

Code, Cape, and Cause: Qahera the Superhero as Transnational Digital Activism

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Introduction

The Arab Spring, followed by the 2012–2013 wave of mass protests, marked a period of profound political upheaval in Egypt. The initial uprising culminated in the removal of longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak, while the subsequent unrest led to the ousting of his democratically elected successor, Mohamed Morsi. By then, one of the biggest Web 2.0 features—social media—was already well-established in online spaces both in the Global North and Global South. It should be no surprise that a transnational icon for superhero fans would emerge from a post-Arab Spring Egyptian society. This essay explores the Egyptian webcomic *Qahera the Superhero* and its titular heroine as a vehicle for transnational digital activism, articulating Arab and Muslim feminist resistance to both local patriarchal structures and global Islamophobia, while strategically harnessing digital media to cultivate cross-border solidarities.

On June 30th, 2013 a novel Egyptian cartoonist named Deena Mohamed posted a short comic on the social media site, *Tumblr* starring

a covered Muslim superheroine named Qahera (the Arabic word for ‘Cairo’) as “a joke with a group of friends” (Demrdash, 2013). The comic, entitled “Part 1: Brainstorm,” detailed a Muslim cleric lecturing to other Muslim men that it was their “Islamic duty to keep your women at home and in check.” (Mohamed 2013, Part 1: Brainstorm, panel 4) After hearing this “sound of misogynistic trash” (Mohamed 2013, Part 1: Brainstorm, panel 3), Qahera confronts the cleric with a sword, saying that he was right. She then seemingly agrees with him that housework is a woman’s duty and quips that she “especially likes doing the laundry” (Mohamed 2013, Part 1: Brainstorm, panel 9). The last panel in the comic shows her hanging the cleric on a clothesline. The humorous comic quickly gained popularity, establishing Mohamed as a rising star on *Tumblr*—a social media platform widely used by superhero fans globally and notable for its open access. By September 2013, her page had attracted over 500,000 viewers, and she was regularly sharing new comics (Demrdash, 2013). *Qahera the Superhero* became an instant hit, thanks in part to the accessibility of social media. Free from the constraints of traditional publishing or editorial gatekeeping, Mohamed was able to share her work authentically, drawing on her natural storytelling talent to express her own perspectives.

Literature Review

Most of the academic literature on Qahera has examined her within the context of a “resistance/subordination binary” (Mahmood 2005, 29) focusing extensively on her dress as an empowered hijabi superheroine. In her article, “The Woman in Hijab as a Freak: Super (Muslim)Woman in Deena Mohamed’s Webcomic Qahera”, Barkuzar Dubbati describes Qahera as the embodiment of a “freak” because she resists Western discourses that express desires to “liberate” her from hijab while simultaneously resisting misogynistic Arab discourses that challenge her visibility through street harassment, traditional gender roles, and everyday sexism (Dubbati 2017, 434). Dubbati intentionally explores the freaked body and thus, Qahera, through a “binary opposition of Self/Other” (435.) She also analyzes Qahera through Homi Bhabha’s concept

of the “Third Space,” examining how the freaked body inhabits a zone of greyness that resists binary categorizations. Situated within a hybrid space, the figure of Qahera disrupts essentialist constructions of identity and challenges the “myth of cultural purity” (436). Dubbati is not the only scholar to explore Qahera through Bhaba’s concept of the Third Space—Samar Abdelsalam did so as well in his essay, “Negotiating/Constructing Identity in Deena Mohamed’s Qahera” (2018). Additionally, Abdelsalam also positions the reader of the comic within a Third Space, stating that their “interaction with the webcomic’s world can provide a Third Space that gives the reader insight into his/her surroundings.” (Abdelsalam 2018, 103)

Jackie Duncan also explores the veil as a visual and cultural marker, drawing a comparison between Qahera’s hijabi costume which is occasionally a niqabi one, and the representation of the veil in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003). After acknowledging the polarising debate around veiling (Duncan 2015, 1) and the widespread stereotype of it as an oppressive garment in Western imaginations, Duncan recasts the veil as a complex symbol, stressing that it should be analyzed through context (2). After contextualizing the veil from an Islamic perspective, Duncan asserts that its imposition in *Persepolis* leads to the protagonist’s rebellious behaviour (2). On the other hand, Duncan asserts that the veil is recast as a symbol of power that is “both physical and moral” (Duncan 2015, 2) when it comes to Qahera’s representation. Again, the veil is framed in a binary and becomes a focal point of Qahera’s identity.

