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## Family Matters: Feminist Nationalism in 20th Century Egypt

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Family Matters:  
Feminist Nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt

By Harry Malinowski

May 27, 2021

A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Arts in  
Teaching Degree, MAT Program, Bard College

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## Synthesis Essay

*“‘[i]f feminism’s response to the call for more non-Western feminisms is inadequate ... the inadequacy arises precisely because feminist thought often does not historicize sufficiently the material conditions under which notions of ‘difference’ are raised.’”<sup>1</sup>*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was an exceedingly transformative time for Egypt. At the beginning of the century, the region existed as a tributary state to the Ottoman Empire, ruled autonomously by the Muhammad Ali dynasty. Despite a British military occupation since the 1880s, Egypt was still formally part of the Ottoman Empire until the Great War broke out in 1914. With the Ottomans and British on opposing sides of the war, the British declared Egypt a protectorate of the Empire. The new ruler, Hussein Kamel, declared himself the Sultan of Egypt with Britain’s blessing, as ultimately the Sultanate was under the control of the British Empire. As the Great War came to a close at the end of the 1910s, nationalism became the number one concern.

In 1919, the Wafd party, headed by Saad Zaghlul, came into existence. In opposition to the dynastic rule of the Ottoman Era, and the Sultanate Protectorate under British control, Wafdists promoted a transition to a constitutional monarchy. Following a request made by the Wafd party for the British to end the protectorate, the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 began. Though the revolution ultimately did not bring an end to the power the British held in the region, Egypt, under the leadership of the Wafd party, was able to draft a constitution in 1923 that created the Kingdom of Egypt. Criticized as essentially a British puppet state, the Kingdom

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Troup & Anna Green, “Gender and history,” in *The Houses of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 266.



fell to a military coup in 1952, which saw the rise of Gamal Nasser during a revolution which succeeded in expelling British forces from the region.

Underlying all of these revolutionary, nationalist, moments was a feminist movement. Safiya Zaghlul, the wife of Wafd leader Saad Zaghlul, became “Mother of the Egyptians,” as the leader of the Women’s Wafd, as some historians, such as Beth Baron, would go on to note. Additionally, the same year that the Wafd party drafted a new constitution for a parliamentary system in Egypt, Huda Sha’rawi established the Egyptian Feminist Union. When Colonel Gamal Nasser came to power in Egypt in the early 1950s, he implemented a series of policies dedicated to ‘improving’ the status of women in Egyptian society, from the culture and role of the family to the legal judicial system.

As a result of the ties mentioned above, the topic of the Egyptian women’s movement is not one that can be studied alone, in a vacuum. Deeply integrated with the history of the movement is also the history of the modern Egyptian nation itself, as well as the role of religion in state and society. This subject has only recently begun to be explored at length by scholars, with many of the pioneering historical works in the subject being published in the 1990s, like Margot Badran’s *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, and Beth Baron’s *the Women’s Awakening in Egypt*. These monographs came out of an era when two strands of gender history had begun separating. One strand, according to Kathleen Troup & Anna Green, “reflects the course of the feminist movement in general.”<sup>2</sup> Studies from this strand tended to focus on the experiences and achievements of women in history that had often been overlooked. The other strand of gender history, however, expanded on gender beyond the experiences of women, examining

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<sup>2</sup> Troup & Green, “Gender and history,” 263.

“the historical dichotomy between women and men,”<sup>3</sup> as well as the questions, “who makes gender, and how does it endure and change?”<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores several of the monographs that have ventured into the combined topic of Egyptian feminism and Egyptian nationalism, beginning in 1995 with Margot Badran’s book, *Feminists, Islam, and the Nation*. Badran’s book first examines gender as a broader concept in the Egyptian state, how it played into the development of an Egyptian state, before turning to the early history of the feminist movement. While she does not always make direct comparisons to the feminism of the revolutionary era of the 1950s, sections of her book appear to be a response, in part, to the feminism and history of the later Egyptian state, as seen in chapters like “Women Have Always Worked,” where she brings out the issue of paid work in the feminist campaign of the 1930s.

Following Badran in 1997 is Azza Karam’s study, *Women, Islamisms, and the State*, where she explores religion and feminism. She first discusses the distinctions between Islamist feminism, and Muslim feminism, which she describes as separate. Islamist feminism focuses on the islamization of the Egyptian nation with respect to feminism, while Muslim feminism ‘simply’ operates within a Muslim environment. She then looks into secular feminism, and how it operated, in part, against the Muslim and Islamist feminisms that she goes on to discuss for the remainder of the book, noting the idea of “official” Islam and women in Egyptian political parties.

