



The Peripheries of Gender and Sexuality in the 'Arab Spring'

Maryam Khalid

To cite this article: Maryam Khalid (2015) The Peripheries of Gender and Sexuality in the 'Arab Spring', *Mediterranean Politics*, 20:2, 161-177, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2015.1033906](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1033906)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1033906>



Published online: 15 May 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1213



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 6 View citing articles [↗](#)

The Peripheries of Gender and Sexuality in the ‘Arab Spring’

MARYAM KHALID

Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT *In much of the world, those who do not perform ‘mainstream’ understandings of gender and sexuality find themselves on the ‘peripheries’: these individuals and groups are often located outside of institutionalized power, beyond state power structures and often lack the power of representation vis-à-vis those who wield discursive authority (actors such as the state and mainstream media). The power relations that underscore the production of knowledge and identities in this way are discursive, functioning to normalize and naturalize them. This article examines how some representations of gender and sexuality are privileged over others in both western and MENA mainstream discourses relating to the ‘Arab Spring’; how those whose voices have been underrepresented in the mainstream attempt to represent themselves; and how this impacts on the political activities of women and LGBT groups in the MENA.*

Introduction

Gender and sexuality are central to understanding the concept of ‘periphery’. The construction of these identity categories, and the placement of particular peoples within them, have been deployed to delineate those who are ‘outside’ of the ‘mainstream’. These identity categories mark out a range of activities, behaviours, identities and peoples as ‘acceptable’ or ‘deviant’ by reference to dominant understandings of sexuality and gender (and in doing so reproduce these understandings). In much of the world (not only in Arab or Muslim contexts), those who do not conform to mainstream constructions of ‘acceptable’ performances of gender and sexuality often have limited access to both institutionalized power and discursive power. For example, those identifying as women and LGBT are often located outside of political power structures, but can also lack the discursive power of representation in mainstream discourses. Discursive and political power is intertwined as the ability to effectively shape representations can afford or limit the power to participate in elite politics. Interrogating the function of dominant understandings of gender and sexuality in mainstream discourses allows us to unpack

Correspondence Address: Maryam Khalid, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia.
Email: maryam.khalid@mq.edu.au

the power relations that underscore the production of knowledge and identities in these discourses, and how these representations (and the knowledges they create) impact on and make possible particular courses of action.

In terms of the so-called 'Arab Spring',¹ understanding *how* representational practices function is central to understanding the peripheries of the MENA region, in terms of both their local activities and, their role in broader (transnational and global) discourses. In this article, I argue that gender and sexuality are central to dominant MENA and western discourses of the 'Arab Spring' and particularly to those who, in these discourses, are characterized by their 'differences' vis-à-vis 'acceptable' or normalized identities, actions, behaviours and so on. These discourses reproduce dominant understandings of gender and sexuality that are narrow, restrictive and deployed in ways that both construct and represent these groups as 'peripheries' and limit their access to (discursive and material) power. Gender and sexuality function to order both MENA and western mainstream discourses in ways that marginalize those who do not perform the gender and sexual identities central to these discourses. However, this is not to say that peripheries (such as women, LGBT people and the various activist feminist and LGBT groups in the MENA region) are completely restricted by these discourses or that they have not played a key role in the 'Arab Spring' (and beyond). They have taken an active role in politics in the MENA (see, *inter alia*, Fortier, 2015; Khalil, 2014a; Rama, 2013; Kreps, 2012; Radsch, 2012); although their political participation generally (although not always) occurs at the margins of the mainstream, it serves to challenge the assumptions that shape mainstream discourses. Through their activities, writings and speech acts, they have challenged the boundaries of dominant MENA and western categories of gender and sexuality and, in particular, what people in these categories can be and do. For example, women's and LGBT movements have challenged dominant discursive structures (western and local) through a range of activities in the 'Arab Spring' (these will be explored further in this article).

In particular, these peripheral people, groups and ideas challenge dominant western understandings of politics in the MENA. This is not to deny the discursive and material restrictions that constrain gender and LGBT activism. What is problematic, particularly in western discourse, is the focus on victimization of these groups, and thus the denial of their agency. I pay special attention to this issue as it is under-critiqued in mainstream western discourses on MENA politics, and on the 'Arab Spring' in particular. The 'Arab Spring' must be read in the context of long-standing western discourses on the MENA, which are shaped by orientalist logics that are themselves gendered. This is important because it is these discourses that influence and shape dominant western understandings of the role of women and non-heterosexual peoples in the 'Arab Spring', which (re)produce orientalist logics that marginalize those who do not conform to particular gendered understandings of the roles of various peoples in MENA. To this end, this article revisits Edward Said's theory of orientalism and frames it as a discourse that is inherently gendered in that it prescribes certain roles to sexed bodies (for example, women and LGBT people as passive victims, men as aggressive, backward). I deploy this theoretical framework to examine how some representations of

gender and sexuality are privileged over others in both western and MENA mainstream texts (popular, political and media) in the context of the 'Arab Spring'. Examining how those whose voices have been underrepresented in the mainstream attempt to represent themselves, and how this impacts on the political activities of women and LGBT groups in the Arab world, allows these discourses to be challenged. In particular, I focus on how these groups have destabilized or challenged mainstream orientalist representations of gender and sexuality in the context of their activities in the 'Arab Spring'.

