Resisting Tyranny with Laughter: Joker and the Arab Revolutions

Abdelbaqi Ghorab
Department of Languages and Cultures
Lancaster University
a.ghorab@lancaster.ac.uk

Ouissal Harize
Department of Modern Languages and Cultures
Durham University
ouissal.harize@durham.ac.uk

Pain, violence, and laughter in Tod Philips's *Joker* (2019) all indicate the possibility of hiding trauma beneath the veneer of humour. While roaring with allusions to the physical and emotional abuse that Arthur Fleck endured during his childhood, the protagonist's memory appears to be amnesiac of this trauma. Its impact, however, lingers throughout Arthur Fleck's life and forces him to laugh, unintentionally, in moments of stress and distress. Not only does this unintentional laughter supress Arthur's emotions of pain, but it also veils his growing cruelty. This polarization of memory and amnesia and their relationship to the rise of violence can be linked to the Arab revolutions with more emphasis on the recent Algerian protest movement.

Often feted as the Arab Spring, the wave of Arab protests which began in 2011 has drastically altered the course of the area's history. Much like the Joker's accumulation of anger and alienation, the Arab revolutions were a manifestation of peoples' impatience in the face of their governments' failure. The experience, however, plunged the region into disorder and forced activists "to rethink the costs and benefits of popular forms of mobilization against their respective regimes" (El Merzouki 2015, p.282). The strive for change continues with the recent waves of protests that swept the Arab world, since the beginning of 2019. These protests have been marked with a strong emphasis on "peacefulness" and the use of humour as a means of resistance. In

Algeria, the ongoing massive protests that broke out since February 2019, armed with signs, slogans, jokes and smiles in the face of tyranny and oppression have achieved the unthinkable in a historic display of the power of political satire. It toppled the long reigning president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in what has been ‘unofficially’ named *Thawrat Al-Ibtisamah* [the Revolution of Smiles].

Mohamed El Merzouki (2015) rightly points to the challenges that political satire faces in nondemocratic conditions. However, his analysis concludes that political satire in the Arab world is bound to an online public sphere and cannot materialize any form of radical political change (2015, p.295). His thesis puts forth the argument that the lack of a “dialogic relationship” between the governor and the governed entails that “rulers have no imperatives to concede to opposition and can always resort to the use of deadly force to suppress dissenters as in the case of Egypt and Syria” (2015, p.295). Against this position, and in alignment with Mifdal (2016, p.43) and Webber (2013, p.159), we argue that understanding the protest movement in Algeria and its particular use of humour reveals that political satire is capable of adapting to repressive political conditions and transcending its imposed boundaries. Furthermore, the success of the protest movement in bringing down Abdelaziz Bouteflika shows that satire is not only capable of speaking truth to power, it goes beyond being a mere instrument of asserting “self-respect and the spirit of freedom” mobilised by a community that “finds itself under occupation or oppression” (Ziv 1984, p.360), it can be employed to enact a radical political change where other means of resistance failed.

This chapter does not aim at engaging with definitions of humour. However, since our analysis is steered towards highlighting the utilization of political satire, it does engage with theories related to the function of humour. John C. Meyer’s work suggests four categories: (1) Identification (the use of humour by the communicator to identify with their audience), (2) clarification (the function through which the communicator clarifies their position vis-à-vis a certain issue), (3) enforcement (to enforce change in regard to specific issue), and (4) differentiation (a juxtaposition of individuals or groups for the aim of establishing a clear distinction between them) (2000, p.323). This chapter offers an original contribution to the study of political satire by considering the employment of humour as a tool of international solidarity through the Arab reappropriation of a foreign artistic artefact: The Joker. This approach opens up new lines of analysis of *Joker*, and offers a necessary contribution to the ongoing debate on global humour from an Arab lens. As Sulafa Zidani points out, the extensive body on global humour, (Kramer, 2013, Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2016, Shifman *et al.* 2014), the study of political humour in oppressive regimes (Dundes 1971, Pi-Sunyer 1977, Oring 2004), and the academic literature on Arab humour (Kishtainy 1985, Fathi 1991, Kanaana 1990, Shehata 1992), are areas of study that "rarely converse with one another" (Zidani 2020, p.3203).