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<sup>3</sup> Troup & Green, “Gender and history,” 265.

<sup>4</sup> Troup & Green, “Gender and history,” 263.

Selma Botman's 1999 book, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, takes a slightly different approach than Karam or Badran. While she engages with the question of women in the state, as Karam did with political parties and Islam under the post-1952 revolution regimes, Botman breaks up her book into sections focusing first on the gender of citizenship, the role of "the woman," before diving into the relationship between gender and nationalism – similarly to Beth Baron's book several years later. The difference partially being the time period that is focused on.

With the groundwork laid out in the mid to late 1990s, the 2000s saw the publication of Nadjé al-Ali's monograph *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East* (2000), along with Beth Baron's return to the subject with *Egypt as a Woman* in 2005. Al-Ali's book picks up the topic Azza Karam explored just a few years prior but focuses largely on secular feminism, as opposed to the mainly religious focus of Karam's monograph. Al-Ali looks at the formative experiences of several Egyptian feminists. She directly introduces to the historical conversation the question of occidentalism, how the Western world is represented. In viewing the campaigns and advances of Egyptian feminism within the Egyptian state, the role of the West is given a different standing. This differs from the orientalist viewpoint, which may suggest the modernization and feminism of Egypt exists as specifically Westernization.

Baron's book, following a decade after her initial work on the subject of Egyptian feminism, discusses feminist and nationalist imagery, including the image of the "Mother of the Nation," and the gendering of the Egyptian state and society. While Botman's book several years earlier chose to focus on the topic in the modern Egyptian state, Baron goes back to the era that Badran covered: the feminist nationalist history of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the second

half of her book, Baron explores the politics of the women activists involved in nationalist and feminist demonstrations in the early days of the Egyptian kingdom.

The most recently published monograph examined in this essay is Laura Bier's *Revolutionary Womanhood*, which was published in 2011. Bier explores the policies of the Nasser regime, in what she refers to as "state feminism." She analyzes the nature of these policies, and how they played into the state's view of women, in addition to men, as agents of change in the Egyptian nation. The change desired, was modernization, and Bier notes early on the idea of westernization versus modernization, connecting back to Azza Karam's discussion of occidentalism a decade before. As she looks into the effects of state feminism on society, Bier also brings into the discussion the role of religion, particularly on the subject of the family and legal systems.

Each of these monographs generally follows a different time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Egyptian feminist movement, yet at times they find themselves overlapping each other and often indirectly responding to one another. In the notes and references of these monographs, it is not hard to find where each author, particularly the later ones in the 2000s, have cited one or more of the other monographs. Throughout all of the monographs discussed here are themes of religion, but also secularism, which some of the historians believe to be overlooked; modernity, but still with a connection back to the role of religion in modernity, perhaps influenced by the increasing islamization of Egypt in the decades following the 1950s revolution; and orientalism, but also the idea of occidentalism and a changing understanding of westernization with a connection back to modernity.

Many of the monographs that studied the subject of the Egyptian women's movement fell into the second strand that Troup & Green described, expanding beyond women to gender and how it's constructed, or even straddled both strands, as in Nadjie al-Ali's *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*. While the experiences and work of many of the women nationalists in Egypt are nevertheless important to these monographs, the central focus tends to be not on those experiences entirely, but rather how the Egyptian state has interacted with women and feminism in the development of a new "modern" Egyptian nation.

One concept that remains present in all of the monographs included in this review of the historiography of the subject is the topic of religion. In Margot Badran's book, she begins by stating that "To this day Egyptian feminism has affirmed its Islamic and nationalist dimensions."<sup>5</sup> Badran looks at the historical impact that Islam has had on the development of nationalism, and how feminism has evolved in that. She goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the beginning of a separate Egyptian state. Prior to the first instance of autonomy in the "modern" day, Egypt had been part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, and as Egypt began to develop under the rule of Muhammad 'Ali, religious learning was brought firmly under the control of the government. At this point, the state focused on the development of secular institutions, like education, that opened up new opportunities for Egyptian women. Despite these efforts, however, personal status/family law was still under the control of the religious community, which continued into the later creation of an Egyptian state post-British occupation. "Egyptians

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<sup>5</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4.

were at once members of a religious community (*ummah*) and citizens of a secular nation-state (*watan*), albeit one in which Islam was the official religion.”<sup>6</sup>