Finally, Christina Ivey explores Qahera through Gayatri Spivak’s concept of epistemic violence which refers to the systematic erasure of marginalized groups in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. In Mohamed’s second comic, Qahera takes on the European feminist group, FEMEN, illustrating them topless in front of a mosque. As they race towards Qahera to “free” her from her veil, Qahera uses her sash to capture them and soon after hangs them from a tree, saying “Hey so, feel free to rescue me anytime... The question is who’s going to rescue

you?” (Mohamed 2013, Part 2: On FEMEN, panel 24) Ivey explores Qahera’s challenge to white saviourism and colonial feminism stating, “FEMEN’s focus on physical depictions of Muslim women feeds into the colonialist mentality that inevitably affects the ways Muslim women are perceived.” (Ivey 2015, 386) However, Ivey also explores Qahera through the resistance/subordination binary and contends that “her power seems to come from her traditional dress, as she is empowered by her choice to wear the hijab despite critiques of the possibilities of Islamic feminisms” (384) much like Duncan.

While these essays established necessary and important conversations about Qahera, none of them explored the character beyond her visual significance as a covered Muslim superheroine available to a global audience. However, Qahera possesses important significance for digital activism within the region as a post-Arab Spring representation. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy protests in the 2010s that was fueled by young students tired of government corruption and economic stagnation in several Arab countries. The trigger for these protests was the self-immolation of the 27-year old Tunisian push-cart vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, who became enraged when local authorities confiscated his pushcart after mocking and humiliating him (Salamey 2017, 115). Bouazizi borrowed \$200 to “buy his wares and sell vegetables” to support his family which included paying for his sister’s college tuition (115). The outrage amongst Tunisia’s “largely educated and unemployed” led to widespread protests that eventually toppled the country’s dictator, Zine El Abidine Ali (115).

The outcomes of the movement were mixed. In Syria, protests that began on March 15, 2011, escalated into a civil war, resulting in long-term destabilization that persists today. As of 2024, Syrians represent the largest refugee population in the world (World Vision 2024). Egypt occupies a complex position within the Arab Spring movement. Following mass protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square—led largely by youth and educated citizens—longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak was ultimately

overthrown (Roll 2020). Following Egypt's first democratic elections, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood narrowly won the presidency (BBC 2013). However, widespread anti-government protests erupted just one year into his term. Morsi was subsequently overthrown by the military and later imprisoned for ordering the torture of protestors (BBC 2013). His removal cleared the path for another authoritarian military figure, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, to assume power (BBC 2013). Qahera and her young creator should be understood as products of a transformative moment—a generation shaped by political upheaval, animated by aspirations for democracy, and driven by a vibrant spirit of activism—even if these dreams have not been fully realized. Mohamed has spoken openly about the revolution's influence on her work, telling *Middle East Monitor*, “We all had this desire for change, and of wanting change and trying to accomplish it, that I created this character [Qahera] that fights for things, which was very much part of the revolution” (Singh 2019).

This transformative moment is crystallized in “Part 4: On Protests,” a comic that directly reflects the Arab Spring's influence on Mohamed and foregrounds the representation of women within the movement. It references widely circulated images from the uprisings, such as the infamous photograph of a woman being dragged by police, her abaya pulled up to reveal her bra—an image that sparked global outrage (Eltahawy 2012). Published one year after the Arab Spring, the comic depicts Qahera observing the protests from above Tahrir Square, narrating in an internal monologue her commitment to protecting women (Mohamed, Qahera #4). She acknowledges the challenges of intervening in chaotic public spaces, emphasizing that harassment is a crime. In one powerful panel, Qahera leaps into the crowd, sword drawn, to shield a female protester (Mohamed 2013, Part 4: On Protests, panel 12). This scene encapsulates both the urgency of political resistance and the comic's embrace of unrestrained feminist activism. Moreover, by addressing not only gender-based violence but also Egypt's systemic street harassment, the comic fosters cross-border

solidarity—resonating with international audiences who supported the uprisings and with regional participants seeking more nuanced representations of the movement. Mohamed has noted that the comic was originally intended for English-speaking audiences before gaining popularity among Arabic speakers. While she now considers both, she emphasizes that “at the end of the day, [her] priority is Muslim women” (Kleer and Taxis 2019). That said, she acknowledges considering both English-speaking (presumably international) and Arabic-speaking audiences, reflecting her awareness of the potential for cross-border solidarity around issues like street harassment and women’s roles in protests and transnational grassroots movements (Kleer and Taxis 2019).

