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# The Glue of a Mosaic: State, Citizenship and Feminist Political Imaginations in Syria (2011-2012)

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by

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes a retrospective examination of the political imaginations and practices deployed during the first phase of the civil uprising in Syria by three prominent activists: Fadwa Suleyman, Rima Dali and Samar Yazbek, on the axes of their activism for the “revolution.” After sketching the contours of both Al-Asad’s politics of symbols foregrounding an idea of statehood and the uprising strategies deployed to subvert such symbols, the essay seeks to answer the question: How has the revolutionary struggle been transformative of an existing regime citizenship in Syria? I argue that Fadwa Suleyman, Samar Yazbek and Rima Dali acted as a sort of “social glue,” conveying the idea of social cohesion within the complex milieu characterizing Syrian society. By foreclosing a new re-conceptualization of state and citizenship, the three activists articulated languages marked by deeply relational feminism, politics of affect against the dominant discourses of belligerence, hatred and division. Overall, the essay points to how their very existence and struggle embodied central fears and desires emerged from the uprising.

In recent years, critical theory and post-colonial studies have nurtured a prolific debate concerning the politics of naming social struggles “revolutions” (Nail 2012) which has got momentum since the eruption of the series of uprisings known with the epitomes of Arab Revo-lutions or Arab Spring (Asef Bayat 2011; Hamid Dabashi 2012). Such debates seem to be particularly poignant in the case of 2011 uprising in Syria whereby attempts to trace contours of a genuine grassroots movement (and the popular sustain which would gain to it the nomenclature of “revolution”) has systematically met with divergent positions among scholars, activists and ordinary people. On the other hand, Estella Carpi (2013) has noticed that the term has kept wide currency among Syrians in northern Lebanon and that “revolution” is used to describe what is going on in Syria, despite its regional side

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effects (Carpi 2013, p. 75). In this article I would like to discuss the political imaginations disseminated by three feminist activists during the beginning of the Syrian uprising (2011-2012) –novelist Samar Yazbek, lawyer Rima Dali and the actress Fatma Suleyman. In particular, how discourses articulated by these women aimed at a re-negotiation of citizenship in Syria. Such re-negotiation was animated by the desire of undoing sectarian categorization, the equation between the state and Al-Assad and by a will to promote a model of citizenship able to maximize the power of affect characterizing the multi socio-ethnic and cultural society in Syria (Susan Ruddik 2010). Desires for unity of the “Syrian people” was one of the central nodes through which activists put an emphasis since the very beginning of the uprising. The three activists played a leading position in disseminating these ideas through their speeches, songs, novels and mobs; their discourses and political commitment substantiated in a desire of making themselves and their practices “the glue” of that complex ethnic, social and cultural mosaic that Syria is. By pointing the attention to the narratives of the three activists, who define themselves feminists, the article intends to suggest how gendered political imaginations were first and foremost embedded in the re-conceptualization of citizenship and how their implications might be at the heart of the current state crisis. Narratives mobilized through public engagement, art and literature, criticized the cultural hegemonic notion of Syrian citizen based and regulated by the enforcement of sectarian frictions while, on the other hand promoting through their projects the incredible capacity of Syrians to accept otherness. Moreover, they sought to de-construct the dominant historical paradigm for which the Syrian state and the Al-Assad family have been two conflating identities in the conceptualization of statehood (Youssef Choueiri 1993). To give context to the ethnography, I will briefly examine the politics of public symbols crafted around the figure of Hafez Al-Assad (and later on his son Bashar) as examined in Lisa Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999) and consequently, a description of the contours of the recent civil uprising’s counter-politics, partially based on participant observation during my eight months staying in Damascus in 2011 and a visit to Beirut in November 2012. The last section will give an account of the conceptual production of three prominent activists on the axes of their political activism for the revolution, which was marked by feminist deeply relational, politics of affect and against the dominant discourses of belligerence, hatred and division. I argue that the language emerged from this production fashions a new notion of citizenship not centered on the hierarchy and the sectarian divide-and-rule logic embedded in “the cult of the Assads” (Wedeen 1999) but rather on a horizontal, cross-sect imaginary. Therefore the question at the core of my enquiry is: how has the revolutionary struggle been transformative of a existing regime of citizenship in Syria?

