularly of what she calls the "eighteen golden days" (xiv). The first part of the book is titled "Eighteen Days" and is supposed to cover the period from 25 January to 11 February 2011.

However, this section ends with the entry dated Tuesday 1 February with the narrator on her way again to Tahrir square.

The narrative is then unexpectedly interrupted; and a new section of the book begins titled “An Interruption – Eight Months Later: October 2011” which covers almost one-third of the memoir. It is interesting to note that unlike the time reference in the other sections of the book which indicates the time of historical events throughout the eighteen days, the reference to October in this section indicates the time of writing the memoir rather than the time of events narrated.³ Addressing her international readership, the author explains her need for this disruptive intervention:

But I need to pause while we’re still there, in the Midan; to interrupt this account of the eighteen days, to tell you the ongoing story of our revolution. Because the story does go on; we have not stopped, even though we may have fallen off your – off the world’s – television screens, for the moment. (Soueif 2012, 63)

Ahdaf Soueif addresses here the period of Military rule in Egypt, giving space to her political analysis of “the incidents that mark our progression down the route of confrontation” (*Cairo* 71). Thus, just as much as the two sections on the 18 days glorify the resistance against Mubarak’s rule, the “interruption” highlights aspects of the struggle against SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces). She therefore concludes this section connecting the Egyptian people’s aspiration for freedom and justice within the global struggle whereby “all echo the call from Tahrir and Tunis: the people demand the fall of this – entire – regime” (Soueif 2012, 118).

The last part of the book “The Eighteen Days Resumed” continues the events of the last day of the first part of the book. Thus this section opens with the evening of Tuesday 1 February, with the people gathering in Tahrir in anticipation of Mubarak’s speech. The part ends, however, with the day of Mubarak’s ousting; the entry dated Friday 11 February does not cover the events of the day in general, but similar to several other occasions throughout the memoir, the day is subdivided into concrete times of the day (morning, noon, evening) or even defined by the hour. The events here for instance begin at “Noon” then we follow the narrator throughout the afternoon, working at her brother’s place at 4:00 pm, then listening to the vice-president’s statement at 6:00 pm announcing Mubarak’s stepping down

from presidency, before she emails her report and joins the celebrations in Tahrir. However, the narrative does not end with that day, but is followed by the “Epilogue” in which she comments on the state of the square on the 12th of February, followed by a shift to 31st of October 2011, when the revolution has taken an unexpected brutal turn under military rule. The author chooses to conclude her epilogue with blog entries and commentaries by her two nieces, nephew and son; thus giving further voice to active participants in the revolution. Interestingly, Ahdaf Soueif chooses to end with her son’s Omar Robert’s entry dated 13 February 2011 in which he comments on the spirit of Tahrir Square: “We made a city square powerful enough to remove a dictator. Now we must re-make a nation to lead others on the road to global equity and justice” (2012, 194). And finally, Ahdaf Soueif’s concluding statement closes the book saying: “Our story continues...” (2012, 194), whereby the emphasis could be placed on the ‘story’ in terms of the historical process of the revolution, or on the pronoun ‘our’ indicating continued narratives of the Egyptian revolution – or, rather, on both.

Autobiographical Intersections: “Tahrir Memoirs”⁴

The motive for writing and the selection of genre are perhaps among the key question that preoccupy both author and critic. Novelist and memoirist, Isabel Allende, asks herself this question and reaches the following conclusion: “Maybe the most important reason for writing is to prevent the erosion of time, so that memories will not be blown away by the wind. Write to register history; and name each thing. Write what should not be forgotten” (1989, 44-45). Now, reading Mona Prince’s and Ahdaf Soueif’s narratives, Allende’s question seems to impose itself – in terms of why and how? Both Ahdaf Soueif and Mona Prince are known for their fictional writing, yet unlike Ahdaf Soueif, whose earlier writing includes short stories, novels and non-fictional works, Mona Prince’s *Ismi Thawra* is her first piece of literary non-fictional prose, apart from two short story collections and two novels, in addition to several works of translation from English into Arabic. Similarly, Ahdaf Soueif is known for her short story writing, novels, journalistic literature, and translation, in addition to her regular contribution to both the *Guardian* and *Al-Shurouk* newspapers. Both *Ismi Thawra* and *Cairo: My*

City, Our Revolution are easily classified under autobiographical writing, where author, narrator and protagonist merge in one, offering a factual account of a personal actual experience, where the narrative is structured around diary-like entries.

