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Weapon of the Weak: Women's Activism and Technology in *The City Always Wins*

Imdad Ullah Khan
Department of English,
University of Swat, KP, Pakistan

Saad Salman
Department of English,
Khushal Khan Khattak University, Pakistan

Qamarul Zia
Department of English,
National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan

Abstract

In recent years, women's activism in Asia has received greater attention in literary production. The active involvement of women in instigating, propelling, and sustaining revolutionary activism has assumed a significant status to warrant in-depth analysis from a female gender perspective. This article examines *The City Always Wins* by Omar Robert Hamilton as an innovative novel depicting the role of women in urban uprisings, particularly during the Arab uprisings of 2011. Drawing on James Scott's (1985) construct of the "weapon of the weak," it explores how technology, specifically smartphones, became central to the activism of female characters in the novel. The analysis involves a close textual reading of the novel, considering the fragmented narration of the novel and the representation of social media as a tool for organizing protests. The article looks at how Mariam's character is used to represent women's activism, highlighting the innovative ways she utilizes technology to oppose more potent oppressive forces. Examining how propaganda and fake news play out in the book against the struggles of the main characters, this article shows how power dynamics shift when even the most vulnerable people have access to powerful technologies.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Women's Activism, Revolution, Smartphones & Social Media, Social Movements, Digital Age, Gender Roles

Introduction

> We are the target, we are the oppressed, we are the front line, and while everyone else has shattered their political axes into impotent fragments, what more cohesive force is there than simply women?
>
> (Hamilton, 2017, p. 151)

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The Arab uprisings marked a turning point in Middle Eastern history and had a significant influence on both the region and the world. The world saw the expansion of revolutionary movements from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and other countries during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings (Allansson et al., 2012; Al-Sayyid, 2014; Bishku, 2013; Dalacoura, 2012; Gelvin, 2015; Heydemann, 2018; Lynch, 2014; Salih, 2013). Several factors, including governmental corruption, economic hardship, and a yearning for more freedom and democracy, all contributed to the uprisings. With citizen reporters filming the events live on their mobile phones, people watched the unfolding of these uprisings on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and watched it live on channels like Al Jazeera. Through television and internet media, intellectuals and journalists, primarily from the participating nations, covered and examined the events (Al-Sayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Lynch, 2015).

Published in 2017, *The City Always Wins* takes readers through the tumultuous events of Cairo from October 2011 to July 2013, focusing on the Tahrir Square uprising. The story delves into the lives of Mariam and Khalil, two ardent young revolutionaries who were deep in socio-political chaos at the time. As they navigate Cairo's bustling streets and secret political world, they are fueled by a mission of change and the belief that they are part of an unprecedented revolution. The book vividly captures their journey, from the thrill of dealing with law enforcement to the helplessness under authoritarian rule. In an ideologically divided country, Khalil and Mariam's determination to hold on to their revolutionary principles and keep their romantic relationship with each other faces severe tests (Chambers, 2019). The novel is conspicuous for its vivid imagery, deep lyricism, unflinching politics, and gritty poetic narration. The City Always Wins is not just a simple depiction of Egypt's political upheaval but also the will of an entire world generation to instigate global change (Robé, 2021).

The uprising depicted in the narrative goes beyond a sequence of occurrences; it transforms into a multimedia phenomenon intricately entwined with contemporary technology, smartphones, the internet, and social media. The novel, resembling an experiment in revolutionary journalism, vividly captures the essence of a new era where activism is intricately linked with digital technology (Moore, 2018). The central figures, Mariam and Khalil, along with their media collective, Chaos, epitomize this digital activism. They transcend mere participation in the political turmoil; they also act as chroniclers, utilizing podcasts, videos, and tweets to mediate and process the unfolding events. Their collective, reminiscent of the real-life Mosireen, mirrors the novel's dedication to illustrating the symbiotic connection between technology and revolution. The instance of tweets from "@ChaosCairo" shows the influence of a new form of media outreach that can organize people and galvanize change.

The narrative transitions between narrative techniques and across diverse styles, including poetic descriptions, detailed depictions, text messaging, and news reporting. These stylistic aspects reflect the tumultuous and continuously changing nature of the revolution, in which messages, declarations, and ideas are shared in real-time without filtration or editing by the authorities (Sami, 2021). The key characters' lives and even their sleep patterns are dictated by their engagements with these technologies, showing the profound dependence of the revolution on digital platforms. In this way, the novel shows the millennial generation's identity predicated upon virtual networks and indicates the growth of social media-based movements in the digital age (El-Ariss, 2018). As an integrated part of the revolutionary activities, smartphones, and social media are integral to the planning and conducting of the revolution, signifying a paradigm shift in the initiation, propulsion, and dynamics of political change in contemporary times.