Digital Activism and Bilingualism

It is important to discuss the comic’s bilingualism—most are available in both English and Arabic—though not all are translated into Arabic. This suggests that some installments are intended to engage a transnational audience primarily through a global language like English. In doing so, it fosters cross-border solidarities among women navigating intersecting forms of oppression, including patriarchy and Islamophobia. The unique digital features of platforms like Tumblr—such as hashtagging—serve to increase the reach and visibility of the comic. English-language editions of *Qahera* are often accompanied by the hashtag #qaherainenglish, which not only organizes and archives related public posts but also amplifies the comic’s accessibility beyond Mohamed’s immediate followers. Mohamed has also strategically added other hashtags such as #qahera, #superhero, #comic, and #illustration broadening the reach of topics that could attract online audiences. From an activist standpoint, this enhances the comic’s potential to engage a broader, transnational audience interested in the issues it addresses.

It is also important to highlight the role of multiple social media platforms in amplifying the webcomic’s reach to a global audience. The

Qahera Facebook page serves as a key extension of the comic's transnational presence, offering posts in both English and Arabic. In addition to reposting comics, Mohamed creates platform-specific content that engages directly with her Facebook followers. For instance, on April 10, 2014, she posted an illustration of Qahera alongside recurring character Layla with the caption, "completely forgot to say thank you for over 10,000 likes!"—a gesture of appreciation tailored to her Facebook audience (Mohamed 2014).

Tumblr also features a unique form of community interaction known as "notes," which reflect user engagement through likes, reblogs, and other forms of interaction, rather than traditional comment threads. Given that not all viewers interact with posts—some may passively read while others actively reblog—it is reasonable to infer that the comic's reach extends well beyond their visible metrics, signaling significant transnational circulation and impact. For instance, the comic on the Arab Spring protests gained 6,645 notes in the English-translated comic and 160 in the Arabic one. This may not be considered much, yet Mohamed's personal portfolio (Mohamed, All Press) indicates a slew of interviews, which speaks to the popularity of the work. Given that she frequently promotes her posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, they gain increased visibility and reach a broader audience. Additionally, she has been candid about the role the Arab Spring played in her comic. In an interview with *Disorient*, Mohamed stated that she "wouldn't have made this comic without the 2011 revolution." (Kleer and Taxis 2019)

One of the most compelling examples of the comic's engagement with both the Arab Spring and the unfolding global refugee crisis appears in "Part 8: On Flight," which focuses on the plight of Syrian refugees. In this comic, a presumed homeless Syrian woman is harassed by a group of boys who steal the only bag she carries. Qahera intervenes, descending from the sky to retrieve the bag and return it to the woman. Initially believing her mission is complete, Qahera is surprised when the woman declares, "I hate you" (Mohamed 2015, Part 8: On Flight, panel 15). She continues to confront Qahera, questioning the utility of her

powers: “Do you think it would have been the same for him? For us?”—a reference to her brother who sought refuge in a boat (panel 23). This moment marks a turning point in Qahera’s journey. She grounds herself—literally and figuratively—traveling to the cramped, bleak environments where refugees are held, even boarding buses alongside them. Eventually, she returns to the woman and hands her plane tickets, stating, “I forgot how difficult it is sometimes to see the sky from here...” (panel 35). The implication is that Qahera’s true superpower lies not in flight or combat, but in empathy—the ability to listen, reflect, and respond meaningfully to those she seeks to help.

Mohamed reinforces this message through the comic’s accompanying hashtag, *#for those of you in countries people immigrate to not from*—a powerful form of digital commentary (Mohamed, Qahera #8) that resonates both within the region and in diasporic contexts, including Europe and North America. Given that the Syrian refugee crisis—a direct product of the Arab Spring—remains unresolved, and that Mohamed has described her webcomic as “born out of revolution nostalgia” (Kleer and Taxis 2019), this installment affirms her continued commitment to the democratic hopes of the Arab Spring. Qahera’s reflective question—“What does it mean to be a superhero? What does it mean to fly?”—reframes heroism itself, inviting readers to consider empathy as the most radical and transformative power of all. Given the comic’s popularity on Facebook—with 136 reactions and 38 shares—readers were encouraged to engage with it directly. One user, Yvette Robertson, reflected poignantly: “What does it mean when we do our best and it isn’t enough?” (Robertson 2015).

