

***Dignity in the Egyptian Revolution***

Zaynab El Bernoussi

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Reviewed by NATALIE GARLAND

Dignity, the essence of humanity, is a complicated notion, a metaconcept. As Zayneb El Bernoussi states, just defining the term is a “struggle” (1). Despite its prevalence across the medical, legal, religious, and humanitarian discourses in sociology, anthropology, and political studies, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of dignity as it is understood and experienced by individuals. El Bernoussi’s work unpacks the significance and meanings of dignity, or *karama*, in the context of the 2011 uprising in Egypt. Her research addresses the subjective nature of *karama* and explores the diverse ways that it was instrumentalized by protestors to oust thirty-year-reigning President Mubarak. For El Bernoussi, the lens of *karama* attributes meaning to the Egyptian experience, struggle, and pursuit of justice.

Through interviews with Egyptian participants of the 2011 protests and descriptions of protest slogans, street art, and music, the book explores various manifestations of the concept of *karama* during the revolution and in the years following. El Bernoussi engages with “dignity” as a theoretical underpinning that provides an entry point into discussing broader socioeconomic frustrations and injustices endured by the Egyptian people.

A key strength of this book is the depth of theoretical research and contextual background information that emphasizes the significance, relevance, and complexity of “dignity” as a concept, as well as the evolution of authoritarian politics in Egypt and across the region.

To demonstrate the diverse manifestations of *karama*, El Bernoussi creates a framework that analyzes key elements of the concept. *Karama* is thus not necessarily defined but instead captured and unpacked from those different components: faith, identity, human rights, materialism, and recognition. This thematic organization is meant to evoke the multiplicity of ways that notions of *karama* are both historically and currently

relevant. However, a clearer reflection on *how* and *where* these elements interact within daily life would strengthen our understanding of the complex social operations of *karama*. Addressing how these subelements are perhaps complementary or contradictory would be particularly useful.

One way that the reader could further understand the complexity of *karama* is through a gendered or generational lens. Throughout my ethnographic work in Lebanon among Syrian refugees, I observed how women, men, youth, and adults navigated their senses of dignity in unique ways. Indeed, gender and intergenerational elements influence feelings and experiences of dignity loss and preservation, and such analytic distinctions could also be useful in unpacking the daily operations of dignity in the Egyptian context. This would further allow space to think more critically about *karama* as an inherently subjective and contextual metaconcept, experienced differently through space and time.

The book's unaddressed gender perspective and minimal use of subjectivity theory are a result of methodological choices. This research is not presented as ethnographic, nor is it situated within gender studies, and thus in-depth explorations to unpack lived experiences are not necessarily expected. Instead, El Bernoussi places emphasis on political theory and the collective instrumentalization of *karama*. In turn myriad questions emerge, mainly around the ways that individual Egyptians grapple with their fragile dignities. How did the Arab uprisings and the Egyptian revolution help restore and reclaim feelings of dignity at the regional, collective, and individual scales of society? How can protesting *threaten* dignity (i.e., the impact of mass arrests, death by brutal military force, and sexual harassment experienced by women in the streets)?

Unpacking such experiences more clearly would reveal a compelling argument for the human need to live with dignity. For instance, when informants describe their political and religious ideologies or class struggles, no clear analytic link between these reflections and their sense of dignity follows. Furthermore, in the discussion on “dignity as materialism,” I found the correlation between employment and *karama* to be an oversimplification, as securing an income also represents the fulfillment of a paramount male gender role in patriarchal society. Through my ethnographic research in Lebanon, for example, I found that unemployed men felt their dignity was threatened not by their lack of money but by their inability to support their families and their dependence on humanitarian aid and working wives or daughters. Here, a gender perspective would strengthen the development of El Bernoussi's argument.

This book presents how dignity is not simply an esoteric empty signifier, as former critiques of the term *dignity* suggest. The background research on the historical and political uses of dignity provides a strong foundation for the work's relevance. It makes an important contribution to the institutionalization and politics of dignity and its link with democracy. However, a comprehensive understanding of *karama* as a multifaceted human feeling that embodies rich meaning and value in our lives is still needed. This is especially important as dignity theory, if applied to practice, has the potential to improve failed humanitarian and political systems. Without thorough and ethnographically

grounded research on this topic, scholarly, political, and humanitarian discourses run the risk of reinforcing the misuse of a ubiquitous metaconcept.

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