In her pioneer study of American women's diaries, Margo Culley distinguishes in her "Introduction" between fictional and autobiographical writing in the following terms: "A novel creates a fictional world complete unto itself, while an autobiography or memoir looks back from a fixed point in time which is the terminus of the retrospect. A diary, on the other hand, is created in and represents a continuous present" (1985, 20). Unlike fictional writing which is mostly the product of the imagination, autobiographies and memoirs are written from a point in the present that remembers, selects and organises the narrative in the present, while diaries are characterised by what Culley describes as "periodic creation and structure" (1985, 20). She further alerts us to the difference between reading the original handwritten manuscript and the edited published version mediated through the editor and publisher of the original text (Culley 1985, 14-16).

In her work on autobiography, Linda Anderson highlights the centrality of self-representation to autobiographical writing (2011, 1), and the hierarchical distinctions within. She further points out the 'superiority' of autobiography that "came to be equated with a developmental narrative which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal; thus the looser, more chronological structure of the journal or diary could no longer fulfil this 'higher' function of autobiography" (Anderson 2011, 8). She further highlights that, by the nineteenth century, autobiography became defined distinctly from other self-representational genres, such as memoirs, which tended to occupy "a lower order" in the hierarchy (Anderson 2011, 8), and were considered to be "more flexible and outward-looking" (Anderson 2011, 113). Unlike autobiographies which tend to be narratives of an overall life-story, memoir-writing is characterised by "the fact that it can focus on any episode from a life" (Anderson 2011, 113). Nancy Miller gives an additional dimension to autobiographical writing, stressing "the relational tie binding self to other" (2002, 2), whereby the autobiographical experience is conveyed through an established relationship between author and reader. This dimension pertaining to autobiographical writing in particular has been emphasised by feminist criticism in terms of a "relational identity that has

characterized women's lives in general and life writing in particular" (Miller 2002, 2).

Looking at the two texts in light of autobiography theory, it becomes clear that neither *Ismi Thawra* nor *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* fits strictly within any of the categories of diary or memoir, but emerge as autobiographical hybrid texts. Although *Ismi Thawra* seems close to the definition of a diary as its chapters are divided in a diary-like chronological period structure, where diarists inscribe their day-to-day experiences adding their own commentaries and reflections. Diaries are, therefore, written in the present tense, referring to the temporal immediacy of events recounted, while memoirs, as defined by Culley above are written at a point in the present recounting events from the past. This hybridity can be detected in the following lines from Mona Prince's first chapter/diary entry:

It's two o'clock sharp. The first group of demonstrators appears. They might have come out of the Metro station on the opposite side of the road. They were about twenty people; you can't say they were a group of exclusively young people, there were women in their forties and fifties, and men of the same age group, in addition to young men and women. The chanted slogans were traditional as far as I'm concerned; I've known them since the nineteen-eighties: "Our people, come and join us .. We're your brothers and sisters .. We're your sons and daughters .. What we're doing is for your own sakes"; and "Freedom, where are you .. State Security separates me from you."

The woman and the young woman rushed into the heart of the group, and started repeating the chants with great enthusiasm. I stood at the margin, watching. (22)

This chapter titled "Tuesday 25 January 2011" opens with a brief personal account in which the author situates herself as an independent middle-class academic on her way to join the Shubra demonstration scheduled at 2pm that day. The lines describing the demonstration are written in the present tense, with a vivid description of action together with

the slogans chanted there and then. These lines evoke a diary entry or journal log – an impression that prevails throughout the text. However, the author’s inclusion of lengthy commentaries, personal reflections and analyses distort the typical diary structure and move the text across autobiographical subgenres, intersecting with memoir. The memoir dimension is further conveyed through the fact that the author closes her text with reference to the place “Egypt” and period of authorship: “31 March 2011 - 14 February 2012” (Prince 2011, 244). This alerts us to the fact that the diary-like account is the product of a writing process that actually began over a month after the end of narrative time, and lasted almost a year. Furthermore, the shift in tense from present to past (repeated throughout the text), suggest the generic shifts between diary and memoir: while the description in the present tense above carries the immediacy of a diary entry, the ensuing commentary and attempt to situate the self ‘at the margin’ suggest the memoir mode of writing in retrospect.

