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RADICAL RHETORIC: TOWARD A TELOS OF SOLIDARITY

NOOR GHAZAL ASWAD

Transnational rhetorical scholarship has yet to enact meaningful solidarity with the subaltern. “Inclusionary” efforts have actively excluded what I term the “radical subject,” the subject revolting against repressive hegemonic forces to achieve liberatory change in society. Without privileging the radical subject and a critique of freedom over a critique of domination, hegemonic narratives continue uninterrupted. This paper turns toward the Syrian revolution to illustrate how critical rhetoric does not stretch far enough for the radical subject. I propose a radical rhetorical paradigm that centers the radical subject’s lived knowledge as determining meaning. This approach realizes the wisdom in relinquishing skepticism during the critical reasoning process by placing the radical subject as the starting point in inquiry in contested spaces where negotiation over meaning is ongoing. It acknowledges the radical subject’s testimony as born of the epistemic relevance of social location and the boundedness of knowledge. The radical rhetorical approach consecrates the epistemologies of the radical subject as inculcating the imperative for action on behalf of the oppressed.

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Listen, listen oh sniper, this is my neck and this is my head.

—Abdul Baset Sarout to the regime forces posted around the clock tower in
Homs during early protests

In the early months of 2011, the Syrian revolution erupted like a fever in the country, to the shock of many who had taken the absence of political resistance as unthinking assent toward the persecution of the Assad regime. Many doubted the Arab spring would reach Syria, a single-party police state where civil society was severely curtailed and the military was deeply infused with the regime.¹ Eventually, the aggrieved segments of Syrian society took to the streets in protest. As put by musical icon Samih Choukair, “*the youth o’mother heard that freedom was at the gate, so they went out to chant for it.*”² Though initially only demanding political reforms, as Syrians were goaded further into revolt, they began to demand an overthrow of the regime. Within months, the brutal repression carried out by the Syrian state against protestors had become so violent that the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon exclaimed “we no longer count days in hours, but in bodies.”³ As of 2016, the latest estimates on the death toll indicated more than 400,000 had been killed, after which the UN stopped counting.⁴

Somewhat surprisingly, the Syrian revolution has not found itself easily accommodated within the milieu of critical rhetoric. Critical rhetoric, a synecdoche of recent efforts to rehabilitate rhetoric within contemporary rhetorical theory, engages in a simultaneous critique of domination and freedom to demystify discourses of power and oppression. Introduced by Raymie McKerrow in the 1980s, it was devised with the intent of escaping “the trivializing influence of universalist approaches” and is arguably best positioned to resolve our static understandings of transnational social movements.⁵ However, critical rhetoricians have yet to produce a reading of the Syrian revolution from the perspective of those who resisted the Assad regime. Scholarship, including my own, has relied on the discourses of the empowered.⁶ Moreover, despite the importance of a critique of freedom in critical rhetoric, in its praxis, critical rhetoric has engendered a neglect of the censured “radical subject” in tandem with the expected workings of hegemonic frameworks. The radical subject, a key term I explicate in this essay, is a specific category of subject able to discern the

exigencies of oppressive rhetorical situations and act with embodied agency to alleviate these oppressions, often at risk of death and/or injury. As will be illustrated, critical readings of the revolution have mirrored oppressive hierarchies through denying the Syrian radical subject competency in providing *determinative* analysis of their revolution. As put by Yassin Al Haj Saleh, a former political prisoner and key revolutionary figure:

Either there is no value to what we say, or we are confined to lesser domains of knowledge. . . mere sources for quotations that a Western journalist or scholar can add to the knowledge he produces. . . in order to sound authentic, but rarely do they draw on our analysis.⁷

Indeed, in spite of the overwhelming amount of firsthand documentation by activists on the ground, the Syrian revolution has been notoriously misunderstood, allowing hegemonic narratives dismissing the revolution to continue uninterrupted.⁸ These hegemonic narratives, even at the initial stages of peaceful protest, insinuated Syrian revolutionaries were Islamic extremists, with no “good guys,”⁹ proxies of Western imperialism, and/or belittled the human right abuses against protestors.¹⁰ The Syrian radical subject has categorically spoken out denying these characterizations of their revolution. In several respects, the Syrian revolution illustrates critical rhetoric’s inability to rupture deeply entrenched biases in hegemonic narratives. With this in mind, the Syrian revolution is selected not as an act of private piety but rather as an example of a rhetorical performance that lies just beyond critical rhetoric’s interpretive capabilities. And so, this essay explores how a well-intentioned quest to inhibit deterministic understandings of history has enabled a detachment from material realities and a moral ambiguity retaining the privilege of those in power. Most importantly, I explore how it has undermined our ability to stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable humans in the Global South, be they refugees, immigrants, and/or revolutionaries.

