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# Giving a Voice to Women Journalists in the Arab World: Challenges, Courage and the Sahafiyat

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Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho\*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- 1 On June 6, 2014 a group of Islamic State fighters began an offensive against Iraq's northern city of Mosul. The invading forces were estimated to be less than two thousand while the Iraqi army defending the city was twenty times its size. The victory of the Islamic State's invading forces "marked one of the most stunning military feats in modern history" (Anderson, 2017, p. 141). Fearing the Islamic State (from now on

referred as Daesh) and the stories of their violent actions, tens of thousands of members of the Iraqi army fled, leaving behind advanced weaponry and military hardware. In less than one week Daesh had taken over the major city of Mosul and while at first some residents welcomed the invading forces<sup>1</sup> it did not take long for the invading force to show its true colors. What followed were two years of a harsh and violent rule imposed by the Islamic State on Mosul's population. After months of fighting Mosul was finally liberated on July 2017.

- 2 Nowadays the strength and territory of Daesh seems to have considerably diminished, although it is important to note that the military group has not yet been eradicated. Even though Daesh became widely known for their social media techniques and their videos of beheadings of soldiers and civilians, the group's actions have been widely reported since the beginning. After reading a number of these reports, however, I began to notice a common trait that took me a while to pinpoint. Perhaps the best way to introduce this idea is by considering journalist Paulo Moura's 2018 book, a compilation of reports and original work regarding his visit to the region in the aftermath of the battle for Mosul in July 2017. Typically Moura approaches all his books in the same manner: with a characteristically intimate voice whilst offering acute accounts of the scenery, the people and their stories. But in this particular narrative the author delves deeper into a different aspect: the backdrop of his work and the many challenges he faces in his research in Mosul. One of those challenges can be seen, for example, throughout the first half of Moura's book when he speaks on several occasions about his translator, Khaled, who is very vocal and at times even jeopardizes the overall research. The common trait that I have noticed throughout my research on Daesh and the Arab world became more evident in the following when Moura addresses the fact that his research is lacking an essential womanly perspective and voice:

"I was tired of only interviewing men. [...] We were moving around the city looking for stories of women but were only able to speak with men. The only women Khaled [...] found for interviews were either widows or they were less than fifteen or more than sixty years old [...] «Where are all the women in their twenties or thirties? Are they all gone? Do you know any of them? I am sure [your wife] Sham has friends her age [25]. I want to interview them.» [...] Khaled smiled, surprised. «No, she doesn't have any friends. It's normal. Women her age have to stay home and take care of the kids.»" (Moura, 2018, p. 22-3)<sup>2</sup>

- 3 What follows this scene is a dialogue between Moura and Khaled where the latter tries to convince the journalist that there is no reason to be preoccupied with the lack of female representation in his work since, in Khaled's view, there is nothing to gain from interviewing women. When later in the same chapter Moura finally gets an interview with his translator's wife Sham, he quickly becomes confused about her demeanor. Sham says practically nothing as she smiles confused and Moura reluctantly notes that "it was true that she never left her house and that no one told her about what was going on [in Mosul], much less asked her opinion on it" (Moura, 2018, p. 27)<sup>3</sup>. Although Sham does not and should not be seen as a representation of all Iraqi women, Moura's struggle to get the interview in a patriarchal society that for the most part sees no value in his endeavor is thought-provoking and thus worthy of further investigation.
- 4 This reminds us of Tiago Carrasco's 2012 book on the Arab Spring and his journey from Turkey to Tunisia at the time. In one powerful moment Carrasco witnesses the funeral of a Shadid, a martyr killed in the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria. As he follows the funeral's procession the following scene unfolds:

“It has been three hours now. Jhia Allarsh’s corpse is being carried across the city towards the cemetery. His wife and daughters are wearing a black veil covering their faces. They want to see the body, touch him, kiss him one last time. But this was a funeral for men. Even death is prohibited for a women’s eyes. As men close the iron gates violently in front of them [...] they tearfully scream [...]” (Carrasco, 2012, p. 115)<sup>4</sup>