Mona Prince initially represents herself as standing “at the margin, watching” (2011, 22), and describes the demonstration from an outsider’s point of view, referring to the crowd in terms of ‘the demonstrators’ mostly using the third person plural pronoun ‘they’ in her account of the events. It is towards the evening of that same day, when she stands in Tahrir among the demonstrators announcing the beginning of the sit-in, that she herself becomes an integral part of the people listening to the statement read out by “one of us in the heart of Tahrir Square” (Prince 30). From that moment on, the author’s account is predominantly narrated in shifts between the first person singular pronoun ‘I’ and the first person plural ‘we’. It seems that the moment she realizes that this is a revolution, reminiscent of the “July 1952 Revolution (Coup)” (Prince 2011, 30), she decides to join the sit-in and her account of the 18 days in Tahrir begins:

Sitting or stretching out on the Tahrir Square (Midan) asphalt among these masses that made the day and are now sharing bread and water! I feel that I belong; that I am a part of one whole; that my physical presence in the Midan has its value; that my chanting the slogans has its weight. ... For the first time I feel that the Midan belongs to me, not to me alone, but to all of us who stayed in it. (Prince 2011, 33-34)

It is here that the author identifies with the ‘masses’ that started the

revolution and are now sharing whatever food and drink they have – a gesture that recurs throughout the narrative, as Mona tells us about her personal involvement, among others, in making hundreds of sandwiches for the sit-in revolutionaries during the first 18 days (2011, 95-97). Most importantly, perhaps, Tahrir figures, in the excerpt above, as the space that empowers individuals, connects the people, and offers them a sense of a collective experience of national ownership and belonging.

Cairo: My City, Our Revolution, too, follows a diary-like structure, though the book is divided into three sections, whereby each consists of a flow of daily reflections. The subdivision of several days into concrete hours suggests that the book narrative is based on earlier brief diary notes and the essays she regularly wrote reporting on the revolution. However, the overall structure of the narrative again suggests an autobiographical hybrid. The book developed out of the author's long-postponed project of writing what she describes as "a book about Cairo; my Cairo", clearly indicating a piece of autobiographical writing. The narrative, however, emerges as more of a memoir, whereby not only does Ahdaf Soueif select 'Cairo' as the centre of her account, but also relies on the revolution as the central organizing force behind the narrative:

That day the government – the regime that had ruled us for thirty years – had cut off our communications. No mobile services, no Internet for all of Egypt. In a way, looking back, I think this concentrated our minds, our will, our energy: each person was in one place, totally and fully committed to that place, unable to be aware of any other, knowing they had to do everything they could for it and trusting that other people in other places were doing the same. (2012, 6)

This quote appears in the opening pages of the book where the story of the author's participation in the revolution begins on Friday 28 January, and concretely at 5:00 pm. These lines, written in the past tense imply that the account of the early days of the revolution was inscribed here again in retrospect, since even the possibility of updated reporting was not an option at the time of lack of electronic communication. Additionally, the preface

suggests that the book is the outcome of several months of Ahdaf Soueif's conscious work on her 'Cairo book', triggered by the phone-call she received from her publisher, in February 2011, urging her to start working on her delayed book project about her Cairo (2012, xiii).

Moreover, throughout the narrative, and as represented by the lines above, facts are very often followed by personal commentaries that mark a shift between the time of events (story-time) and the time of the narrative (discourse time). Here, for instance, Ahdaf Soueif straightforwardly points out this temporal shift as, after describing the situation, she reflects on the communication cut saying "In a way, looking back, I think" (2012, 6). Furthermore, the explanatory 'Notes', included at the end of the book (2012, 195-202), emphasize an editorial aspect in her writing, whereby autobiography merges with history and journalism. For example, in this particular extract above, the point about the state's decision to cut off all mobile and internet communication is asterisked, a personal experience supported by a technical report by Renesys: The Internet Intelligence Authority, quoted in an endnote.