A RADICAL RHETORICAL PARADIGM

Remember me when you celebrate the fall of the regime. . . And remember that I gave my soul and blood for that moment.

—Ghiyath Matar

I propose a radical rhetorical paradigm constitutively informed by the Syrian situation and the Syrian radical subject who has resisted and protested Assad's rule and yet has been systematically ignored. As a rhetorical performance, the Syrian revolution enacts a theory of its own possibilities, an expression of a liberatory moment in history where radical subjects rose from under an authoritarian regime's historic eclipse. Radical rhetoric emerges from a space of liminality, retrieving elements of both modernist and postmodernist rhetorical theory, while also crossing beyond these considerations. Radical rhetoric does not necessarily exist "post" critical rhetoric but opens a space within rhetorical studies for liberatory transnational social movements.

Radical rhetoric's recognition of the radical subject, an autonomous subject who discerns the exigencies of oppressive rhetorical situations and acts with agency to alleviate these oppressions, is of primary importance. The radical subject's autonomy exists despite and notwithstanding their existence as a historicized social actor experiencing "self-renewal and... a revolution to change reality."¹¹ The radical subject's agency is not illusionary but has a corporeal quality arising from purposeful political action in the face of formidable constraints. I restrict considerations of the radical subject to one who hails from historically oppressed communities, is in crisis, and is revolting against repressive hegemonic forces. As a "subject(s)-in-revolution,"¹² the radical subject risks death, injury, and/or imprisonment to create liberatory social change in society. Abdul Baset Sarout, a national football player who became one of the symbolic figures of the revolution, embodied these sentiments when he famously decided to put his life on the line to break the siege of Homs and liberate the city from regime control: "I decided that I would return, in solidarity with those under siege, that *we would starve and even die with each other* and if God granted us liberation then we would all be liberated together."¹³

Radical subjects are not located at an unmoving center, as all subjects are in permanent states of transition. The radical subject only exists at a moment in time, emerging out of extraordinary, revolutionary events in history. By identifying the radical subject in this manner, I am inviting "new participants into the conversation."¹⁴ Omar Aziz, an anarchist who led the move to democratic self-governance in Syria, defines the juncture from which the radical subject emerges as an "exceptional event that will alter the history of societies, while changing humanity itself. It is a rupture in time and space. . . to move into a new era."¹⁵

I identify an attendant *conditionality* placed on the radical subject within critical rhetoric's "critique of freedom" that has prevented a shift of master-narratives on the Syrian revolution. Fundamentally, the terms under which critical rhetoric's "inclusionary" efforts operate have actively and materially excluded the radical subject, a subject whose agency is already circumscribed and subverted by hegemonic forces. A central axiom of critical rhetoric is its decentering of the subject as a form, and not substance. Though not eliding the subject entirely, the oxymoron of its treatment of the subject has been its Achilles' heel.¹⁶ McKerrow states "the individual, as subject, does play a role in the revised conception of rhetoric as corporeal, *but is not the starting point for such a revision.*"¹⁷ That is to say, the radical subject's embodied rhetoric is expected, indeed, dictated, to not be the primary or "responsible" means of creating meaning.¹⁸

Conversely, within radical rhetoric, I propose that an exhaustive inclusion of a kaleidoscope of discursive formations is not a sign of health¹⁹ but rather a case of magnetic interference that deflects the compass away from the material reality inherent in the condition of marginality. Without privileging the radical subject over a critique of domination, we will never intuit the material localities of the radical subject. Without centering the radical subject as an active knower, as one whose lived knowledge determines, as opposed to has "bearing" on meaning (to borrow from Linda Alcoff),²⁰ we obviate a recovery of the totality of the radical subject's lived experience. Foregrounding the radical subject is the only way to balance the favored discursive constructions of those "who move(s) with the least friction and the most favor in the field of rhetoric" with the counterhegemonic articulations of the oppressed.²¹ As such, this essay is based on one premise: the urgency for rhetorical paradigms to propel us toward a telos of solidarity with the radical subject. In what follows, I posit this is achieved within a radical rhetorical paradigm that acknowledges the radical subject's testimony as a resistive historical actor and the radical subject as the starting point in inquiry. These axioms, interrelated and invoking one another, inculcate solidarity with the radical subject, whenever, wherever, and whomever they might be.