- 5 The wife and daughters are not allowed in the ceremony, just like every other woman across the city, as Tiago Carrasco describes it. As the scene takes place the grieving female family members are kept away as their sorrow is disregarded violently by those present, like an inconvenient burden, something uncalled for on such occasion. Coincidentally this moment is quite indicative of these particular narratives of both Carrasco and Moura. Both journalists make an effort to give voice to their female subjects and when this is not possible the journalists show their own reactions instead. This happens in more than one occasion, for example, when Carrasco describes a scene in Lebanon where he instinctively greets a woman with his hand, a sign of disrespect<sup>5</sup>. What follows is a monologue where the journalist begins to discuss the differences in cultures and his efforts to fit in. A somewhat similar monologue is shared by Moura when in one situation he fails to interview a group of women being escorted to Bartala, an alleged rehabilitation camp where supposed relatives linked to ISIS were kept<sup>6</sup>. He is quick to express his disappointment because of his inability to talk with these women despite his efforts. When the journalist later finds out that they were executed on the journey to the camp he is distraught. Moura follows this with a long introspection where he questions his sudden inadequacy to interview these women. He feels therefore that that was why he feels that that was his responsibility as a journalist.
- 6 In both Carrasco and Moura’s work a lack of female representation, not by choice but by default given the general circumstances in the Middle-East. The often rare representation of Arab women in journalism is part of a deeper problem invariably connected to the many obstacles that affect their status. As media expert Rasha Allam notes, these challenges are often related to a “high percentage of illiteracy, lower socioeconomic standing, and the grip of customs and traditions” (Allam, 2008). While western journalists face a language challenge when working in the Arab world, which might hinder their desire to tell stories of Arab women, the same cannot be said about the Arab media. And yet, as Allam notes, Arab media “have tended to portray women in a manner that arguably has done more to compound than to alleviate these problems” (Allam, 2008). That is not to say that there is no female representation at all or that there is no good journalism with a positive and in-depth focus on stories about Arab women. Consider for example Scott Anderson’s 2016 article for *The New York Times Magazine*. In this comprehensive reportage later compiled into a book the journalist tells the story of six individuals’ lives, from the dictatorial regimes in the Middle-East and North Africa, to the Arab Spring and to our current times. Through their stories, four men and two women, we get to know their experiences concerning the Arab Spring, the war, the new regimes and the migrant crisis.<sup>7</sup> While this work does expand on many topics and makes an effort to give voice to women in the Arab World, we are however limited to what the individuals interviewed “know” and to the way their stories are narrated. This can be seen, for example, in a particular moment the twenty-three year old Khulood al-Zaidi talks about the fight over her hometown of Kut in Iraq:
- “[...] American forces launched a devastating assault. By afternoon, the fight for Kut was essentially over [...]. Of this battle for her hometown, Khulood [...] heard a great deal, but saw nothing at all. There was a simple explanation for this. ‘Women

weren't allowed out of the house,' she said. [...] As the marines consolidated their hold on the city [...] Khulood, like most other women in Kut, observed the spectacle from a discreet distance." (Anderson, 2017, pp. 37-8)

- 7 Scott Anderson, in this example, could have explored more of the battle for Kut and yet he chose not to since this is not the story of that conflict. While we, the reader, only have access to Khulood's point of view in this example, we are still being informed and it becomes clear that her experience, although distant in this moment, is still valuable. And as her story progresses she is no longer a secluded bystander as she fights for the rights of other Iraqi women. However, this progression on her part can only be fully understood if we have this previous knowledge and access to her seclusion and her expected role of being removed from the conflict and hidden with all the other women and children.
- 8 Scott Anderson, Paulo Moura and Tiago Carrasco all voice Arab women in their own way in a reality where it is regularly difficult to do so. Oftentimes the reality of the Arab world is defined by patriarchy, expected gender roles and traditional values which ultimately play a role in the reporter's investigations and reportage. Still, while these journalists and others deserve praise for their efforts and insightful perspectives and research, the truth is that they do not suffice to really understand the challenges faced by most Arab women. When reading these and other journalists' work there is a sense that something is lacking, something is missing, something that can perhaps be reached with a different perspective.