It is worth noting here that Ahdaf Soueif's experience of the revolution is set in communal terms. The author tells us that while attending a conference in India she was aware of the fact that "something was happening back home", but her first glimpse of the revolution on 25 January came through the CNN news transmission from Tahrir (*Cairo* 9). It was only on Friday 28 January that she participated in the mass protests on the streets of Cairo, as she headed with her two nieces to Tahrir in a dramatic attempt to join the revolutionary crowd:

So we ran through the underpass, scrambled up the bank and found ourselves within, inside, and part of the masses ... Close up like this it was people, individual persons with spaces between them – spaces into which you could fit. ... we had come together, as individuals, millions of us, in a great cooperative effort. ... We stood on the island in the middle of the road and that was the moment I became part of the revolution. (Soueif 2012, 6-7)

Ahdaf's experience is represented as communal, in the sense that from the very beginning we see her accompanied by members of her family, her two

nieces, whom we follow in their attempts to catch up with the crowd marching across Qasr el-Nil Bridge towards Tahrir. The shifts from the plural 'we' to the singular 'I' and then to the plural 'we' indicates the author's tendency to identify herself with others. Her individual person merges here with the demonstrators, and consequently a new identity emerges – the self as 'part of the masses' on the bridge, as well as the 'millions' all over the country. It is there and then that the narrator identifies herself as fitting in and belonging to the people; hence becoming 'part of the revolution'.

Ahdaf Soueif's participation, however, is not confined within the activist dimension on the ground alone, nor limited to her role as reporter on the revolution. We see her playing various political roles within the political circles, supporting the No To Military Rule group and taking part in political meetings:

Rabab el-Mahdi phones with an initiative to pull together all the 'revolutionary political forces' to cooperate for the protests called for Friday the 29th; it's the only way we can pressure SCAF. ... But everyone absolutely has to speak with one voice. Rabab says she has the leaders from the Ikhwan, the Salafis and the Liberals. We have the Left and Progressives. ... And I should moderate – because I've no power at all and have no relation with any faction. (Soueif 2012, 86-87)

This additional dimension of political action appears in the section entitled "An Interruption," and refers particularly to an event organized in July 2011 – the period marked by resistance against the military rule that followed Mubarak's ousting. Six months after the beginning of the revolution, Egyptians were struggling to get rid of the political force in power: SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces). In this case, the author is telling us about the political initiative to unify the emerging political powers – Islamist, liberal and leftist – against SCAF. It is worth noting here that the author affiliates herself with the political Left, though she explains the reason behind her being chosen as moderator to her position as independent and politically powerless.

Unlike Mona Prince, whose participation in the revolution is presented through her activism on the ground: taking part in the Tahrir sit-in, together with her presence within a circle of intellectuals in support of the revolution (centered around Merit Publishing House in downtown Cairo), Ahdaf Soueif is represented as participant in demonstrations, reporter on the revolution, as well as connected to the higher rungs of political decision-makers. Thus, while Prince mentions names of people such as publisher Mohammed Hashem, Ahdaf Soueif is seen among political figures such as Rabab El-Mahdi. Both texts, thus, convey their authors' conscious reflections on their position in relation to the revolution, where from the outset they represent themselves primarily as Egyptian citizens and hence active participants in the revolution. Citizenship is soon combined with another aspect of identity, where the intellectual self emerges as both become documenters, reporters and historians of the revolution – with historical events being presented through participant-observer lenses. Each of the two narratives, thus, emerges as a hybrid text occupying an inter-generic location, where autobiography intersects with diary, memoir, history and journalism.

Metaphors of the Revolution

Since the decision of the demonstrators to occupy Tahrir Square on 25 January, the narrator of *Ismi Thawra* makes the 'Midan' her home. The Midan (the Square, i.e. Tahrir Square) is used in the text not as strictly referring to the Square itself, as much as an epicenter of the revolution. Her parents' house, where she lives in Cairo, becomes merely a place where she goes for an occasional uninterrupted period of rest: sleep and a bath. During the week of persistence, the narrator goes to her parents to celebrate her father's birthday, and once they have their family lunch and birthday cake, the narrator tells us that she soon changes her clothes and gets ready to leave. When her father asks her why she is rushing back without having some rest, she apologises, and shares with us, her readers, her state of mind: "I don't know how to tell him that the Midan has become my home!" (Prince 2011, 220). Yet, by Midan she does not strictly refer to the square itself, as we know throughout the text that although she used to spend most of her days camping among the protesters in the Square, Tahrir is metaphorically extended to refer to Dar Merit (Merit Publishing House), to which she often refer in terms of el-Dar (which means house or/and home in