Reaching the early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist movements, Badran looks at the actions of upper-class and middle-class Egyptian women in charity efforts to help poor Egyptian women make money and learn to read and write, among other things. She notes particular activists, like Huda Sha’rawi, who played important roles in this, and would later go on to establish feminist unions. The actions of these women, and the then-secular, “modern,” society led to new developments in the evolution of Egyptian society. As Badran notes,

Social assistance came to be understood as not solely a religious obligation but also a civic and national responsibility for Muslims and Christians to shoulder together as Egyptians...While Egyptian feminists respected religious difference, they refused to allow religion to be a divisive force.<sup>7</sup>

As she moves into the establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) and the feminist movement that was led by it, Badran deals with the growth of secular feminism. Focusing on the aim of the movement to be “all-inclusive,” Badran notes that “The feminist movement was a national, secular movement of Egyptian women, both Muslim and Christian.”<sup>8</sup> Not present in that description, of course, is Egyptian feminists who eschewed religion entirely in the pursuit of their feminist goals. This is something that Azza Karam contends with in her book *Women, Islamisms and the State*. Karam presents a sharp distinction between the secular

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<sup>6</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 95.

feminists and Muslim feminists in Egypt. She suggests that “secular feminists maintain a politics of Othering – where ‘the Other’ is the one who thinks differently vis-à-vis religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Karam specifically points to secular feminists as separate from Muslim feminists, even in the case of Muslim feminists who may have “claimed” secularism. She is discussing a complete rejection of the role of Islam and religion in the state, and places secular feminists on the opposite side of a political spectrum than Muslim feminists. In her explanation of how Muslim feminists stand in regard to “the dynamic of state-Islamisms-feminisms,” Karam writes that “Muslim feminists can either be the outcasts or the trendsetters – depending on the politics they choose and the climate within which they function.”<sup>10</sup> This is a sentiment that seems to be shared by other historians, like Nadjé al-Ali. This criticism of the “secularism” of religious feminists that Badran describes is discussed as well by al-Ali, as she notes early in her monograph, “Egyptian women activists, whose efforts have been historically rooted in nationalism and the struggle against anti-colonial powers, have run the risk of being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious.”<sup>11</sup> While Muslim feminists were not immune to this, Karam and al-Ali’s perspective is that Muslim feminists were still relatively protected, simply by operating within this Islamic discourse. Karam writes that “In their manner of rejecting any discourses of emancipation within religious frameworks, secular feminists are effectively risking both estrangement from, as well as the exclusion of, many contemporary Egyptian women activists.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Azza Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 235.

<sup>10</sup> Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 236.

<sup>11</sup> Nadjé al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 235.

What follows from this is Karam's exploration of the feminists claiming secularism. Her point is that "this merely indicated a selective appropriation of religious material."<sup>13</sup> The intention behind this "secularism" is rather not a rejection of religion in the state, but a focus on presenting a specific interpretation of Islamic values and how they related to the Egyptian state, society, and perhaps most importantly in this regard, women. Karam cites, as a brief example of this, Nasserist women.

The women and policies of Nasser regime are the subject of Laura Bier's book *Revolutionary Womanhood*. Bier's book takes a different position with respect to Islam in feminism than Badran, Karam, or al-Ali. She focuses instead on modernity and feminism. To be clear, Bier does not ignore the religious element of this topic at all, but it is framed differently. As she examines the idea of the Egyptian woman and feminism, Bier writes that "calls for reforming local domestic practices (and women with them) were not solely the purview of secular Westernized reformers but were also a preoccupation of reformers working within the Islamic modernist tradition."<sup>14</sup> Bier explores the question of modernization in Egypt, and the Western influence on this modernization, by discussing the reforms under the Nasser regime. She actually notes, perhaps in line with the Badran "secular" cooperation mindset, that "Within both secular nationalist and Islamist ideologies, gender was a particularly charged site for negotiating the meanings of being 'modern' and being 'authentic.'"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 42.