Research Objectives

The current study investigates aspects of the novel that contribute to its depiction of the Arab Spring. Specifically, it focuses on the role of the main female character Mariam, her role as a youth activist, and the importance of digital technology and social media in propelling the Egyptian uprisings shown in *The City Always Wins*. The key objectives involve:

- Exploring how women's activism is shown in the novel through the main character of Mariam
- Analyzing the role and function of technology in the revolutionary movement shown in the novel
- Understanding how women's activism and technology inform the themes and narrative of the Arab Spring shown in the novel.

Research Questions

The current study investigates the following specific research questions.

RQ1: How does the role of Mariam as a woman activist in the narrative of the novel inform female-gendered political activism in the Arab uprisings?

RQ2: What significance does technology, particularly smartphones, hold in the novel's depiction of activism?

RQ3: How does the narrative of the novel reflect the broader socio-political context of the time through the narrative of a revolutionary movement?

Review of the Literature

Roles of Women in Social Activism

Over the last few decades, the role of women in social movements has undergone significant changes in several aspects, challenging commonly held patriarchal beliefs about the female gender's role in social activism. Various concepts are reified based on gender, such as wearing hijab in Western countries, to keep the female gender marginalized from mainstream culture and economy (Khan et al., 2020). Further, information and communication technology (ICT) has lubricated the active involvement of females in social activism due to its easy access and provision of a relatively safe space for the female gender (Shirazi, 2012; Skalli, 2006). Movements such as anti-hoax exemplify the positive impact of the use of ICT to propel social change and strive effectively to achieve common goals (Jumrana &Wastutiningsih, 2019). Analogously, in Latin American movements, unity among women is forged through activism based on motherhood that connects the transnational concerns of women in challenging times (Gideon & Ramm, 2020). In these instances, women have moved from supportive and often passive positions to roles of authority and leadership.

Women's activism, however, carries both potential and challenges. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have opened tremendous opportunities to reach out to large sections of the population from the relative safety of online spaces and galvanize their support for social justice and equity. Through hashtags such as #Me Too and #Why I Didn't Report women can challenge the power of hegemonic regimes and patriarchal norms attempting to silence their voice and minimize its impact on society (Chouliaraki, 2021; Connell, 2016). However, the downside of this change includes women's vulnerability to online harassment, false information and propaganda through gendered discrimination, online threats and trolling, and stigmatization of women's liberation movements (Chambers, 2019). Additionally, an optimistic approach toward women's engagement stresses the key role of the internet and social media in mass mobilization, holding instant protests, and working under the radar of authoritarian regimes (Quinlan, 2021; Truscello & Gordon, 2013).On the other hand, a pessimistic approach stresses the ineffectiveness of these digital movements to bring a fundamental long-term change in the system (Zannettou et al., 2019) Proponents of both sides have substantial significant arguments in support of their approach that need to be seen in balance with one another to understand the potential and pitfalls of internet and social media driven revolutions in supporting women's liberation and empowerment in a dominant patriarchal social and political system.

Literary Aspects of "The City Always Wins"

The City Always Wins uses rhythm and form to convey the progression and tempo of the revolution as it unfolds through the narrative. Chambers (2019) studies the social media aspects of the novel in conjunction with its literary and artistic aspects focusing on the depiction of social media, its artistic use of imagery and language, and the pulsating rhythms of optimism and revulsion as the narrative progresses through the positive and despondent times for the characters in the story. She focuses on how the characters attempt to bring to fruition the abstract goals of their movement that are reflected in the rhythm and form of the novel throughout the narrative. The research compares the novel with other creative productions to the 2011–13 Egyptian uprisings, emphasizing its speculative nature and critical temporalities that resist closure. Relatedly, Moore (2018) critically analyzes two literary works, Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* and Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City Always Wins*, both responding creatively to the 2011–13 Egyptian uprisings. Despite differing genres, both novels share a skeptical outlook on representation and evoke a somber tone. Focusing on the ability of creative works like fictional writing to reflect on ostensibly unsuccessful revolutions, the article explores reader responses to literary depictions of the present, specifically those embracing alexithymia.