### **Personification of the State and Spaces of Counter-Politics**

There lies in the rhetoric of the Assads regime a central aspect that Lisa Wedeen defines as “the personification of the state” (Wedeen 1999, p. 2). The process underlying this rethoric, Wedeen argues, operates on a complex system of symbols which results in a metonymic relation between the president and the state. How

does this metonymy happen to be enforced? Weeden builds on Michelle Foucault's notion of *spectacle* and language in the way they produce governability through meanings. In other words, the modality through which different imaginaries are produced and re-produced in publics would determinate specific forms of cultural hegemony, relying on a set of iconographic images and rituals. Such strong colonization of the publics by the figure of the president is a recurrent element throughout the MENA region, normalized to the point that it has become part of the urban landscape, as one could observe in many other totalitarian states. A regime such as that of Al-Assad in Syria emanates its consensus through a set of symbols, rhetoric and spectacles which collectively form an "enforced participation in rituals of obedience" (Weeden 1999, p. 6). Dwelling in the streets of Damascus one can't help but notice the omnipresent portraits, glittering writings, and gadgets carrying the image portraying the face of the president. To add to that, Miriam Cooke (2007) notices how the massive reproduction of Assads image conflates with a religious element. Similarly to the Islamic monarchies of Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the Syrian regime generates not only a personification of the state in a secular sense, but also heralds the head of state to the highest rank of political legitimization, a religious one. The inscription "God protects Hafez Assad's Syria" prominently carved on the east minaret of the Umayyad mosque (symbol of Damascus and one of the most important Islamic venues of worship) is to testimony the political attempt by the president to take upon himself a double-folded role. Hence, the cult of Al-Assad travels both through spectacle in publics and religious markers of political authority. Another example of this double-folded mechanism occurred during the many massive pro-regime parades which were staged throughout the city during 2011, as chants of adoration and songs such as *mnhabbek* (we love you) were directed to the president and the image of the national flag was closely associated to that of Bashar Al-Assad. Once I asked F., a friend who was working for the Ministry of Finances why she attended such parades regularly despite being an (underground) political opponent of the regime. Her answer was that all state employees were forced to be present at parades, otherwise they would have been subjected to scrutiny at the workplace and investigated for political engagement by the *mukhabarat* (the Syrian bureau of investigation). The fact that F. had to participate to this ritual of public obedience despite her aversion to the regime makes clear how the status of citizenship is inseparable bounded to that of the figure of the president. Artistic production has been one of the most relevant forms of contestations to the cult of the Assad as Miriam Cook's *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (2007) widely discusses. In a more recent work Leyla Zubeidi (2012) gives account of the creative resistance emerged in the first two years of the uprising. Zubeidi successfully captures the function of political satire in chants, murals and poetry that directly targeted the figure of the president and thus aimed to contest the iconography of the president. For instance, the puppet play *Top Goon, the Diaries of a Little Dictator*, portraying the president as a childish, inept persona or the mural depicting the slogan "we love you" a line that Syrians have to repeat over and over in order to show their loyalty to the president, this time surrounded by a

duck, an animal to which Assad is often mockingly compared for his guttural vocal tone.

Another central node of the uprising poetics can be traced into the high level of awareness concerning sectarian discourses as a way to break the unity of the social movement. It is this element that has emerged as central in the narratives of Samar Yazbek, Fadwa Suleyman and Rima Dali.

A powerful tool of regime's repression of the 2011 uprising recurred in the rhetoric of external enemies, sectarian strife and the assertion that only Assad could prevent the state from disgregation (Roger Owen 2008). In November 2012 I met again N., a friend from the time of Damascus who came to visit me in Beirut as I was denied the Syrian visa at the border in the city of Masnaa. N.'s brother had been fighting with the Free Syrian Army in Homs and subsequently fled to Turkey. When asked why Homs had become the hotspot of political violence he explained that the city represented the ideal ground for enforcing the divide and rule strategies of the regime because, unlike other Syrian cities, it contained clear-cut divisions into Alawite (the same class-sect which Assad and the Baath party elite belong) and Sunni neighborhoods. To the Alawite affiliated elements of society, he explained, were allocated in the top employment positions and other benefits. His family, being from a Sunni background could not get favors from the establishment in power. "My father, unlike other colleagues, hadn't never received any promotion, and this is only because we are Sunni". According to N. words then, social categorization according to religion, or better according to forms of kinship capitalism related to sects, was already a long-established social practice within the Syrian disciplinary apparatus enforced by the Syrian state, unlike the state self-portrayal as being secular. Defined by Fadwa Suleiman as "the heart of Syria", Homs was the core point of street peaceful demonstrations between 2011 and 2012 when thousands gathered in Clock Tower square. Demonstrations podcasts show the Syrian poet Ibrahim Qashoosh guiding people with his voice while he performs one of the most known chants of the uprising *Yalla irhal ya Bashar* (step down o' Bashar). It is important to underscore the high level of awareness of these sectarian strategies exhibited by many of the Syrians I came to know in 2011. The counter-hegemonic language employed since the beginning of the uprising put great emphasis on the call for unity of all Syrian people; a language of resistance based on an alternative imagining of citizenship. The multi confessional social layers which informs Syrian society shapes it as a complex mosaic of different social segments each one carrying its burden of political and economic interests. This component possibly represents the most fascinating aspect of Syria for its people incredible capacity of acceptance of otherness. Nonetheless the same nature which marks the cosmopolitan nature of the Syrian society constitutes its Achilles' heel. As Frantz Fanon pointed out, hegemonic discourses aimed to break up this will to unity by revealing them the existence of "spiritual rivalries" (Fanon 2001, p.134).