Representation and Power: Discourse as Analytic Method

Gendered and sexualized discourses have historically been central to regulating and controlling knowledges and peoples. The construction of these discourses has been predicated on binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Binary understandings of gender, sex and sexuality (reflected in the construction of dominant gendered and sexualized identity categories such as male–female, straight–gay), and the attachment of particular behaviours to them (for example, feminine, masculine) is *naturalized* in dominant discourses. Such categorizations of identity (including, but not limited to, gender and sexuality) are discursive because what they tell us about the world and the people in it is '(re)constructed through ... an ordering of terms, meanings, practices that forms the background presuppositions and taken-for-granted understandings that enable people's actions and interpretations' (Milliken, 1999: 92). Discourses, then, are 'structured, relational totalities' that 'delineate the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular "reality" can be known and acted upon' (Doty, 1996: 6). That is, language, meaning and 'reality' are not imbued with 'natural' or 'pre-given' 'meaning' but are incomprehensible to us without discourse as an interpretive tool. 'Reality', 'knowledge' and the discursive practices that 'create' them must be analysed 'not to reveal essential truths that have been obscured' (as mastery of knowledge is impossible given no one has perfect information), but rather to uncover *how* certain representations influence the production of knowledge and identities, and how these representations and the knowledge they create make possible particular courses of action (Doty, 1996: 5).

Discursive regimes work to create meanings and attach them to certain subjects and objects, which in turn creates and justifies certain possibilities and actions, and excludes or limits others. Instrumental to this is the construction and representation of 'the world', prescriptions of 'proper' or 'acceptable' behaviour for the 'types' of people in it, and of the actions and events that take place in it. As Jutta Weldes explains, '[d]ifferent representations of the world entail different identities, which in turn carry with them different ways of functioning in the world, are located within different power relations and make possible different interests' (Weldes, 1996: 287). Interrogating the representations of various peoples, ideas, places, things and so on in discourses is important because the power to construct a dominant discourse enables the privileging of some knowledges and 'truths' over others.

The apparent obviousness of what is meant by identity markers like 'men' and 'women' is precisely why gender, as a critical tool that seeks to lay bare the power

relations that shape our understandings of the world, is useful. For example, constructs of the 'Middle Eastern woman', 'Muslim woman' and 'Arab woman' have been used, often interchangeably, for a range of political, cultural and ideological projects (Zine, 2006). Although often deployed by colonial and imperial powers, these categories are constructed and regulated by a range of actors, including those within the MENA (Zine, 2006: 35). The function of gender in imperial projects specifically is intertwined with orientalism.

This discourse has a history (and longevity) which is central to interrogating the gendering of the 'Arab Spring' in western discourses, and for understanding how these representations interplay with those produced in the MENA. Orientalism as a critical tool was most comprehensively developed by Edward Said (1978). In this understanding, orientalism is a discourse that is predicated on an artificial division of the world into 'East' and 'West', and requires the (re)production of stereotyped images of peoples along these lines. Understanding orientalism as a *gendered* discourse in which representations become 'fact' uncovers a system of representations that produces and renders intelligible specific categories such as 'East', 'Arab', 'Muslim', 'West', 'civilized', 'barbaric', and organizes them according to binary logics and in hierarchical ways that reflect the function of mainstream understandings of gender and sexuality. Recently, for example, the deployment of gendered and sexualized ideas about various 'types' of people discursively enabled the 'War on Terror' and its military interventions by drawing on traditional understandings of gender, sexuality and race to situate 'the West' as superior to 'the East' (Khalid, 2011). As I will demonstrate, the basic assumptions of orientalism (as a gendered discourse) are reflected in dominant western representations of the 'Arab Spring', most significantly in the deployment of gender and sexuality to construct 'the West' as enlightened in contrast to a backward and barbaric 'East'.

Critical engagement with such discourses and the representations that are (re) produced in them, undertaken largely through alternative readings of these discourses and representations, serves to show them as contingent. In this article, I do this by looking at dominant sources of information on women and LGBT people in the 'Arab Spring' as 'texts'. By 'texts' I am referring not only to written words and speech acts, but also physical actions, legal frameworks (legislation and so on) – anything that conveys information that shapes the ways in which we understand the world. The producers of such information, for my research, include both 'official' (government or state) entities and mainstream media sources. I interrogate these using a discourse analysis (DA) approach: this means interrogating representations by looking for instances of presupposition and predication (the presentation of background knowledge as 'true'), and pre/proscription (whereby certain qualities are linked to subjects and objects). My research is underscored by the understanding that peripheral groups, while characterized by distance, difference and dependence in political, cultural and economic life, are not entirely powerless; rather, they pursue possibilities of resistance. To this end, I also employ techniques of deconstruction and juxtaposition to demonstrate the ways in which peripheral groups have operated in the MENA since the early events of the 'Arab Spring' in 2010.

The 'Arab Spring': Between Orientalism and Authoritarianism

The political developments in the MENA since 2010, often referred to as the 'Arab Spring', have seen varying levels of change through the MENA. The most effective uprisings took place against the governments of the non-Gulf states of the MENA; generally poorer and with less revenue from natural resources, these states had largely failed to respond to some of the most basic needs and aspirations of their citizens. As W.J. Karim (2011: 604) explains, many MENA governments have been 'alienated from their own people, who seek 'employment, better living standards, and democratic freedom'. 'Long-dismissed as prisoners of the "Oriental soul"', Agathangelou and Soguk write, the many who participated in the uprisings and complex transitional processes taking place in the MENA 'have shattered the familiar presumption that only a Western European or a North American is the authentic agent of direct (i.e. unmediated) democracy and political change' (2011: 551, 552).

However, in much mainstream western discourse, this period in Arab politics has been characterized as something unusual. That is, these events are taken to signal a new-found political awareness of Arab citizens across the MENA; this was particularly well-captured in the *Financial Times*' characterization of the 'Arab Spring' as an 'awakening' (Financial Times, 2012). The implication is that, until the events following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, political engagement among the masses in the MENA had been dormant. This reading of political engagement in the MENA is hardly new – it continues a long tradition of denying Middle Easterners agency by defining them almost entirely in terms of dominant western assumptions around political engagement. The decades of political activity amongst ordinary Middle Easterners is marginalized in this narrative, rendered invisible, shaped by the orientalist narrative of the 'eastern other' as inherently backward and unable to progress. It also points to the dominant orientalist narrative of the contemporary MENA as too weak to progress politically (citing the lack of democracy in the region) and yet strong enough to pose a threat to 'us' (Tuastad, 2003).