Laughter, Trauma and the Necessity of Peacefulness

The notion of peacefulness, as an indicator of the Algerian people's willingness to adopt democratic means of challenging the established authoritarian regime, must not be conflated with the movement's inability to resort to violence. We argue that peaceful protests are rather a conscious choice that reflects the constant presence of violence within the nation's collective imagination. Political violence, historically embedded in the nation's colonial and postcolonial memory and its ramifications, force the movement to take hold of the present through humour. Furthermore, as an embedded memory, political violence functions as a cautionary reminder of the nation's possible future. We observe that Arthur's journey of radicalisation begins with peaceful entertainment as a clown and ends with a performance of dissent and radical violence as the Joker. This development is analogous with the potential course of dissent in the MENA region. More importantly, this metamorphosis of the clown persona encourages a careful consideration of the Algerian Hirak movement's adamant reliance on humour and peacefulness in comparison to all other protests in the region. The Joker, whether in the film or in the streets throughout the Arab world, conveys the possibility of a violent retaliation by the oppressed. In Lebanon protestors wore masks or painted their faces in colours similar to Todd Philips' joker. In Iraq, the government took a strong stance against a group of protestors labelled *Al-Jukariyyah* [the Jokerists]. This phenomenon encourages a cautious analysis, as Caroline Bainbridge points out that the Joker "provides an opportunity for projective identification – an evacuation of the toxic malignity felt inside into a character who has been embraced as a valued object, one that enables an enactment of the violent emotional imperatives that threaten to overwhelm the subject with their darkness" (2021, p.60). Furthermore, A closer examination of the Algerian protests reveals another dimension of the popularity of the joker in the Arab world: His struggle with memory and past trauma.

At the opening scene of *Joker*, Arthur Fleck is calmly wearing his makeup as the news announce a state of emergency in the city of Gotham. The city has turned into a slum due to the ubiquitous trash piling up. This emergency here accompanies an exceptionality that might affect the entire city, eventually creating a state of mayhem. This chapter takes the view that, similarly, the national emergency state which began in 1992 in Algeria, and lasted for 19 years, had the same effect of engendering an exceptional situation where violence was rampant and civil rights were frozen. To be sure, Arthur's struggle with depression is blatant where he uses his fingers to, forcefully, shape a smile on his face, as a tear escapes his eye. This forced smile, coupled with the state of emergency, and exceptionality, insinuates the state's role in forcing certain narratives and disciplines on its citizens. As the film develops, we see Arthur's encounter with a group of teenagers who steal his sign and beat him up; it is important here to accentuate the fact that they only physically attack him when they catch him alone in an isolated alley. This emphasis on isolation further highlights the sense of alienation that envelops Arthur, a feeling that would eventually give birth to a violent anarchist.

The scene also probes the struggle of different social classes as they jostle against each other. To be more precise, Arthur does not get attacked by homeless individuals squandered across the city; contrarily, he falls prey, repeatedly, to a physically violent and socially privileged upper class. This depiction of an aggressive upper class tacitly places society's richest stratum as an ally to the state, and an enemy to the lower classes. This hypothesis is further corroborated by the scene that ushers Arthur into the new persona of the Joker; the shooting scene on the train that juxtaposes the clown with three rich men.

First, the location of the altercation places further emphasis on the class struggle in Gotham. The killing takes place underground, in a place that is symbolically befitting for a rat –a dark, uninhabited, and abandoned place. Second, this scene incurs us –the spectators –to analyse the power dynamics that govern social interactions in Gotham as three rich men vituperatively attack Arthur, presuming, that he is weaker than them. Our sympathy with Arthur is sustained by the fact that they were verbally harassing a woman before, which distances the spectators from them. The mockery of Arthur's laughter also insinuates that they are ableist: they see disability as a laughable weakness, and an invitation to mock/abuse the disabled person. Furthermore, the dichotomy of the unwanted rats infesting the city countered by super cats which the city's ruling class suggests as a solution, becomes a powerful symbolic depiction of class struggle when the city descends into chaos. From the undergrounds, after the two police officers get attacked, the surface is flooded with swarms of rioters of different social backgrounds wearing the clown mask. The opening scene of the film rightly warns against the city being overtaken by rats as it has been constantly negligent of its lingering problem.