Bier engages with gender history as Troup & Green described it as “who makes gender,” as with each chapter she discusses the different state feminism policies of the Nasser era and what that meant for the changing role of women in society, the development of a “new” Egyptian woman. As the job market opened up for women in the Nasser era, “The presence of middle-class women in the professional workplace in the late 1950s and 1960s occasioned new discussions over etiquette, femininity, fashion, and bodily deportment.”<sup>16</sup> Though Bier’s exploration of these policies includes little in terms of criticism of the Nasser state for the motivation behind such policies, her description of this as “state feminism” is integral to understanding what occurred. Selma Botman’s book, which precedes Bier’s by a decade, specifically attacks the Nasser regime for these types of policies, noting that “The gains women did achieve were thought of by the regime not as the granting of civil rights but as a means of achieving economic modernization and nation building.”<sup>17</sup>

Though she does not explicitly state it, Botman appears to agree with Badran’s observation that Egyptians existed in two communities simultaneously: the Egyptian nation-state, and a religious community. This agreement comes through in her criticism of the Nasser regime’s failure to act on any religious “personal status” laws, writing that “although legislation allowed women an increased public role in politics, education, and the economy, they were still expected to fulfill their traditional familial duties as prescribed by the Sharia.”<sup>18</sup> While seemingly insignificant compared to the advancements made in the rest of society, the familial duties held a power that limited how far women could actually go. Bier, however, sees

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<sup>16</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 52.

something else in the role of religion in the family. In fact, true to Karam's view of the interpretation of religion playing a significant role to Egyptian feminists, Bier explains that "Drawing on a new discourse of citizenship rights, [women activists] called upon the state to regulate the rights of men under *shari'a* law in the interests of protecting the family and its most vulnerable members: women and children."<sup>19</sup>

As explained earlier, following the Troup & Green understanding of gender history, there are two strands. Firmly within the second strand, dealing with the relationship of gender to national imagery, lies Botman's book. While she takes care to include the experiences of Egyptian women, the central focus of her study was to examine "the interrelationships of women and men in the context of Egypt's evolving socioeconomic and political system."<sup>20</sup> Looking deep into the experiences of women to see how their identities as Egyptian women have evolved, Botman begins by "accepting" the idea that gender is shaped by culture and society, but mostly focuses on society and moments in society, like the publishing of a notable book or founding of a feminist group<sup>21</sup>. What follows in each chapter is a look into not only different moments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also chapters focusing on specific concepts as they relate to society, from nationalism to the patriarchy. As one example, Botman describes the leadup to and publication of Inge Aflatun's *Eighty Million Women Are with Us*. In 1945, sent by the League of Women Students and Graduates from University and Egyptian Institutes, Aflatun attended the First World Congress of Women (and not the only conference bringing together

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<sup>19</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> This description of Botman's writing separates culture and society, simply on the kind of writing she does, as well as Beth Baron's book further in this paper. The distinction drawn between culture and society is more so for observational purposes than having any significant historiographical meaning.

oppressed groups that year). Inspired by the collective belief in national liberation and the liberation of women, Aflatun wrote her book.

As several of the other authors also discuss, Botman too shows how Islam played a role in the early Egyptian feminist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing “Blending nationalism with feminism and incorporating Islam into their discourse in order to legitimize their calls for change, they organized an independent feminist movement...”<sup>22</sup> Again recalling the conclusions of other authors – how Islam has played a role in legitimizing the movement, proving it “authentic.” But while Islam has played such a role for some Egyptian feminists, it has also served as essentially the law to form a prison. As discussed above in regard to the personal status law, Botman observes the existence of personal status laws, reinforced by interpretations of Islam, as limiting to the progress of women in Egypt. “Citing the applicability and immutability of Islam, [Egyptian men] impose their will and shape the character of the family.”<sup>23</sup>

Beth Baron’s book, *Egypt as a Woman*, similarly concerns itself with the role of culture and society in shaping gender and what it meant to be a woman in Egypt, focusing more on the culture aspect, complementing Botman’s. Half of her monograph deals solely with imagery created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Egyptian nationalism and uses this to explore the connections between Egyptian feminism and Egyptian nationalism. Her book begins by discussing the unveiling of a sculpture, Mahmud Mukhtar’s *Nahdat Misr* (Egypt’s Awakening) in 1928. It shows a peasant woman lifting her veil from her face with one arm, the other placed on

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<sup>22</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 48.

the back of a sphinx rising up. Intended to depict the “old” Egypt and the “new,” Mukhtar presents an idea of the “modern” Egypt – a woman. For the unveiling, the Egyptian government planned a ceremony, which barred women from attending. “The almost complete absence of women from a national ceremony celebrating a sculpture in which a woman represented the nation epitomizes the paradox faced by women nationalists.”<sup>24</sup> Despite this, the sculpture became a symbol of women’s rights alongside Egyptian nationalism.