The events of the 'Arab Spring' were too visible and widespread to be ignored in western discourses. However, in mainstream western discourses, they have generally been taken as indicative that the Middle Eastern 'other' has finally realized the superiority, if not the inevitability, of the (neo)liberal political logic (Agathangelou & Soguk, 2011: 552). That is, the dominant narrative is that the 'other' has now come to accept that to be 'like us' in 'the West' is to 'progress'. This ignores the role that 'the West' (and the US in particular) has played in shaping political economy in the MENA; the policies of economic liberalism that have empowered some in the region have largely marginalized the desires and needs of most in the MENA (Ali, 2011; Karim, 2011). The situation in which the uprisings and protests of the 'Arab Spring' took place is then 'partly a consequence of their [MENA states'] dependence on US support' that is itself geared toward institutionalizing a particular type of development geared toward specific economic and political ideals that are thought to best reflect what the peoples of the MENA 'need' (Karim, 2011: 604).

Gender Peripheries in MENA and the Local and Western Discursive Opportunity Structures

It is in the above context that mainstream western discourses around gender and sexuality in the political events in the MENA in the 'Arab Spring' must be understood. That is, the orientalist logics that shape dominant western discourses of the East have not only painted 'the eastern other' as backward/underdeveloped/uncivilized/undemocratic and so on, but have also deployed specific understandings of gender and sexuality as central to this. For example, gendered orientalist understandings of 'us' and 'them' in the 'War on Terror' functioned to situate 'the West' as civilizational superior to 'the East' by locating gender inequality in 'the East'; the construction of 'other' women as passive victims rather than active and agential was central to this (Khalid, 2011). As will be explained further on in the article, this is central to understanding the transnational opportunity structures for peripheries as it sets further discursive limits on the very peripheries it claims to be concerned with. This is not to say that specific (and narrow) understandings of gender and sexuality only shape western discourses and have not played a central role in shaping the discursive and material situations in which feminist, LGBT and women's, groups in the MENA work. Rather, the point here is that, as I will illustrate, western discourses on the 'Arab Spring' have centred on gender (largely understood in these discourses as the treatment of women) and sexuality in 'reading' the events of the 'Arab Spring' in ways that function to reaffirm orientalist tropes of 'eastern' backwardness and barbarism. This both privileges dominant discourses of gender and LGBT issues in the MENA and effectively marginalizes groups already on the peripheries of these discourses, and overlooks the varied functions of logics of gender and sexuality in the MENA.

This narrow understanding of 'gender' is unsurprising given the centrality of broader functions of gender in many societies (including non-western *and* western societies). Feminist scholarship has long identified that gender (in particular the construction of 'ideal' womanhood) is central to the construction and control of social communities and nations in particular. While masculine traits are generally central to the construction of the state as 'protector' of citizenry, women play a feminized role as discursive and biological reproducers of 'the nation' (Nagel, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Feminist analyses have illustrated that women's citizenship is tempered by the state's construction of 'private' familial relationships (such as marriage and child rearing) in ways that reinforce male-headed family structures and encourage the (re)production of traditional roles for women and men that centre on a binary understanding of gender and women's primary role (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 625–626). The peripheries this article is concerned with are also affected by discourses that construct genders and gender roles along binary lines. Gendered discourses impact on the dynamics between the periphery and core by shaping and constraining the political, socio-economic and cultural context in which those who are 'outside' the 'mainstream' find themselves.

The aims, activities and struggles of MENA feminist, women's and LGBT movements must be understood in terms of their complex relationship with broader

nationalist struggles in the region, as well as contemporary authoritarian governments (themselves at least partly the product of engagements with powerful neoliberal states and institutions) and their repression of civil society(ies) in the region. These movements are heterogeneous, responding to, shaped by, functioning within and challenging a range of circumstances from levels of modernization and development to avenues for political participation. Not only do dominant discourses determine what 'legitimate' knowledge about gendered and sexed bodies (e.g. naturalizing binary genders, placing people within binary gender categories and setting clear boundaries of acceptable performances of these gender identities), but in doing so they set the limits of, for example, what kinds of feminist agendas can effectively be pursued. For instance, feminist scholars of the MENA point out that state-sanctioned women's groups had been bound up with the nationalist agendas that co-opted feminist agendas insofar as they could serve the state's purpose (Khalil, 2014a: 131).

Generally, women's agitation for rights relating to political participation, education and work have been legitimized through their inclusion in the discourses of (often male-dominated) elite politics. However, issues such as reproductive rights, violence against women and LGBT rights are underrepresented in 'mainstream' movements and are less prominent in state-sanctioned agendas (Al-Ali, 2003). The effect of this is to limit, both discursively and materially, the boundaries of 'acceptable' feminist activism; in effect, it also discursively prescribes what women can be and do. To challenge this is to be at odds with not only 'proper' womanhood, but also the nation itself; feminist activism which challenges dominant (often state-led) discourses of women's activism has often led to accusations of collusion with imperial interests (Zine, 2006). Indeed, the discourse of authoritarian government itself is gendered, (re)producing masculine/feminine divisions that are heteronormative (shaped by understandings of heterosexuality as 'norm' and 'ideal'), and privileging the former over the latter (Khalil, 2014b).

Discourses on Gender and Sexuality during the 'Arab Spring'

Peripheries have found expanded opportunities to engage in activism and challenging dominant norms around gender and sexuality in the 'Arab Spring', but have also faced obstacles in terms of negotiating the changing political contexts across the region. The discourse of gender, sexuality and political engagement has evolved since 2010, and can be analysed through examining events, actions and written and verbal representations in this context. Both gender and LGBT issues and groups, to varying degrees, remained situated at the margins of (even outside) dominant discourses of the 'Arab Spring'.