Joker constructs a socio-politically alienated and mentally disturbed Arthur Fleck. Furthermore, the film problematizes the theme of the manipulation of memory narratives and intertwines it with trauma. This narrative strategy is one of the main reasons behind the massive popularity of the character amongst the protestors in the Arab world. Moreover, the unvoluntary laughing condition that Arthur suffers from masks the true nature of his feelings: He laughs uncontrollably in a manner that, in most instances, opposes his actual psychological state. Arthur's inability to control a prolonged period of laughter rather causes him pain. The choices behind the characterization of Arthur invites a careful analysis as the film deliberately constructs a protagonist that is denied agency over his own ability to express his thoughts properly. Similarly, the Algerian protestors, and by extension protestors in the Arab world, are forced to mask the aggression that they harbour towards their rulers as they take the street to dance and brandish humorous signs, despite the accumulated feelings of humiliation and subjugation.

Arthur's uncontrollable laughter is the result of an unclear incident that he experienced while he was a child. The nature of the incident remains undeterminable despite the fact that he manages to break into a facility in which his mother was hospitalized. There, he obtains documents that indicate that he was abused; his mother's complicity poignantly severs his ties with the only person he trusted. The roots behind Arthur's condition entices Arab protestors to identify with him on the basis of trauma and memory/amnesia. The film muses with the notion of the manipulation of memory and the unreliability of narration. Arthur's struggle to rebuild his personal history goes in tandem with the spectators' endeavours to discern reality from Arthur's fantasies. The authenticity of the documents that Arthur obtains cannot be verified. Furthermore, Portraying Thomas Wayne as Arthur's potential father, while suggesting that Arthur was abused by his mother's boyfriend, tacitly vilifies Wayne. The film reinforces this claim when Arthur and Thomas meet in the bathroom of a theatre. It is worth noting that during the only instances when the two characters are presented in the same location, Thomas attacks Arthur after denying Penny's allegation. The sequencing of scenes instantly changes location from the bathroom to Arthur's apartment. There, Arthur is depicted in the same position that he was in after he was attacked by Thomas. In Arthur's mind, regardless of whether Wayne is his actual father or not, Wayne is a source of both physical and emotional harm.

To zoom on the similarities between Arthur's experience, and the Algerian national experience of trauma, it is important to explore the amnesic aspects of Arthur's journey. Arthur's trauma is only worsened by his forgetfulness of his history of physical and emotional abuse. His behavioural turbulences are exacerbated by his knowledge of what has happened to him. Similar to Arthur's struggle with his past, the events of the Black Decade in Algeria are problematic. Lost in two opposing narratives, and endless conspiracy theories that try to make sense of the illogical, unfathomable spree of killing that took lives on both sides. Moreover, the policy of censoring the media gave room to a burgeoning preference of conspiracy theories and severely dented the bond of trust between the people and their government.

The Black Decade, along with the experience of the Arab Spring, left many Algerians disillusioned with the idea of democratic change. These two experiences, most importantly the Black Decade, rather contributed negatively to a complete abandonment of political engagement. Consequently, the Algerian society developed a distorted sense of citizenship that contradicts its very basic premise (Chaaban 2017, p.161 ; Gaith 2016, 52). Abstaining from voting became an act of integrity and patriotism as the notions of the nation and the state developed into two distinct constructs (Bekkis 2020, p.17). Whereas the state constitutes of an entity, represented by political institutions that monopolize power; the nation is cultivated as the imaginary community that is subjugated, rather than governed, by the state.

The Black Decade, the name used to refer to the period that span from the end of the 1980s till the beginning of the new millennium, was a period of civil unrest in Algeria. The bloodshed culminated in approximately 200 thousand casualties when the primary elections' victorious Islamist party the FIS picked up arms against the regime. The latter, led by high officials within the Algerian army, intervened and stopped the electoral process. Since then, the state monopolized the Black Decade's narrative and justified the army's actions when combating terrorism (Gèze 2020, p.51). Furthermore, it continues to exploit the residual trauma of the Black Decade to govern by politics of fear. When protestors took the streets on February 22nd, the regime strategically evoked painful memories of the Arab spring and the Black Decade. However, Algerian protestors responded with a continuous mocking of the regime in order to undermine its legitimacy and morality while insisting on the uniqueness of the Hirak. Laughter was tactically used to explore the perilous paths of national memory, the killing sprees of the 1990s, and the duplicitous policies of the military and the government were all nothing but a joke; to be mocked, belittled, and defied.