Bakker (2021) delves into the emergence of Arabic dystopian fiction during the first two decades of the 21st century, with a significant concentration on Egyptian authors. The study deals with the defining characteristics of dystopian narratives and their manifestation in select literary works related to the Egyptian context. It evaluates the significant aspects of the dystopian fictional genre and provides a concise overview of the genre's evolution in Arabic literature. Through the analysis of six Egyptian novels including *The City Always Wins*, the discussion identifies common elements and specific themes, drawing comparisons and contrasts with Western dystopian traditions. The paper advocates for a categorization of Arabic dystopian narratives that acknowledges the unique social, political, historical, and cultural factors inherent in the broader Arabic and Egyptian literary landscape. While the existing studies have extensively covered different aspects of social media activism in *The City Always Wins*, there's a clear need for a more focused examination of how women are portrayed and engaged in the activism within the novel.

Research Methodology

The current study explores social activism in *The City Always* Wins using the lens of the "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985). The theoretical framework of "weapon of the weak" takes an optimistic view about the power and potential of digital media as it underscores the significance of liberatory technologies in empowering those who are left out of the

mainstream traditional power structures in patriarchal political settings (Ginzberg, 2014). The main character of Mariam puts great trust in the potential of digital media tools to mobilize civic engagement and organize rallies and protests. With the help of Scott's theoretical construct, this article aims to analyze the different aspects of how and to what extent these unconventional tools of protest empower women as one of the marginalized groups. Further, the construct of "weapon of the weak" is used to focus on female activism as a specific aspect of the novel having specific opportunities and challenges mediated by gender roles (Tillyris, 2023). Against the backdrop of a highly charged political context, Mariam fights against a social and political status quo that is based on the patriarchal oppression of women. The construct of 'weapon of the weak" is used to understand the choices and limitations imposed upon her individual agency as a gendered being.

Analytically, the study is based on a close reading of the text that aims to identify categories, sub-themes, and themes, and their intersection with the narrative and formal aspects of the novel (Culler, 2010). The study examines in detail the language, structure, and underlying themes of the novel that are informed by the narrative style, imagery, and rhythm of narration of the story (Federico, 2015). Through iterative readings and recursive analysis of the text, the article explores the relationship between the text and its socio-political context, imagery and mood of the text, message, and tempo, and closure and openness of Hamilton's messages about the possibilities of the revolution and its inherent contradictions as a social media based movement (Smith, 2016). This method facilitates a deeper understanding of its complexities, contributing to a nuanced analysis of the literary work. Conclusions drawn from the text, are subsequently linked to broader literary, cultural, or historical contexts, thereby enhancing the overall analysis.

Findings

Visible Women: Grassroots Activism in Egypt

> "What more cohesive force is there than simply: women." (Hamilton 2017, p. 151)

The City Always Wins presents a vivid and nuanced portrayal of women's activism in Egypt, set against the larger backdrop of the nation's struggle for human rights and gender equality. This struggle is intricately woven into the narrative, demonstrating Hamilton's inspiration from personal and familial experiences with matriarchal influences (figure 1). The narrative depicts the prominence of women who were vocal in openly protesting against oppression and pressed for political reforms and social change. Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts became a medium choice for the young revolutionaries to target the Egyptian authoritarian regime for their tactics of sexual harassment of women to make them toe the line of the authorities. In the clashes between police and protestors, a young woman stripped violently of her *abaya*, dragged and beaten by police

while she was on the ground, became an iconic image of the brutality of the regime and the resilience of the young protestors (Chambers, 2019). The picture showing a woman wearing a blue bra became instantly popular in stenciled revolutionary graffiti, symbolizing the resistance and defiance of women against gender-based oppression.