Initially, western and Middle Eastern media images of the protests that began in Tunisia and Egypt largely featured men (Al-Ali, 2012: 27). For example, a *Foreign Policy* photo essay contained one image of a woman (not in a protest context) out of 13 (Foreign Policy, 2012). In mainstream Arab media, women's involvement was read in various ways. In Egypt's state-run NileTV, archives on the 'Arab Spring' have few references to gender activism in terms of the protests. Those articles that do

mention women tend to do so in the context of 'women and children'. Placing women in a category with children serves to infantilize them, thus denying their agency. This effectively situates women, along with children, outside the revolutionary activities of the 'Arab Spring'. This was also done in a more explicit way. An article in the pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* characterized women's rights activism as lying outside the 'core' concerns of the 'Arab Spring', despite its protesters' slogans of equality and removal of oppressive government. Rather, an article in the paper explained that, in the Egyptian context:

with the generals still holding on to power, the secular parties struggling in the ballot boxes against the Muslim Brotherhood, and the youth confronting the police firing at them in the streets of Cairo, the liberation of women should not be added to the current agenda. (Quoted in Mourad, 2014: 69)

However, the involvement of women in the protests could not be ignored completely. A broad range of women participated in the protests, including those who had a strong history of activism, those who had not participated in organized political action before, working women and housewives (Pedersen & Salib, 2013: 257). Rather than simply supporting men, women were on the 'frontlines' of the revolutions across the MENA; in Yemen, the symbolic figurehead of the revolution was a female human rights activist in local media (Yadav, 2011). Women were heavily involved in public forums and spaces, not only in terms of protesting on the streets, but also in their online presence. Leil-Zahra Mortada found a lack of acknowledgement of women's participation in these protests in early media coverage and established an online blog for people to submit photos illustrating women's participation (see <http://www.sawtahniswa.com/2011/02/women-of-the-egyptian-revolution/>). Young activists like Esraa Abdel Fattah (Egypt) and Lina Ben Mhenni (Tunisia) played a prominent role in the online space, as activists aligning themselves with the broader struggles of the Arab masses, as well as specifically feminist agendas to empower women. Abdel Fattah is active in print and television media, and founded a women's organization; Ben Mhenni's activities and influence saw her nominated for a Nobel Prize (Pedersen & Salib, 2013: 256–266).

Women became a particularly important feature in both MENA and western mainstream discourse in light of the sexual assaults that were perpetrated against women involved in protests in Egypt. These media representations illustrate the narrowness of the mainstream media discourse in which gender activists operated in the 'Arab Spring'. In this discourse, women became currency in debates on 'authenticity', 'tradition', 'national identity' and 'civilization', in which the appropriate ways to 'be' female (and therefore, in these discourses, a woman) were policed. Paul Amar explains that Egyptian and western media outlets shifted between the construction of Tahrir as a 'utopian space that forged a new social contract' and 'the moshpit for a hypermasculine mob' (Amar, 2011: 300). Asmaa Mahfouz created and featured in a video protest that went viral in social media and featured in mainstream media outlets. Urging Egyptians to become involved in the protests, she explicitly channelled 'the 'manhood' of Egypt through political action,

in order to make legible the violence of the state and challenge the security state's notions of gendered honour' (Amar, 2011: 300). State discourse responded to women's participation and reconfiguring of gender norms by sexualizing them (through accusations, innuendo and physically through assault) (Amar, 2011: 301) and thus reasserting pre-'Arab Spring' discursive boundaries around the limits of appropriate female (and feminine) political action.

In western media, coverage of women in the Arab Spring varied in terms of degree of focus, but retained the underlying logics of gendered orientalist discourse (s) that have structured much mainstream western knowledge of 'the East'. A *New York Times* article on the roots of the 'Arab Spring' attributed the trigger, Bouazizi's self-immolation, to a 'Slap to a Man's Pride' (Fahim, 2011), reflecting dominant understandings of 'honour' that most (if not all) Arab men are perceived to subscribe to. In this context, women's activism became currency in a broader discursive struggle to retain the stability of orientalist and gendered logics that can divide the world into 'progressive West' and 'backward East' through reference to the treatment (but not the agency) of women. A search of Fox News' coverage of the events in the MENA, for example, is notable for its lack of focus on women's activism in the MENA; when women are featured, this is largely in the context of sexual assaults perpetrated by men during protests, or to illustrate that 'they' had now begun to progress by subscribing to 'our' understandings of equality and justice (Sjoberg & Whooley, 2013). As one western journalist explained, '[p]eople in the West recognized themselves in the faces of the young female protesters, and they were pleased that people in these countries were not as different as many had previously believed' (von Rohr, 2011).

Representations of one particular incident of sexual violence which captured the attention of the western media – the assault against CBS journalist Lara Logan in Tahrir Square in 2011 – drew explicitly on orientalist logics, and reflected dominant western understandings of gender and sexuality as much as they attempted to shed light on these understandings in the MENA. While western journalism tended to represent Tahrir as undisciplined to the point of lacking any leadership or direction in terms of political activism, there was some reluctance initially to cast all Arabs as possessing an uncontrolled hypermasculine sexuality. Rather, hypermasculine violence was seen as a tactic employed by the authoritarian Egyptian state (Amar, 2011: 301). As the Lara Logan story unfolded, however, the discourse shifted from one directed at the authoritarian state to 'the predatory culture' of Muslim/Arab² men. Focusing on Logan's femininity, and her blonde hair as symbolic of 'the West', the attack became evidence of the uncontrolled sexuality of the male 'other' (Amar, 2011: 301). Such representations effectively presuppose certain things about 'their' culture, predicated on broader and historical discourses of orientalism, in which the hypermasculinity of the 'other' is uncontrolled and a threat to 'our' women (Khalid, 2011).