The enactment of public "display of obedience" parades as the dominant paradigm of civil society engagement argued by Wadeen as the only possible way for Syrians of being in the square was blatantly disavowed by Homs demonstrations. However, in Damascus, things were different. The only demonstration I had the chance to witness was held in the damascene neighborhood

of Midan, beside Al-Hasan mosque's bridge on a Friday afternoon, October 2011. As I was sitting in a cafe suddenly chants were heard of people saying "the people want the fall of the regime." After some minutes, a small group appeared in front of me, and another group came from another direction to join with the first one. Police rushed behind them arresting the many and dispersing the others. In general, tight regulation of public life in force since the state of emergency was enacted in the 1970s have resulted in a society stripped from the basic concepts of liberal rights such as the right of assembly. It is not by chance, in fact, that one of the earlier demands of the movement (which was initially refused by the regime) in March 2011 was the lifting of the state of emergency. The prohibition of any form of public assemblage, the long lasting repression of any political formations and great fears of sectarian radicalization were among the causes of the social movement's lack of a "Tahrir Square moment" and overall incapacity of organization. This is why the Syrian uprising has in many ways distinguished from the Egyptian and the Tunisian uprisings. Similar to the Egyptian uprising however is that the political engagement of many resulted to be spontaneous, developed independently on an individual level and in what has been also defined a *ryzhomatic structure* as described in Hardt and Negri re-reading of Deleuze (Hardt-Negri 2000). The square as space of political recognition is part of the modern imaginary but this cannot equal the fact that it has to be the only and possible place to make claims. Nancy Fraser (1990) questions the assumption of the liberal public sphere as a privileged site of democracy in its basic axiom between equal participation and the act of talking (Habermas 1989). Fraser's idea of the multiplicity of publics formed by a constellation of subaltern counter-politics might serve well to explain the way in which different subjectivities deployed in Syria during the first phase of the uprising. The virtual space of Facebook was also important, namely the page of "The Syrian Revolution against Bashar al Assad" which people used as a platform to call for demonstrations when taking the street became too risky.

Therefore, the re-negotiation of citizenship in 2011-2012 passed through two main processes: first, the de-personification of the state and the undoing of sectarian categorization; second, a ryzhomatic, spontaneous and individual participation to the movement. The combination of these two elements are the key themes which mark activists narratives in the first phase of the uprising.

### **The Glue of a Mosaic: Recasting Citizenship Through Gendered Politics of Affect**

Within the wide framework I have drafted stand the words and practices enacted by three prominent public figures within the first moment of the Syrian uprising and their role as "the glue of a mosaic." Their experiences were strongly marked by political imaginations "whose litmus test does not originate in the model it provides, but rather in its capacity to maximize the affective power" (Ruddik 2010, p. 35). They opened up new possibilities for what Susan Ruddik – re-reading Spinoza concept of affect in Deleuze and Negri works – names the politic of affects, a politics that in Samar Yazbek's memoir of her experience in Damascus

2011 *A Woman in the Crossfire* counter the regime strategy to hide behind the Alawite sect and exploit their fears in order to stay in power (Yazbek 2012, p.171). Fadwa Suleyman, a well-known Syrian actress, was born in Aleppo and lately moved to Damascus to pursue an acting career. Among Suleyman's most famous performances *Unshudat Al-Matar* (Song of the Rain), *Nisa'a Saghira* (Young Women) and *Layal* (Nights). Suleyman who is from an Alawite background, decided to join peaceful demonstrations since the beginning proving that professing Sunni Islam was not a required status in order to participate. In July 2011, she took the stage of a public demonstration sit-in Homs. According to many, she played a crucial role among grassroot movement in Homs to prevent violence exacerbation that was getting momentum between Alawites and Sunnis. During 2011 and 2012, her public speeches, songs and performance were always driven by the desire of claiming the unity of all Syrians "the Syrian people is one" or "this is our revolution, no Salafists nor terrorists". Having been accused of treason by her brother, she went into hiding but continued to deliver monologues to the camera from her shelter in Homs encouraging all Syrians to join her in the hunger strike and stand with Homs under heavy siege at that time, as she pointed out "what is happening in Homs can happen everywhere in Syria". Suleyman later flee Syria to become an exiled in Paris where she recently released an interview about freedom and exile. Along with Suleyman, the novelist and tv presenter Samar Yazbek, has a relation of kinship with the Alawites of the coastal city of Jableh, therefore, was driven to flee to Paris due to her political activism by a series of threatening events. In joining the uprising in Damascus she decided to cut the bonds with her family in Jableh, a powerful symbolic act vis à vis the dominant sectarian discourses. Her literary production focuses on themes concerning gender relations in the Syrian society and in particular, the paradox concerning theme such as sexuality and marriage within social structure of damascene upper middle class (Yazbek 2001; 2002; 2005; 2008; 2012) Yazbek was involved in the political action of "The Union of Coordination Committee" of the uprising in Damascus, which greatly influenced her novel *A Woman in the Crossfire; Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* (Yazbek 2012). Through the novel, her autobiographical introspective style merges with the propulsive force of the social movement as it opens new space for new gender performativity and re-negotiate gender boundaries