The idea of “the family” is the basis for much of Selma Botman’s historical writing, and she is not the only author to focus much on the family either. In fact, Laura Bier, for all she does to focus on the policies of state feminism, cannot ignore the family when viewing the changing position of women. As Botman notes several times across her chapters, “reform was offset by the regime’s acceptance of traditional family life.”<sup>25</sup> This is something that Bier directly refers to, citing Botman’s observations, in her own book, in a chapter discussing the struggle between “home” and the workplace. In responding directly to Botman’s observations, among others, Bier writes that she sees those arguments as having a basis in exclusion. Essentially, gendered legal and social norms limit women to the private sphere (home), not public (workplace), so the Nasserist reforms invite conflict as a result. Bier does not agree with this. Rather than believing that tradition and norms of exclusion made women entering the public sphere problematic, Bier instead suggests that it was because “state feminism was predicated upon women’s *inclusion* and participation in public life.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 69. Italics added for emphasis, not in original text.

As noted above, with Beth Baron's example of the sculpture and ceremony that both depicted Egypt as a woman and banned them from the event in which it was unveiled, historians see that even prior to the state feminisms of the Nasser era, women activists struggled with inclusion/exclusion. Introduced in the era Baron's book covers, is the idea of "Mother of the Egyptians." Combining feminism with nationalism, "Motherhood...gave [the women] license to speak out and the rank to impose their will on their 'sons,' or at least try."<sup>27</sup> Baron's view of this time is that women, in attempting to enter the public sphere, carve out a space for themselves, used this maternal/family concept to legitimize that process and what they fought for.

In Laura Bier's exploration of the debates over the personal status/family law during the Nasser years, a theme stretching across many of these monographs becomes clear – orientalism. Or, perhaps instead, occidentalism, as Nadjie al-Ali suggests. "The decade-long debate during the Nasser period over the personal status laws challenges the binary framing of that debate that places 'Islam' and 'Westernization' at its center."<sup>28</sup> Karam's description of secular feminists that engage in the politics of "Othering," separating themselves from those who are religious, fits squarely into the analytical box of orientalism in part on the basis of modernization. For Egypt and Nasser, who had economic concerns rather than social, the new rights to be afforded to women were central to modernizing Egypt. Yet Egyptian feminists did not entirely agree on the framework on which modernization should be built. Several of these monograph authors, like Laura Bier, talk about modernization as Westernization. Perhaps as

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<sup>27</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 217.

<sup>28</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 102.

more an observation of the nature of “secular” modernization, this still reinforces the concept of the new as the West, and in conflict against the Islamization of the state and society.

While none of these monographs deeply engage with question of Egyptian feminism in the present day, a few of them touch on it briefly, especially Nadjé al-Ali as she discusses “occidentalism.” Al-Ali makes it clear that she does not consider “occidentalism” as explicitly the opposite of “orientalism.” Instead, she positions it within a larger discussion on modernity, characterizing it “in contemporary Egypt as a critique of modernity which is deeply aware of and reacting against orientalism.”<sup>29</sup> Al-Ali’s view of occidentalism presents it as a framework in which the West is essentially vilified, presented as an imperialist, corrupt, dominating force. Al-Ali places the Islamists in Egypt as strictly opposed to modernization as Westernization, which creates another dimension to the criticism some Egyptian feminists, particularly secular feminists, face when calling for progressive actions. Al-Ali’s earlier note, regarding anti-nationalist and anti-religious criticisms, is further reinforced when bringing in the question of occidentalism and considering the impact of viewing secular modernization as Westernization. Similarly, as secular feminists create an “Other” against religious thought in feminism, al-Ali presents a case in which the “Other” becomes the West – a rejection of the West, is a rejection of modernity.

Nadjé al-Ali is not the only author to note this “Othering” of the West in Egypt when discussing the role of women in Egyptian society. Laura Bier’s introduction recalls the words of Adel Omar Sherif, a deputy chief justice of the Constitutional Court of Egypt, from a speech he gave to the Court in 2008,

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<sup>29</sup> Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, 26.