Arabic). This is where Mona Prince feels the comfort of community, and the spirit of the revolution, to the extent that on one occasion, when she goes home to her parents for some rest, she fails to fall asleep:

I shut the door, turn off the light, and stretch my body in the bed. ‘The people want to bring down the regime’: the people insistently chant into my ears. ... The chants surround me like a buzzing bee. I start tossing and turning in my bed. I try to shut my mind up, but it does not respond. Scenes from earlier today intersect with the stories told by my friends – with visual and sound effects. ... Suddenly I feel that I don’t want to be on my own, and since I can’t fall asleep it’s better to be among my friends. I leave the house and go back to Dar Merit. (2011, 101)

Dar Merit figures as a physical and metaphorical extension of Tahrir. A few pages later, the narrator describes it as “Beit al-Umma” (the nation’s home) and a metaphor of Tahrir Square at the same time. With “its doors open to everyone, friends and strangers,” it brings different people from all walks of life together; and with “the television transmitting the news” (116). The Dar, thus, emerges as a microcosmic representation of the Midan during the first 18 days of the revolution.

Unlike Mona Prince whose narrative is strictly confined to the present, Ahdaf Soueif’s *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* is characterised by her constant dips into the past and occasional shifts into the future. For instance, on her way back home very late at night on 28 January, after the Police had withdrawn from the battle, and the Army took over, the present brings back a stretch of memories from the past:

I come again to the four tanks on Maspero. The soldiers in camouflage are still standing on top of them ... Behind one is the sign of the Paprika restaurant and as I look at the restaurant’s darkened window I see – so clearly that my breath catches – I see my younger self, ablaze with love and poetry and the stormy, dusty khamsin winds, sitting, leaning, across the table from the man I love, the man who has followed me from London to Cairo. (2011, 40)

Such shifts are a recurrent feature throughout the text, where memories haunt most of the places frequented during the revolution. The narrator tends to constantly compare between the present and the past, and the memories triggered by the present are predominantly related to family members. This intensive mode of shifting between past and present can be attributed to the fact that the author has spent many years abroad where Cairo has grown to occupy a mental setting rather than an actual daily-life space; this geographical distance seems to create a temporal distance, and making changes more strikingly visible. It is through these temporal extensions that the author writes a text where Cairo lies at the centre, in a state of continual transformation. It is as though the present experiences of the revolution bring along with them a whole personal history. The text does not present a biographical account of the city, but is rather an autobiographical narrative of a life-time: past and present; where Cairo emerges as a metaphor of the self, as the author remarkably manages to shift not only across stylistic and narratorial boundaries, but also across time: a situation in the concrete now and here carries us back into a journey into the author's memories, reconstructed in the context of present incidents, people, places and events.

Ismi Thawra and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* are two revolution memoirs written by women, and as such metaphors of womanhood can be traced within the two texts. Mona Prince's narrative establishes the revolution as feminine. This can be traced in the following: first, the Arabic word 'Thawra' (revolution) is a grammatically feminine form. Second, the narrative highlights women's various roles amidst the crowd, feeling safe from sexual harassment (Prince 2011, 35), as though protected by the feminine space represented by the revolution. It is outside the borders of the Midan that women are said to have encountered forms of sexual assault attributed to counter-revolution thugs (Prince 2011, 121). And third, the author identifies with the revolution in straightforward feminine terms when she decides to go and have a bath at her parents' home and then visit her hairdresser because "the revolution doesn't mean that we look bad and unkempt" (Prince 2011, 205). Ahdaf Soueif, too, points out the sense of safety (2012, 38) and absence of sexual harassment against women (2012, 56). However, in her case, the metaphor of womanhood and femininity extends from Cairo to the revolution: "her streets, her Nile, her

buildings and her monuments whisper to every Cairene who's taking part in the events that are shaping our lives and our children's futures as I write" (Soueif *Cairo* 8). It is worth noting, first, that 'Cairo', 'City' and 'Revolution' are feminine nouns in Arabic, which explains the power of language over imagery, as the author intentionally uses the pronoun 'her' instead of 'its' in reference to Cairo, and thus transfers this metaphor of womanhood from Arabic into English. This metaphor is further emphasized by the identification between the author and her city, describing the text as "a story about me and my city" (*Cairo* 8).