Painful Laughter in the Arab World

"We -the poor- are laughing because of our misfortunes, like Roosters whose hearts hold on to hope, despite the sharp knife on their necks" sings the Egyptian Sheikh Imam, in one of his most famous songs of *Iltizām* [Engagement]: *Why Does the Sea Laugh?* The verses seamlessly - demonstrate how humour has been used as a coping mechanism in the Arab world. Oddly, despite resorting to humour as an escape, the singer Sheikh Imam, and the poet who wrote the song Nagib Sorour were both sentenced to 18 and 14 years in prison, respectively. Humour is taken very seriously by Arab dictatorships. To focus more on Algeria, the country's history of violence is steeped in its decolonial war and the ten-year period of civil unrest; laughter rose as a major tool of surviving unbearable life, but also as a subversive tool of dissent. A major category of humour that emerged from the ruthlessness of the cycle of terror and counterterror during the 1990s in Algeria is deeply rooted in self-deprecation and laughing at one's own tragedy. Most of the jokes about the Black Decade centre on helpless victims whose sense of danger makes them do or say funny things to save their lives from the terrorists (Perego 2018).

Despite the carnivalesque atmosphere that characterizes the ongoing protest movement, laughter in Algeria is not exclusive to its quasi-therapeutic efficiency while coping with social unrest. Political jokes have become a major cultural constituent of the Algerian street. Humour therefore can also create a more liberated alternative to social space similar to the Carnival in Bakhtin theory; Badarneh explains that "Carnival was characterized by festivity and laughter, which created an arena where free expression of non-legitimated voices could resist and even mock the dominant elite. It was a forum which opposed the official hierarchy that presented everything as unified, ideal, and fixed" (2011, p.308). Similarly, Takovski explains: "It is through humor, burlesque, Menippean satire and absurdity, that the political carnivalesque challenges power, reduces fear, and creates a joyful, inviting, alternative space" (2019, p.488). Arguably, the wave of satirical political jokes began with the reign of president Chadli Benjedid. Blamed for the country's economic crisis, Algeria's third president became the protagonist of endless jokes. By the same token, the reign of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika also witnessed an upsurge in political jokes; mainly through social media where youtubers systematically used their videos to satirise the country's socio-political status quo. Memes, as a new form of cultural production, have also been used to express dissent and to diminish people's dread of the state. Linda Hutcheon clarifies: "satire has the potential to offer a challenge to the hierarchy of the very 'sites' of discourse, a hierarchy based in social relations of dominance" (1994, p.30). Just like Arthur Fleck's position of marginality, these satirical cultural productions come from a position of the alienated citizens aiming at subverting the narrative of the political centre. Similar to Arthur's transition to the Joker through laughter and dissent, political satire has been the first step of transitioning towards a nation-wide revolution in Algeria.

The use of humour in protests is a form of self-scrutinization that aims at dismantling the sociological alienation that the regime carefully architected and imposed on Algerians. Jokes and memes which millions of Algerians displayed on signs, graffiti, banners and on social media, mock the absurdity of the current political and social situation. This practice hides a repressed anger and an embedded self-hatred cultivated by years of colonialism and a failed post-colonial state. Bekkis and Rezki (2020) offer a sociological analysis of the excessive use of humour and mockery during Bouteflika's era. They argue that the culture of mocking an imaginary collective self, an Algerian self, first and foremost, aims at constructing "a homogenous self" which Algerians tend to project on their nationals as a way of at establishing sociological belonging (2020, p.34). Although derived from a sense of hate towards the self and the imaginary collective Algerian self, this practice is a coping mechanism that justifies, first, one's own inadequacy and inability to initiate a socio-political change and offers "a sense of satisfaction towards the self and society as a whole" as the notion of collective inadequacy absolves the individual from guilt (Bekkis and Rezki 2020, p34).