‘Egypt was a different place. Women were very elegantly dressed, more fashionable, more Westernized...’ He went on to mention the various gains Egyptian women had made over the course of the last half-century ... that stood to be rolled back by the sweeping Islamization of Egyptian society ... ‘Now,’ he said, referring to the proliferation of hijab ... among young, educated urban women, ‘the streets of Cairo look very different.’<sup>30</sup>

Bier’s focus on the transformation of women in Egyptian society is informed in part by this remark, and places her writing within this “Egypt, the West, and Islam” occidental discourse. She does not shy away from the concept of “Western women” vs “Eastern women” either. The final chapter of Bier’s book is titled “Our Sisters in Struggle,” and there is a distinctly international element to the chapter. She begins by mentioning an interview published in *Hawwa*, a women’s weekly magazine published in Egypt. The interview in question was with Sakina Kusima, a leading figure of Indonesia’s feminist movement, who was invited to Egypt in the late 1950s by the head of the women’s committee of the Arab Socialist Union, Nahid Sirri. Bier notes that this visit and interview came on the heels of the Bandung Conference, a historic meeting where many newly independent African and Asian states met to affirm commitments to fight colonialism and neocolonialism. “According to the article, [Kusima’s] mission was to bring to life the spirit of Bandung by promoting ties of sisterhood and solidarity between the women of African and Asia.”<sup>31</sup> Kusima’s views focused on the role of the “Eastern Woman” in regard to the struggle against imperialism, against colonialism. Bier writes that there were many articles like that published in the time immediately following the 1952 Egyptian

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<sup>30</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 1. Quote shortened.

<sup>31</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 154.

revolution. She believes that the proliferation of such articles suggests the process of creating the “modern” Egyptian woman was not restricted to the state itself. It became part of “an era of transnational, imperialist struggle.”<sup>32</sup>

While al-Ali may not consider this occidental focus to be the opposite of orientalism, it becomes clear that, in “reacting” to orientalism, al-Ali’s work, among Bier’s and the other monographs still very much work against orientalism in their historical writing. Towards the end of his book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said presented a report published in 1967 by Morroe Berger as an example of the endurance of orientalist ideas in academic work. “Berger came to the following conclusions: ‘The modern Middle East and North Africa is not a center of great cultural achievement...’”<sup>33</sup> The series of monographs discussed in this paper all appear to go against orientalist ideas like that. Central to every one of the studies is the development, the evolution, of the “Egyptian woman” in society. Directly under criticism is the West vs. Egypt modernization question and rejecting any notion that the modernization efforts – whether Westernization or not – were about elevating the Egyptian nation to the “level” of the West.

Continuing along the theme of orientalism and occidentalism, these monographs engage in historical writing beyond gender history. While the idea of the West plays a significant role in a few of the monographs, there is nonetheless an effort to resist any Western-centric writing about the topic. Modernity and feminism are looked at strictly within a focus on Egyptian development. The West plays as merely a factor and something argued against; the authors of the monographs do not even refer to Egypt’s modernization as

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<sup>32</sup> Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 288.



specifically Westernization themselves, rather they use the words of women's activists and political actors in Egypt when describing the role of the West, taking on a postcolonial perspective in viewing the history.

World history and/or global history (the differences are not clear) has tried to expand historical analysis ... but continues to struggle against Eurocentric metanarratives. Part of the problem seems to be that... 'there were and still are many Europes, real, historical, and fantasized.' It is therefore easy for 'Europe' to slip into analyses as a point of contrast, rather than being perhaps one among a number of regions whose identity and relationships might be examined.<sup>34</sup>

Something that all of these monographs do quite well is limiting what the West means in terms of the history of Egypt's nationalism and modernization. The quote above from Kathleen Troup & Anna Green describes how a fantasized Europe, or even perhaps historical, can easily become a significant part of historical writing on many subjects. For the monographs that discuss Egyptian nationalism and feminism during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is particularly relevant. Beth Baron, Selma Botman, Nadge al-Ali, especially, who cannot avoid discussing the West due to the impact of British occupation on the development of Egyptian nationalism during that time. The one moment that Baron appears to truly give much weight to the British is only in an early chapter, as she discusses the events of World War I. In a subsection titled "War and Revolt: The Rape of the Nation," she looks into the effects of the British actions during World War I. The Egyptians were caught between the British and the Ottomans and suffered out of British concern about a possible Egyptian uprising. In the British occupation

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<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Troup & Anna Green, "Historical Sociology," in *The Houses of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 139.

during this time, they assaulted Egyptian women, which had consequences reaching beyond the individual that was affected. “The dishonor to the woman and her family became a collective dishonor; her body became a metaphor for a communal or national disgrace.”<sup>35</sup>

Nationalists did not shy away from this idea, either, even endorsing the idea that the attacks on the Egyptian women were attacks on the Egyptian nation, dishonor to Egyptians as a collective.