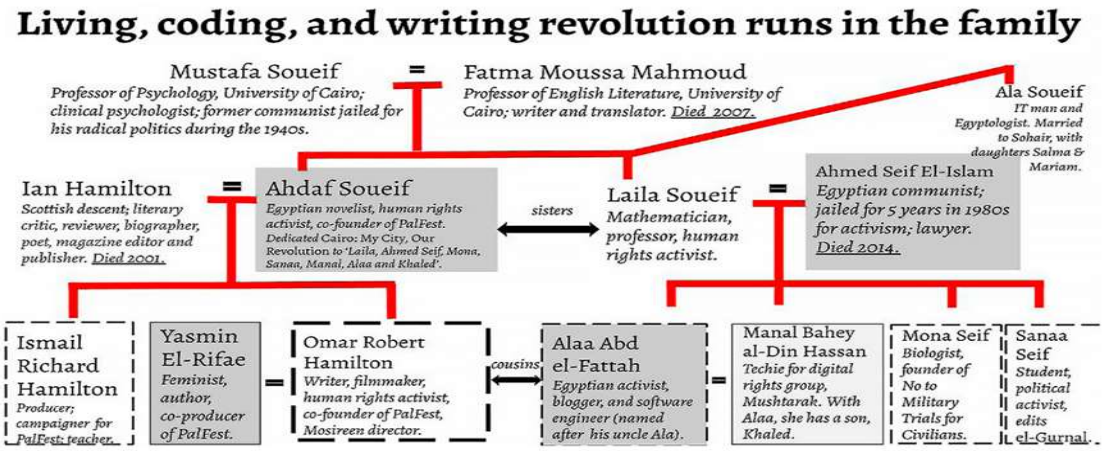


Figure 1: Family Tree by Freya Hope and Claire Chambers (2019)

The City Always Wins does not shy away from the harsh realities faced by women activists, highlighting the severe backlash they endure, including lewd comments, groping, and even rape. Hamilton addresses these issues directly, mentioning "the army doctors' vaginal violations they call virginity tests" (p. 74), a brutal tactic used by authorities to intimidate females and discourage them from taking part in public protests. However, Hamilton and Yasmin El-Rifae, through their respective writings, are careful not to depict women merely as passive victims. Instead, they spotlight the resistance and agency of women, as exemplified by the work of Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment and Assault (OpAntiSH). The character of Mariam is reflective of this active resistance. Her involvement in OpAntiSH, along with the support of male characters like Khalil and Hafez, underscores a collective fight against gendered violence.

Mariam emerges as a pivotal character, providing profound insights into the role of women in the tumultuous times of the Egyptian Revolution. Omar Robert Hamilton, through Mariam, not only depicts the challenges faced by women activists but also illustrates how their activism is intricately linked to their identities and experiences. When Mariam reflects, "We are the target, we are the oppressed, we are the front line, and while everyone else has shattered their political axes into impotent fragments, what more cohesive force is there than simply: women" (p. 151), it serves as a powerful affirmation of her belief in the solidarity and agency of women in bringing about social change. This perspective challenges the prevalent marginalization of women's roles in a context where they are often overlooked. Mariam's role shows women not merely as

participants in the revolution but as a leading figure that drives it. Also, Mariam's activism goes beyond a concern with gender issues. Her presence in tending to the injured in hospitals after protests and simultaneously engaging with digital media as a means of resistance shows her as an activist deeply invested in the ethos of the revolution.

By focusing on the revolution carried out in this highly charged environment, the novel captures a moment of change in Egyptian history as the old order is not yet completely wiped out and the new is yet to emerge. The story is not just concerned with the outcome of the revolution but it emphasizes it as a ripe moment of possibilities and dangers that could lead to several outcomes for the Egyptian people. Mariam, a staunch believer in the techno-revolution she and Khalil are engaged in, reflects on the existential value of the present moment within the context of future history. This reflection occurs as she and Khalil witness the burning premises of President Mubarak's National Democratic Party headquarters:

> *How short life is. Life is to be lived and death is to be feared and hated and remembered and resisted every day. There is only now, there is not even tomorrow. A life that others will talk about when it leaves us. That's the goal. A life that conquers death with memory. (Hamilton ,2017, p. 61)*

These lines reveal her deep commitment to the ideals of the revolution, underpinned by a leadership vision that sees the present moment as part of a continuum of time and space. In this view, individuals participate in the flow of life, leaving an essence that lingers and is passed on to future generations after they are gone. However, the struggles of the present time are not the same for Khalil and Mariam, as it is acknowledged that she is fighting on both the political front and along gender lines. It is not just the regime of the past but also the revolutionary resistance that tries to "appropriat[e], coloniz[e] Mariam's language, her life' as a woman" (p. 141). Mariam's predicament as a gendered being shows that inequality runs deeper than what is apparent in systemic patriarchal structures. Thus, the novel not only highlights the challenges faced by women activists in Egypt but also celebrates their resilience and ability to enact change. It underscores the importance of their narratives in the Arab Spring and the revolutionary movements.