Finally, *Ismi Thawra* and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* are two fine accounts of the Egyptian revolution, whereby the authors' literary skills transform the common experience of the revolution into a personal narrative. Mona Prince seeks to document the day-to-day events, incidents, stories and her experience of the revolution through a pseudo diary, including a photo at the beginning of each chapter. Being part of the resistance movement on the ground, her narrative is replete with factual material, stories and commentaries written in a dramatic and humorous style, reflecting the spirit of Tahrir Square. Ahdaf Soueif, on the other hand, writes descriptively and analytically from the standpoint of a reporter, whose narrative essentially addresses a non-Egyptian readership, whom she tries to bring close to her world, by stylistically addressing her readers throughout the text. This, perhaps, explains her inclusion of two almost identical maps of Cairo at the beginning of the first and last sections of the book, with handwritten comments as to places of particular prominence in the narrative. The main difference between the two maps is the fact that while the first one is a map of the city of *Cairo*, the second offers a zoomed-in version of *Central Cairo* – the difference representing the two aspects of Cairo entailed in the title: City and Revolution.

Conclusion

In an article on the revolution, Nadine Naber reported on the women's roles in the Egyptian revolution. Her well-informed argument raises the issue of the cultural image of Arab women in the West as 'passive victims'. This misrepresentation is exposed and dismissed in the following lines, especially when juxtaposed against the exemplified description of women's active participation in the revolution:

The women now holding Tahrir Square as we speak are of all ages and social groups, and then struggle cannot be explained through Orientalist tropes that reduce Arab women to passive victims of culture or religion or Islam. They are active participants in a grassroots people-based struggle against poverty and state corruption, rigged elections, repression, torture, and police brutality.

They are leading marches, attending the wounded, and participating in identity checks ... They have helped create human shields ... organize neighbourhood watch groups and committees nationwide

They are fighting against dictatorship among millions of people – not guided by any one sect or political party – united under one slogan: We want an end to this regime. (Naber 2011, 9)

Mona Prince and Ahdaf Soueif recount similar actions taken by Egyptian women as part of revolutionary activism – roles that they themselves have played or witnessed. *Ismi Thwra* and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* support the various reports on women's role in the revolution; they add to the projects documenting the history of the Egyptian revolution; and additionally they offer an alternative narrative to that represented through Western eyes. Thus, the two narratives, as autobiographical published texts, take part in “countering silence and misrepresentation” (Swindells 7); they moreover give voice to each author's account of her self and document her experience of the revolution; and finally, as hybrid texts, they include several voices and sub-narratives, which collectively lead to the emergence of valuable literary contributions to the cultural history of our revolution. Although Ahdaf Soueif alerts us to the difference between the time of writing the text and the time of reading it, the two narratives prove to gain value as historical documents, rather than outdated accounts. Every reading and rereading of *Ismi Thawra* and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* involves participants and witnesses of the revolution in acts of remembering, reflection, and perhaps criticism and nostalgia – not as living documents or autobiographies, but rather as collective narratives of our revolution.

NOTES

¹ The list of revolution literature also includes several collection of poetry, such as Ahmed Doma's *Sotak Tale* (Your Voice is Rising, 2012), and comic writing such as Riham Magdy's *Shaab Akher 25 Haga* (25 of Its Kind Nation 2011).

² All translation of quotes from *Ismi Thawra* is mine.

³ Seymour Chatman distinguishes between "story-time" and "discourse time" in narrative fiction, whereby the former refers to the period of events narrated, while discourse time indicates "the time it takes the narrator to tell or show those events" (24).

⁴ I borrow the phrase 'Tahrir Memoirs' from Tahia Abdel Nasser's article "Women's Revolution and Tahrir Memoirs."

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