## Changing the Tide and the Importance of Voicing Arab Women Journalists

- 9 It would be wrong to assume that western male journalists are all incapable of reporting and portraying the reality faced by women in the Arab world. While their perspectives are valuable and at times essential to understand this reality, is it important to recognize that there is still a breach in knowledge. To truly comprehend this gap one needs to consider a different approach to this reality, one that both encompasses the author/journalist and the explored and analyzed subject. This belief is in part what motivated journalist Zahra Hankir to curate and edit the book *Our Women on the Ground* (2019), a book that in my perspective contributes like none other towards voicing journalism by Arab women in the Arab world. As she explains:

"For many years I have been a journalist myself – an Arab woman journalist – and I felt like there was a gap in the narrative in the discourse in the Arab world in the Middle-East, when it comes to international media in particular. Foreign correspondents that are often given attention with coverage on the region are western, usually, and for many decades have been male as well, although that is starting to change. My goal with this book is to fill that gap in the narrative by giving local women voices in that particular space [the Arab world]. [...] There was a need to amplify their voices." (FRANCE 24 English, 2019, November, 6)

- 10 The result of this effort can be seen in the book *Our Women on the Ground* where we have access to stories and accounts told first-hand by nineteen Arab sahafiyat (sahafiyat meaning women journalists and sahafiya woman journalist). If earlier I argued that there was something lacking on reportage coming from the Arab world, then I believe this book is the first of its kind to truly try to change that paradigm whilst directly contributing to a change of paradigm. *Our Women on the Ground* explores the many

challenges that these *sahafiyat* faced and continue to face while working in the Arab world and, at the same time, it addresses the impact of their craft in a region where these women are still part of the exception and not the rule. In order to really delve into this book and its contents it is important to note how it came to be. Editor Zahra Hankir explains that while compiling a list of journalists covering the Middle-East, she noticed an imbalance:

“While I added their names to my ever-growing journo-list, it didn’t take long for me to notice the considerable gender and background discrepancy. As the list grew, so, too, did the imbalance. Soon I observed that not only were there more men than women reporting on the region for international media, but most of the reporters were Western. The gap came as no surprise to me, but to see it in such plain form was a shock nonetheless.” (Hankir, 2019, p. xviii)

- 11 In a sense *Our Women on the Ground* aspires to contribute to fill this gap and perhaps inspire other *sahafiyat* to speak out and tell their stories. However as Zahra noticed, the “*sahafiya* is twice burdened [...] she is among some of the most mistreated women in the world when it comes to her basic rights.” (Hankir, 2019, p. xxi) This burden takes the form of limitations and constant challenges that have a clear social and emotional impact. Consider for example journalist Hind Hassan whose family left Iraq for England when she was three and how she addresses in her essay that her choice of profession was not accepted initially by her conservative Iraqi parents. Still, as the journalist states, as years went by her reporting on Iraq allowed her to engage with the particularities of her own heritage and her father’s belief system. As Hind Hassan remarks, her father “was interested, and happy that journalism had at least allowed me to understand the place we were born a little bit better.” (Hassan, 2019, p. 107) For journalist Eman Helal in Egypt the challenges she faced took place not only at home, where her brother disapproved of her job choice, but also at work where she was sexually harassed by a co-worker. Eman Helal faced this trauma with fear and silence, in part due to her self-imposed sense of responsibility for her gender. As she explains, the harassment took place when she was sent to work abroad:

“This was the first time that the newspaper had agreed to send a female photographer abroad. [...] They might use my experience to prevent other women [...] from travelling [...]. I was shouldering the hefty responsibility of proving that as a woman, I was professional and capable of dealing with the pressure of working in a foreign country. I was also frightened that if I told them, they wouldn’t believe me.” (Helal, 2019, p. 114)