The sexuality of women was also central to mainstream western discourses, in ways that recall orientalist preoccupations with uncovering the female 'other'. A dialogue, of sorts, between western and Arab discourses illustrated what I mentioned earlier regarding the deployment of Arab women as 'currency' in debates

around citizenship, authenticity, tradition and national identity. A prominent example of this was Egyptian Aalia Elmahdy's posting of a nude picture of herself on Facebook, and then on her blog. Elmahdy's act undermined 'the normative social order' in Egypt, but it arguably shocked more than it opened debate (Mourad, 2014: 67). Some reactions to Elmahdy's photograph were violent, or threatened violence; the social norm which they challenged was virulently defended by some Egyptians. Even for those who were otherwise staunch supporters of freedom from oppression, this particular act of expression fell outside the parameters of the Arab protests. Mainstream media representations in the Arab world tended to discursively reposition 'Arab Spring' discourse away from the boundary-challenging message Elmahdy claimed. Some did this by 'slam[ming] her from the point of view of aesthetics, depth, timing and cultural sensitivity', while others erased the significance of the act altogether (Naguibe, 2011). Elmahdy's form of protest was also critiqued for its perceived cultural origins – an op-ed piece in *al-Dustour* asserted that Elmahdy's actions 'followed a style that was adopted in the West as a tool for protest or for the demand for gender equality ... but in our Arab world, such public nudity is related to humiliation, weakness, and the violation of human dignity' (cited in Mourad, 2014: 70). As Mourad explains, 'the sexual was mapped on to the foreign, and sexualized forms of dissent were dismissed as the mimicry of Western culture' (Mourad, 2014: 70). In mainstream western discourses, overlooking that Elmahdy's first publication of her photograph was removed from Facebook (a western-based social media platform) precisely because of her naked body,³ the reaction in Egypt to Elmahdy's act became evidence of the backwardness of Arab culture, and its limited democratic potential despite the events of the 'Arab Spring'.

The status of LGBT peoples in the MENA has also been discussed in ways that reflect long-standing orientalist logics. A 2013 *TIME* report on LGBT issues in the MENA deployed many of these. The author explained that '[t]he sodomy law in Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring in 2011, stands as a stark reminder of the discrimination the gay and lesbian community continues to face in the Arab world' (Rayman, 2013). Reminding the reader that Tunisia was the location of the initial protests that set off the revolutionary movements in the Arab world serves to discursively link these to anti-LGBT agendas. 'The East' remains 'othered' through the predication of the initial location of its most prominent popular democratic movement as unable to attain equality of sexuality, rendering the entire region as inherently backward.

As LGBT discrimination comes to stand for the backwardness of 'the East', it also functions as a marker of 'the West's civilization. Central to this is the juxtaposition of the treatment of LGBT communities in the MENA and 'the West', which also serves to construct the authority of the latter in speaking about sexuality in the MENA. The experiences of LGBT peoples in the MENA serve to reinforce civilizational hierarchies, as 'their' treatment of LGBT people is contrasted directly to their status in 'the West', which remains unproblematic. For example, in the *TIME* report cited above, the author consults a western scholar on LGBT peoples in the MENA, who states that calls for 'freedom', 'justice' and 'dignity' in the 'Arab

Spring' will 'take a long time' to take hold in terms of LGBT issues in the MENA 'because Arab societies are traditionally authoritarian and conservative' (Rayman, 2013). This is contrasted with the image painted by a gay Tunisian man quoted as saying: 'at least gay people in the West can stand up and say we are here and we exist' (Rayman, 2013). Such representations of 'the East' fail to problematize the discrimination faced by LGBT peoples in the 'West', and serves instead to rearticulate orientalist narratives of the 'undeveloped Other' vis-à-vis the 'advanced West' (Sabsay, 2012). Although the *TIME* report makes (brief) mention of online LGBT activism in the MENA, the struggles – oppression as well as activism – of LGBT peoples in the MENA thus become currency in a long-standing discursive struggle in which 'East' and 'West' are delineated in binary ways, and organized along hierarchical lines.

A particularly prominent story emerging from the 'Arab Spring' in terms of LGBT rights was that of 'Amina Araf'/'Gay Girl in Damascus' hoax ('Amina's' blog was later revealed to be written not by a gay Syrian woman, but a man and woman residing in Edinburgh). The 'Gay Girl in Damascus' blog sought to document the life of a gay woman living through the revolutionary events of the 'Arab Spring'. 'Amina' communicated with journalists, who saw her as an 'authentic voice'; her struggles were reported on by the *Guardian*, CNN and CBS (Bennett, 2011: 187). The story gained particularly significant media attention when it was reported by a 'cousin' that Araf had disappeared, arrested by government security agents. Media outlets pursued the story, and the US State Department became involved in the investigation. The terms of this discourse construct LGBT concerns in the MENA as an 'updated' version of liberation/rescue tropes that have long been deployed in gendered orientalist discourses, which have most often centred on the need to 'save brown women from brown men' (Oğuzhan, 2014: 81–83).

In mainstream Arab media discourse, LGBT issues were not considered central to the freedom being pursued through mass uprisings; this discourse was largely same-sex-phobic, reflecting the long-standing marginalization of LGBT peoples in mainstream national discourse. For example, the 2001 Queen Boat/Cairo 52 controversy in Egypt, where 52 Egyptian men were charged with debauchery and offending religion, very publicly highlighted that same-sex behaviour was policed in Egypt even in the absence of a specific law against this (homosexuality is not a crime in Egypt, although laws like those policing 'debauchery' and 'offences against religion' are used to the same effect) (see Fortier, 2015; Mourad, 2014; Hawley, 2001). The discursive delegitimization of homosexual identity continued in the 'Arab Spring'. For example, a TV appearance by the new Egyptian human rights minister reinforced the conceptualization of non-heterosexuality as something requiring 'medical treatment' (Kreps, 2012: 224). This discursively continues to construct 'natural' (and therefore legitimate) sexual identities in binary ways, and privileges heterosexuality as the norm.

