



PROTEST ART IN ORWELLIAN-MIDDLE EAST STATES

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Abstract: Art is a soothing expression. It connects to the heart of people. Moreover it is the very resemblance of culture itself. One thing that makes art fascinating is its relevance to society. It speaks out for justice and injustice, the powerful and the powerless, war and peace, oppression and resistance, so on...The world has witnessed a number of street protests, music, drama, dance, paintings, film etc. to reach out to the mass and convey the tyranny of power politics to civilians. One such artistic revolution which pioneered resistance in Middle East is Arab Spring. This paper tries to analyze the resonance of Orwellian jargons in the real world with special reference to Arab Spring and how art, being a powerful weapon of resistance, helped to mobilize national population onto streets. It further examines the role of social media in the Arab world and the kind of censorship put upon it.

Keywords: Power Politics, Orwellian Jargons, Arab Spring, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

'On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of a cigarette Packet- everywhere. Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed- no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull'

This is how George Orwell described a dystopian future in his most celebrated work '1984'. It is a bold voice against fascist, communist and other totalitarian forms of governance. He speaks of a world where 'Thought crime' is death, 'Thought Police' watched everybody all the time and posters titled 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU' is omnipresent in the whole country. The protagonist in the story is an editor responsible for changing and doctoring the past to match the Party's official version, so as to make the state an omniscient entity. The state was such that even the slightest expression on face can blow you away, which is called as Face crime.

So each and every aspect of human life is controlled and regulated by the Party alone. The state twisted and turned every order passed according to its convenience. It was scarier when the government itself narrowed the range of thought by cutting down the words from dictionary so that there won't be words to express what people actually wanted to convey. Every action and movement of an individual is scrutinized and every sound made was overheard. So the extreme governmental control led to subjugation of people.

This paper tries to investigate similar Orwellian states like Middle East and North Africa, the revolutions that followed to overthrow such authoritarian regimes and how protest art is helping to restore the very essence of democracy. It also overlooks the new method of resistance through

social media and also the kind of restrictions imposed upon art and artists in this new world of chaos.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS IN ORWELLIAN ARAB STATES

The rejection of liberal values by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes across the globe has caused the outbreak of unprecedented popular uprisings against those systems. The most prominent among them would be uprisings that swept through the countries of Arab Middle East and North Africa during 2011 and 2012... Similar to what Orwellian Newspeak did, those governments poured resources into the production of artistic and architectural projects that were intended to serve two key purposes: demonstrating explicitly who now owned the state, and ensuring that no other version of truth other than what favors the ruling class prevailed and claimed that such rule was in the name of people.

It all started in December 2010 when Muhammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, was slapped and insulted by a police woman for his unlicensed vegetable cart. Out of helplessness, he set himself on fire in front of the provincial municipality. This incident acted as a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution.

Arab Spring has been marked as a sign of the new age, where extreme governmental interventions are no longer tolerated, and in which people can make statements to an audience of millions. The only barrier that existed was that of language, where the primary spoken languages of resistance were Arabic, Spanish etc that could lead to loss of the overall message in translation². Thus, the modern activists proved that there is one language everyone can understand universally: ART.

As Theodor Adorno writes, ‘all art is an uncommitted crime’ meaning that art challenges the status-quo by its very nature. Art in the Arab Spring has been decidedly anti-authoritarian in nature, with posters of former Tunisian president Zine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak being deposed, ignored, or defamed, now decorating street walls and art galleries alike. However, one can’t deny how power politics is institutionalized through art as well.

The Arab governments have made long use of visual arts to reinforce their authority like in the extravagant displays of communist and fascist dictatorships through vast sculptures and posters over the streets of Moscow, Berlin, Rome and Pyongyang³. Thus, Middle East celebrated the massive posters of President Ben Ali in Tunisia, hand on heart in an expression of sincerity and assuring progress, President Bashar al-Assad using the image of his late father in invoking the protection of god for the Syrian nation etc... This got reversed when the protest commenced. Tahrir square became a powerful space where all forms of art like music, graffiti, posters, humor, song, photography and poetry occurred. The most surprising element about all these was how these art forms fitted into the same old wine bottle with a vibrant aura.