Digital Activism and the Rise of Webcomics

In his article, “Comics Activism: A (Partial) Introduction” (2018), Martin Lund articulates two specific terms—“activist comics” and “comics activism” (Lund 2018, 40). According to Lund, “activist comics” refers to the creation of comics that explicitly convey the creator’s political views, while “comics activism” encompasses the

broader practice of using the medium to support or challenge political issues (Lund 2018, 40). Since *Qahera the Superhero* serves as a vehicle for Mohamed's political and cultural commentary, the webcomic aligns closely with the category of "activist comics" and should be situated within this framework. The practice of aligning comics with politics is hardly unusual – nor is it new. As Lund aptly observes, "the graphic arts are no stranger to voicing political support or opposition" (Lund 2018, 43). He illustrates this with the well-known account of Thomas Nast's influential cartoons targeting the American political figure "Boss" Tweed, whose downfall in the 1870s is often credited to Nast's powerful visual critique (43). Lund also proceeds to give a brief genealogy of comics activism, pointing out the success of *Wimin's Comix* in the Underground Comix movement in the 1970s which became "the first time in American comics history that any organized sense of group movement and belonging fueled comics creation in a sustained way." (44) Feminist comics continued to emerge in the succeeding decades (44).

It should be no surprise that this combined tradition of feminist and activist comics would move to the global stage, ushered in by social media giants such as Tumblr. In their essay, "Feminist Comics Activism: A Global Phenomenon", Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin, situates feminist comics as a global and historically grounded movement, crediting it as "an expanding global phenomenon" (Nordenstam and Wictorin 2024, 3). While both authors gave case studies only in Sweden, they acknowledged a growing scholarship that examined feminist comics in China, India, the Baltic, and several other regions (4). *Qahera the Superhero* would certainly fit this phenomenon as an Egyptian Muslim woman who challenges negative notions of the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype.

In their 2023 essay "Webcomics", Andrew Kunka and Rachel Miller characterize the medium as a democratizing force, particularly for marginalized creators. They observe that "webcomics have provided opportunities for otherwise marginalized creators to attract and build an

audience for their work” (Kunka and Miller 2023, 237), highlighting the medium’s capacity to circumvent traditional gatekeeping structures and foster direct engagement between artists and audiences. Some of the notable characteristics unique to webcomics is its immediacy which provides artists with leverage to make timely commentary on political and cultural issues which is unlike the slower pace in print publishing (237). They also note the lack of constraints related to gatekeeping, giving “freedom of content and expression” while making successful creators visible to the gatekeepers in print publishing (237). This is certainly true of Deena Mohamed who not only became popular with global audiences but also to Western media outlets who are eager to spotlight a representation such as a Muslim superheroine (Berger, 2020; Demrdash, 2013; Rowsome, 2017; Mohamed 2025). *Qahera the Superhero* not only launched Mohamed’s artistic career but also brought her widespread visibility, paving the way for the publication of her graphic novel *Shubeik Lubeik*—a work set in Egypt—in both English and Arabic editions in 2023.

The Digital Veil: Comics, Activism, and Muslim Feminist Visibility

In *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that “if the world is currently structured by transnational economic links and cultural asymmetries, locating feminist practices within these structures becomes imperative” (Grewal and Kaplan, 3). They emphasize that “certain forms of feminism emerge from their willing participation in... colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations” (2), framing transnational feminist practices as a form of “counterhegemonic feminist reading” (3). In this context, *Qahera the Superhero* can be understood as a counterhegemonic feminist intervention that articulates feminism from a third-world perspective while challenging First World feminist frameworks that lack intersectionality.