In the context of the 'Arab Spring', Mourad notes that, as with feminist issues, mainstream discourse reflected a 'compromising stance' on issues of sexual freedom (Mourad, 2014: 68). Shalakany (2007: 9) points out that in promoting human rights

around sexuality in this context, individuals run the risk of ‘being painted supporters of “sexual deviance”’. Discursively, options for challenging dominant understandings of sexuality and identity are closed off; the mainstream discourse of the ‘Arab Spring’ constructed hierarchies of freedom and oppression. In mainstream discourse, rights around sexuality and gender are at best ignored (with the hope that securing political stability and so-called ‘core’ rights will open the way for other rights to be considered); at worst, they are constructed as something ‘outside’ a particular understanding of Arab ‘cultural values’. The interplay between mainstream Arab and western discourses illustrates that these issues are currency in competing discursive battles around civilization and identity – the individuals and groups in these peripheries themselves are marginalized.

Peripheries’ Strategies: Shifting the Discourse of the ‘Arab Spring’

Peripheral groups were thus marginalized in dominant discourses; however, they have demonstrated their agency in a variety of ways. The strategies adopted by the peripheral groups discussed here have been touched on above, in terms of the ways in which their activities have functioned in the construction of dominant discourses on the ‘Arab Spring’. However, it is also important to acknowledge the various approaches, ideas, actions and forums for expression these peripheries have utilized outside of dominant discourses. The shifts in the broader ‘Arab Spring’ toward widespread ‘non-institutional activism’ (in public spaces and in online spaces through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and online blogs) was very much reflected in the activism of peripheral groups such as women and LGBT people. While the peripheries discussed in this article were represented, to some extent, in mainstream media outlets, social media has generally allowed these groups to represent themselves in their own terms – and, in terms of LGBT movements, they have value as a safe(r) space for activism and for the expression of ideas that challenge a range of dominant constructions of gender and sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, addressing gender (in)equality in terms of official policy and institutions has been, to some degree, limited by the scope set by the state. However, both in the context of the ‘Arab Spring’ and before it, broader gender activism has been ‘decentralized’ through the increasing utilization of online space to discuss issues of gender and sexuality, as a tool for organization and as a forum through which to place pressure on new governments in terms of shifting the boundaries of what reform related to gender (and sexuality) should and could entail (Khalil, 2014a: 131). In terms of the political changes taking place in the MENA since 2010, a range of women’s groups have taken the opportunity to challenge and interrogate understandings of gender in terms of national identity, as well as legal and constitutional instruments. ‘State-defined action’, Khalil explains, has been seriously challenged by ‘atomised forms of cyber-activism’ that can challenge ‘state-imposed binaries’ (Khalil, 2014a: 131).

Activism in this space has been both individual and group-oriented, both ‘new’ and continuing a longer tradition of using online forums for activism. Social media has been used as a tool for organizing street protests as well as virtual protests.

It also offered a range of Arab women (Manal Hassan, Nawara Negm, Nora Younis and Dalia Ziada, to name but a few) a forum through which to put forward non-mainstream accounts of the 'Arab Spring' – to both Arab and western audiences. Importantly, women from rural areas also blogged about the revolutions, offering audiences a more nuanced picture of the events themselves, motivating factors and the role of women and women's rights here (Rama, 2013: 38, see also Elghamry, 2015). As Kamal and ElKholy explain in the Egyptian context, women outside urban centres have been active in the events of the 'Arab Spring', 'turning the "political revolution" into a cultural and moral one' through 'alternative ways of resisting' – not only in the 'public sphere' but also in less visible spaces, such as within the home (Kamal & ElKholy, 2014). Women thus have an important role as revolutionaries, especially as citizen-journalists, challenging the representations disseminated by state and mainstream media outlets (Radsch, 2012: 14–16). Importantly, their activism did not reflect the disconnect between gender and so-called 'core' issues displayed in mainstream discourse. For example, a range of Facebook sites organized by Arab women situated women's rights as part of more general topics (Zlitni & Touati, 2012). As Courtney Radsch (2012: 6), notes there are varying levels of internet participation across the MENA, but the audience includes those with greater access to the centres of power than enjoyed by peripheral groups.

LGBT groups have also utilized online spaces to voice their concerns and challenge dominant discourses of sexuality (Kreps, 2012). These spaces, in part, make possible aspects of what Needham explains as 'closet activism' that has been deployed in Egypt. In contrast to open LGBT rights activism, this approach harnesses the movement for freedom and human rights amongst Arab masses, without specifically enunciating LGBT identity (Needham, 2013: 317–319). LGBT peripheries have faced more constraints than feminist groups (at least, those which have had a focus on gender equality between 'men' and 'women') in terms of engaging with dominant discourses of gender and sexuality in traditional political spaces. The online space, offering potential for a less regulated and more anonymous forum than traditional activism, has been utilized by LGBT individuals and groups. For example, the Tunisian-based magazine *Gayday* was launched in 2011 and offers a forum for expression that is not available in mainstream outlets; it also aims to challenge the criminalization of same-sex acts and identities in Tunisia (Abrougui, 2012).