THE RADICAL SUBJECT'S TESTIMONY AS A RESISTIVE HISTORICAL ACTOR

Radical subjects are endowed with the free will to manifest agency through choice and in creative relation to the world—their rhetoric is necessarily

liberatory. Unlike postmodernist notions of agency privileging the relativism and multiplicity of the abstract, this notion of agency is born of the prediscursive ontological positioning anchored in historical, political, and social location. In a radical conception of rhetoric, agency has an embodied apparatus that brings about superior forms of lived knowledge, or *testimony* (*shahada*). The radical subject's testimony has an epistemic realism that simultaneously disauthorizes other voices. Alcoff states that:

Advocacy for the oppressed must come to be done principally by the oppressed themselves. . . The unspoken premise here is simply that a speaker's location is epistemically salient.²²

For Syrian revolutionaries, this means "owning politics,"²³ instantiating a radical political imaginary in which their subjectivity is preserved in its entirety. In other words, their epistemological agency has a relevance born of the boundedness of knowledge. Often, they are the only trusted sources when nation-states deny independent media access and freedom to report on events.²⁴ Trad Al Zahori, an activist cameraman from Homs who diligently covered events from Al-Qalamoun to Eastern Ghouta and eventually Yabroud, discloses how the radical subject is at times the sole source of testimony:

If I don't film this video, who will? And send it to people? But with my brother, when I first started filming, I took the video, the first body was my brother but I didn't realize it. So I started filming the others, suddenly I realized that was my brother. . . This is my brother! Guys, this is my brother! Oh God, Oh God.²⁵

A radical rhetorical approach is conscious of testimony as sacred knowledge, as foundational to epistemological agency. This testimony forms a specific kind of epistemological agency born of the radical subject's visions of their own utopia. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan explains how such subjects produce "critical knowledge, which in turn empowers the voice of suffering to make its own cognitive-epistemological intervention by envisioning its own utopia, rather than accepting an assigned position within the amelioratory schemes proposed by the dominant discourse."²⁶ Yassin Al Haj Saleh

explicates the apprehension he felt writing about the Syrian subject, grappling with an uneasiness about his own “naïve consciousness.”²⁷ His words illustrate the radical subject’s recognition of the power of one’s “shahada,” one’s testimony:

The Syrian revolution released me from such Hegelianisms. For me, naivety has come to mean the *shahada* (testimony) of a witness, my own shahada about what I was part of, and my sense of things when the seemingly impossible *erupted into vivid existence* in my country. The impossible was a revolution.²⁸

Elsewhere, he describes the experiential state of cognition of Syrian radical subjects who have not been given a “single day of reprieve. Not one day has passed without Syrians being killed by airstrikes or under torture. We are not distant from these events, and *we have not had time to catch our breath and look around*, to check on ourselves and on our neighbors, *to think about where we are and ponder the path* that has taken us to where we are today.”²⁹ The “imminent realism” of their testimony is directly implicated in the superiority of the radical subject’s lived knowledge.³⁰ They are wholly formed through their discourse, and their discourse wholly forms them.

Importantly, radical subjects are not ahistorical autonomous beings, but rather their autonomy exists *notwithstanding* their existence as historicized social actors, that is, their ontological and epistemological groundings are from within a historical context that intimately knows their oppressor. As such, the radical subject is enmeshed in circumstance, place, time, and society. However, the radical subject is *not* an empty vessel whose actions are *wholly* attributable to his subjectivation by his society and culture. Resistance cannot be both against oppressive power and also *completely* a dependent function of it.³¹ Thus, though existing *in situ* and not *in vacuo*, the radical subject is able to act in a politically resistive manner to hegemonic norms.

One story that surfaces here is the mythic story of the start of the revolution when schoolboys in the rural province of Daraa spray-painted “You are next, doctor” (in reference to Bashar Al Assad) on their school walls, hopeful at the wave of protests in the Arab world. The next day, they were taken by security forces to the regional mukhabarat (security) headquarters. The city elders pleaded for the boys’ release. Instead, the local mukhabarat chief Atef