Though the West cannot be eliminated from Baron’s discussion of the development of nationalist imagery, Baron does not exactly focus on the West. What plays as central to the discussion are the Egyptians themselves. Their experiences are particularly relevant, how they responded to the actions of the British soldiers during the Great War. It is not the crimes committed by the British soldiers that are described as significant to Egyptian nationalism, but how the Egyptians perceived it. They saw the attacks on the women as an attack on honor, an attack on the Egyptian “family” state.

The West plays a different role in Botman’s monograph. Her first chapter, “Engendering Citizenship,” addresses how historians and other academics look at gender roles in society. Botman begins her chapter by exploring what other historians have already said about gendered citizenship. According to Botman, scholars like Carole Pateman base their argument in the history of European women: only in motherhood were women deemed essential to the family, and never essential to politics. Though the scholars that Botman cites do not refer to Egypt in their own arguments, Botman’s use of these arguments as the basis for her own creates the path which compares the Western and Egyptian societies. Later in the same

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<sup>35</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 46.

chapter, Botman specifically writes on a “social contract” that men in both Western and Islamic societies establish for the purposes of controlling the public and private spheres.

This is not to say that the history Botman writes has an unfair inclusion of the view of Western societies when the overall topic is on Egyptian society. Just as she responds to the arguments of scholars who are more based in Western history, Botman presents arguments from scholars that focus the discussion firmly in the Middle East, like Hisham Sharabi. In fact, the purpose that this appears to serve, though this is admittedly speculation, is that Botman provides an introduction to Egyptian women and feminism through a connection to what a reader may already be familiar with, or also to note the international nature of movements like feminism. She writes, “like females across the globe, Egyptian women are often, ironically, the strongest supporters of the customs that limit their own lives.”<sup>36</sup> To Botman, though ultimately her focus lies in Egyptian women and Egyptian feminism, the international nature of feminism (for example, in 1919, there was an international congress of women, at the same time as the Paris Peace Conference) appears to be key, though this is still merely speculation. The use of the West is not in an orientalist view of Egypt.

Despite literature on the subject only really opening up in the 1990s, already a variety of historical works have been published on Egyptian feminism and nationalism with a variety of directions being taken. From Nadjé al-Ali’s book focusing on the concept of “Islamisms” and its role in the feminist movement and development of different groups of feminism with varying levels of religious faith, to Beth Baron’s exploration of nationalist feminist imagery and the gendering of a nation, the existing books on the topic are shown to be quite different between

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<sup>36</sup> Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*, 16-17.

each other. Against that, however, is that these books also all follow recurring themes. While not all six of the monographs discussed in this essay fall so cleanly into each discourse, each is linked to at least one other. Religion in particular is a topic relevant to many of these books, but they do not all involve religion the same way, nor do they all fully agree when it comes to the historical roles of secular feminists and Muslim feminists. Aside from Azza Karam's discussion of islamist feminism, most of the authors who write on religion keep strictly to the Muslim vs. secular feminism idea, not engaging with the further idea of islamists in the feminist movements.

Interestingly enough, much of the writing from these monographs tends to fall under the term "gender history," as opposed to strictly "women's" history. Much of the conversation on the role of Egyptian women in society focuses on the social aspects of it and the relationship of feminism to the broader idea of the state, and in the case of Bier, who writes on Nasser's state feminism, the roles of men in relation to that. Botman too, in discussing gendered citizenship, writes on gender roles and the connection between gender roles and citizenship in the state.

## Document Collection

### “Danshaway II”

The title of this ballad, “Danshaway II,” is an informal title. It refers to the Danshaway incident of 1906, when British soldiers shot an Egyptian woman, the wife of a local prayer leader in Danshaway, a small village in Northern Egypt. Following the shooting, protests erupted against the British occupation. This ballad was reportedly produced by Mustafa ‘Ibrahim ‘Ajaj and transcribed during an interview in 1959 with a close friend of the author. The document comes from a text on a series of similar documents, Pierre Cachia’s *Popular Narrative Ballads of Modern Egypt*, which was published in 1989.<sup>37</sup>

