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# Heroism Revisited: The Superhero Genre in Modern Arabic Culture

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The absence of leadership during the Arab uprisings of 2011 was as remarkable as it was ironic. Most revolutions, uprisings, and coups d'état in the history of the Arab region are closely related to, and even named after, a leader. Some examples are the 'Urabi revolution in Egypt (named after its leader, Colonel Ahmed 'Urabi); Saad Zaghloul and the 1919 revolution in Egypt; Abdelkader al-Jazairi and the struggle against French colonialism in Algeria; Abd al-Karim Qasim, the leader of the July 14 revolution in Iraq; Muammar Gaddafi, the leader of the 1969 military rebellion in Libya; and of course, the most famous example of all, Gamal Abdel Nasser and the 1952 coup in Egypt. These examples, and many others all over the region, point to a mindset in which the leader of any popular civil uprising or military rebellion eventually becomes a hero in the eyes of the people, and victory is unilaterally attributed to his efforts in overthrowing a government. In a region known for its deep-seated belief in patriarchal leadership, the people's ability to threaten the long-standing political dominance of authoritarian regimes in 2011, with no leader to spearhead these uprisings, was profound. It brought the idea of the leader/hero into the limelight and offered a chance to revisit the meaning of heroism, especially when the revolutions eventually came under attack for their inability to produce leaders who would take matters in hand and lead the countries forward after the first wave of demonstrations.

In Egypt, this leadership void was brought up immediately after the 2011 Egyptian revolution in response to attempts to assimilate (for lack of a better term) a different kind of leadership and governance that did not adhere to the traditional concept of heroism. Alternatives to the traditional model were rarely entertained, even on a popular level, and if they were, it was only to prove their failure. Counterrevolutionary forces used the traditional image of the leader based on the definition of heroism—the larger-than-life demigod, the fearless savior who sacrifices himself for the sake of others—to convince people of the failure of the revolution and the need for such a “super” hero and therefore to prepare the stage for the emergence of such a figure.

In this essay, I consider the superhero genre and how it is used in modern Arabic culture. I read it in ways that allow a reexamination of the traditional concept of heroism and show how artists using the genre attempt to reflect the changing sensibilities of a generation of young Arabs in the post-2011 generation. I use examples from different artistic media that include photo shoots, films, soap operas, and comics, and from different parts of the Arab region by both male and female artists. I examine the genre from its translation into Arabic in the 1960s to the present, charting the mutations it has undergone to show how the genre greatly foreshadowed the dynamics of the 2011 uprisings.

## The Superhero Genre in Modern Arabic Culture

In 2014, Spider-Man, the famous superhero, suddenly appeared on the streets of Cairo. His unprecedented appearance in the old city was exciting, especially for children, who were ecstatic to see their beloved superhero suddenly within reach. They gathered around him, reached out to touch him, and asked him to zip around as they had seen him do in comics and films. They were greatly disappointed when instead of performing his superheroic stunts, Spider-Man was bent on doing his laundry, running to catch the bus (a daunting task in the overcrowded streets of Cairo), praying in a mosque, smoking a hookah in a squatter area of Cairo, and performing other mundane activities as normal people are wont to do. This was a photo shoot orchestrated by two young people, twenty-year-old Atef Saad, who works as a chef at an Italian restaurant and impersonated Spider-Man, and his friend Hossam Atef Farouk, a freelance photographer who documented the project.<sup>1</sup> The two explain that their intention was to “highlight the everyday difficulties Egyptians face . . . but in a funny way.” According to Atef, living in Egypt is a superheroic feat: “Cairo is an overpopulated city, the traffic and public transportation are crazy . . . I find it difficult to live . . . but we still do, which makes Egyptians superheroes.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the project was carried out in impoverished working-class areas, where people are suffering the most just trying to make ends meet. Instead of the regular image of a superhero on a mission to save a community, Spider-Man is projected as the impersonation of every Egyptian trying to survive in a city that

<sup>1</sup> Hossam Atef Farouk and Atef Saad, *Antikka Photography*, 2014, <https://www.behance.net/gallery/21929839/SpiderMan-at-Egypt>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellie Violet Bramley, “No Power, Great Responsibility: The Spider-Man of Cairo,” *Guardian*, December 21, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2014/dec/21/spider-man-cairo-egypt-photographer-hossam-atef>.

is making it impossible for citizens to live a decent life. His heroism lies in his ability to go on living despite continuous hardships.