This is particularly evident in the second comic, “Part 2: On FEMEN,” which offers a scathing critique of the European feminist group FEMEN which

notably wasn't translated into Arabic, indicating its participation in transnational feminist critique outside its borders. While Ivey analyzes the FEMEN comic primarily as a commentary on veiling, it can also be read as a broader critique of First World feminism and its failure to consider diverse cultural approaches to women's issues beyond Europe. In particular, Qahera is depicted glaring at her computer in one of the opening panels as she watches FEMEN activists protest topless outside a mosque—a provocative tactic emblematic of their movement (Ivey, 385). Central to FEMEN's platform is their belief that they are “speaking out against what they perceive to be the treatment of women under hegemonic religious oppressive forces” (385). As noted earlier, a confrontation ensues between Qahera and the FEMEN protestors before she suspends them from a tree, remarking, “Hey so, feel free to rescue me anytime... the question is who's going to rescue you?” (Qahera #2). While the quip directly references her headscarf, it also serves as a pointed critique of Eurocentric assumptions about veiling and Muslim women's agency. Although this particular comic was not translated into Arabic, it is evident that Mohamed used her growing visibility as an international comics creator to communicate directly with a non-Muslim, English-speaking audience about Muslim women's agency. In addition to receiving significant media attention, the comic garnered 29,949 notes—making it one of the most highly engaged posts on the platform. When asked about the response to the FEMEN comic, Mohamed described it as a “turning point” that prompted her to become “more conscious and thorough” in her creative process (Aleya 2018). Despite this shift in approach, her original motivation for creating the comic remained unchanged, as debates around veiling continue to dominate public discourse. Frustrated by the persistence of these conversations, Mohamed created the FEMEN webcomic as a declarative response, stating: “Yes, Muslim women can be feminists. Yes, veiled women can be superheroes. Yes, some veiled women are forced to wear it. Yes, forcing them to take it off is bad too. Yes, the problem is patriarchy/classism/capitalism worldwide” (Aleya 2018).

In “Claiming Our Space: Muslim Women, Activism, and Social Media”, Faiza Hirji acknowledges that activism among Muslim women “is not a

new phenomenon,” but argues that the internet has enabled voices to emerge that might otherwise remain silenced (Hirji, 81). At the same time, she cautions that the digital realm remains a colonized space subject to surveillance (81). Nevertheless, Hirji highlights how figures like Mona Eltahawy and the #MosqueMeToo campaign have drawn attention to sexual harassment, while social media influencers such as Ayesha Malik have challenged public figures like Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra for her perceived nationalist support of the Indian army during the Kashmir crisis (82). These actions, Hirji contends, represent forms of activism that allow Muslim women to “break down barriers of discourse and perception” on a “transnational level” (82). In many ways, this aligns with *Qahera the Superhero*, a webcomic that has garnered international attention, as evidenced by its coverage in global media outlets (Deena Draws) and its creator’s stated aim of depicting “a superhero who combats misogyny and Islamophobia” (Qahera About).

In addition to leveraging engagement metrics, Mohamed utilizes Tumblr’s unique affordances—particularly the “Answered Questions” section on her site—to further her transnational feminist activism. Unlike print media, where authors rarely have the opportunity to directly and repeatedly clarify their intentions, the webcomic format on *Tumblr* allows for ongoing dialogue across multiple pages of the site. For example, when a reader asked whether the hijab is meant to protect women from sexual harassment, Mohamed emphatically responded that it is “*not* meant to help prevent you from getting sexual harassment,” citing that “the entire country of Egypt is proof of this” (Mohamed, *Qahera* Answered Questions). To reinforce this point, she includes two panels—one in Arabic and one in English—depicting Qahera being sexually harassed, illustrating that such violence affects even visibly covered Muslim women. When addressing the Arabic panel, Mohamed states, “this panel [is] also available in Arabic for the selective readers from my Arabic-speaking clientele” (Mohamed, *Qahera* Answered Questions). The juxtaposition of the Arabic and English panels underscores her intent to foster cross-border solidarities—connecting

Egyptian women with audiences beyond Egypt through their shared frustrations over street harassment.

