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The Body and Power in Tunisia: From Discipline to Rebellion and Freedom

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Abstract

This article traces the transformation of the relationship between the body and power in Tunisia, from a condition of subjection to control and surveillance—through appearance, behavior, and presence in public space before the revolution—to a means of political and social expression during the uprising. The revolution marked a decisive turning point, as the body became a tool of protest and a direct vehicle for political expression, whether through its mass presence in the streets, hunger strikes, self-immolation as an outcry against injustice and exclusion, or the act of undressing as a form of dissent. Despite the reemergence of certain mechanisms of control after the revolution, the body continues to play a central role in the public sphere, particularly in artistic fields such as theater and cinema, where it is mobilized to expose both symbolic and physical violence, to reclaim lost dignity, and to contribute to the construction of a counter-memory. Thus, the body is no longer merely a biological entity subjected to discipline; it has become a social agent that negotiates with power, resists it, and redefines the meanings of presence in the public domain.

Keywords

Body;Power;Revolution;Control;Resistance

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Introduction

Since the early days of the national state in Tunisia, the body has never been a mere biological entity subjected to social organization; rather, it has functioned as a sensitive site where power and meaning intersect—where obedience, resistance, representation, and exclusion unfold. In authoritarian systems, the body is reduced to symbolic functions: discipline, compliance, and appearing as the state desires. Yet the revolutionary moment that erupted in December 2010 marked a qualitative rupture with this paradigm. The body reasserted itself not as an object of surveillance or a tool of spectacle, but as a political agent.

In the Tunisian context, the body thus transitioned from submission to agency, from invisibility to public presence, and from docility to protest—becoming a key locus for reconfiguring the relationship between the individual and the state, between the private and the public, and between power and resistance.This corresponds with Bahri (2022), who emphasizes that bodily representations in Arab societies are not isolated phenomena but are historically shaped by religious, institutional, and cultural forces, especially through the long-term processes of socialization.

These transformations have raised new theoretical and sociological questions about the meaning of the body, its function, and the modes of its presence in the public sphere—particularly in light of the tensions that marked the post-revolutionary transition, including symbolic battles over the female body, the rebellious body, and the represented body in art, performance, and transitional justice. Has the revolution truly liberated the body from the mechanisms of prior discipline? Or has it merely reproduced them in new forms and under different rhetorical banners? And what does the Tunisian body—through its presence and absence, regulation and liberation—reveal about the trajectories of power, the limits of democracy, and the contradictions of modernity?

Problem Statement

This article departs from a central question:
How has the body, in the Tunisian context before and after the revolution, functioned as a site of intersection between power and resistance, between authoritarian strategies and emancipatory dynamics?
From this core question arise several sub-questions:

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How was the body—both male and female—transformed into a disciplinary tool under the pre-revolutionary authoritarian regime?
In what sense can the revolution be understood as a bodily eruption before being a discursive moment?
How did the revolution reconfigure the symbolic functions of the body, and to what extent have mechanisms of control persisted after 2011?
What role have theater, cinema, and art played in reshaping the representations of the body in the post-revolutionary period?
And has transitional justice succeeded in acknowledging the violated body and restoring its symbolic dignity?

Methodology and Procedures

This article adopts a qualitative analytical methodology, combining both descriptive and qualitative approaches through an examination of bodily manifestations in the Tunisian context before and after the revolution. The research does not rely on direct field tools such as surveys or interviews, but rather on the analysis of non-empirical data, including official discourses, artistic works, and testimonies from transitional justice sessions. The study draws on several theoretical frameworks, such as Michel Foucault (bodily discipline and biopolitics), Pierre Bourdieu (symbolic violence), Judith Butler (the politics of the body), and David Le Breton (the anthropology of the body), allowing the researcher to deconstruct the mechanisms of control and transformation in the relationship between the individual and power through the body.

The strength of the qualitative approach in this context lies in its ability to capture the deep meanings and cultural-political dimensions that cannot be reduced to numbers or indicators. While the descriptive approach provides a foundation for presenting a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon's development, the qualitative method enables an in-depth exploration of the symbolic and social dimensions that accompany bodily experience in the public sphere. Therefore, the choice of this methodological combination appears most appropriate for the nature of the topic, where the body cannot be separated from its representations and multiple meanings—making the qualitative approach more suitable than a purely descriptive one when addressing such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Engineering Obedience: The Body as a Tool of Political Control in Pre-Revolution Tunisia

In the context of the Tunisian state before 2011, the body formed the cornerstone in organizing the relationship between authority and the citizen—not as a mere biological entity, but as a subject of political domestication and a vital field for producing obedience and discipline. In a state built upon strict centralization and tight control over the public sphere, the body was not absent from the tools of governance. Rather, it stood at the core of the authoritarian strategy that aimed to turn it into an "obedient" body—submissive, behaving as the authority dictates, and producing meanings of obedience not through conviction but through institutionalized, continuously monitored practice.

The concept of the body in this context can only be understood within what Michel Foucault calls "disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1975, p. 25), which does not exercise violence only through direct coercive tools, but works to tame and shape bodies through a precise daily system of guidance, observation, and surveillance. The Tunisian body under Ben Ali's state was not a free entity, but a technical subject—an object of control and monitoring. The authority sought to produce a body that expresses "prestige," reproduces "stability," and displays "order" in the finest details of daily life.

This is clearly reflected in the security scene that governed Tunisian streets before the revolution. The state employed the police body not merely as a tool of deterrence but also as a symbol of embodied authoritarian presence (Bourdieu, 1992). The physical presence of police in the streets, at gatherings, in stadiums, and even at wedding celebrations reproduced the same meaning: the body of the state is present—watching, intimidating, and framing. This authoritarian physicality carried a dual dimension: on the one hand, it symbolized "security" according to the official narrative, but on the other, it constantly signaled that the citizen was under watch and that their body was subject to permanent accountability.

On another level, the police apparatus was a central tool in exercising power over bodies, especially through torture in detention centers and prisons. This reality produced a "bodily culture" based on fear, where the body became vulnerable to violation whenever it expressed dissent or deviated from loyalty to the system. In this sense, the body was not only a stage for violence but also a victim of a political-social production that empties the human being of their will and turns them into a subject of bio-political control, as Foucault noted in his analysis of the paths of Western modernity (Foucault, 1976, p. 183).

One of the manifestations of bodily control also includes the organized physical presence in national events, such as official celebrations or major demonstrations organized according to strict bodily protocols. The citizen was required to attend, sit, applaud, and chant slogans according to a predetermined rhythm. Here, bodies turn into theatrical tools that reproduce the image of the state as if it were a single, disciplined body moving as the leadership wishes. This spectacular use of the body reflects an authoritarian logic based on conformity and the erasure of individual distinctions in favor of a submissive collective identity (Le Breton, 1990, p. 54).

The body in pre-revolution Tunisia cannot be discussed without addressing the place of the female body within this authoritarian system. Despite the legal gains achieved by Tunisian women since independence, they continued to be subject to dual surveillance: the authority of the state and the authority of religion. This was especially evident in the symbolic struggle over clothing, particularly the hijab and niqab. During the Bourguiba and Ben Ali periods, the hijab was considered a sign of Islamic political affiliation and was fought under the banners of "modernity" and "national identity." Thus, the female body was reduced to a mirror reflecting the ideological conflict between the state's project and the projects of political Islam.

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The paradox lies in the fact that the state, while opposing Islamic clothing, was at the same time imposing on women's bodies a "civilized" image—one aligned with the Western model, not as a personal choice but as part of a social engineering project that defines what is desirable and what is forbidden. In this context, the female body was understood as a symbolic field of negotiation with the international community as well, where the regime sought to present the image of the "liberated woman" as a sign of Tunisian progress, while in reality it strictly monitored women's choices (Butler, 1990, p. 136).

From here, it becomes clear that the female body was not a subject of empowerment but of representation—used as a symbolic tool to showcase the state's dominance over the private sphere and demonstrate its ability to define "modernity" according to its own vision. Some researchers have even considered these policies a form of "internal colonialism," where power exercises a kind of disciplining over women's bodies in the name of liberation while, in essence, reinforcing a patriarchal logic masked by modernization discourse (Irigaray, 1977).

In this context, clothing was treated as a political sign, not as a personal choice. The hijab was not just a piece of fabric covering the hair—it was interpreted as an indicator of ideological and political affiliation, and thus, the veiled body was subjected to surveillance and exclusion. These practices extended to institutions of education, employment, and administration, turning the female body into a site of silent resistance, or, in many cases, a space of self-denial, as women were forced to remove their hijabs in order to access their basic rights.

As for the male body, it too was subjected to discipline, albeit through different means. The man in pre-revolution Tunisia was expected to embody loyalty to the regime—whether through his dress, behavior, or participation in public events. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the state always seeks to produce "appropriate" bodies for its symbolic requirements—bodies that conform not only to legal standards but also to cultural and political expectations (Bourdieu, 1992).

Thus, physical deviation—such as excessively long hair or wearing out-of-place clothing—was viewed as a threat to public order, not merely a matter of personal taste. This environment contributed to the emergence of what might be called a "culture of bodily discipline," in which individuals from childhood were conditioned to adapt their bodies to the logic of obedience. In school, students were taught how to sit, stand, and when to speak. In public life, they learned to hide expressions of anger or discontent. This bodily culture is not neutral—it constitutes a collective psychological structure that prevents bodies from erupting and subjects them to self-monitoring, which is the most effective outcome of any disciplinary power (Le Breton, 1990, p. 121).

National events are a striking example of this culture, where thousands of bodies were forced to be present in specific places at specific times to perform repeated political rituals. Photographs were taken and broadcasted on television in an effort to create the "illusion of consensus" through the display of the disciplined collective body. In this way, the body transforms from an active agent into a spectacle, from a free subject into a part of a symbolic machine that produces loyalty.

Within this political engineering of the body, it becomes evident that the Tunisian body before the revolution was never absent, but always present—as an object of control, surveillance, and representation. Yet its presence was always dictated by the logic of authority, not of the self. This reality contributed to the development of a bodily-psychological structure based onrepression, which quickly exploded in 2011—the moment the body shifted from a symbol of obedience to a tool of rejection and confrontation, a theme to be addressed in the next section.

The Body in the Moment of Revolution: From Submission to Protest

The Tunisian revolution of December 2010 – January 2011 represented a sudden rupture in the regime of the submissive, disciplined body that had governed individuals' relations with the state for decades. If pre-revolutionary power had constructed its legitimacy on subjugating and surveilling the body, what unfolded during the revolution can be read as an inverse process — the body shifted from being an object of control to a political agent, from a silent entity to a medium of raw, dramatic expression. The body re-emerged as a force of protest, not as a carrier of traditional political discourse, but as a resistant text in itself — exploding power from within its symbolic structure through corporeal acts that elude institutional language (Nancy, 2000).

This profound transformation began with Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17, 2010. His burning body marked a pivotal symbolic reversal: from a marginalized, voiceless, and oppressed subject to a body that screams without words, destabilizing the regime through an act of self-erasure. This was not simply an individual protest suicide; rather, in its sociological depth, it was a violent corporeal act targeting an entire system.

From a sociological standpoint, Bouazizi's act can be interpreted as a form of protest suicide, echoing Émile Durkheim's concept of "altruistic suicide," where the individual sacrifices himself when submerged by collective constraints and despair. However, it also aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's idea of symbolic reversal, in which a marginalized body, stripped of discursive means, employs its own destruction to destabilize a hegemonic system. In this sense, Bouazizi's self-immolation was not a final escape, but an inaugural act—a moment where the body imposed itself violently into the political space, bypassing mediation and reclaiming visibility through fire.

For the first time, the body itself became a site of direct resistance — a language that bypassed all institutional mediations to proclaim, through fire, the failure of every available channel.

This act inaugurated a revolutionary moment radically different from previous forms of protest, where the body was no longer absent or suppressed but became a vessel of dissent and a platform for reconstructing political meaning. In the streets, on sidewalks, and in public squares, thousands of bodies — men and women, young and old — occupied public space, not with abstract ideological slogans but with a visceral bodily presence, signifying the body's full return to the political stage (Springer, 2011).

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This moment calls for the theoretical lens of corporeal politics, as developed by scholars of new social movements, who argue that modern societies have generated new forms of political engagement that transcend parties and unions, rooting themselves in the body as a medium of meaning and resistance. The Tunisian revolution offered a vivid embodiment of this perspective (Bayat, 2017; Khosrokhavar, 2012), where the masses were not merely demanding regime change, but redefining their relationship with power by asserting their physical presence in public space.

In Place Mohamed Ali, Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Tataouine... bodies emerged from invisibility to visibility. They no longer feared police surveillance, tear gas, or even death. The body, at this juncture, reclaimed its sovereignty, shed its fear, and reappropriated the street as a liberated political space. This shift cannot be explained solely by public anger or economic despair but must be understood as the eruption of corporeal meaning — the moment when the body ceases to adapt and begins to generate its own autonomous action.

This corporeal eruption surfaced even in the revolution's earliest slogans, which were not ideological but deeply embodied: "Degage!" (Leave!), "Freedom, Dignity, Employment." These were demands for existential recognition before any political affiliation. Dignity, in this context, was not merely a moral value but a call to restore the battered, humiliated, and excluded body. Protesters took to the streets in search of bodily dignity, not just legal rights.

In this context, Judith Butler's theory of embodied politics proves highly relevant. She argues that collective corporeal presence in public protests does not merely signify symbolic resistance but enacts a direct occupation of space that threatens existing hierarchies. When bodies occupy public space, they do not simply demand; they create a new political reality (Butler, 2015; Ahmed, 2004; Butler, 2011), redrawing the boundaries of the possible.

The Tunisian revolution exemplified this theory in practice: the bodies in the square were not only repeating slogans — they were shaping a new world.

Significantly, this corporeal revolution was not male-dominated. Women participated massively — in marches, coordination, logistical support. The female body acquired a dual meaning: on the one hand, asserting female presence in public space; on the other, destabilizing entrenched gender norms. Women were not merely present but were shaping a new political agency through physical engagement, direct confrontation, and refusal of invisibility. Here lies a radical transformation: from a body surveilled to a body that confronts the police, shouts, demands, and authors the moment.

This bodily presence transformed collective affect: the wounded body became sacred, the martyr glorified, the protesting body respected. The revolution redefined the symbolic status of the body in national memory — shifting from being an object of punishment to a source of heroism. Bodies gained names, faces, narratives. They moved from anonymity to symbolic recognition (Nancy, 2000), becoming sites of valor, not merely punishment.

The diversity of embodied actions during the revolution was striking: sit-ins, hunger strikes, long protest marches, tear gas resistance, climbing fences, raising flags, carrying the wounded — all expressions of a profound transformation of the body's function: from submission to action. The body became the message, the language, the political gesture itself.

From a semiotic perspective, this moment disrupted the symbolic order of state power. The regime operated through a strict symbolic system: dress codes, official rhetoric, ceremonial rituals. But the revolution introduced new corporeal signs: screaming, dancing, blood, collective crying, sleeping in squares — unruly symbols that unsettled and subverted the state's codes. The revolutionary body confounded power because it spoke in an untamed language and refused to ask permission.

The revolutionary body was stripped of traditional discourse. It neither sought party affiliation nor ideological justification. It spoke from pain. That pain was its legitimacy. This made it difficult for power to neutralize or co-opt it. It was a collective, plural, decentralized body — expressing the explosion of demands from across social spectrums: the marginalized, the unemployed, women, youth, the urban poor, rural populations. The political body became multiple, uncontainable, and relational.

This reveals a key feature of the revolutionary moment: it did not merely produce a new political discourse; it restructured the political field itself. The revolution reclaimed the right of the body to exist in public space and shattered the state's monopoly over the visible. What was most striking about this moment was that it did not seek representation — it demanded presence. The bodies declared: We are here, occupying space, redefining it, and rebuilding politics from below — from the street, the sidewalk (Springer, 2011).

The absence of a political leader or central party was not a flaw but a sign of the revolution's refusal of mediation. The protesting body did not need a spokesperson — it spoke for itself. This is what rendered official discourse impotent, delayed, and sterile — it failed to realize that the battle was no longer rhetorical but corporeal. The body preceded language and became meaning itself.

But this transformation came at a cost. Bodies paid the price: deaths, injuries, arrests, violations. And yet, they did not retreat. That physical insistence was the key to symbolic victory. The revolution did not succeed through slogans alone — it succeeded through the body that refused to leave and remained in the square until the regime fully collapsed.

Thus, the revolutionary moment can be seen as the body reclaiming itself — its right to act, to express, to exist. It was the liberation of the body from surveillance, a metamorphosis from pliant tool to sovereign being. This opens a new path for understanding politics — not as institutional practice, but as embodied emergence, where the body becomes the battleground itself.

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Bodily Surveillance After the Revolution: New Resistance or a Reproduction of Domination?

If the Tunisian revolution of December 2010 represented a collective bodily eruption that reclaimed the body's sovereignty over public space, what followed did not necessarily extend this liberating dynamic. Instead, it often marked a concealed return of disciplinary regimes, albeit through new mechanisms. As numerous sociological studies suggest, revolutions do not always create a complete rupture with the past. Frequently, they reshape the symbolic order according to new balances of power, sometimes reproducing the very forms of domination they sought to dismantle, albeit in new terms. Thus, the question of the body post-revolution emerges as a multifaceted battleground, wavering between expanded possibilities of expression and increasing mechanisms of surveillance—whether in the name of morality, religion, public order, or even the revolution itself.

In post-2011 Tunisia, the body was expected to enter a phase of definitive emancipation—not only from political power but also from all patterns of disciplining and objectification that had historically defined it. Yet paradoxically, the same body that stormed public space and imposed its presence during the revolutionary moment quickly found itself enmeshed in new struggles over its meaning, visibility, and legitimacy of expression.

As Kadri Dombrovska (2022, p. 44) states, "the emergence of the body in public space after the revolution did not end social surveillance, but rather reproduced it in new forms of symbolic and political monitoring. The body came to be surrounded not only by state institutions, but also by society itself, in the name of morality, religion, and identity. Thus, the tension between freedom and control was not resolved, but restructured in new forms."

Once again, the public space became the main arena for this confrontation, not only between the state and society but also within society itself—among actors claiming to represent "revolutionary legitimacy," "authentic values," or the "collective identity."

The transformation of the body into a site of political and cultural conflict post-revolution reveals the dynamic nature of symbolic struggles in societies undergoing transition (DeLaet, 2013, p. 142). While the revolution signaled a moment of political emancipation for the body, the aftermath represented an attempt to neutralize or reframe it. This was manifested in the intense public debates around women's clothing, bodily freedom of expression, dancing in public, nudity, gender presence, homosexuality, feminist demonstrations, and even religious expressions of the body. These issues extended the ongoing struggle between conflicting conceptions of the body: the free individual body versus the disciplined collective body; the secular civic body versus the moral religious body; the revolutionary liberated body versus the "modest" body as envisioned by conservative forces.

From this perspective, debates around "modest dress," for instance, should not be reduced to mere ideological confrontations. Rather, they reflect a reassertion of symbolic control over the body via new social intermediaries. After the revolution, women were freed from traditional police surveillance, only to face a societal-religious gaze that proved equally coercive. The body was no longer surveilled solely by the state, but also by "the street," "public opinion," and "collective consciousness"—all intervening in bodily presence under the guise of identity or morality. Here lies one of the revolution's great paradoxes: it opened up space for bodily freedom while simultaneously triggering social dynamics that reimposed control under new banners.

This return of surveillance did not originate solely from conservative systems; at times, it also involved revolutionary actors themselves. Upon transitioning into positions of power or representation, some began reproducing the very forms of domination they had once opposed. The discourse of "revolutionary seriousness," used to criminalize "undisciplined" bodily expressions, often mirrored authoritarian rhetoric in structure: both defined what was "legitimate" or "illegitimate" in bodily conduct and both claimed the exclusive right to determine acceptable expression. Thus, the revolutionary body was once again subject to repression—albeit under different pretenses.

In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic violence" becomes essential to understanding this process (Bourdieu, 1992; Foucault, 1976). Post-revolutionary power no longer operated only through material repression but through symbolic systems—what Bourdieu calls "symbolic domination": the ability of certain actors to impose meanings and representations on others without their full awareness. The most insidious forms of such violence are those enacted in the name of values, religion, or cultural identity. When a woman is coerced into wearing a particular garment in the name of "tradition," or when an artist is censored in the name of "collective identity," a new form of domination emerges—one that relies not on police force but on social persuasion and moral conformity.

Amid these transformations, the body becomes the primary victim of such symbolic politics. It is shaped by multiple discourses: a religious one advocating modesty, a revolutionary one calling for discipline, a patriarchal one reinforcing gender hierarchies, and a political one urging the body to be "responsible" and "committed." Between these conflicting imperatives, the body is pressured to be free without being "provocative," visible without being "excessive," expressive without being "inappropriate" (Butler, 2004, pp. 52–59). Such practices render the post-revolutionary Tunisian body a site of invisible struggles waged not through law but through representations, connotations, and public expectations.

Yet this does not imply total submission. On the contrary, a new wave of resistance has emerged—no longer through mass political structures but through individual initiatives, artistic protests, and alternative cultural movements. Figures such as Olfa Youssef and Amina Sboui, among others, have used their bodies as tools to disrupt norms, expose contradictions, and destabilize dominant narratives. Movements such as "FEMEN Tunisia," initiatives like "Dancing in the Street," and the use of bodily imagery in rights-based campaigns all represent novel forms of corporeal resistance. These bodies protest not only

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against legal constraints but against hegemonic representations. They delegitimize the authority of the "expected"—the normative mold society imposes on bodily being.

Michel Foucault's concept of "disciplinary techniques" offers a lens to analyze how post-revolutionary power has shifted from state institutions to new forms of social organization. Foucault demonstrated that modern power does not operate merely through prohibition but through organization, normalization, and self-surveillance. Bodily surveillance today is no longer confined to the police or judiciary but is enacted through public gazes, social media comments, media platforms, and everyday moral judgments. This renders the body a complex site of negotiation, which defies simple binaries like freedom versus repression (Le Breton, 2012, pp. 115–122).

Ironically, the digital sphere—initially a space for bodily empowerment and expressive freedom—has itself become a terrain for renewed bodily surveillance. Images, videos, posts, and comments serve as tools of indirect control, reshaping the body according to a logic of "acceptable visibility." Power no longer requires enforcement through police; it operates through "likes," "mockery," and "canceling"—mechanisms that frame the body within a regime of display. This aligns with Anthony Giddens' concept of the "monitored self," wherein modern societies enforce control from within, integrating individuals into self-disciplinary systems (Giddens, 1991, pp. 70–75).

In this dual dynamic, the post-revolutionary body in Tunisia is caught between surface liberation and covert regulation, symbolic explosion and moral constraint, hyper-visibility and contested legitimacy. It becomes a battlefield of protracted struggles—between freedom and discipline, the individual and the collective, modernity and conservatism, expression and normalization.

These contradictions suggest that Tunisia's current moment should not be seen merely as a regression from revolutionary gains, but as a new phase of symbolic negotiation over the body's meaning, expressive limits, and function within the socio-political sphere. This phase is no less important than the revolution itself, as it will determine the future of individuals' relationships with their bodies, of the society with its collective identity, and of the state with its citizens.

Therefore, analyzing the post-revolutionary body is not an academic luxury but a necessity for understanding the political process itself. Democracy is not measured solely by elections, but by the freedom of the body, its expressive capacities, and its legitimate presence in public life. As long as the body remains subject to negotiation, surveillance, and silencing, the revolution remains incomplete. Only a free body, capable of saying "no" in its own language, can truly signal the fulfillment of a democratic transition

The Feminine Body as a Political Agent After the Revolution: From Physical Presence to Symbolic Rebellion

The public space in Tunisia underwent profound transformations following the revolution, particularly regarding the feminine body. No longer confined to traditional roles or imposed silence, the female body gradually emerged as a site of resistance, representation, and negotiation with both power and society. The Tunisian revolution—by ushering in a relative opening of the public sphere—redefined women's relationship with their bodies, turning the body not only into an object of political or moral discourse but into an agent in its own right, a locus for the production of meaning and a challenge to the symbolic and material boundaries that governed it for decades (Johansson-Nogués, 2013).

The presence of the feminine body in post-2011 protest spaces was striking—not as a symbolic accompaniment to political struggles, but as an integral part of the protest itself. When women took to the streets, confronted security forces, chanted, danced, wept, and stood their ground, they were creating a new representation of womanhood: a fully embodied citizen, challenging dominant representations of "modesty" and "virtue" that had long served to restrict female participation in public life. The rebellious feminine body was not merely expressing socio-economic demands but embodied a political stance in and of itself—a rebellion against the ethics of silence, the surveillance of family and state, and the patriarchal logic that reduces the female body to a site of seduction or guardianship (Grami, 2018).

This shift in the status of the female body cannot be understood without accounting for the symbolic structure that shaped its representation for decades. Prior to the revolution, the female body was enveloped in constraints: controlled dress, restricted behavior, linguistic censorship, and modesty as a supreme value. However, in the aftermath of the revolution and under the influence of a relatively freer climate, the feminine body began to subvert this normative structure—not only through protest but also by reshaping public space itself: through women's presence in digital platforms, in the streets, in the media, and in civil society initiatives. The female body thus became a tool for reconstructing politics—not as an institutional act, but as a lived experience and daily positioning (Khan, 2019).

Feminist movements such as "#EnaZeda" (2019) exemplify this evolution. These initiatives reclaimed the violated, raped, and silenced body, breaking the culture of shame and silence surrounding sexual violence. The testimonies women shared—whether under real names or pseudonyms—transformed the body from a mere victim into a witness and a political actor exposing patriarchal authority and institutional complicity. Simply daring to say "Me Too" became a corporeal act: revealing what had been hidden, reclaiming voice, turning pain into political position, and scars into testimonies.

The feminine body also carved out new spaces of resistance in the digital realm. Social media became an expressive outlet for bodies historically excluded from traditional platforms. Through images, poetry, and videos, feminist activists imposed an alternative narrative of the body: one that celebrates selfhood, confronts cyberbullying, defies hate speech, and redefines notions such as modesty, chastity, and freedom beyond conventional norms. In this virtual space, the body was no longer a

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mirror of social control but a means of self-possession and symbolic negotiation: a body that refused standardization—be it in weight, beauty ideals, or fixed gender identities.

In the streets, the symbolic power of the female body was equally evident—particularly during protests against violence on days like March 8 or November 25. The female body in these contexts was not merely a statistic among demonstrators, but a visual icon of expression: dressed in white or black, holding pictures of victims, chanting slogans, and affirming that resistance passes through the body. The forms of bodily expression—collective dance, choreographed silence, street sit-ins, or even symbolic nudity—were not mere "performances" but acts of reclaiming public space and redefining who has the right to be seen and heard.

This bodily defiance did not go unchallenged. Many women, especially activists, faced smear campaigns, digital violence, threats, and moral policing. These forms of backlash were essentially attempts to repacify the rebellious feminine body, to depoliticize it by shifting the discourse from citizenship to morality, from protest to "shame." Yet, these same threats were often reappropriated as material for resistance: the threatened body became a subject of writing, art, and cinema—a living archive of struggle and testimony.

One cannot overlook the political symbolism of clothing as an extension of the body and a field of ideological contention. Debates over the hijab, niqab, or symbolic nudity in art reopened the central question: "Who owns the female body?" Is it a domain of religion? Of public morality? Of the family? Or of the woman herself? In this context, divergent feminist voices emerged: some defended the hijab as a free choice, others saw it as an instrument of submission, and others perceived its removal as a political act of liberation. What united these otherwise conflicting perspectives was their shared insistence that the female body should no longer be an object of debate—but rather a speaking subject, capable of defining the terms of its own representation (Baker Institute, 2021).

Artistic production also played a critical role in centering the female body in public discourse. Post-revolutionary cinema and performance—such as Kaouther Ben Hania's Beauty and the Dogs, or contemporary dance performances by young women in public spaces—reaffirmed the expressive and political function of the body. Theatre and film became more than entertainment—they transformed into arenas for reclaiming the silenced feminine voice and embodying pain, conflict, and defiance. The performing, dancing, screaming body became a narrative force—rewriting reality, and etching female subjectivity onto public space, beyond censorship and normativity.

Thus, post-revolutionary representations of the female body in Tunisia are no longer confined to abstract notions of "womanhood" but rather focus on the embodied subject as a political agent—capable of raising questions, challenging traditions, and reshaping the symbolic order of meaning. The body has moved from being an object of patriarchal regulation to a sign of its unraveling: a site of symbolic struggle over the meaning of freedom, dignity, and belonging.

The feminine body is therefore not merely a "victim" of violence but a producer of meaning, a political medium, and an archive of both small and grand rebellions that have shaped the post-revolutionary era. It is, simultaneously, a site of vulnerability and strength, exposure and resistance—a sensory expression of the evolving relationship between women and the state, between the individual and the collective, between the private and the public, and between silence and speech.

Ultimately, understanding the feminine body in post-revolution Tunisia requires moving beyond ready-made classifications and embracing the multiplicity of voices and experiences. It necessitates interrogating the discourses that reduce it to weeping or seduction. The feminine body has become a fluid sociological site—reconstructing politics from the margins and redefining the political act through dance, pain, voice, clothing, and visibility—whether veiled or bare.

The Body on Stage and Screen after the Revolution

Since the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution in 2011, the artistic fields—especially theater and cinema—have witnessed an expressive explosion that repositioned the body at the center of symbolic action. These mediums revealed profound transformations in representations of the body, particularly the political and female body, as a mirror of power, a vessel of memory, and a stage for suffering and exposure. The body is no longer portrayed as a mere object of decoration or aesthetic embodiment; it has become a space of conflict, tension, and representation—of collective and individual pain, of symbolic and material violence, and of a collective desire to break silence and expose power. In this sense, post-revolution artistic works act as bodily archives of political and social repressions, and as sites for the reconstitution of meaning, belonging, and violation (Schechner, 2006).

This shift has contributed to the emergence of the body as a central medium through which the unspeakable is expressed, particularly concerning political, sexual, and institutional violence. Whereas the body in pre-revolutionary artistic practices was constrained by moral and regulatory norms, the post-revolution body has gradually liberated itself from superficial and aesthetic representation to become a vessel of social and political critique, and an expression of both individual and collective fractures. In this context, the film Beauty and the Dogs (À la recherche de Kalthoum) by Kaouther Ben Hania stands as a striking example of this symbolic shift. The film does not present the female body merely as a victim, but rather as a site of conflict, a space of representation, and a testimony to the systemic complicity between male violence and security institutions.

In this film, the female body is not shown in its idealized or innocent form, but in its torn, humiliated, violated state. Yet, it does not succumb to violation; rather, it transforms it into a moment of resistance and scream, reclaiming its symbolic power through disclosure and confrontation. The moment in which the protagonist recounts her rape at the hands of police officers is not simply a narrative act—it is a bodily inscription of violation: the trembling voice, the fearful gaze, the spasmodic gestures—all establish a physical presence that transcends language, exposes state violence, and interrogates the security apparatus not only as an institution but as a masculine, violent structure (Abaza, 2014; Turner, 1969).

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Here, the presence of the female body cannot be understood merely within the logic of victimhood; it is the reclaiming of a feminine agency erased for decades. This body speaks not to seduce, but to unveil—to break the wall of silence. It is no longer an object of male desire but a political terrain. In many moments of the film, it becomes a witness to institutional failure: hospitals, police, judiciary—all intersect to expose the fragility of post-revolutionary rights discourse, despite grand slogans about dignity and freedom. The body reminds us that politics is not only about institutions and elections (Le Breton, 2001, p. 22; Le Breton, 2015, p. 66), but also about touch, skin, blood, moans, and bruises.

This conception aligns with several theatrical works in which the body has played a central role in interrogating the self, society, and power. The actor on stage is no longer merely performing a text; his or her body becomes a living text. In many post-revolutionary plays, the body is presented nude or semi-nude—not as visual provocation but as political and symbolic protest (Boal, 2000). A body unafraid to reveal its fragility, its scars, its pain. This theatrical body no longer adheres to the rules of classical performance but follows the rituals of expressing collective wounds, transgressing taboos, and embracing nudity as an act of resistance—as seen in performances that explore themes of rape, torture, imprisonment, or migration.

In this sense, performance becomes a process of dismantling dominant representations of the body. By evoking police violence, moral judgment, or betrayal of memory, these works destabilize hegemonic discourses and create expressive spaces that restore the body's foundational role: testimony. The screaming body, the vomiting body, the body dancing to exhaustion—this is not a body seeking applause but recognition. It summons the audience not for spectacle but for participation in pain, persuading them that art is not a refuge of comfort but a battlefield of truth (Martin, 2014).

These works have redefined aesthetic sensitivities, making the body a medium that conveys a wide spectrum of individual and collective experiences—between politics and violence, love and loss, belonging and breakdown. The body is no longer detached from the political context; it is its product and active participant. In many performances, the narrative was secondary to the body's cry. The script was not central—the bodily performance was: the pulse, the muscular tension, the shiver, the convulsion, the fatigue, the collapse. All of these, often marginalized in traditional theater, became central as alternative narrative tools—not to translate words, but to embody them.

In this atmosphere, theater and cinema have become key arenas for deconstructing the patriarchal system that governs the body—especially the female body. Post-revolutionary representations of the body reject heroic storytelling ethics, portraying it instead in its vulnerability, anxiety, and exposure. They highlight forms of invisible violence: societal complicity, moral surveillance, betrayal by loved ones, state silence, memory's brutality—all of which manifest on the body of the individual, who rewrites politics not through discourse but through skin, bones, and tears.

In many of these works, the body evokes individual memory as a political moment. The actress recounting her experience of harassment, or the character mimicking the marks of torture, presents herself not merely as a victim but as a narrator, a witness, and an author of her own body. This reappropriation of the body as an artistic subject is simultaneously a political act of liberation. For decades, authoritarian and patriarchal regimes monopolized the meaning of the body and imposed restrictive representations. But post-revolutionary artistic works, with their aesthetic power and radical approaches, have reconstructed the body as a site of negotiation and struggle.

In this context, the body on stage or screen becomes not only a medium for narration but also for remembering. It bears the scars of the past, evokes moments of repression, and transforms them into rebellious narratives. Thus, the political body—as presented in art—is a mobile archive, an unofficial memory that exists powerfully through performance (Schechner, 2006; Martin, 2014). It is a different kind of archive: unwritten yet deeply felt, non-objective yet truthful. It writes history, in Walter Benjamin's terms, from the perspective of the defeated (Tilly, 2004).

Through this lens, the body on stage or screen becomes a tool to destabilize certainties, to expose structural violence, and to raise disturbing questions about power, justice, and dignity. It does not reassure the viewer—it unsettles. It offers not answers but necessary discomfort. This provocative function of the body in post-revolutionary art places the audience before an ethical responsibility: to see what they don't want to see, to hear what is rarely spoken, and to realize that the body before them is not a representation but a real, threatened, violated, and rebellious life.

In conclusion, the body in post-revolutionary Tunisian theater and cinema is no longer a mere aesthetic element—it has become a political agent, a witness to violence, and a site of pain and resistance. It has imposed its presence not as decoration but as message—not as tool but as subject. In this sense, the body becomes a counter-language, writing history from below—in the language of skin and blood—and reminds us that the revolution did not only take place in the streets, but also in the body, and that what was not expressed in the squares was screamed by theater and whispered by cinema.

The Body as a Testimony in Transitional Justice Processes: From Personal Pain to Public Recognition

At the heart of transitional justice processes, the body emerges not merely as a biological entity, but as a silent witness that holds the memory of violations and reshapes the boundaries of justice and meaning. Transitional justice, in its pursuit to recognize victims and restore their rights, does not limit itself to collecting verbal testimonies or recording legal facts. Rather, it opens more profoundly to the body as a living archive of violence, a site of suffering, and a symbolic field. When a victim testifies before a Truth and Dignity Commission, they do not merely present a narrative of a past event; they expose their body to society, revealing the marks etched upon it by repression, torture, and violation. Here, the body itself becomes a testimony.

The body that has endured torture, solitary confinement, rape, or symbolic humiliation does not forget. As Pierre Bourdieu states, "the body is memory," inscribing experiences unconsciously and gradually transforming into a carrier of

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political and social knowledge. From this perspective, the presence of the body in transitional justice is not only symbolic but epistemic, as it produces a truth that documents alone cannot demonstrate. When a victim shows the scars of torture on their skin or stammers due to chronic trauma, they offer a form of alternative truth that transcends language: an embodied truth (Scarry, 1985, p. 27).

The public hearing sessions in Tunisia, organized by the Truth and Dignity Commission, marked pivotal moments in highlighting this dimension. Victims appeared with their burdened, exhausted, sometimes paralyzed or damaged bodies to say: "Here we are; we who were broken, we who were tortured; we are not mere numbers." These sessions represented a shift in the centrality of testimony—from the tongue to the body, from speech to appearance. Fragile, fatigued, hesitant bodies ascended platforms and sat before camera lenses, carrying more than they spoke, and voicing their silence more than their words expressed.

This exhausted physical presence of victims cannot be separated from the symbolic dimension of transitional justice. The latter does not aim only to punish perpetrators but also to rebuild the social contract through recognition of injustice. This recognition is incomplete unless the state and society confront the bodies of victims—not merely as biological remnants, but as symbolic entities expressing the state that inflicted cruelty and the societal silence that colluded. The wounded body in this context transforms individual pain into an ethical argument and calls for recognition not only from institutions but from the collective conscience. (...) Here, the female body specifically becomes a battleground for political control, and recognizing it as a victim is part of dismantling authoritarian mechanisms (Madlingozi, 2007, p. 144).

Paradoxically, despite its centrality, the body often remains a silenced subject in justice narratives. Many victims do not recount the physical details of their violations, either because of unbearable pain or because the experience is burdened with shame. This bodily silence reveals another form of symbolic violence, where bodily memory stores pain without narrative outlet. Therefore, if transitional justice aims at genuine justice, it must establish spaces that listen to the body—not only what is said about it, but what it expresses through symptoms, emotions, and tremors (Teitel, 2000; Ross, 2003; Bourdieu, 1980, p. 73).

Some civil society initiatives post-revolution have sought to engage with this bodily dimension of testimony through workshops in bodily expression, performance arts, dance therapy, or painting. These forms aim to transform the body from a site of trauma to a tool of expression. When the body that has suffered violence dances or paints its wound, it not only vents pain but regains sovereignty over itself. This symbolic restoration represents a form of restorative justice, rewriting the painful experience anew and turning the body itself into an agent rather than a passive object (Arosteguy, 2013, p. 38).

The body in transitional justice also testifies to the class and spatial inequalities of injustice. Often, the violated bodies belong to marginalized groups, interior regions, impoverished classes, or unrepresented communities. Their appearance in the public sphere as bodily testimonies represents an overturning of symbolic hierarchies, making previously "invisible" bodies visible and recognized. From this viewpoint, transitional justice is a political moment redistributing symbolic recognition between center and periphery, between those who had voice and those who had only their bodies.

While the old state sought to silence the body through torture and repression, the new state is called upon to restore dignity to this body—not only through material or symbolic compensation but through historical recognition. This recognition occurs only when bodily testimonies are recorded in the national narrative, taught in history, preserved in archives, and respected in collective memory. The body that endured torture must neither be forgotten nor imprisoned again in silence but must transform into a symbol of resistance and an eternal witness to what must never recur.

However, these processes remain fragile unless paired with genuine political will and societal readiness for recognition. Many bodies that testified before the commission returned to the shadows, marginalization, and exclusion, as if the temporary appearance was merely a symbolic exception. This calls for viewing transitional justice not just as a temporary phase but as a continuous process demanding constant vigilance and a profound cultural shift in understanding the body—not merely as a sexual tool or labor force, but as a political entity, a witness to history, and a maker of justice.

In conclusion, the body in transitional justice contexts is more than a victim. It is a living archive, an undying memory, and a symbol of resistance. Any attempt to achieve justice without listening to this body remains incomplete, if not false. Between its silence and pain, between its appearance and disappearance, between its fragility and strength, the Tunisian body writes its own chapter in the history of the revolution, affirming that justice is not built by words alone but by bodies that endured, screamed, and testified.

Findings

1. The body in Tunisia : was never a neutral or natural entity but has historically served as a central instrument in shaping the relationship between power and society—through techniques of discipline, surveillance, and representation.

2. The pre-revolution authoritarian era: epitomized the total subjugation of the body, transforming it into an object of symbolic and institutional control—whether through policing, collective protocols, or dress codes—with the female body emerging as a doubly contested site of domination: political and religious.

3. The Tunisian revolution: marked a symbolic bodily rupture, where the body emerged as a direct political actor—not through discourse but through its visceral presence in public space and embodied practices of resistance: sit-ins, confrontations, and protests.

4. The post-revolution phase: did not deliver full bodily liberation. Instead, it revealed new forms of symbolic surveillance reimposed by society, religion, and the new political authority—reproducing patterns of domination, even under the banners of emancipation.

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5. Art, theater, and cinema: played a pivotal role in reimagining the body—not as an aesthetic object but as an archive of violation and resistance, a tool to expose the unspeakable, and a space to articulate the unspoken.

6. Transitional justice: underscored the body's centrality as a site of memory. Through lived testimonies, bodily suffering entered public discourse, proving that the tortured body is not merely a victim but an entity endowed with knowledge, memory, and symbolic legitimacy.

Conclusion and Suggestion

In Tunisia's modern experience, the body was never merely a peripheral component in the process of political and social transformation. From the outset, it stood at the heart of conflict—both a medium of action and a mirror reflecting power and resistance alike. Under the authoritarian regime, the body was subjected to molding and discipline, only to erupt into visibility during the revolution, before being subsequently re-enclosed within new mechanisms of symbolic and societal surveillance. This trajectory not only reveals the nature of shifts in the individual's relationship with the state but also lays bare the profound fragility of incomplete symbolic gains. It underscores how the struggle for bodily freedom remains unresolved, merely reformulated within new frameworks of negotiation and control under the banners of identity, morality, or even "revolutionary legitimacy."

Among the deeper paradoxes highlighted by our analysis is that revolutions do not necessarily liberate bodies. Instead, they open new avenues for symbolic domination, where the tools of control shift from the police to the public, from law to social norms, and from batons to digital shaming—governed by the logic of "likes,""mockery," and "cancellation." The body, which forcefully invaded public space during the revolution, has since been partially subjected to a societal gaze that questions its freedom, re-enclosing it under the rhetoric of "modesty,""revolutionary discipline," or "acceptable appearances."

Yet despite this constriction, the body has not fully retreated. New forms of bodily resistance have emerged: in artistic expression, in bold feminine presence, in reclaiming the streets, and in politicizing personal pain within transitional justice discourse. The body has become an archive of scars, a silent witness to violent experience, and a symbolic catalyst for collective memory. When a torture victim speaks before a camera, their testimony is not conveyed through words alone—the trembling body, the faltering voice, the haunted gaze all serve as instruments of documentation and resistance.

Thus, democracy cannot be fully realized unless the body is recognized as a right in itself: the right to appear, to scream, to dance, to suffer, to be absent, and to differ. Only when the body is granted unconditional freedom of expression does true politics emerge—not merely as a legal institution but as a lived space of embodied dignity and material belonging that cannot be confiscated.

Perhaps the central dilemma posed by Tunisia's experience is that while the body was more present during the revolution than ever before, it has since remained in a state of perpetual symbolic and societal negotiation. The body that took to the streets, confronted power, danced, fell, and testified has yet to find justice—legally, morally, or representationally.

At its core, this paper proposes rethinking the state and citizenship through the lens of the body—not as a mere object of policies but as their precondition. Perhaps revolutions do not begin with a slogan but with a shudder, a tear, a body that refuses to be touched without consent.

Politics that fails to recognize the body as an agent remains incomplete. Revolutions that do not liberate the body remain deferred. There is no democracy without a free body. No freedom without a visible body. No dignity without a body capable of saying "no" in its own language.

Overall, the Tunisian revolution represents a profound bodily expression reflecting individuals' desire to reclaim their self-identity and break free from oppression and marginalization. The question here is: Are we able to understand this pain and listen to its deep social meanings?

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