NEW RHYTHM OF MUSIC

Music has always been a weapon of resistance for the present as well as the future. It definitely is a motivating factor for bringing people into streets and challenging the existing social and political structures. Hamza Namir, an Egyptian singer played a key role in the Arab Spring. One of his songs that promise a better future is as follows:

‘Dream with me
Tomorrow’s coming
And if it doesn’t come

We will bring it ourselves.....
 All our steps will lead us to dream.
 No matter how many times we fall
 We can always get up
 We can break through the darkness
 We can turn our night into a thousand days⁴

One stream of music that was widely appreciated and accepted during such protests is obviously rap music. Rap music was established as a major force for aesthetic expression in the Arab world by mid- 1990's. The most famous among them was the song "Rais Lebled" by El General. He captured the very essence of the Arab uprisings, which eventually became the anthem of the revolution. These songs made out of pains and dreams united a large number of people against the government. On the other hand, Lebanese-Swede singer Maher Zain offered not a secular, but Islam-based message. His debut album, *Thank You Allah* asked Muslims to take up the issue and resolve them. Within months of its release a large number of people in the Arab world gained the confidence to challenge the government.

Another stream was Arab hip-hop which got most of the attention. However traditional national music and folk songs also had a major role to play. Indeed, it's not just the male artists but female artists also started off their musical journey through these protests.

POETIC WAYS OF RESISTANCE

Poetry transcends others forms of art. From rhymes of rappers to caption written by cartoonists, everything is poetry. There was a shift in poetry from love and romanticism to nationalism and politics, which was quite evident for a century. Right from the beginning of the revolutions, poetry had a strong face. The famous slogan of the revolutions, chanted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and beyond is an adaptation from the poem "Izza ash-sha'b yowman arada al-haya", which means 'If the People One Day Will to Live'. It was written by the Tunisian poet Abou el- kasem Chebbi, which later was incorporated in Tunisia's national anthem⁵. So poets in Middle East succeeded in escorting civilian's movements and educating people about the tyranny.

LANGUAGE OF THEATRE

Theatres are well known for its way of blending other art forms into it. The birth of the same was not as a reaction to 2011 protests, but as a means of resisting colonial occupation in those countries. Cairo has been home to International Festival of Experimental Theatre since 1988. Even Palestine and Yemen had theatre companies long back. However, it was indeed in between 2009 and 2013 that this art form reached its zenith. A Palestinian theatre troupe called El Hakawati in Jerusalem and Jenin Freedom Theatre in Jenin had much to do with this art culture as they operated before these uprisings and always stood as a means of resisting the status-quo. Unfortunately, even in democratic Arab countries like Tunisia, actors have been physically attacked by the audiences in response to what they wear. This has happened to members of Tunisian Street Theatre Company like Fanni Raghman Anni in their work "My Art In Spite of Myself"

PAINTING THE TRUTH

The reality of Arab uprisings was drawn by cartoonists, caricaturists, common people and particularly graffiti artists. For instance, the bloody revolution in Syria was sparked by the arrest of fifteen children for painting anti-government slogans on the walls of their school. Graffiti had a most prominent space as it is one of the oldest and most politicized genres. The verbal content of graffiti has been simple and complex at times. Whereas, visual images made it more

revolutionary so as to call it a 'war paint'. During the 18 days of the January 25 Revolution in Tahrir, dozens of cartoonists, caricaturists, painters, poets, rappers, musicians and other artists showcased their artwork on the walls of a KFC restaurant⁵.

While graffiti was prevalent in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran even before the outbreak of the revolution, Tunisia witnessed its birth only after the protest. Countries like Bahrain and Yemen had the most developed and organized graffiti movement in the region. A web portal in Yemen named Muftah organized a review of the vibrant graffiti which enriched Arab graffiti culture in national and international arena. Similarly cartoons also conveyed relevant messages that have migrated from newspapers to books to social Medias.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media played a significant role in the popular protests that swept the Arab world in 2011. Real-time Twitter feeds, YouTube videos and Facebook posts created a wider momentum of audiences across the borders. Thus, something that commenced as internal crisis erupted as an international dilemma. These technologies helped people to restore democracy through a network by creating social capital and organizing political action within a less span of time. However, there are two arguments in Arab world regarding the role of social media during the uprising. One which argued the inevitable role played by it and other its exaggerated version.

The impact of Social Media was different in different regions. Egypt and Tunisia had more positive impacts, whereas Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain and Syria were shown to benefit less from social media because of high government interventions. Tunisia, where the revolt started, relied much on this new media as a tool to mobilize people against authoritarian regime. Most of the casualties were updated on Twitter and videos on YouTube as well. It also helped the protesters to know about the place of gathering and mobilizing social action. The second edition of the Arab Social Media Report revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 Egyptians and Tunisians used Facebook to organize and publicize protests. The report also found that the number of Facebook users increased or doubled between January and April of 2011⁶.