This mundane Spider-Man is one of the many recent renditions of the superhero genre that have gained popularity particularly after the 2011 Arab uprisings. This timely interest in the superhero genre coincides with an attempt to revisit the meaning of heroism as manifested during the 2011 revolutions and the ensuing events. Like many forms of activism, comic artists, as well as performance and visual artists, found a space for social and political engagement in the superhero genre. Edward Said, in his introduction to Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine*, explains that one of the attractive features of comics is their direct approach in foregrounding issues. They "seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said," he argues, "perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined." In this way, comics defy the ordinary processes of thought, that are "policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures."<sup>3</sup> This directness creates a sense of freedom that readers find liberating. Comics have always been considered a frivolous art form that targets children, and as one grows older, they should be put aside for a more serious reading material. Superhero comics have always been the exception to this, in the sense that they do not solely address children but have always targeted a wider audience. The history and the popularity of the genre in modern Arabic culture point to this.

The translation into Arabic of the *Superman* comics dates back to the 1960s when the Egyptian publishing house Dar el Helal announced in *Samir Comics Magazine* that it was introducing a new hero and asked readers to suggest an Arabic name for the new character. People suggested names such as R'aad (Thunder), Qaher (Conqueror), and Zaffer (Victorious). DC Comics, which holds the copyright for the *Superman* comics, refused to grant Dar el Helal permission to translate them into Arabic because they believed that such names would change the American superhero into an Arab hero. DC insisted on retaining the title of the comic, *Superman*, and giving the characters Arabic names, like Nabil for example, that did not carry any cultural implications. Dar el Helal wouldn't agree to these terms, and DC granted the copyright instead to the Beirut-based publishing house Illustrated Publishers, who translated the *Superman* comic series in 1964, *Batman* in 1965, *The Flash* and *The Incredible Hulk* in 1969, and other superhero comics in the following years. The publications were enthusiastically received across the Arab world, especially in Egypt, which eventually became the biggest consumer market for translated comics. Although the translation of

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, "Homage to Joe Sacco," in Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), i-ii.

the comics remained faithful to the original texts, names of characters and places were Arabized to suit the taste of the Arabic reader and to make the comics more accessible. Superman became al-rağul al-ğabbār (the powerful or mighty man), Supergirl al-ḥasnā' al-ğabbāra (the sweet, powerful or mighty girl), and Batman al-rağul al-wotwat (*wotwat* means “bat”), while the alter egos, Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, and Lois Lane, among others, became Nabil Fawzy, Sobhy, and Randa, respectively. The characters retained these common Arabic names until the 1980s, when Egyptian publishing house Dar el Nahda (and later Kuwaiti publishing house Teshkeel Comics) took over the translation of the superhero

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comics and dropped the Arabized names in favor of the original ones. From the beginning, the translated *Superman* comics were marketed as entertainment magazines, targeting both young readers and adults.

This mixed readership added to the popularity of the magazine, and the use of Arabic language and common Arabic names made the genre more accessible.

The translation project of the superhero comics led to local adaptations. The first mutation of the superhero genre in modern Arabic culture dates back to Egyptian film director Niazi Moustafa's spoof of Batman in *l-ataba ğazāz* (*The Glass Threshold*, 1959). In the film, Egyptian comedian Fouad el-Mohandes plays a timid government employee who becomes involved in an espionage conspiracy. To help the police arrest the spies, he impersonates Farafeero,<sup>4</sup> whose superpower comes from eating spinach. Produced two years after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, and despite the continued support and love for Nasser, this film shows that the concept of heroism was already being questioned. Although one of the early examples of the mutation of the genre, Moustafa set the tone for later depictions of superheroes who parody the original genre and subvert the notion of the all-powerful male hero.