Dominant discourses of sexuality continue to reproduce traditional understandings of 'appropriate' sexual expression. However, as David Kreps notes, this is more complex than 'mainstream' western discourses of sexuality might suggest. Historically, Arab understandings of sexuality have tended to be fluid: same-sex acts have not necessarily been seen as determinative of sexual identity, and there has been tolerance toward non-heterosexual activity in Arab cultures (Kreps, 2012: 224). Edwige Fortier (2015) makes the point that speaking publicly about non-heterosexual acts is more socially sanctioned than the acts themselves. Similarly, Joseph Massad has argued that non-heterosexual sexual acts themselves are less problematic than what he calls 'western' homosexual identity (Massad, 2007). The

discourse that constructs this identity ‘produces homosexuals ... where they do not exist’ (Massad, 2002: 363). However, as Fortier (2015) warns, the view that LGBT identity does not exist ‘outside small groups of men in metropolitan areas’ (Massad, 2002: 373) serves to ‘negate the agency of homosexual actors in these countries whilst simultaneously side-lining’ the discursive and material violence done to those who identify as non-heterosexual (Fortier, 2015). There is increasing desire amongst those Arabs who identify as non-heterosexual to be able to secure the freedom to express their sexual identities on their own terms, whether this happens to accord with ‘western’ or ‘eastern’ notions of sexuality (Kreps, 2012).

The opportunities for political engagement also point to an increased possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. An Egyptian student, for example, pointed out in respect of his perception of LGBT issues in the protests that ‘As a gay Arab, I feel represented in these protests in every way and I’m confident that one day there will be a gay rights movement sweeping the Arab streets’ (quoted in Rousseau, 2012). Indeed, those who challenge dominant discursive constructions of gender and sexuality can face accusations of importing ‘western culture’ and aiding western imperialism. However, as Rasha Moumneh explains, the ‘social anxiety brought about by homosexuality is not all that different from conservative fears that arise from the promotion of women’s rights and freedoms’ (in Rousseau, 2012).

Conclusion

This article has analysed the periphery theme of this volume from a discursive angle. It has examined the discursive opportunity structures in which gender peripheries find themselves. Discourses that influence and shape dominant western understandings of the role of women and non-heterosexual people in the ‘Arab Spring’ have (re)produced orientalist logics that marginalize those who do not conform to particular gendered understandings of the roles of various people in the MENA. ‘Local’ discourses too have deployed specific (binary) understandings of gender and sexuality to exercise control over groups of people.

Nonetheless, gender peripheries have pursued their own strategies in these opportunity structures and their activism has deeply challenged them. Those whose voices have been underrepresented in the mainstream have attempted to represent themselves through a variety of ways, which, in particular, have destabilized or challenged mainstream orientalist representations of gender and sexuality in the context of the ‘Arab Spring’ and more broadly.

The changes brought forth in the ‘Arab Spring’, as with any significant political upheaval, have been unpredictable and fast-paced. In this sense, the strategies of dissent and political engagement chosen by groups seeking to challenge dominant discourses of gender and sexuality in the MENA during this period have been impacted on by events very much out of their immediate control, shaped by a multiplicity of factors and interests. On a broad level, the calls for freedom and justice that marked the protests of the ‘Arab Spring’ intersect with the aims of those seeking to change dominant understandings of gender and sexual identities and

roles. However, these peripheries have had varying success in changing dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. While political engagement in traditional forums has not always been fruitful in this sense, peripheral groups concerned with gender and LGBT rights have been able to find other avenues to challenge discourses. The importance of online forums in contemporary political movements has also been significant in recent years in popular political engagement in the MENA; this can be seen as an opportunity structure shift that has been utilized by groups that have (and continue to have) limited access to the institutions of state to voice and act on their own understandings of rights related to gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. I use scare quotes around this term to denote that it is problematic in terms of the implication of political dormancy amongst the Arab masses in the MENA until the events of 2010 sparked wide-scale protests and uprisings. To speak of an 'Arab Spring' ignores the decades of political agitation around the Arab (and non-Arab) states in the MENA and ignores the wider political context of the lack of success of challenges to authoritarian regimes in the region, which include the support of some of these regimes by the same western states that engage in the construction of discourses of political underdevelopment in the MENA (Khoury, 2011; Teti, 2012: 281; Tyner & Rice, 2012).
2. I use 'Muslim/Arab' here to indicate that these identity categories are too often conflated in dominant (orientalist) discourses.
3. Facebook's terms of service, arguably reflective of mainstream (western) social norms, prohibit content that contains (particular types of) nudity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Abrougui, A. (2012) Gayday magazine: Tunisia's first LGBT magazine, *Uncut: Freedom of Speech on the Frontline*, 27 March, Available at <http://uncut.indexoncensorship.org/2012/03/gayday-magazine-tunisia-first-lgbt-magazine/> (accessed 16 June 2014).
- Agathangelou, A. & N. Soguk (2011) Rocking the Kasbah: insurrectional politics, the "Arab streets", and global revolution in the 21st century, *Globalizations*, 8(5), pp. 551–558. doi:10.1080/14747731.2011.622101.
- Al-Ali, N. (2003) Gender and civil society in the Middle East, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5(2), pp. 216–232. doi:10.1080/1461674032000080576.
- Al-Ali, N. (2012) Gendering the Arab spring, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5(1), pp. 26–31. doi:10.1163/187398612X624346.
- Ali, T. (2011) Who will reshape the Arab world: its people, or the US? *The Guardian*, 29 April, Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/29/arab-politics-democracy-intervention>
- Amar, P. (2011) 'Turning the gendered politics of the security state inside out?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13(3), pp. 299–328. doi:10.1080/14616742.2011.587364.
- Bennett, D. (2011) A 'gay girl in Damascus': the Mirage of the 'authentic voice' – and the future of journalism, in: R. Keeble & J. Mair (Eds) *Mirage in the Desert? Reporting the Arab Spring* (Bury St Edmunds: Abramis).
- Doty, R.L. (1996) *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

