

Chapter 7

Gendered Subjectivities and Cyberspace Dialogues in Lebanon: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of a feminist website that raises awareness about issues related to Lebanese women. By uniting women's voices via blogging, story narration, and comic strips, the Nasawiya feminists strive to challenge the hegemonic discourses that currently constitute the reality of women from Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon. The author inspects the discourses in that space and how they articulate the meanings of what is said and cannot be said, thereby conditioning the way gender and citizenship reality is constituted. The author concludes that cyberspace provides a new form of resistance for women in the Arab World. It is a promising advocacy medium for confronting patriarchy and all its intersections, hopefully paving the way for a better future for all citizens.

INTRODUCTION

The current increasing digital activities via Websites, platforms, and other Web 2.0 technologies allow the formation of online niche communities that hold clear objectives, beliefs, and strong group

identities. Feminists across the Middle East are using these mediums to cross the imposed traditional structures of patriarchy (Eltanatawy & Wiest, 2011; Harcourt, 1999; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). As Coleman (2005) explains, “blogs diminish people’s need to be spoken for by others” (p. 276). Online social media has an added advantage, in that it makes these acts of resistance hidden yet public at the same time, because bloggers

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5206-4.ch007

hide behind their relative anonymity within these online environments (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). In that way, online social networks give a voice to people who do not have voices (Eickelman & Anderson, 1999).

Technological forces also allow individuals to “glocalize” (Friedman, 2006). Sharing experiences via online social media allows opening up to a circle of global positions and influences, with empowering ideas shared globally and locally (Everett, 2004; Gajjala, 2002, 2003; Wheeler, 2006). Cyberspace permits those resistance movements to connect with others across the globe (Langman, 2005). In that sense, social media can be used for social change. On the other hand, some researchers see online networks as a potentially victimizing mechanism. These scholars wonder if the Internet gets to marginalize and shun some individuals (Daniels, 2009a, 2009b). Although online social platforms have resistance potential, they act as repressors at the same time because some marginalized groups, such as women, are left out because of non-access to online social media due to a lack of Internet access (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Berenblum, 2010).

Doring (2000) adds that “the Net is a part of the computer culture and therefore traditionally a male domain. It is especially the domain of young, sexually-oriented men, who dominate the Net by virtue of their computer competency and superior number” (p. 863). In addition, the poor and disadvantaged do not have access to the Net, which presents a drawback as it denies them agency and the possibility of empowerment that this medium offers (Gajjala, 2002). However, things are progressively changing in that female access to the Internet is slowly but consistently increasing (Intel, 2012; International Telecommunication Union, 2011; Sassen, 2002). With regards to cost, Internet access is becoming inexpensive therefore paving the way to access by disadvantaged communities all over the world (International Telecommunication Union, 2011; Mele, 1999). In actuality, many women currently use cyberspace for their acts of

resistance. Kensinger (2003) argues that the Web turned out to be the best tool for recruiting expatriate Afghan woman. In Egypt, recruiting some groups to be included in the resistance movement wouldn’t have been possible without the help of online social networks (Langman, 2005). Cyberspace offers a system of linkages and connections that helps women in the empowerment process (Nourai-Simone, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online social networks in the Middle East region are challenging conventional communication and dialogue interactions imposed by the ruling political and religious forces (Eickelman & Anderson, 1999; Ghannam, 2011). According to a report published by the Center for International Media Assistance: “To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history” (Ghannam, 2011, p. 4). Lebanon is “celebrated among Arab nations for its protection of freedom of expression” (Meguerditchian, 2011, p. 1). In addition, there is no particular law that censors online social media (Nash, 2011). That’s why the blogosphere in Lebanon is affording a new space for identity construction. Hamdy (2009) describes it as “the blogging culture of outspokenness” (p. 93). It has been acknowledged as a new channel for citizens’ communication that is unrestricted, self-governing, and politically active (Hamdy, 2009).

The history of Lebanese blogosphere goes back to key political and national happenings such as the 2005 assassination of Rafic El Hariri, Lebanon’s Prime Minister. Lebanese people chose blogging and the Internet to learn more about, and to express their opinions on the major happenings in the country without resorting to the politically corrupted media outlets in the country. In that

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