In 2006, Teshkeel Comics, which had taken over the Arabic translation of superhero comics, produced Naif al-Mutawa's *The 99*, a comic series in Arabic and various foreign languages that introduced a new concept of superhero comics. In the series, a group of young people become superheroes when they

<sup>4</sup> Farafeero is a parody of Batman. The word “Farafeero” is a play on the word *far*, the Arabic word for mouse.

acquire special abilities from mythical Noor gemstones that contain the wisdom of all the books lost after the destruction of the House of Wisdom during the thirteenth-century siege of Baghdad. The title of *The 99* is taken from the ninety-nine attributes of Allah. These attributes—strength, honor, truth, mercy, invention, generosity, wisdom, and so on—“are the aspirational qualities of life that people of good heart throughout the world aspire to emulate.” In this sense, *The 99* subverts the notion of parahuman abilities by emphasizing that these qualities are inherent in humans but, as al-Mutawa adds, “none of the heroes has more than a single attribute and no power can be personified to the degree that can only be possessed by Allah.” *The 99* also highlights the notion of group heroism, as Dr. Ramzi, the leader of the superheroes, explains, “the power of any single Noor stone means little without practicing with it and learning to work in conjunction with other attributes.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when Naser the Aleem, a superhero who can foresee events, predicts a plane crash, he can do nothing about it without the help of the other superheroes. Although *The 99* is more concerned with redefining Islamic culture especially after 9/11, al-Mutawa is also critical of traditional concepts of heroism in the Arab region. The incident with Naser, the young superhero, can be read as a critique of Abdel Nasser’s authoritarian rule after he rose to power. But al-Mutawa’s portrayal of a group of young men and women who suffer from physical and social impairment, despite being superheroes, also suggests a generation of young Arabs struggling to survive against all odds. Darr, the paraplegic; Dana, the kidnapped girl; Nawaf, the Jabbar, stigmatized for his size, and many other examples are no different from Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi or Egyptian Khaled Said, who became symbols of the brutality and corruption of the political regimes in their countries and whose death instigated, respectively, the revolutions of 2010 in Tunisia and 2011 in Egypt. The superheroes of *The 99* are similarly crushed human beings who represent millions of young Arabs living under authoritarian regimes.

In 2010, a few months before the Arab uprisings, similar images of impairment appeared on the film poster of *Bulbul Hīrān (A Bewildered Lovebird)*, directed by Khaled Marie.<sup>6</sup> Superman is seen nursing a broken arm and leg! In the film, comedian Ahmed Helmy impersonates the role of Nabil, or Bulbul,<sup>7</sup> a womanizer searching for the superwoman of his dreams. The character draws on the early translation of the *Superman* comics by Illustrated Publishers, who gave Clark Kent the name of Nabil Fawzy. It is also reminiscent of Farafeero in

<sup>5</sup> Naif Al-Mutawa, *The 99*, no. 1 (Kuwait: Teshkeel Comics, 2006), 29.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2210509/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bulbul is a nickname for Nabil. It is also the Arabic word for nightingale.

*Al-‘ataba ġazāz*, since Bulbul is afraid of mice and starts running when he sees one. In his depiction of Bulbul, Marie deconstructs the image of the charming macho Superman, instead creating a hesitant man who is unable to decide where his emotions truly lie. In the end, the women gang up against him, and he ends up in hospital. The inability to compete with Hollywood’s superhero blockbuster productions has encouraged Arab media, particularly Egyptian cinema and TV, to turn to comic representations of the genre.