Second, it is a desperate attempt at salvaging an imaginary collective self under an oppressive regime that sought, for decades, to prevent the construction of a harmonious society capable of embracing its diverse sociological organisms.

When analysing psychological habits that develop under oppressive regimes, Mustafa Hijazi makes a similar, yet more generalized, thesis when it comes to the sense of oppression that coexists with citizenship in the Arab world. Hijazi argues that "the essence of oppressiveness resides in a constant search for a perpetrator to blame for the internalized and accumulated sense of aggression" (2005, p.51). The oppressed "projects the feelings of guilt and self-hatred on the other, not the oppressor but the similar, the oppressed other. The latter becomes the target of internalized aggression and hatred. The aim is the destruction of the rejected image of the self which the oppressed other mirrors" (Hijazi 2005, p.52). The culture of excessive mockery and self-scrutiny which Algerians exhibited during Bouteflika's era manifested an aggression towards a collective self. However, it signified the failure of the regime in fracturing the sense of collectiveness which would later become one of the Hirak movement's fortes.

When protesting, Algerians were not solely mocking the president and his entourage, satire also targeted the protestors themselves and Algerians in general regardless of their ethnic, social or economic backgrounds. The practice of excessive mockery and self-scrutiny is a cultural practice that did not emerge during the Hirak. On the contrary, it is a social practice that reached its peak during Bouteflika's era. The Hirak however, adjusted its purpose from a negative cultural practice which the regime encouraged as the epitome of subjugation, to a weaponized form of protests that constructs and sustains a national sense of unity and resistance. This shift signals the disregard of the possible outcome of the protestors' own safety as they risk imprisonment or the decent into violence.

Performing the Joker in Protests

Laughter was particularly used as a valve of respite during the Arab revolutions (Jones 2017). It goes beyond a mere means of coping since humour is mobilised to probe intricate socio-political issues during very turbulent times. Consequently, laughter has been liberatory, didactic, punitive, and most importantly, cautionary. What is particularly interesting is the wilful adoption of a symbol coming from the West. The Algerian Hirak has been adamant about mobilising "Algerianness" as a way of warding off any foreign intervention, especially that of French media. This identification with the Joker is rooted in two important factors: Gotham is perceived as an independent heterotopia, and the Joker has practically become an archetypal revolutionary figure.

Arthur's transitioning journey from a vulnerable clown to a dangerous criminal is interluded by several ritualistic scenes. The first of which is the scene of dancing after begetting his first gun, a phallic symbol *par excellence*. Arthur's empowerment, and regained agency, as he holds a gun and dances is paired with the mysterious disappearance of his hematomas which have marked his back prior to getting the gun. That is to say, his readiness to protect himself *through* violence is almost curative. Furthermore, after killing the three businessmen on the subway, Arthur performs another dance in a public bathroom. The slow dance with a poignant feeling etched to it, is almost a rite of passage from one personality to another: an acceptance of his new violent persona. Amanda Howell comments that Arthur's dancing is a process of "remaking himself," a performance of triumph for an "imagined audience" (2021, p.81). As the dance ends, Arthur looks at the mirror, absorbing the reflection of a disturbed clown, as if greeting his new identity. The following dancing sequences are more empowered, the movements are more audacious and even performed in public. Each dance is either followed or preceded by a murder.

Similar to Arthur's experience of estrangement, all Arab revolutions, began with the systemic alienation of citizens by denying them any right in decision making. The crowds that decided to wear masks in solidarity and identification with the Joker aim at appearing as *one*, advocating a collective cause behind the fight instead of an individual one. Like Arthur's acceptance of the Joker through ritualistic dancing, the protestors' peaceful and creative performances enable them to embrace a collective self. The Joker is therefore a mere vehicle of a shared sense of desperation, alienation, and a roaring anger. The protestors who dressed up as the Joker in Iraq, Algeria, and Lebanon are not any different from the characters who supported Arthur in the film. They are conveying that social injustice and disillusionment have severed their ties with their governments, they are subtly transmitting one message: reforms or anarchy. The message is sent through the Joker banners, the attire, and the makeup; becoming the Joker -in protests- is therefore a performance of dissent: a cautionary gesture to express the crowd's readiness for total anarchy if their demands remain unheeded.