The author argues that embracing power of the revolution not only created a common political ground for men and women but also provided women of a new public space and a new subjectivity. Women "crossed the sacred line that separates the sexes and defines their difference" as "they refused to reiterate the norms and do what is expected from them" (Yazbek 2012, p.155).

Yazbek's gendered analysis of the uprising passes through the articulation of a new subjectivity whereby the call for social change is tightly bounded to a critique to sectarian categorization endangering the uprising. "This is a revolution not a sectarian war, and my voice as a writer and a journalist must come out in support of the uprising, no matter what the cost" (Yazbek 2012, p. 230). As the narration unfolds, personal chronicle of the harassment she was subjected to by her family member for whom she "betrayed" intersects with a new consciousness of the role

Yazbek is called to play in Syrian civil society as intellectual and woman to counter the regime sectarian domination.

Rima Dali became a symbolic figure after she stood in the front of the Syrian Parliament and then with Ru'a Jafar, Kinda and Lubna Al-Za'our in front of Midhat Basha market in April 2012, Damascus. In both occasions, banners reading "Stop the killing now: We want to build a country for all Syrians" were displayed during the sit-ins.

When I met Rima Dali through a virtual conversation in Beirut, three years ago, it was on the occasion of a workshop about crafting new political strategies aiming to put down the increasing violence between different components of the movement organized by several Syrian human rights organizations. Dali is one of the founding member of *Dawlaty* (My Country). The project is thought to be a common platform where different political imaginations merging together for the creation of a different country. The project structures its contents around the artistic production of Syrian activists with a didactic purpose of showing in a more simple and direct ways as possible theme such as human rights basic principles, gender, race, religion and law issues in Syria. Dawlaty website gathers an excellent collection of original artworks that give a unique, direct and often satirical insight about a variety of themes such as social change, violence, power, war, mobility. One of Dawlaty members points out to the lack of organization and the fragmentation of the movement's components as a main concern for the future fulfilling of the civil uprising demands.

The movement has reached an impasse right now, we have not been involved in new activities for a long time, all of us acknowledged the need to look at the movement in a different perspective. I've realized that a revolution is a long process and it takes a long time, the second thing is that political organization of its component is fundamental for it to succeed. If you are not organized enough it is the people who pay the price (personal interview, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

It is clear how many activists present in Syria, expressed a political agenda whose major concern is that of working to ensure unity, organization and social cohesion even after the fall of the regime which can be pursued through a gradual re-crafting of the national narratives and imagine of citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

Taking into account gender as category of historical analysis (Joan W. Scott 1986) four years after the beginning of the uprising can be useful to reflect on this moment of social transformation, economy restructuring and the rise of totalitarianism not only in Syria but in global societies at large. Practices fashioned by Fadwa Suleyman, Samar Yazbek and Rima Dali put affect, relational values, acceptance of otherness, social cohesion as constitutive rather than derivative of a re-conceptualization of citizenship vis à vis state. The radical attempt to overcome what Ruddik defines as an ontological divide between the self and the other passes by the politics of affect and its liberating potentials. These feminist political imaginations have therefore sparkled the possibility of a new possible *imagined community* in Syria. In this sense their practices, artifacts and discourses have been

transformative of an existing regime citizenship in Syria in so far as they affirmed the urgency of undoing of sectarian categorization along with fictive reconciliation processes promoted by Bashar Al-Assad as well as the international community (Carpi 2013). The three activists acted as a sort of “social glue” conveying the idea of social cohesion beyond Assad’s conception of state as well as promoting its multiple components together. Fadwa Suleyman and Samar Yazbek have been both representative of Syrian cultural elite and both belonged to the ‘Alawite community, the same of the ruling establishment. Therefore, their very existence and struggle worked in the direction of building an alternative political myth based on affect to give significance to the series of events and experiences that the Syrian society, and the global societies more and more, are called to interpret.

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