Qahera as Transnational Feminist Critique

Given that Mohamed's primary audience consists of Muslim women across the globe, *Qahera the Superhero* is best understood through a transnational lens, offering incisive political commentary on women's rights, cultural norms, and crises such as forced displacement—issues that resonate deeply across diverse Muslim cultures. While the comic resonates strongly with an international audience—including non-Muslims—its feminist framework and themes are articulated with a universality and accessibility that extend its appeal beyond this core demographic, engaging broader global concerns. Take, for example, the third comic, “On Sexual Harassment,” which addresses an issue experienced by women globally—street harassment. Given that street harassment affects women across regions such as France, the Netherlands, and India, the comic is particularly effective in reaching transnational audiences and fostering cross-border solidarity—evident in its immense popularity, with over 114,000 notes in English and 2,082 notes in Arabic (Fillion 2021; Kassam 2024; Abraham 2023). The comic also gained traction on Facebook, receiving 197 reactions and several supportive comments in both English and Arabic.

The comic features Layla, an uncovered woman, alongside Qahera, who wears the hijab—allowing the characters to resonate with both Muslim and non-Muslim women (Mohamed, *Qahera #3*). In the opening panels, Layla is shown walking down the street when, in panel two, an unnamed man shouts, 'Nice curves, gorgeous!' (Mohamed 2013, Part 3: On Sexual Harassment, panel 2), and by panel four, he grabs her buttocks. In panels ten through twelve, Layla reports the incident to the police, who dismiss her complaint by blaming her choice of outfit, thereby engaging in victim-blaming. This is immediately shown to be a falsehood as a covered Qahera walks past a group of men who engage in sexually

harassing her before she slams one of them against the wall and threatens him not to “bother another woman again!” (panel 15). Outside of the police station, Layla resolves to stand up to the next group of men who harasses her on the street. In panel twenty, she tells them “That is it! I am tired of men like you on the streets! Get lost!” (panel 20) – a response that angers them so much that they brandish a knife and back her into a corner. By panel 32, Qahera intercedes, wielding a large rod which she uses to break their knees. She helps Layla up, and explains to her that she doesn’t need to be “incredible like me” (panel 32). Then she assures her that she is “willing to testify against these men” (panel 46).

The entire comic seems to read as a public service announcement about sexual harassment on the street. While Egypt has faced international criticism for the prevalence of such harassment (BBC 2017; Al Jazeera 2018), the issue is by no means unique to Egyptian society. Instead, the comic’s treatment of the topic fosters a sense of cross-border solidarity among women globally who share similar frustrations by reposting, liking, and sharing the comic on multiple social media platforms. As noted before, Mohamed has addressed questions on her “Answered Questions” section of the site as to whether hijab is a way of protecting women from street harassment which she emphatically made clear that it doesn’t. Mohamed also includes an FAQ on the website where she explicitly addresses this misconception, clarifying that the comic does not suggest hijab prevents harassment but asserts the opposite. In doing so, she exemplifies transnational digital activism by openly engaging with a diverse, global audience and responding directly to their concerns. Recognizing the effectiveness of webcomics in leveraging multiple social media platforms, she also shares her *Tumblr* responses on Facebook to broaden her reach and amplify the comic’s transnational feminist message to a diverse audience.

Another example of the webcomic’s transnational feminist activism lies in its incisive critique of misogyny in everyday culture. This is explored

in “Part 5: On Music (Sort Of)” (Mohamed, Qahera #5), which takes aim at a popular musician whose lyrics perpetuate sexist narratives. In the comic, Qahera and her friend Layla begin with a casual conversation that shifts when Layla makes her listen to a song with overtly misogynistic lyrics. Qahera, visibly disturbed, imagines dangling the singer over a building—a fantasy triggered by his self-identification as *si al sayed*, which she translates as “a term denoting a lot of manliness, the context being that said manliness is superior to all else” (Mohamed 2014, “Part 5: On Music (Sort Of)”). Layla quickly reprimands her for this violent thought, reminding her that while music can have a powerful influence on youth, violence is not the answer (Mohamed 2014, panel 9). Mohamed notes in the comic’s description that it is “intended for amusement,” but in a later interview with *In Plainspeak*, a magazine based in the Global South, she emphasizes the broader message: “patriarchy, authoritarianism, and traditions... inform our gender and sexuality” (Aleya 2018). Once again, the comic engages in transnational digital activism by fostering cross-border solidarity among its international readership beyond a Muslim readership. This comment also reflects Mohamed’s continued commitment to the hopes and ideals of the Arab Spring—particularly its feminist dimensions, which are foregrounded in her comic “Part 4: On Protests” (Mohamed, Qahera #4). Rather than signaling resignation, the comic underscores her ongoing effort to challenge authoritarianism and everyday forms of oppression. While this particular installment received a more modest engagement—810 notes in English, 141 in Arabic, and 90 reactions on Facebook—it nonetheless generated several supportive comments, underscoring its resonance with Mohamed’s fanbase.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that Mohamed’s primary audience is Muslim women. The comic often addresses broader critiques of Islamic patriarchy and traditional gender roles which is important to note considering the heterogeneity of the Muslim faith that extends beyond the borders of Egypt and the Middle East. This is evident in the first comic, “Part 1: Brainstorm” (Mohamed, Qahera #1), where Qahera hangs a cleric from a clothesline—a bold visual that