"Army of Samsungs": Smartphones, Social Media, and Subversion

> "They can't keep up with us, an army of Samsungs, Twitters, HTCs, emails, Facebook events…" (Hamilton, 2017, p. 20)

In the contemporary world, the empowerment of historically marginalized groups through technology, particularly smartphones and social media, presents a formidable

challenge to the traditional hegemony of the powerful elite. During the Arab uprisings, these tools became a pivotal ‘weapon of the weak’ (Scott, 1985) through which they could bypass the regime and reach out to the masses directly, organizing themselves in what Appadurai calls cellular networks – networks that are more fluid and less hierarchical – as against vertebrate networks that are hierarchical and more rigid in structure, making them more vulnerable to diffusion and dissolution by the hegemonic powers (Appadurai, 2006). Mariam's belief in the unstoppable nature of the revolution, fueled by an "army of Samsungs,” underscores the transformative potential of these tools:

> *The revolution is unstoppable. Chaos will carry news, and tactics, and triumphs from Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Palestine. Start with the Arab Spring countries, and then open to the whole Arab world, then: who knows? They can't keep up with us, an army of Samsungs, Twitters, HTCs, emails, Facebook events, private groups, iPhones, phone calls, and text messages all adjusting one another's movements millions of times each second. An army of infinite mobility—impossible to outmaneuver. All they know to do is pull the plug and cut the line. And the world saw what happened when they tried that. They have no moves left. (Hamilton, 2017, p. 20)*

As Cohen (2011) reports, the Egyptian government's attempt to quell dissent by shutting down the internet backfired, further galvanizing the resistance. This underscores the paradoxical effect of suppressing digital communication: far from quelling dissent, it can amplify it. Mariam believes in the empowering nature of social media, as she reflects on the potential of online media to prevent human rights abuses from being hushed up. She expresses her conviction that social media can connect global communities, disseminate news, and bypass traditional censorship methods. Mariam's character exults in the fact that social media platforms have successfully connected people, enabling them to see one another, talk to one another, and plan together, thus fostering a sense of unity and collective action. This earnest belief of Mariam in the potential of the modern technology tools they have at their disposal is put to the test through the unfolding of the narrative in the novel.

The use of social media in organizing and executing protests, as seen in the Egyptian Revolution, demonstrates a profound shift in how grassroots movements operate. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter not only facilitate the rapid dissemination of information, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers but also aid in the formation of virtual communities united by a common cause (Mason, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). This was evident in the widespread use of Facebook in organizing pivotal protests, such as

those for Khaled Said – a young man who was tortured and killed by the Egyptian police for trying to upload a video about the violence of police on common innocent citizens – and the novel's representation of Twitter as a tool for instant and effective planning of protests and spreading of news. In the context of Arab uprisings, Mason (2013) elaborates on how the social media platforms were purposefully used by the protestors, allocating to each platform-specific functions that it could do best:

> *If you look at the full suite of information tools that were employed to spread the revolutions of 2009–2011, it goes like this: Facebook is used to form groups, covert and overt—to establish those strong but flexible connections. Twitter is used for real-time organization and news dissemination, bypassing the cumbersome 'newsgathering' operations of the mainstream media. YouTube and Twitter-linked photographic sites are used to provide instant evidence of the claims being made. (Mason, 2013, p. 75)*

At its peak of techno-optimism about the potential of unconventional internet-based media to propel the revolution, Chaos – the social media collective for the revolution – begins each of its online podcasts as, "Hello, dearly liberated from the streets of our revolution, today we've got news from the front lines, tunes from the underground, and every political beat you need to get through your week" (p. 20). However, as the novel progresses, the trust in the power of social media transforms. The narrative shows the targeting of the "Twitter revolution," as disillusionment and despondency gets more widespread among the members of the revolution. The initial techno-optimism gives way to a more pessimistic view, as the social media, and digital activism based on it, are depicted as turning 'toxic,' becoming a source of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news. As *shabab's* (youth) techno-optimism about winning the right of the people for 'bread, freedom, and social justice' (p. 31) dwindles, they take stock of what has gone wrong in the course of the revolution and what counts in the socio-political setting of Cairo. "What can we do with information or facts when the only currency that counts is guns and lies, when all anyone wants are guns and lies?," Khalil declares near the end of the novel (p. 287).

