

Aya Elshafei (ELTE): Narrative Construction of the 'Survivor' Identity in Egyptian Women's Stories on Sexual Assaults: A Discourse-Historical Approach

In a culture of patriarchy and conservatism, many victims of sexual violence in Egypt have been silenced because the tendency to blame the victim has been very common over the years. As a result, there was very limited access to the narratives of sexual assault survivors, and hence the 'survivor' voice remained insignificant for a long time. Previous studies on sexual violence narratives have tackled the potentialities of online technology to serve as a medium for 'counter-publics', as Fraser (1990, p.61) puts it, through which girls and women have developed alternative routes to representation and participation in the public sphere, and thus, disseminating counter-hegemonic discourses (e.g. Loney-Howes, 2018; Salter, 2013). In view of this, the present research investigates online stories on sexual violence posted by Egyptian female survivors, an emerging type of narrative that has acted as a catalyst for potential social change, as it has brought about significant legal amendments in the Egyptian Penal Code regarding sexual crimes¹. The study examines the linguistic construction of the 'survivor' identity in 15 stories posted on social media platforms between 2020-2023 in English and Arabic, on three of the major anti-sexual violence pages on social media platforms. Using a discourse-historical approach (DHA), the study investigates the linguistic choices employed by the female survivors in their self-presentation as well as for the representation of their perpetrators in the light of the discursive strategies of perspectivization, nomination, and predication. The analysis reveals a sharp contrast in the representation of the survivors vs. their perpetrators, with the male abuser as the active agent, mostly represented in terms of his manipulateness and 'animalistic' behaviour, while the female survivor as acted upon and represented as the weaker, naïve and gullible participant, mostly pressured by the abuser, feelings of shame, self-blame and the passiveness of society. However, some narratives portrayed women as challenging, determined and sometimes aggressive, in response to their assault. As this case study has only investigated social media narratives as one side of the public sphere and how these personal stories are focalized from the survivors' perspective, the narratives can also be studied in relation to the wider institutionalised 'public' discourse of the local news reports, or in relation to other narratives by survivors from different cultural backgrounds to compare and contrast the strategies used by women to challenge and transform social and legal discourses in different international contexts.

Keywords

sexual violence, social media, women's narratives, discourse-historical approach

References

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¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27726849>