helped the comic garner 23,508 notes, making it one of the most widely circulated in the series. This sentiment reflects a broader frustration that resonates with many Muslim women globally—not only with the specific expressions of Muslim patriarchy, but also with more universal ideologies that confine women to traditional roles as housewives. Yet the comic also alludes—albeit loosely—to the broader currents of the Islamic Revival Movement, a phenomenon that has become a prominent force across many Muslim-majority cultures, including Egypt. This term refers to a range of movements aimed at reinforcing Islam’s role in public and civic life, emphasizing social conservatism and a “return” to religious values. Saba Mahmood situated this movement from a feminist perspective, exploring women’s roles in it and their perspectives (Mahmood 2001). However, what the reader should take away from this is that the movement focuses on “the teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment” (Mahmood 2001, 201). Specifically, that is what the cleric’s expressions about women’s roles have captured.

However, it is not only the first comic that references this specific movement; such themes also recur throughout the series, situated not only within the context of Egyptian society but also resonating with transnational Muslim diasporas. In the seventh comic, “On Women’s Choices,” Qahera and her uncovered friend enter a café and overhear two men debating whether women should be covered. In panel 5, the first one describes the practice of covering as “oppressive” and “the sign of a developing nation” (Mohamed 2015, Part 7: On Women’s Choices, panel 5). His friend disagrees in panel 13 and begins to compare a woman to candy, stating that a “covered woman is a sign of value” (panel 13). By panel 18, Qahera notices her friend’s sadness at this response and slams her hand on the table in the next panel. She then proceeds to explain to them that they are wrong and by panel 28 she points out that “women’s choices are not your political punchlines” (panel 28). Once again, the comic’s theme resonates universally, as debates surrounding women’s clothing—particularly that of Muslim

women—serve as ongoing sites of political and cultural contention both in the Global North and Global South (Najmabadi 2006 239–55). Flashpoints such as the banning of headscarves, burkinis, and veils in France are yet one of many examples (Diallo 2024).

Yet, Muslim women themselves occupy only a small part of these broader, often externally driven, discourses. Mohamed makes a point about centering Muslim women in these discussions by having Qahera, a covered Muslim woman, visually centre herself between both men as she makes her point. This panel, along with others, powerfully exemplifies Nordenstam and Wictorin’s concept of feminist comics as a form of “visual activism” (Nordenstam and Wictorin 2024, 5). They define this mode of activism as one that “consists of making visible something that has been forbidden and thereby resisting remaining prejudices” (5), positioning visibility itself as an act of resistance (5). Additionally, this is the only comic in which Qahera does not display any superpowers—a detail Mohamed herself highlights in the accompanying post, noting, “Honestly she didn’t even use her superpowers” (Mohamed, Qahera #7). This choice effectively distances Qahera from conventional superpowered archetypes, grounding her instead in the everyday experiences of ordinary women. The analogy made about comparing uncovered Muslim women to unwrapped candy on the floor is also not the first time that comments like that have been made by Muslim men—in countries such as the U.K. and elsewhere (Rahall 2021, 9; Sawyer 2024). By addressing a familiar trope within Muslim communities that marginalizes women’s views on this topic, the comic extends its resonance beyond its immediate context, fostering a sense of cross-border solidarity among Muslim women.

Conclusion

This essay pursues multiple objectives. It situates *Qahera the Superhero* within a transnational feminist framework, analyzing the webcomic as a form of digital comics activism that emerges from a post-Arab Spring

context. Through close readings of selected comics that address global Islamophobia, local patriarchy, and sexual harassment—as well as an examination of the digital affordances of the webcomic form—this essay demonstrates how the universal language of women’s rights is strategically mobilized to cultivate transnational feminist solidarity.

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