Najib told the parents “forget you have children. And if you want new children in their place, then send your wives over and we’ll impregnate them for you.”³² The affront spread like wildfire in the conservative society of Daraa. Local protests exploded seemingly from nowhere. Hamza Al Khatib, a pudgy 13-year-old who participated with his father in these antiregime protests, was detained. Frantic, his family begged authorities to release him. In response, his dead body was delivered to his family, peppered in burn marks and gunshot wounds, his jaw and kneecaps shattered, and his genitals severed. Al Khatib’s family distributed a video of his battered purple body with the realities of his torture evident.³³ The images of his dead body thrust the protests from an “abyss of potentiality” to the actuality of revolution.³⁴

I do not bring these stories to light to spur empathetic responses but to signify the rhetorical significance of the body’s testimony—as holding “truth,” nonperspectival *alethia*. The reality of torture exists “independent of our consciousness of it.”³⁵ If radical subjects are “not the center of all experience and change,”³⁶ if their texts are only a “fragment” of the truth, what other “forms” better stand at that mantle? More critically, this testimony permits a specific kind of epistemological agency in which *the “body” can articulate cerebral ideas, thoughts and concepts*. The radical subject here is an “active knower,”³⁷ and no omniscient perspective is needed to ascertain their truth.

On the other hand, critical rhetoric has existed *apart* from the categories of “truth” or “knowledge,”³⁸ making no attendant reference to nondiscursively deployed realities.³⁹ It has shifted away from theories on the autonomy of the individual toward a Foucauldian “discursive turn” where ethical, political, and social knowledge is not based on an a priori abstract truth.⁴⁰ For example, McKerrow postulates one cannot determine whether certain “regimes” have legitimacy or not, alleging “the world of the social is not this simple.”⁴¹ In such scenarios, the normative ideal of discursive formations has become more relevant than the epistemologies of the radical subject. Therefore, one of the limitations of critical rhetoric is that though it may pay lip service to epistemological agency, it is in fact on hiatus in its praxis. Epistemological agency is given to institutional bodies, academics, and their “discursive formations.”⁴² Though Foucault, for example, saw power everywhere, in his analyses, he prioritized the university and helping professions.⁴³ These professions are more often than not dominated by Western, white, cis-gender men in Europe and the United States who

exhibit assumptions embedded in the judicial and public sphere.⁴⁴ Indeed, most dismissive critical readings of the revolution have been by well-respected intellectuals, journalists, and academics, including Noam Chomsky, Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn, and Seymour Hersh, to name a few. Another case in point here is Slavoj Žižek, an esteemed intellectual who confidently asserts the Syrian people have no “radical-emancipatory” voice and that the Syrian revolution is ultimately a “pseudo-struggle.”⁴⁵ Even within critical rhetoric and other progressive spaces, we find no differentiation between the forms of the “specific intellectual” and the forms of the social actor engaged in political action.⁴⁶ As will be explored in the next section, this apparent “equality” of positionalities, though seemingly egalitarian, enables hegemonic frameworks to endure uninterrupted.

THE RADICAL SUBJECT AS A STARTING POINT IN INQUIRY

Following the premises explicated above, I put forth radical rhetorical theory as necessarily centralizing radical subjects, sensitively listening to their truths as opposed to hiding them under philological bushels or viewing them with critical suspicion. The invitation to rhetorical listening enacts a “stance of openness” where one “stands under” discourses listening not for what one can agree or disagree with but rather “for the exiled excess.”⁴⁷ This is not to say that radical subjects should not be answerable to critical contemplation but that they should be given the ethic of decolonial love, that is, the same privilege furnished to mainstream orders of knowledge.⁴⁸ In comparison, critical rhetoric holds that vernacular discourses within a critique of freedom should be subject to the same suspicion given to hegemonic discourses.⁴⁹ What this does not consider is that hegemonic discourses have always and already been afforded a privileged space. In radical rhetorical paradigms, we counteract by not constraining the radical subject who requires higher orders of hearing and theorization to be on a level playing field with those in elevated positions in “hierarchies of civilizations.”⁵⁰

Noam Chomsky is a provocative illustration of the necessity of centering the radical subject. Remember that Chomsky participated in the denial of the Khmer Rouge’s brutality toward Cambodians, dismissing their agency and veracity of their narratives. In reference to stories of Cambodians who had escaped the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, he stated that

“refugees are frightened and defenseless, at the mercy of alien forces. They naturally tend to report what they believe their interlocuters wish to hear.”⁵¹ Similarly, he has dismissed the voices of Syrian revolutionaries, insisting their revolution is indistinguishable from atrocities committed by Da’esh, a narrative Syrian revolutionaries have repeatedly denounced.⁵² Of note here is that Chomsky’s admitted source on Syria has been the Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn,⁵³ resulting in a phenomenon that Syrian activist Leila Al Shami has called “old white men who rely on each other for their news about Syria, rather than actually talking to Syrians.”⁵⁴ One might even call it “epistemic coloniality.”⁵⁵ Riad al Turk, a prominent Syrian opposition leader (“Syria’s Mandela”) captures the hermeneutics of decolonial love with which one must engage the radical subject:

Now we face a people emerging from their silence, are developing their own language, inventing their slogans and forms of action. *Let us listen to them carefully, walk with them and not ahead of them and forbid ourselves to hijack their voices to our benefit.*⁵⁶

By insisting on absolute relativism, critical rhetoric insists we must not “privilege one form of ‘rationality’ apart from others.”⁵⁷ Within critical rhetoric, subjects are bracketed to give space to those who have the corollary privilege of detachment and presumed objectivity as opposed to affording the radical subject a privileged position in “truth-calculations.”⁵⁸ This “unmitigated rhetorical relativism” contends all are on an equal footing, diminishing the epistemologies of those closest to oppression.⁵⁹ Those already implicated in the dominant discourses and who are detached from the historied nature of conflict are given equal and unearned considerations of credibility. McKerrow indicates the subject contributes to “the intersection of truth rather than the being that finds truth.”⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas shows how a concern with the multiplicity of perspectives proffers an indifference to others:

It all happens as though the multiplicity of persons. . . were the condition for the fullness of “absolute truth,” as though each person, through his uniqueness, ensured the revelation of a unique aspect of the truth, and that certain sides of it would never reveal themselves if certain people were missing from mankind.⁶¹

Though privileging *all* forms of rationality echoes an ethos of inclusivity,⁶² in broadening the possibilities of what “counts,” we relegate to lower dominion those with intimate knowledge of crises and social movements. Critical rhetoric’s “inclusive” ethos hovers too close to the institutional standards that have demonstrably marginalized the radical subject time and time again. Radical rhetoric draws this distinction: *the rhetoric of the radical subject should be consecrated above that of others as a starting point in the search for the nonrelativized truth*. As put by Edward Said, “if power oppresses and controls and manipulates, then everything that resists it is not morally equal to power, is not neutrally and simply a weapon against that power.”⁶³ The Syrian revolutionaries who protested against the sclerotic Assad regime, even as they were being shot in cold blood, are not “insane rhetors” as McKerrow claims,⁶⁴ but surely heroes.⁶⁵ Their rhetoric should be bestowed positional superiority so we may “listen closely to prophetic traces of the hieroglyphics of the flesh.”⁶⁶

By designating the radical subject’s discursive formations doxastic, critical rhetoric introduces ontological ambiguity into interpretations of radical epistemologies, sanitizing their “irrational” aspects. The radical subject’s emancipatory discourse rarely aligns with normative scripts of resistance, triggering anxieties that lie at the heart of Euro-American reason. Particularly within the Global South, orientalist tendencies have eased the downplaying of the Syrian radical subject.⁶⁷ Due to the nature of hegemony, the *decentralization of radical subjects compounds the negation of their discourse*, retaining the inherent precarity of these subjects even among those who stand in solidarity with them. The radical subject is therefore afforded a subordinate reading within normative discourses of hegemonic voices of authority. Radical rhetoric is a vital countercorrecting mechanism to the peripheralization of the radical subject as one reading within a constellation of other readings. It is only through the centering of their rhetoric that we resituate radical subjects in spaces where “negotiation over memory and meaning” is ongoing.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

Within critical rhetoric, skepticism has become an end in and of itself with no substantive telos at the end of its practice.⁶⁹ What critical rhetoric is missing is a conviction that actions of solidarity are the meaningful

conclusion of a *process* that purposively values the alternative ontologies and epistemologies of the radical subject above other determinations. Without practicing the ethic of decolonial love, critical rhetoric is handicapped in its ability to initiate solidarity with the radical subject. We cannot place the vernacular discourses of the radical subject on the same plane of suspicion as mainstream discourses and hope to transformatively inculcate action on their behalf. It is precisely here I identify the rhetorical “disconnect” of what critical rhetoric purports and what its rhetorical practices entail—a jadedness toward radical subjects. With this, a radical rhetorical paradigm is closer to enacting the emancipatory ends of rhetoric’s critical turn. We must establish a practice of rhetoric that agitates toward creating a space for us all to become “cognitive revolutionaries” by relinquishing skepticism during the reasoning process, so we might become vulnerable to the voices of others.⁷⁰

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