

ZAKIA SALIME TALK SEPTEMBER 9, 2014: *Gender and Sexuality in the Arab Uprisings*  
a blog by Heather J. Denyer, PhD Candidate, Theatre and Women's Studies, Graduate Center



On Tuesday, September 9, 2014, Zakia Salime, Associate Professor of Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University spoke to a crowded room of over fifty students, professors, and guests about women who exemplified "personal revolution through the assertion of self" in the context of the Arab Spring revolutionary events of 2011. The thrust of her talk was to illustrate how the events and the spirit of the Arab Spring "brought to the fore sexuality and the female body" in both Islamic women's movements and Arab feminist movements.

Salime borrowed the notion of "personal revolution" from a blog by Saudi Arabian activist Nora Abdulkarim who claimed: "I am proud of being a woman ... but I was born into a society that only recognizes external signs of modesty." Launching off from this point, Salime described a number of individual women who have demonstrated "a power of assertion" through their bodies, as in the example of Amina Tyler of Tunisia who posted a naked photograph of herself with a sign that read "My body belongs to me." Such examples demonstrate Salime's premise that for Arab women, the female body is a central site of protest.

Salime started by recalling John Berger's distinction between nudity and nakedness: "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself," (in *Ways of Seeing*). From there, she considered the epistemology of the naked body operating outside of the gaze, which is at stake in the political statements by the women discussed. In Arabic cultures, where the female body is objectified and not spoken of as one's own, the act of calling attention to the body, naming it, or even pointing to the fact of its anonymity can be rebellious, as in the case of the Moroccan Facebook group "Woman-

Shoufouch” who asked: “Can we see it?” on signs that pointed to their vaginas in photographs posted online.

In the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, the simple act of a woman posting a photograph can take on the power of a microrevolution that promote alternate ways of thinking cultural identity. As Salime explained, “The individual acts of dissent . . . incited a politics of remembering along sexual, rather than moral lines.” Because of the manner of their protests – through social media – which operates outside of time and space limitations, the “disruptive nudes” alter the framing of the Arab women in society, such that their bodies are “inserted into the uprising.”

Salime did not seek to gauge the political or social effects that these multimedia acts of protest affected. However, she made a strong case as to how these acts of protest can be considered in tandem with the more publicized acts led by men, such as Mohamed Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation, which actually incited the Tunisian revolution. Salime left it for the audience to consider the potency of these acts. The last example she gave required no video clip to enforce this point: Fatima, a single mother of two in Morocco, who was denied housing on the basis that she was a single mother, filmed herself demanding her rights before the town hall, and for the world to witness on Youtube, while being consumed by the fire she had herself lit.

Arab feminism, Salime concluded, is leaving its old sites to occupy temporary sites, hybrid spaces filled with potential, on the margins of rebellion.

For further information, see Salime’s book, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also the 2013 *New Yorker* article, “How to Provoke National Unrest with a Facebook Photo” by Emily Greenhouse, Woman-Shoufouch’s Facebook page, and the blogs posted by Nora Abdulkarim and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy’s “A Rebel’s Diary,” at <http://ana3rabeya.wordpress.com/author/ana3rabeya/> and <http://missrosen.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/alibiaa-magda-elmady-a-rebels-diary/>, respectively.

*Professor Zakia Salime’s talk was cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Women and Society and the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center at the Graduate Center. Please join us for our next cosponsored event on Tuesday, October 7<sup>th</sup> from 6:30-8:00: “Caught in the Cross-Publics of the ‘Muslimwoman’” with Lila Abu-Lughod at the Graduate Center, CUNY, 365 Fifth Ave., New York, NY, Room 9204.*