THE ACT OF CENSORING ART

When people are flooding into streets with their artistic expressions so as to fight against the politics of power, the only way of putting them down is by means of Censorship. This is similar to what George Orwell explained as expunging all anti-governmental words and framing a dictionary for their convenience.

Any art work which entailed opposition or portrayed the government's act of injustice was immediately put under control. Egyptian poet and lyricist Ahmed Fouad Negam was jailed by the Nasser for his anti-regime poems. Even the very act of stenciling or spraying an unauthorized image was treated as an act of sedition. A group of teenage boys in the Syrian town of Dara'a in 2011 was detained and tortured by security forces for the same reason, which later ignited the uprising.

Tunisia has witnessed oppression of mainstream media from the very beginning. Facebook was blocked from time to time for portraying brutality of government forces. The result was more people coming out to protest. When the Egyptian government blocked the internet and telecommunication network, several other governments and human rights organizations came against it. This put extra pressure on Mubarak government as well. Social Media had a little role to play in countries like Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain and Syria, where government took extreme preventive measures for social media⁷.

Thus music, paintings, theatre, poem and every form of resistance were either controlled or censored. But the result was more people joining the demonstration and relentlessly fighting against the government.

ART AND PLURAL PUBLIC

Banksy rightly observed that 'Art Should Comfort the Disturbed and Disturb the Comfortable'. The plural public in Middle East countries developed a collective voice in the wake of the uprisings. They expressed their hopes and ambitions for the future to escape from the grip of autocracy, corruption and imprisoned lives. They were also concerned about how tolerance, dissent and self-expression will be embodied in the new constitution. The mandate Islamist political organizations also tried to restrict this plural public in many ways.

In 2012, authorities in Egypt tried to erase some of the more provocative works by Egyptian artists. Thus, walls of Tahrir square were whitewashed to a great extent. In no surprise, artists retaliated against this. The more government oppressed the public, the more they got aggressive with their piece of art.

RESTORING DEMOCRACY?

These waves of uprisings aimed to establish a democratic system in the Arab world. People fled into streets and expressed their dissent and need for personal liberties that were restricted to them. Musicians, graffiti artists, poets and others portrayed resistance through their piece of art. Millions responded in Tahrir square and other urban centres.

Finally, on January 14, 2011, Tunisian president Ben Ali and his family fled to Saudi Arabia, marking the first time in history an Arab dictator was overthrown by his own people. Also the authoritarian governments in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were overthrown. Surprisingly, the autocrats in Saudi Arabia and Algeria assured social reforms. Somehow, there was a democratic transition in Middle East after the protests, without taking into consideration the ongoing issues. The Islamist, Mohammed Morsi became the Egyptian president, ousting autocrat Hosni Mubarak. Of all the countries, Tunisia witnessed more progress through its new modernist constitution⁸.

Unfortunately, the fruits of success lasted for a short while. Egypt returned to authoritarian rule, terrorism threatens the whole region and other countries are a political mess. There was no redistribution of wealth or power which usually accompanies historic revolutions. Moreover, in 2012 Tunisia again went through a mass demonstration in response to country's deteriorating economy. So, whether Arab Spring completely restored democracy or not is still a question.

CONCLUSION

The uprising in Middle East was brought into a wider international arena by writers, poets, musicians and visual artists. Art has much to do with this movement which was fought against authoritarian, autocratic and corrupt government. As artists and common citizens, people organized themselves and expressed dissent through new media's and innovative art works. Protest Art unveiled the vulnerabilities of people in power and proved how to make them powerless. Thus artists succeeded in mobilizing people which was impossible otherwise. Social Media also provided a sustainable environment for such people to react to oppression and express their dissent. The vision in art and politics mirrored the desire of many Arabs and Muslims to find new ways to solve the challenges. The region has seen a real explosion of creative talent since the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi in various forms like Tunisian rap, Libyan literature, Egyptian graffiti, Yemeni protest music etc.

Somehow, Arab Spring succeeded in proving that a national population can dismantle the so called modern states. Similarly, other national populations also may try to topple the powerful and establish a democratic system like a domino effect. On the other hand, it was also disheartening to see that Arab political and socio-economic aspects were unaffected by the uprising, which usually accompanies such historic revolutions. Nevertheless, the way this movement attracted millions into streets through music, poems and theatre is unbelievable. Though it didn't completely work out, it can be viewed in the near future as the precursor to a far larger revolutionary event.

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