This subversion of the genre is seen clearly in more recent depictions of superheroes, most popular of which are *Super Heneidy*, *Superman’s Daughters*, and *Super Miro*. All three of these Egyptian TV programs offer farcical portrayals of male and female superheroes. More important, these depictions of the genre focus on representing the mundane reality of the superhero characters, rather than their super powerful personae. In this way, they touch on issues relevant to many in their audience. *Superman’s Daughters* and *Super Miro*, which include female superheroes, indirectly discuss the problems that young women face in patriarchal societies and their struggle for identities independent of their families, but we do not encounter examples of empowered women through such depictions. On the contrary, Superman’s daughters end up dreaming of a knight in shining armor when their own superpowers fail to help them solve their problems. This representation highlights traditional gender roles, where many women still consider themselves damsels in distress waiting to be saved.

Joumana Medlej, a Lebanese comic artist and creator of *Malaak (Angel of Peace, 2007)*, a comic series with a female superhero, is aware of this predicament. She argues that given “the unsatisfactory position of women in the region, young girls need empowered women figures to identify with, and these need to be local.” (Malaak, the guardian angel, is sent by the ancient cedars of Lebanon to save the country from the destruction of war. After an initial phase where the heroine is obsessed with her superpowers, Malaak slowly changes, becoming more human, as she realizes that “raw power” alone cannot help her. As Medlej explains, “I feel like I have watched the character grow from being an angry young girl who had to resort to violence to a woman leaning more towards intuition and sacrifice to reach a solution.”<sup>8</sup> Having grown up in the 1980s, Medlej is reflecting on her own transformation in dealing with the trauma of the civil war in Lebanon. She is similar to Hanan el-Karargy and Safia Baraka, the creators of Nano Volta and Lamis, respectively, two female superhero characters. Nano Volta and Lamis are reflections of their creators. In fact, the artists argue that the female superheroes are normal young women who look and

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gravett, “Joumana Medlej: Lebanon’s First Superheroine,” July 1, 2012, [http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/joumana\\_medlej/](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/joumana_medlej/).



behave like most Egyptian girls. Baraka explains that readers are attracted to Lamis because they feel that she is one of them, “with all of their flaws and their grace.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, el-Karargy argues that superheroes can be normal humans just like herself. These artists subvert the notion of superpower by emphasizing the strength in normal people. Baraka explains that “every morning, we see heroines with super powers in Egypt’s streets. All they care about is protecting their children, educating them well, and raising them with manners and principles. They [are] carrying their families’ burdens on their shoulders.”<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In their study of the superhero genre, Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester identify three main elements that have remained constant despite the evolving nature of the genre; these are: a pro-social mission, extraordinary powers, and a double identity.<sup>11</sup> When Spider-Man appeared on the streets of Cairo, running to catch a bus, the people reached out, grabbed him, and hauled him right into the moving bus. In that instant, the roles were reversed, while the three determining elements remained the same. Instead of Egyptians seeking Spider-Man’s help, believing that his superpowers could save them from an everyday reality that was becoming hard to tolerate, Spider-Man had become just another person in need of the help of his fellow citizens. The examples surveyed in this essay suggest a different reading of the genre that supersedes the larger-than-life iconic character of the superhero. They project instead normal citizens who assume the alternative identity of superheroes, with latent forms of power that enable them to survive without giving up their humanity. As Hossam Atef Farouk explains, “all Egyptians are superheroes for enduring [the] difficulties [of] every day [life].”<sup>12</sup> I argue that those people who filled up the squares of Arab cities in 2011 were the superheroes. They made that moment possible. It is unsurprising that they were not recognized as heroes by the archenemies of the Arab world, who insist on one form of heroism and disregard the latent powers that we all have.

<sup>9</sup> Nada Deyaa, “First Female Superhero Finally Introduced to Egypt’s Comic Book Market,” *Daily News Egypt*, July 24, 2016, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2016/07/24/first-female-superhero-finally-introduced-egypts-comic-book-market/>.

<sup>10</sup> Aswat Masriya, “Egypt: Founder of First Egyptian Superheroine Shares Behind the Scenes Secrets,” *allAfrica*, August 17, 2016, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201608190184.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, introduction to “Part 1: Historical Considerations,” in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Reem Gehad, “Spiderman ‘Exhausted’ by Cairo,” *Ahram Online*, December 7, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org/NewsPrint/117380.aspx>.

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