- Elghamry, K. (2015) Periphery discourse: An alternative media eye on the geographical, social and media peripheries in Egypt's spring, *Mediterranean Politics*, 20(2), pp. 255–272. doi:10.1080/13629395.2015.1033902.
- Fahim, K. (2011) Slap to a man's pride set off Tumult in Tunisia, *New York Times*, January 2011.
- Financial Times (2012) Arab awakening is just the beginning, Editorial December 23.
- Foreign Policy (2012) Looking back at the Arab spring, Available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/16/photos_of_the_arab_spring (accessed 7 April 2014).
- Fortier, E. (2015) Transition and marginalisation: locating spaces for discursive contestation in post-revolution Tunisia, *Mediterranean Politics*, 20(2) doi: 10.1080/13629395.2015.1033904
- Hawley, C. (2001) Anger over Egypt gay trial, *BBC*, 15 August, Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1493041.stm (accessed 16 June 2014).
- Kamel, L. & M.E. El-Kholy (2014) Women activism and resistance in rural upper and lower Egypt, *The Hill*, 27 March 2014, Available at <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/201830-women-activism-and-resistance-in-rural-upper-and-lower> (accessed 16 June 2014).
- Karim, W.J. (2011) Stratagems and spoils in US policy in the Middle East, *Globalizations*, 8(5), pp. 601–607. doi:10.1080/14747731.2011.621312.
- Khalid, M. (2011) Gender, orientalism and representations of the 'other' in the war on terror, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 23(1), pp. 15–29. doi:10.1080/14781158.2011.540092.
- Khalil, A. (2014a) Gender paradoxes of the Arab spring, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(2), pp. 131–136. doi:10.1080/13629387.2014.885782.
- Khalil, A. (2014b) Tunisia's women: partners in revolution, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(2), pp. 186–199. doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.870424.
- Khoury, R. G. (2011) Drop the orientalist term 'Arab spring', *The Daily Star*, August 17, Available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2011/Aug-17/146410-drop-the-orientalist-term-arab-spring.ashx>
- Kreps, D. (2012) In/visibility of LGBTQ people in the Arab spring, proceedings of CATaC'12', CATaC, Aarhus, Denmark. 18–20 June 2012.
- Massad, J. (2002) Re-orienting desire: the gay international and the Arab world, *Public Culture*, 14(2), pp. 361–386. doi:10.1215/08992363-14-2-361.
- Massad, J. (2007) *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- Milliken, J. (1999) Intervention and identity: reconstructing the west in Korea, in: J. Weldes, M. Laffey, H. Gusterson & R. Duvall (Eds) *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Mourad, S. (2014) The naked body of Alia: gender, citizenship, and the Egyptian body politic, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 38(1), pp. 62–78. doi:10.1177/0196859913508782.
- Nagel, J. (1998) Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(2), pp. 242–269. doi:10.1080/014198798330007.
- Naguibe, R. (2011) Aliaa's nudity: a different form of protest, *Egypt Independent*, December 11, Available at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/aliaasnudity-different-form-protest> (accessed 16 June 2014).
- Needham, J. (2013) After the Arab spring: a new opportunity for LGBT human rights advocacy? *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 20, pp. 287–323.
- Oğuzhan, Ö. (2014) Whose Niqab is this? Challenging, creating and communicating female Muslim identity via social media, *Journal of Media Critiques*, 2, pp. 71–90.
- Pedersen, J. & M. Salib (2013) Women of the Arab spring, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15(2), pp. 256–266. doi:10.1080/14616742.2013.796218.
- Radsch, C. (2012) Unveiling the revolutionaries: cyberactivism and the role of women in the Arab uprisings, James A. Baker III Institute For Public Policy Paper, Rice University.
- Rama, S. (2013) Remembering their role: keeping women involved post-Arab awakening, *Journal of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East*, 1, pp. 31–48.
- Rayman, N. (2013) After the Arab spring, no bloom for Arab LGBT rights, *TIME*, 1 July 2013, Available at <http://world.time.com/2013/07/01/after-the-arab-spring-no-bloom-for-arab-lgbt-rights/> (accessed 12 January 2014).

- Rousseau, S.S.K. (2012) A touch of spring for LGBT Arabs, *Inter Press Service*, January 11.
- Sabsay, L. (2012) The emergence of the other sexual citizen: orientalism and the modernisation of sexuality, *Citizenship Studies*, 16(5–6), pp. 605–623.
- Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism* (Hammondsworth: Penguin).
- Sjoberg, L., & J., Whooley (2013) New discourse, old Orientalism: a critical evaluation of the 'Arab Spring for women'?, in: J. Davis (Ed) *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- Shalakany, A. (2007) On a certain queer discomfort with orientalism, *Proceedings of the American Society of International Law* 101, 7–11, Available at <http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/law/faculty/Documents/PROCEEDINGS.pdf> (accessed 16 June 2014).
- Teti, A. (2012) The EU's first response to the 'Arab spring': a critical discourse analysis of the *partnership for democracy and shared prosperity*, *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(3), pp. 266–284. doi:10.1080/13629395.2012.725297.
- Tuastad, C. (2003) Neo-orientalism and the New Barbarism thesis: aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s), *Third World Quarterly*, 24(4), pp. 591–599. doi:10.1080/0143659032000105768.
- Tyner, J.A. & S. Rice (2012) Moving beyond the 'Arab spring': the ethnic, temporal, and spatial bounding of a political movement, *Political Geography*, 31(3), pp. 131–132. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.01.001.
- Von Rohr, M. (2011) Freedoms at risk: Arab women fight to defend their rights, *Der Spiegel*, 29 November.
- Weldes, J. (1996) Constructing national interests, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2(3), pp. 275–318. doi:10.1177/1354066196002003001.
- Yadav, S.P. (2011) Tawakkul Karman as cause and effect, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, October 21.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997) *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage).
- Zine, J. (2006) Between orientalism and fundamentalism: Muslim women and feminist engagement, in: K. Hunt & K. Rygiel (Eds) *(En)Gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- Zlitni, S. & Z. Touati (2012) Social networks and women's mobilization in Tunisia, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(5), pp. 46–58.