- 12 While *Our Women on the Ground* works as a powerful statement on the importance of the *sahafiyat* of the Arab world and the many challenges they continue to face, it is also a book about the perpetuity of misconceptions and the danger they pose. This idea is explored in more than one occasion in the form of the following question often asked to these *sahafiyat*: What was it like to be a woman over there? While Hannah Allam first addresses the question with a rehearsed line she admits to never having actually used – “well, I’ve never been there as a man, so I’m not sure I can compare” – she is also quick to answer through her personal experience:

“[...] when I hear the question, I see faces. [...] I think of slivers of Iraq that they and many other women showed me, spaces that were off-limits to my male colleagues. Kitchens where meals were prepared without electricity. A bedroom with a mortar crater in the ceiling. [...] Reporting on Iraq through the eyes of its women was illuminating, but, perhaps more important, it was more representative of the population as a whole.” (Allam, 2019, p. 3)

- 13 This idea of truly representing a population, as Hannah would note on an interview for *PBS NewsHour*, is ingrained in the fact that “in order to fully and thoroughly and accurately cover a conflict like Iraq, for example, you cannot leave out half the population, and in fact more than half in the case of Iraq.” (*PBS NewsHour*, 2019, August, 26) But the question of what is it like to be a *sahafiya* in the Arab world brings with it further implications. As Lina Attalah explains when considering the answer to the question of being a woman over there, she marks that to “answer to that question [...] I didn’t want to recount stories of sexism, patriarchy, and oppression that would feed into commonplace Orientalist essentialism and render me a heroic survivor.” (Attalah, 2019, p. 49) The implications of this stereotypical question are therefore ingrained in conventional western views and the anticipation of oddness and trauma as possibly being part of the answer. In this example, this question assumes the principle that the extremity of the Arab world would not and could not allow for the presence of women journalists and thus their experience and work is somewhat tainted from the start due to their gender and the lack of acceptance in the Arab reality. In this way the question itself guides us towards an expected answer and the opposite of the said answer can be easily confused with resentment, pretexts and/or normalcy of the whole situation. And yet as Jane Arraf notes the stereotypes and the challenges she faced were also part of the mindset of her western counterparts, the American armed forces that she was embedded with on Iraq when working for a news organization. In one particular moment, for example, she remarks that a marine told her “I didn’t imagine you’d look so ethnic” (Arraf, 2019, p. 60) and on another moment she explains that the American forces lacked the knowledge of the language spoken on Iraq and sometimes she had to fill in the gap and act as a much needed and unplanned translator in order to bring some clarity and at times some comfort to “children screaming in terror and weeping women” (Arraf, 2019, p. 62) during American army raids (although it should be noted that the journalist is also quick to remark that many soldiers were genuinely interested in creating and establishing good relations with the Iraqi).
- 14 Despite the fact that these and other challenges had a clear impact to these *sahafiyat* working in the Arab world, the book *Our Women on the Ground* also argues on a different perspective: the advantages of reporting as a woman in this reality. This angle is first addressed by editor Zahra Hankir when she remarks that these women were wise to use “gender to their advantage, managing to conduct harrowing interviews with other women precisely because being female has given them access a male reporter would not have been able to secure as easily, if at all.” (Hankir, 2019, p. xv) This perspective is shared by several of the women who authored different chapters of the book and ultimately further emphasizes the fundamental importance of their work in the region. In Qayyarah in Iraq, for example, Hind Hassan notes that women in different villages were cautious to speak to anyone besides them. In her chapter Hassan tells the story of a mother who lived close to blazing fires and because of this she complained about the difficulty of cleaning the black soot off her children. After listening to her the mother later remarked her reasons for accepting to be interviewed by Hind Hassan, stating affectionately that “«I’m only speaking to you because you’re my daughter.»” (Hassan, 2019, p. 101) This nurturing approach was only part of the overall kindness Hind Hassan remarks from her experience in Iraq. Likewise journalist Jane Arraf notes her presence oftentimes gave others courage to speak their mind. In one particular tense

moment that took place when Jane Arraf was accompanying a group of military forces in Baqubah, Iraq, she noticed:

“The twenty-four-year-old lieutenant needed to secure a safe place from which they could keep watch on the street, and settled on the home of a couple with five daughters and a son. I was left to explain to the family that the soldiers would be there for a few hours [...]. Selma, the mother, was worried the soldiers would put them in danger, but she nonetheless offered the men glasses of tea and apricots from her garden. She was even more worried about her daughters Yasmine and Sabreen, who insisted on walking to school. [...] Yasmine’s and Sabreen’s ambitions were to become teachers [...]. It was an hour-long walk through streets that could turn violent in an instant [...]. But the girls were already dressed [...] clutching their books in plastic bags. Selma asked me to ask the soldiers if it would be safe for the girls to go. The platoon commander [...] radioed his soldiers to keep an eye out for the two girls walking through the area. Selma stood in the doorway and watched her daughters walk away [...] «I’m so afraid for them,» she told me.” (Arraf, 2019, p. 65-6)

## Conclusion: Pushing the Envelope and Sahafiyat Telling Stories of the Arab World

- 15 In many ways *Our Women on the Ground* resembles 2007’s *Telling True Stories* edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call in the sense that both books focus on journalists, their experiences and their approach to their craft through different first-hand essays. This focus, it should be noted, is one not often seen when talking about literary journalism where frequently the academics are the ones given the spotlight through their analysis and authorial perspective. To hear these nineteen Arab women journalists talk about their work, the challenges they faced and how these experiences changed them makes this book an invaluable resource, hopefully one that can take root in academia and give rise to impactful studies on the subject. In fact, when first reading it I was reminded of Mark Kramer’s statement on literary journalism: “The genre’s power is the strength of this voice. [...] The powers of the candid, intimate voice are many, and they bother people who insist on idealized versions of reality.” (Kramer, 1995, p. 29) Indeed the journalists of *Our Women on the Ground* stand out and challenge the status quo of the region whilst being pioneers (photojournalist Heman Helal, for example, remarks in one moment that “you can probably count the number of female photojournalists in Egypt on one hand” (Helal, 2019, p. 112) which further emphasizes how their work truly changes the landscape).
- 16 Yet if we are to consider further the importance giving an opportunity to hear these women firsthand and have the chance to learn from their work, the fact remains that each journalist in this book is reporting about conflicts that hit close to home.<sup>8</sup> In this sense it is important to understand and assert that their Arab identity does ultimately play a role in their research and their judgment but that does not need to define them as individuals. Each of these journalists stands out both by challenging the traditional role that is often expected of women but also by challenging the role of the traditional journalist given that they report in areas affected by conflict and on the ground. In this sense we are reminded of journalist Ted Conover who argued that: “Anyone who leaves the comfortable role of the traditional journalist [...] risks embarrassment, awkwardness, even injury. At the same time, taking chances in research opens the door to insights not otherwise possible.” (Conover, 2007, p. 35) In that regard we would not



be wrong in stating that, given the circumstances, taking chances is something that the sahafiyat of the Arab world continue to do every day in their efforts to bring the news.

- 17 While at the beginning of this essay I expressed that in my perspective that there was a clear gap when analyzing journalism from the Arab world, given that western male journalists still define the vast majority of mainstream journalism coming from that area, the fact is that this book shows a different side of that reality. Hopefully it can contribute to bring about an important discussion and a focus on the many other women journalists, the sahafiyat of the Arab World and many other realities who, despite the many challenges they face, they still continue to work to change the status quo and give voice to stories that would otherwise be beyond reach. Perhaps the best description of this book is the one shared by the editor and journalist Zahra Hankir, since it encompasses the importance of *Our Women on the Ground* in one single sentence: “This is not an uplifting book but there are moments of hope and resilience.” (*BookTV*, 2019, August, 19)

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## NOTES

1. See Williams, 2014.

2. Translated from the original: "Andava farto de falar apenas com homens. [...] Andávamos pela cidade à procura de histórias de mulheres mas apenas conseguíamos falar com homens. As únicas mulheres que Khaled [...] logravam angariar para entrevistas ou eram viúvas ou tinham menos de quinze anos ou mais de sessenta [...] «Onde estão as mulheres de vinte e de trinta anos? Desapareceram? Não conheces nenhuma? De certeza que Sham tem amigas da sua idade. Quero entrevistá-las.» [...] Khaled sorria, surpreendido. «Não, ela não tem amigas. É normal. As mulheres da idade dela têm de ficar em casa a tratar dos filhos.»" Moura, 2018, p. 22-23.

3. Translated from the original: "[...] era verdade que nunca saía de casa e que ninguém lhe contava o que se passava ou, muito menos, lhe pedia uma opinião." Moura, 2018, p. 27.

4. Translated from the original: "Passaram-se três horas. O cadáver de Jhia Allarsh for transportado com o mesmo alarido pela cidade fora até ao cemitério. No quintal, a mulher e as filhas com o rosto coberto por véus negros tentavam sair para ver o corpo passar, tocar-lhe, beijá-lo pela última vez. Mas era um funeral para homens. Até a morte as mulheres estão proibidas de ver. Alguns homens fechavam-lhes à bruta o portão de ferro [...]. Elas expeliam gritos de sofrimentos e enxugavam as lágrimas [...]." Carrasco, 2012, p. 115.

5. See Carrasco, 2012, pp. 219-20.

6. See Moura, 2018, pp. 48-9.

7. It should be noted this is regarded as the largest migrant crisis since the Second World War, as seen in: Ronk & Rothman, 2015.

8. Consider for example journalist Nour Malas relationship to Syria and her reporting, stating that: "By the time the conflict had been raging for a few years, Syria had perfected the coy game of finding out strangers' political views without asking. Only a straight-up rebel supporter [...] would still refer to the conflict as a «revolution». Regime backers tended to call it «the war», while those in the hazy area between the regime and its opponents reverted to [...] «the events». I watched people do this verbal dance often, only to realize later that I was walking a similar tightrope in my own reporting and writing. I was so aware – even paranoid – of my personal connection to the story [...]" Malas, 2019, p. 85.

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## ABSTRACTS

When considering journalism from the Arab world, one is often faced with complex stories from a troubled region. For the western perspective it is easy to forget that the Arab region encompasses twenty-two countries and it is not reasonable to assert that conflicts and hostilities constantly affect the whole region. This study will focus on a number of journalists reporting on this reality, the challenges and the specificity of their craft. Afterwards, this study will focus on a recent publication that voices the Arab women journalists and their work in the region. By exploring the importance of this publication and their news reporting, this analysis hopes to address how their work contributes to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions. At the same time this essay hopes to consider the value of their reporting as part of literary journalism while also arguing for its just place in academia.

Quando se fala do jornalismo vindo do mundo Árabe é comum verem-se histórias complexas vindas de uma região atribulada. Na perspetiva ocidental é fácil esquecermo-nos que a região Árabe contem vinte e dois países e que não é razoável considerar que conflitos e hostilidades definem continuamente a região. Este estudo irá centrar-se nos jornalistas que reportam nesta realidade e nos desafios e especificidades dos seus trabalhos. De seguida este estudo irá focar-se numa publicação recente que procura dar voz às mulheres Árabes jornalistas e os seus trabalhos na região. Ao explorar a importância desta publicação e as suas implicações, esta análise procura demonstrar como é que o trabalho destas mulheres contribui para quebrar estereótipos e perceções incorretas. Ao mesmo tempo este estudo espera demonstrar o valor desta publicação como sendo parte do jornalismo literário argumentando-se a necessidade de estudar esta obra a nível académico.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** journalism, arab, women journalism, literary journalism, true stories

**Palavras-chave:** jornalismo, árabe, mulheres jornalistas, jornalismo literário, histórias reais

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