Although the "kill the rich" movement seems to have been started fortuitously by the Joker, the transition of Arthur to the Joker, in itself, is analogous with the life journey of all revolutions: it is the direct result of years of alienation, marginalisation and falling victim to unfair policies. In the Joker's conversation with the comedy show host Franklin Murray, the Joker ponders the question of the valorisation of life itself as he juxtaposes his precarious life to rich people's grieveable life: "If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me". The same concept is used over and over throughout the Algerian Revolution of Smiles as millions of people confront the state with its culpability in rendering life unbearable in Algeria. Just like the trash piling up the streets of Gotham, mental illness, acute alienation, and anger were proliferating till they finally exploded in a violent combustion of complete anarchy. The Joker, as a symbol of rebellion, is therefore not the disease, but rather a symptom of social injustice.

Interestingly, the riots in Gotham demonstrate people's choice of violence even before the state turns to coercion in order to squelch demonstrations. This goes in tandem with *Joker*'s shift in defining the role of laughter during distressful times; it is not only used to maintain a sense of normalcy, quite the contrary, it is used to announce a state of complete irrationality and anomaly. The Joker was adopted by Arab revolutionaries because he is an oxymoronic figure of vulnerability and power. It is important here to muse with the question of morality vs. rationality; although violence is not moral, under extreme circumstances, it might seem rational to revolutionaries. Whereas the Joker rose as an embodiment of desperation, alienation and rebellion, Gotham has become a symbolic representation of all corrupt states.

While Saudi spectators were reported to laugh alongside Arthur in each of his sporadic laughing scenes (Abid 2019), protestors in Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq dressed up as Joker in performances of dissent (Ussakli 2020). These performances of the joker in protests became a way of connecting all revolutions. Ironically, in view of the film's representation of violence, the fear of anarchy was openly expressed in Iraqi media after the film's popular reception, a fear that divulged the worrisome knowledge that there are many alienated youngsters awaiting the final instigation to resort to violence. Furthermore, social media was also used to creatively claim the Joker as an Arab; photoshopped images placed the Joker in the Medina in Tangier, standing next to Egyptian food carts, and in the protests of Iraq with the flames behind him in the background. One of the most viral images is designed by the 25 year old Iraqi graphic designer Ahmed Shwqy who shared the photoshopped image of Joker partaking in an agitated protest, the caption says "The Joker exits the cinema to join protesters on the streets of Baghdad" (Bedirian 2019)· This adoption of Joker's violence is rooted in the concept of *Al ʿUnfuwān Al Thawrī* [revolutionary zealousness], a concept which began with the Arab decolonial revolutions and continues to be widely shared and idealised throughout the Arab world. This takes us back to the equation of rationality vs. morality, which also features in *Joker*. Arthur's mental illness blurs his moral judgement, arguably, the state of continuous repression of the peoples' civil rights, ends up engendering a similar state of exceptional rationalization of violence.

Hence, Joker as a performance in Arab protests, is cautionary in its nature. It serves as a reminder of the possibility of violent *ʿUnfuwān* [zealousness], if the state does not heed the people's demands. Whereas laughter has been used as a valve of survival in the Arab world, with the new wave of upheavals, people are demonstrating their knowledge of this utilitarian laughter, and are consciously taking it a step further to strategically use it as a way of demeaning the tight grip of dictatorships. Unlike Arthur's transition into the violent persona of the Joker, recent Arab protests have taken an opposite journey of maturity. The Algerian Hirak, for example, has demonstrated an adamant insistence on peacefulness throughout the protests, despite the possibility of a bitter resort to violence. To this end, the Joker has become a serviceable vehicle to express the pressing need for political change. A need that can only be supressed by a *soupçon* of guilt from past traumas. To conclude, we wish to end with an emphasis on the reason why the Joker has been embraced by Arab revolutions despite a growing animosity to Western symbols. The past histories of trauma, political violence, and state oppression of people in the region have all colluded to create a deep sense of alienation, despair and anger shared, especially, by the new generation. The Joker was therefore adopted as a symbol of dissent to mock and challenge Arab dictatorships.

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