The City Always Wins also illustrates the generational divide in the utilization of social media, highlighting the contrasting experiences and perspectives of characters from different age groups. For instance, the younger generation, represented by characters like Mariam and Khalil, is depicted as actively and adeptly using digital tools like Twitter to keep in touch with their compatriots in real-time communication. It helps strangers connect and form groups and gets Chaos 'a thousand new followers…every day' (p. 20). Conversely, the older generation, exemplified by characters like Abu Bassem, is

portrayed as less proficient and less enabled by social media. The text depicts Abu Bassem's laborious and less enabling use of social media, emphasizing the challenges and limitations faced by older individuals in navigating digital platforms. As he explains to Khalil, “I’m just doing a tweet for people to watch this [TV] show” (p. 24), illustrating his less familiarity with the social media world. Analogously, Khalil’s neighbor lauds the achievements of the young generation in raising awareness about the hegemony of military power but mentions flippantly the role of social media in making it possible: "You kids and that Facebook of yours” (p. 68). As the revolutionaries discuss the most central question of the narrative, that is "What comes after saying no?" (p. 85), they deliberate the lessons from previous uprisings having cyclical patterns of uprisings – repression – status quo. Their highly cynical remarks illustrate this: "The young do all the dying and the old go to the polls to vote for other old fucks to tell the young what to do" encapsulates the novel's thematic exploration of generational disparities and power dynamics. It underscores the disillusionment and frustration felt by the younger generation, who are actively engaged in revolutionary activities and social media activism while feeling marginalized and disenfranchised by the older generation's political influence.

Conclusion

The City Always Wins depicts Mariam as a social reformer who stands for bringing change at a time when the Egyptian political landscape was highly charged with potential for revolution and, at the same time, was very dangerous for reformists. She believes in the power of collective action and uses online social media to galvanize support for the cause of the revolution. Mariam tries to “reclaim her agency” by subverting the traditional gendered norms of her society and does not let the traditional patriarchal roles dictate her actions (Hamilton, 2012; Khan et al., 2021). As such, she becomes symbolic of resistance against oppression and the changing role of the female gender in Egyptian society MacLeod (1992) pointed out more than two decades before the revolution that is the subject of this novel. Through her character, Hamilton enunciates a liberatory ideal for Egypt that is innovative in its reliance on digital tools and depiction of the possibilities for females as active civic change makers (Cohen, 2011).

Challenging established power structures, the characters' use of online media like Facebook and Twitter signals the transformative impact of these technologies in social-political activism and the empowerment of marginalized groups, especially females, to initiate, organize, drive, and propel social justice movements. As enunciated through the metaphor of the "army of Samsungs," the narrative gives literary form to a growing grassroots change as people in the digital age, especially the younger generation, rely on the potential and possibilities offered by online media (Chambers, 2019). Conversely, the narrative also underlines the inherent pitfalls and limitations of these new forms of

communication that ostensibly offer limitless space to fight back against totalitarian regimes' oppressive social structures and gendered norms (Bakker, 2021; Rambe, 2015). As the narrative progresses and the limits of their online communication dawn upon the characters, they enunciate the rather pessimistic aspects of these new channels of civic resistance specifically predicated upon the rather easy dissemination of misinformation online and governmental efforts to suppress online dissent.

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 exemplifies how struggles over narrative are central to collective organizing and social transformation (Robé, 2021). This uprising, like most revolutions, deviated from its initial trajectory, demonstrating the non-linear progression of history (Benjamin, 1968). The unfolding events in Tahrir Square, leading to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, were not just a series of reactive protests but a complex battle over the dominant narrative and whose narrative will prevail, both within Egypt and globally. Benjamin's notion that history "became historical posthumously" (1968, p.263) is particularly relevant when analyzing the Egyptian Revolution as depicted in *The City Always Wins*. What started as a movement for democratic reforms took on multiple dimensions as it progressed, each influenced by the collective memory and aspirations of those involved. In *The City Always Wins*, the revolutionary politics of Chaos collective, Mariam, and Khalil were amplified by their ability to traverse digital platforms and physical spaces. This represents a new form of media activism, responsive to historical moments and pressures. The revolution was not contained within the physical boundaries of Tahrir Square; it spread across digital platforms, creating a global echo chamber. This digital aspect allowed for a decentralized, yet coordinated, approach to organizing and narrative-building. It showcased how modern revolutions are fought on multiple fronts, not only in the physical realm but also in the digital world where ideas and narratives are as potent as physical presence.

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Imdad Ullah Khan is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan

Saad Salman is M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Pakistan

Qamarul Zia is Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan