

Chanting Revolution: Environmental Performance in Syrian Protests Chants and Youssef-Agha's *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution*

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This article analyses the performative dynamics of language in the chants of the Syrian demonstrations (2011–2024) in relation to Tarif Youssef-Agha's memoir *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed*. It employs an interdisciplinary framework that draws on Richard Schechner's theory of Environmental Theatre. Schechner reconceptualises performance as an immersive practice in which space, sound, participants, and audiences collectively constitute meaning, thereby challenging the boundary between staged performance and lived experience. Within this framework, Syrian street-protest chants, such as "Ash-sha'ab yureed isqaat an-nizam" (The people want the fall of the regime) and "Janna, janna ya watana" (Paradise, paradise, O homeland), are examined as embodied performative acts that transform public spaces into sites of collective expression and resistance. These chants are characterised by colloquial Syrian Arabic, repetition, and rhythmic structures that facilitate mass participation and contribute to the construction of collective identity. Youssef-Agha's memoir mediates this process by transforming street chants into poetic and narrative forms that bear witness to trauma. This article contributes to interdisciplinary discussions of linguistic performativity, revolutionary expression, and Middle Eastern cultural studies by highlighting the role of embodied language in shaping revolutionary experience.

Keywords: environmental performative chants, Syrian revolution, trauma-affected-language, collective identity, embodied resistance

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Introduction

For decades in Syria, demanding the for the rights of basic facilities and the freedom of speech meant arrest or death. That was the main reason of the Syrian Revolution which began in March 2011 and achieved the freedom in December 2024 and which was inspired by the “Arab Spring” uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The revolutionary people marched demonstrations, requesting freedom, justice, and dignity, but they were faced by violence by the old regime forces. The thing which led to a wide range of artistic forms of expression that were shaped into a collective performative practice.

This piece of writing explores several aspects of the Syrian demonstrations from 2011 to 2017 in connection with Tarif Youssef-Agha’s testimony, *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed*, alongside with the street chants that were composed and sung by the revolutionary people. Drawing on Schechner’s theory of *Environmental Theatre*, the paper examines how revolutionary chants, slogans, and repeated linguistic expressions do not merely communicate political demands but enact them, transforming ordinary streets into spaces of collective agency. It analyses the transformation of everyday urban space, collective bodies, revolutionary voices, architectural objects, and traumatic memory into a performative environment, and how the choice of words of chants serves as a performative tool to force the audience to join the chorus, transforming them from passive observers into active performers in the environmental space.

The article contributes to ongoing discussions within performance studies, trauma in performative practices, and Middle Eastern cultural analysis by demonstrating how language becomes a site of agency during the revolutionary struggle. It illustrates how Syrian protest chants operated not only as tools of movement but also as methods through which Syrians collectively processed violence, preserved memory, and confirm their continued existence against suppression.

Literature Review

Recent studies on Hadi Al-Abdullah’s *Critical Conditions: My Diary of the Syrian Revolution* have mainly considered the testimony as a testimonial narrative that illustrates the Syrian Revolution and the psychological impacts of prolonged violence. Al-Abdullah’s narrative contemplates demonstrations, sieges, injuries, interments, imprisonment, and the deaths of friends through striking memories and enduring emotional effects. Al-Abdullah’s role as a participant and journalist merges the distinction between observer and performer, with the camera acting as a medium that displays revolutionary activities to both local and international audiences. Demonstrations, chants, and stories emerge not merely as records of political events but as expressive actions in which Syrians personify revolutionary identities and fight against being overlooked. The testimony emphasises the significance of preserving voices, documenting struggles, and publicly testifying, suggesting that storytelling evolves into a performance that sustains collective memory and strengthens group power amidst violence and displacement.

While Youssef-Agha preserves the revolution through poetry, testimony, and the textual recording of chants, Al-Abdullah preserves it through testimony, journalism, and visual witnessing. In both texts, revolutionary performance and traumatic repetition operate simultaneously as modes of resistance, remembrance, and collective identity formation.

Brothers of the Gun by Marwan Hisham and Molly Crabapple. Marwan Hisham was a young Syrian from Raqqa who participated in the early protests of 2011. The testimony recounts how he and his friends joined demonstrations, faced repression, and witnessed the transformation of the revolution into war. The testimony as a narrative reflecting the transition from revolutionary optimism to persistent struggle and dislocation.

Methodology

This study states an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combining performance analysis, performative trauma-informed literary criticism, and performance of chants through close textual reading and demonstration songs. The primary materials consist of the most prominent chants performed during Syrian demonstrations between 2011 and 2024 alongside Youssef-Agha's testimony.

The selected chants were chosen because of their widespread circulation across Syria, their centrality to revolutionary discourse, and their linguistic features of repetition, rhythm, and collective participation.

Spatial transformation, audience participation, and collective embodiment are examined depending on Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* framework. The article investigates the performative effects while simultaneously preserving collective memory.

Discussion

The Total Environment (Analysing "Places")

The Revolutionary Street and Unity of Cities

Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre" redefines performance as an interactive event in which performers, audiences, and space collectively generate meaning. Schechner argues that theatre is "a set of perceptual transformations and elaborations on behaviour" through which "we become aware of our behaviour" (Schechner, 1994). Rather than treating performance as an isolated artistic event, he conceives it as a dynamic process grounded in human interaction. As he further explains, "the theatrical event is a set of related transactions among performers, among members of the audience, and between performers and audiences" (Schechner, 1994). He rejects the separation between an actor and spectator. Within this framework, performance is not confined to a specific stage but can emerge wherever social interactions produce a shared meaning.

One of the defining characteristics of the Syrian demonstrations described in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* is the transformation of ordinary urban space into a performative environment. This transformation reflects Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre", in which performance is generated through the interaction of bodies, space, and spectators rather than being confined to a conventional stage. As Schechner argues, "All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the performance" (Schechner, 1994) while "the theatrical event is a complex social interweave, a network of expectations and obligations" (Schechner, 1994). Revolutionary performance therefore emerged not from a designated performance area but from the continual interaction between demonstrators and the spaces they occupied.

Through his writing, Agha transforms geography into a performative network by linking Daraa and Homs through a shared revolutionary voice. The line, “Oh Daraa, I can hear Homs roaring from the Gate of Sibaa” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) collapses physical distance, presenting separate cities as participants in a single theatrical event. Rather than functioning as passive locations, Daraa, Homs, and the Gate of Sibaa become active performers whose identities are constituted through the collective voices of demonstrators. The metaphor of “roaring” evokes both the defiant chants of protesters and the symbolic association of the Gate of Sibaa (“Gate of Lions”) with courage and resistance. Similarly, the chant portrays Jisr al-Shughour as an active participant in the revolutionary performance, demonstrating how cities become collective voices within the environmental theatre of the Syrian uprising. The line, “Oh Daraa, Jisr al-Shughour wrote an epic” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) transforms the city’s resistance into a heroic narrative that is continually recreated through public chanting.

His poem further expands the revolutionary performance by incorporating eastern Syrian cities into a collective theatrical space of resistance. The opening question, “Oh Daraa, do you know who also joined from the east to support you?” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) invites both performers and listeners to recognise the geographical breadth of the uprising. By declaring that Al-Boukamal “stood up” to demand the departure of the oppressors, that Deir al-Zor proclaimed, “Living with the executioners is impossible” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) and that Al-Hasakah vowed to remain “in their throat,” the chant personifies entire cities as speaking actors rather than passive settings. The revolutionary stage is broadened still further through the inclusion of Syria’s coastal cities, illustrating how Environmental Theatre unites diverse regions within a single performative event. The declaration that “Jableh, Banyas and Latakia of the Arabs rushed to your help” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) transforms these cities into active participants whose voices merge with those of Daraa and the wider protest movement.

Moreover, not only in Agha’s testimony but in the street chants, this process culminates in repeated affirmations of solidarity with Hama, Homs, Daraa, and Idlib: “Oh Hama, we are with you till death, Oh Homs, we are with you till death, Oh Daraa, we are with you till death, Oh Idlib, we are with you till death” (Shaam Network S.N.N, 2011, 0:01-1:59). These chants construct a performative geography in which each city is repeatedly called onto the revolutionary stage through collective vocalization. The repeated declaration “we are with you till death” functions as a performative pledge that binds demonstrators across geographically distant regions into a single community of resistance. In Schechner’s Environmental Theatre, the boundaries between performers, spectators, and performance spaces dissolve; likewise, these chants erase regional divisions by allowing every protest site to participate simultaneously in the same revolutionary event. Through the continual reactivation of shared memory, sacrifice, and commitment, the streets of different cities become interconnected performance spaces, producing a unified national identity that transcends local boundaries and transforms the Syrian Revolution into a nationwide performance of resistance.

Ordinary Public Architecture as a Theatrical Set

Schechner argues that performance does not simply occur within a space; rather, space itself becomes integral to the performance. One of the defining features of the Syrian demonstrations is the transformation of ordinary urban architecture into an interactive theatrical environment. In Homs, for example, Clock Tower Square ceased to function as a neutral public landmark. The central clock tower became a stage prop, while surrounding balconies served as elevated viewing platforms from which residents watched, chanted, and documented the demonstrations. The architecture also amplified sound, reflecting chants back onto the crowd

and reinforcing the experience of a unified, immersive performance. Everyday urban space was thus reconfigured into a performative environment.

This transformation reflects Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre", which rejects the conventional separation between stage, objects, and audience by insisting that "All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the Performance" (Schechner, 1994). Schechner emphasises the architecture when he argues that "the given elements of a space—its architecture, textural qualities, acoustics, and so on—are to be explored and used, not disguised" (Schechner, 1994).

Within this performative environment, the mosque assumed a particularly significant role. Friday prayers in the mosques provided both the temporal and spatial cue for collective action. As worshippers emerged, religious architecture was immediately reconfigured as political space, dissolving the boundary between sacred ritual and civic resistance. Agha writes, "In the Omary Mosque (of Daraa) they gathered. And formed from. Themselves shield to. Protect the Homeland. They performed the burning. Of the first of the Assad idols" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). In Schechner's terms, the mosque functioned not merely as a backdrop but as an organizing force that structured entrances, exits, and collective rhythms, enabling participants to transform religious gathering into revolutionary performance.

The demonstrations also expanded vertically through the use of rooftops and balconies. Residents who did not physically join the marches nevertheless participated by chanting slogans, performing zaghroua (ululation), waving revolutionary flags, filming events, and applauding from above. These elevated spaces dissolved the distinction between spectators and performers, extending the performance throughout the surrounding architecture.

Walls throughout Syrian cities likewise underwent a profound performative transformation. Once functioning as ordinary architectural boundaries, they became political texts bearing revolutionary graffiti, portraits of martyrs, and slogans demanding freedom. "Where it all started from school walls. Walls with words saying 'The cups of suppression will never be drunk again'" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). Each inscription reshaped the visual environment while inviting further participation through additional writing, preservation, or erasure. Government attempts to remove graffiti intensified this process, turning walls into contested sites where opposing political narratives were repeatedly inscribed and erased. Architecture thus became a medium through which political struggle was continually performed. Government buildings acquired an equally significant symbolic role. Although demonstrators often remained outside governorate headquarters, security branches, municipal offices, and Ba'ath Party buildings, these structures embodied state authority and therefore became focal points of confrontation.

Throughout the memoir, urban space does not merely contain revolutionary action; it organises, amplifies, and reshapes it. As Richard Schechner argues, "A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, 'as' performances" (Mukhopadhyay, 2013). Performance Studies examine art, culture, architecture, and other things not as fixed objects, but as things that do something and interact with people and society. It focuses on how these things function through actions, behaviours, events, and relationships in particular contexts. Architecture influences movement, participation, visibility, and confrontation, demonstrating that revolutionary performance emerged through the dynamic relationship between people and place. The Syrian city therefore functioned not simply as the

location of protest but as one of its principal actors, continually participating in the production of revolutionary meaning.

From Spectators to Participants: Kinesics and Proxemics in The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution

A defining feature of Richard Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* is the dissolution of the boundary between performer and spectator. Rather than separating actors from an observing audience, performance emerges through the participation of everyone present. Tarif Youssef-Agha's *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* demonstrates this principle throughout its depiction of the Syrian uprising. Revolutionary action did not depend upon professional leaders performing before passive observers. Instead, every participant contributed to the event by chanting, clapping, marching, carrying banners, documenting violence, treating the wounded, or responding from surrounding buildings. Leadership remained fluid: a chant initiated by one protester immediately became the collective voice of thousands, while the arrest or death of a leader simply prompted another participant to assume the role.

This participatory structure was enacted through what Schechner identifies as kinesics and proxemics: the expressive capacities of the body and the social organization of space. Political meaning was communicated not only through slogans but also through coordinated movement, bodily gesture, and the strategic occupation of public space.

One of the clearest examples of kinesic performance is the collective march through streets and neighbourhoods. Agha says, "It marched asking for freedom while holding its coffin" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). Rather than presenting demonstrations as spontaneous crowds, Youssef-Agha depicts protesters advancing in coordinated movement that transformed hundreds of individual bodies into a single collective performer. The march itself became a performative declaration of political agency, physically enacting the freedom demonstrators demanded. Every step through government-controlled streets challenged the political order by replacing fear with collective visibility.

The memoir likewise emphasises the political significance of bodily gesture. Protesters repeatedly raised open hands, clapped rhythmically, pointed toward symbols of authority, and synchronised their movements with revolutionary chants. Agha tells the world that he "will keep knocking on the door of freedom, by my hand and my gun" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). These recurring gestures constituted a shared performative vocabulary through which demonstrators expressed peaceful intent while simultaneously displaying moral defiance. Raised palms, for example, visually underscored the unarmed nature of the demonstrations in contrast to heavily armed security forces.

Bodily movement also structured protesters' responses to repression. "The behaviour is 'released' (performed) on cue according to specific 'releasing mechanisms' (stimuli)" (Schechner, 1994). Demonstrators repeatedly dispersed under gunfire or security raids before regrouping in nearby streets and resuming their protests. This recurring pattern of advance, retreat, and reassembly constituted a choreography of resistance rather than evidence of defeat. The body likewise became the primary medium through which grief was publicly expressed. Protesters carried the wounded to safety, embraced grieving relatives, and lifted the bodies of martyrs during funeral processions. These physical acts transformed individual suffering into

a collective political experience, extending mourning into public resistance and reaffirming communal solidarity.

Alongside bodily movement, the memoir highlights the importance of proxemics, or the social organization of space. Protesters deliberately stood shoulder to shoulder, linked arms, and moved as densely organised groups, creating both psychological reassurance and a visible image of collective unity. The confrontation with security forces further demonstrates the political significance of spatial relationships. As Schechner observes, street demonstrations consist of “shifting groups of performers and spectators” (Schechner, 2003) in which both protesters and police alternately occupy both roles. Tarif’s memoir reflects this dynamic as demonstrators repeatedly advanced toward police lines while security forces attempted to re-establish distance through barricades, checkpoints, armoured vehicles, and gunfire. Political conflict thus unfolded through the continual negotiation of movement and control over public space.

Taken together, the memoir demonstrates that bodily movement and spatial organization were central to the performative character of the Syrian Revolution. Through synchronised marches, ritualised gestures, adaptive movement under repression, collective mourning, and the strategic occupation of public space, protesters communicated political meanings that exceeded verbal language alone. Schechner’s concepts of kinesics and proxemics therefore illuminate how Youssef Agha’s testimony presents the uprising as an embodied performance in which coordinated bodies and contested spaces became the primary medium through which collective identity, resilience, and aspirations for freedom were enacted.

Children as Performers Who Stimulate Adults to Resist

The Syrian Revolution is widely understood to have begun in Daraa in 2011, when a group of schoolchildren wrote the anti-regime graffiti, “Oh Doctor (Assad), your turn is next,” they wrote on the walls (Youssef-Agha, 2017) on a school wall. According to Richard Schechner’s performance theory, these children were not only passive victims of state repression but active symbolic performers whose actions transformed ordinary urban space into a revolutionary stage. This illustrates this process by representing Daraa as a performative environment in which collective memory, emotion, and political action converge. The reference to the children who “documented on the walls that they don’t accept humiliation” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) elevates graffiti from an isolated act of writing into a public performance that redefines the city itself. The wall becomes part of the performance environment, while the children emerge as the performers whose actions initiate the revolutionary event. Their inscription is not presented as passive documentation but as an embodied act that “Children who woke up a nation which forgot its glory” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) demonstrating how political action and theatrical performance become inseparable within the revolutionary landscape.

Schechner’s concept of restored behaviour provides a useful framework for understanding the significance of these actions. He argues that performance consists of behaviours that are learned, repeated, and adapted to new contexts rather than spontaneously invented. Many Syrian children echoed the slogans, gestures, and forms of resistance circulating throughout the Arab Spring, particularly the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Furthermore, children occupied a central moral and performative role in the revolutionary imagination through chants commemorating Hamza al-Khatib. This portrays Hamza as assuming the burden of confronting injustice on behalf of an entire nation. The rhetorical

questions, “Are you going to accept our apology?” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) and “Will any apology at all be acceptable to you?” express collective guilt by acknowledging that adults failed to protect the very children who became the revolution’s most powerful symbols. The line, “We left you defending a nation silent for generations” (Youssef-Agha, 2017) reverses conventional social roles, presenting the child as the nation’s defender while adults become passive witnesses. Through repeated public performance, Hamza’s memory is transformed into a living presence that continually renews the crowd’s commitment to resistance. Rather than functioning solely as remembrance, the chant becomes a ritual through which protesters collectively reaffirm their political and moral obligations.

Although Hamza al-Khatib became one of the most recognizable symbols of the Syrian Revolution after his arrest, torture, and killing in 2011, his experience represented thousands of Syrian children who became unwilling participants in the regime’s political violence. Through Schechner’s concept of Environmental Theatre, these children can be understood as performers whose bodies, voices, and even absences became integral components of the revolutionary event. Hamza’s tortured body, widely disseminated through videos and photographs, became a performative event that mobilised grief, outrage, and political resistance far beyond Daraa. Likewise, the disappearance of Rania al-Abbasi, her husband, and their six children after their arrest in 2013 transformed absence itself into a political performance. As Schechner argues that the event is not contained in the script but in the transaction among performers, spectators, and environment, Schechner (2013). The experiences of Hamza, the al-Abbasi family, and countless unnamed children illustrate how the revolutionary performance extended beyond demonstrations to encompass prisons, schools, hospitals, homes, cemeteries, and digital media. Within this expanded performative environment, children’s lives, deaths, disappearances, and memories became central to the emotional and political force of the revolution.

This process is especially evident in the opening verses of *Ya Heif*, the protest song performed by Ibrahim al-Qashoush following Hamza al-Khatib’s death. The song opens with emotionally charged questions and direct accusations that transform mourning into collective political performance. The lament, “For shame, brother, for shame! Shooting the defenceless – for shame!” (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016) immediately frames violence against civilians as a source of national shame. The following lines, “Shooting the defenceless – for shame! You are a son of this country but you kill its children. You turn your back to the enemy but assault us with a sword” (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016) stage a dramatic confrontation between protesters and the regime’s security forces. The lyrics emphasise the tragedy of fratricidal violence by addressing them as fellow Syrians who have betrayed their own people.

Variable Focus and Organic Framing: Analysing Revolutionary “Occasions”

A central feature of Schechner’s Environmental Theatre is variable focus, whereby performance has no single centre of attention. Multiple actions unfold simultaneously, and spectators continually shift their attention as the event evolves. The Syrian demonstrations depicted in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* exemplify this principle through the recurring “Friday” demonstrations, each organised around a named occasion such as the “Friday of Dignity.” Rather than functioning as fixed spectacles, these protests unfolded as fluid, multi-centred events. As Agha provides,

They also gave names to those Fridays to reflect the current events; the first one was the Friday of Dignity (3/18/11), then Friday of Glory (3/25/11), Friday of Martyrs

(4/1/11), Friday of Withstanding (4/8/11), Friday of Insistence (4/15/11), and so on until today, more than 300 Fridays counted. (Youssef-Agha, 2017)

While one group led chants such as “Yalla Erhal” in the centre of the demonstration, others monitored approaching security forces, cared for the wounded, comforted grieving families, or documented events. The revolutionary “stage” therefore expanded and contracted in response to changing political circumstances and emotional intensity.

Funeral processions in the Syrian demonstrations of 2011 evolved into significant political events, turning individual grief into collective public dissent. Agha describes this by saying that, “Every time a martyr leaves, another one follows. Wedding sounds are now used just in funerals” (Youssef-Agha, 2017). As mourners came together to inter the victims of security forces, the funeral march frequently spilled into the streets, where they shouted slogans advocating for freedom and opposing the Assad regime. In this regard, the funeral transcended a mere ceremony for the deceased; it transformed into a collective act of defiance, uniting individuals in a shared space and converting sorrow into unified political engagement. The procession thus blurred the line between grief and dissent, showing how common cultural practices could transform into moments for political expression and unity.

Ramadan turned into a significant event for communal assembly and political expression amid the Syrian protests. The communal activities linked to Ramadan, especially nighttime prayers and gatherings near mosques, provided chances for individuals to unite in public areas, where religious gatherings could transform into protests against the Syrian government. In this context, Ramadan transcended a purely religious timeframe, evolving into a social and political event where individuals showcased solidarity, sorrow, and defiance. From a Performance Studies viewpoint, these assemblies illustrate how a pre-existing cultural and religious tradition can be converted into a public display of political opposition, as bodies converged and rendered their united presence apparent in public areas. Ramadan offered a familiar social environment and allowed protesters to transform routine religious activities into forms of collective political expression.

Dissolution of Performer/Audience Roles (Analysing “Words”)

Schechner emphasises that everyone in the space is a participant. Words in a protest chant are not passive; they are participatory scripts designed to convert onlookers into actors. When the lead chanter screams a word, the crowd must hurl it back. An Environmental Theatre analysis evaluates how the choice of words, especially inclusive pronouns like “Al-Shaab” (The People) or “Hurriya” (Freedom), serves as a performative tool to force the “audience” (people watching from windows or hiding in shops) to join the chorus, transforming them from passive observers into active performers in the environmental space.

Call-and-Response as a Theatrical Mechanism of Inclusion in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed*

Schechner argues that performance is fundamentally participatory, rejecting the conventional separation between performers and spectators. One of his six axioms states that “all the space is used for the performance,” while another insists that the focus of performance is “flexible and variable,” allowing participants to shape the event collectively rather than simply observe it. Within this framework, theatrical meaning is created through interaction and mutual participation instead of passive spectatorship. Tarif Youssef-Agha’s testimony illustrates these

principles through the protesters' use of call-and-response chanting. He says, "They started a peaceful revolution by marching and chanting" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). The demonstrations described in the testimony were not organised around speeches delivered to silent audiences; rather, they depended upon continuous vocal exchanges in which every participant became responsible for sustaining the performance. Revolutionary slogans therefore functioned as collaborative acts through which collective identity was continuously produced.

Schechner argues that theatre originates in the "exchange of stimuli—either sensory or cognitive or both" (Schechner, 1994) and the Syrian demonstrations exemplify this principle through the constant circulation of voices between individuals and the larger assembly. Each response or repeated slogan confirms not only agreement with the slogan but also a communal participation while continually reshaping the emotional atmosphere of the demonstration.

The testimony further demonstrates that call-and-response creates a performative mechanism through which participation remains open and accessible. Unlike formal political meetings that distinguish leaders from listeners, the demonstrations required no specialised role or official position. Individuals joining the protest could immediately become participants simply by repeating the collective response. The act of answering a chant therefore functioned as an initiation into the revolutionary community. Protesters from different social, educational, and generational backgrounds were united through the shared rhythm of the slogans rather than through institutional affiliation.

The repeated use of familiar slogans throughout the testimony also reflects Schechner's concept of restored behaviour, which he defines as "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first-time; that are prepared or rehearsed" (Schechner, 2013). Although the demonstrations responded to changing political events, their performative structure remained remarkably consistent. Weekly protests repeatedly employed recognizable chants whose rhythms and patterns had become collectively learned through continual participation. Protesters instinctively anticipated both the timing and wording of the communal response, enabling thousands of individuals to speak with extraordinary coordination. Tarif repeatedly portrays demonstrations in which chants organised the rhythm of collective action and sustained the cohesion of protesters despite escalating violence. "Calls, hoots, group enactments, and chanting involve an ancient audio-vocal communication system predating speech, an expressive system" (Schechner, 2013).

Ultimately, Youssef-Agha's testimony demonstrates that call-and-response functioned as far more than a method of organizing revolutionary chants. It constituted a theatrical mechanism that transformed isolated individuals into a collective political body through reciprocal participation. Every slogan invited a response, and every response reaffirmed both individual inclusion and collective solidarity. Viewed through Schechner's theory of Environmental Theatre, the demonstrations emerge as participatory performances in which language acquired political power only through communal enactment. The revolutionary crowd did not merely communicate ideas; it performed a new model of civic life based upon shared voice, mutual recognition, and collective agency. The theatrical structure of call-and-response thus became one of the principal means through which the Syrian protesters enacted the democratic community they sought to create.

The performances of Ibrahim Qashoush illustrate this participatory structure with particular clarity. Qashoush's chants achieved extraordinary influence not because they were delivered as individual artistic performances but because they were immediately absorbed into the voices

of thousands of demonstrators. His celebrated refrain, “Yalla irhal ya Bashar” (“Come on, Bashar, leave”), acquired revolutionary significance through collective repetition rather than authorship alone. “This chant was taken up, modified, and adapted by each singer and province” (Dubois, 2013). As protesters echoed the chant across streets and public squares, individual expression was transformed into communal performance. Qashoush’s voice therefore functioned as the catalyst for a much larger environmental event in which every participant became a performer. *Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar* became one of the defining anthems of the Syrian Revolution because it transformed a simple political demand into a collective performative act. Through its repetitive refrain, “Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar” (“Come on, Bashar, leave”), the song encouraged thousands of demonstrators to participate simultaneously, dissolving the distinction between singer and audience. Led in many demonstrations by Abdul Basit al-Sarout and popularised through the performances associated with Ibrahim al-Qashoush, the anthem relied on rhythmic repetition, direct address, and collective chanting rather than musical complexity.

A similar dynamic characterises the performances of Abdul Baset al-Sarout. Before becoming one of the most recognizable revolutionary chanters, al-Sarout had been celebrated as a football goalkeeper whose public identity was already associated with collective participation and communal aspiration. During the uprising, however, his role changed fundamentally. Rather than addressing audiences from a position of distance, he remained physically immersed within demonstrations, leading chants while marching alongside fellow protesters. His authority emerged not from separation but from participation, reinforcing the environmental principle that performers remain integral components of the communities in which performance occurs.

The emotional dimension of the demonstrations was equally expressed through chants such as “Skaba ya dumū’ al-‘ayn skaba” (“Flow, O tears of the eye, flow”), which continues with the refrain, “‘alā shuhadā’ Sūriyā skaba” (“Flow for the martyrs of Syria, flow”). “The chant comes from a preexisting cultural heritage; it is modified according to the demonstrators’ needs and achieves the status of a protest hit when it is sung abroad by one of the star singers of Syrian protest music” (Dubois, 2013). The repetition of the imperative “flow” transforms tears from a private emotional response into a public, collective act of remembrance dedicated to those who lost their lives during the revolution.

In Schechner’s terms, the chant exemplifies Environmental Theatre by dissolving the distinction between private and public performance: the mother’s farewell becomes the farewell of the entire community, while the martyr’s imagined return is continually re-enacted through collective participation. The repeated performance of the chant enabled protesters not only to commemorate those who had been killed but also to reaffirm their commitment to the revolutionary cause, turning sacrifice into a living element of the theatrical event. Through this embodied act of remembrance, the demonstrations converted personal bereavement into collective solidarity, sustaining both the emotional and moral continuity of the Syrian Revolution.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Syrian Revolution can be understood as an environmental theatre in which political resistance emerged through the continuous interaction of bodies, voices, urban space, and collective memory. By bringing Schechner’s performance theory into dialogue, this study demonstrates that revolutionary performance is mutually reinforcing rather than separate phenomena. This reading contributes to scholarship on performance studies,

trauma studies, and Syrian revolutionary literature by demonstrating that the revolution can be understood as a performative struggle over space and memory.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I declare that I used ChatGPT and Grammarly only to correct grammatical and spelling errors for accuracy and clarity. I also declare that apart from Grammarly and ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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