dansaway II  
(Second version)  
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la ba'as ya dingiway ma l 'arqik haqig wi naqil  
ḡalit mā ḥadda zayy il-muḥaman mutadil wi  
naqil [niqilluh]  
'ammā r-rigal hattikuhā fi s-sigun winaqil  
[w ingalu]  
sabab il-qadiyya wiliyya fi l-gurn 'arabiyya  
5 waḥid mi l-ingiliz 'ammaḥ bārūd wi qarab  
min 'aql ged il-ḥamam talquh 'arabiyya  
[ʿa f-rabya]  
ḥaraq il-wiliyya ḥatta gurniha wi qarab  
[dar 'abb]  
gih<sup>1</sup> waladhā wi ḡal 'af'al 'arabiyya [ʿaf biyya]  
mā xudḡa tar wi haqq in-nabi wi qarab  
[da f-rabb]  
10 rah inxatāf li l-mudir gih rakib 'arabiyya  
wi yiḥsiḥuḥā l-ingiliz min mulkihum wi qarab  
[d-darb]  
waḥid fiq<sup>2</sup> mi l-'awagiz l-ingiliz 'ataluh  
[ʿatu luh]  
mayyit ba la ḥanbi la yunzur wa la jani  
'itlammum 'aleḡ bi 'izwithum ḡawam ḡataluh  
15 wi f-ḡulma da ge' mā yirḡaḡa 'insa wa la jani  
[jinn]  
wi jathā l-ḡukuma bi 'askarhā lmizadiyya  
[l-mazida]  
gum yikḡifum 'an il-xabaḡ ḡan il-lawā' wi l-xof  
'u ḥaḡar kirḡmaḡ wi kan y'uz ilmizadiyya  
[il-mazad diyya]  
'amaḡ bi s-sa'a w baddil il-ḡukma bi l-gald

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A Political Event

20 wi ḡal inhi nas illi ti'uz ilmizadiyya [il-miza  
diyya]  
ḡadī misihī yistiḥaqqi qarab in-na'l  
mi lli qa'aduh yistahil qarab in-ni'al wi lxof  
[l-xuff]  
ḡakam 'ala 'arba'a bi g-ganqi wi l-'a'dam  
w illi nganaḡ mat min qarab il-gilad 'i'dam  
[wiqī' damm]  
25 wi da ge' tamam yibakkī 'ahl il-waḡan wi naqil  
[ʿangaluh]

Danshaway II

Be comforted, O Danshaway! How is it your soil [still] sprouts  
clover and herbage?  
She answered, 'There is none like Him Who watches; He is  
mild, and Him we magnify.'  
As for the men, they have been abused in gaols, and have  
passed on.  
The problem started with a woman—an Arab—in the barn.  
One of the English loaded his gun and fired. 5  
In order to shoot pigeons, they let fly upon the hill,  
And so he burnt the woman, also her barn and her father's  
house.  
Up came her son and said, 'Such deeds bring shame upon me.  
Shall I not take revenge, by the claims upon us of the Prophet  
and of this Lord of ours?'  
He hied off to the provincial Governor, who came riding in a 10  
carriage.  
The English reckoned it all part of their realm, their patch.  
A reciter of Scriptures, a disabled man, the English came upon.  
He died, though faultless—he could not see, nor was he guilty;  
With all their might, they ganged up on him and promptly  
killed him.  
Such oppression is something neither man nor jinn will tolerate. 15  
The Government with its numerous soldiery came to it.  
They came to investigate the matter. Anxiety and fear were  
manifest.  
Cromer turned up, seeking excessive restitution.  
He issued orders on the spot, and substituted flogging for  
[lesser] sentences,

Danshaway I and II

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Saying, 'What kind of people are they who are content with  
such characterization?' 20  
A Christian judge, who merits to be beaten with a shoe,  
Who, by whoever appointed him, deserves to be beaten with  
slipper and shoe,  
Passed sentence on four to be hanged, to be executed.  
Those who were hanged have died, and from the lashes blood  
ran,  
Something that indeed brings tears to the people, the sons of 25  
the Fatherland.

<sup>37</sup> Mustafa ‘Ibrahim ‘Ajaj, “Danshaway II,” in *Popular Narrative Ballads of Modern Egypt*, ed. Pierre Cachia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 254-257.

## “Harem Women Make Public Speeches”

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At the beginning of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, Egyptian women gathered to protest British occupiers. To these women, Egyptian feminism was hand-in-hand with Egyptian nationalism. This photograph, taken in June 1919, depicts veiled women calling on their right to free speech. The event became popular enough that in the United States, the Library of Congress archived a section of an American newspaper, *The Madison Journal*, which had a brief mention of the event. This image is from the issue of *The Madison Journal*, where it was captioned “Harem Women Make Public Speeches.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Harem Women Make Public Speeches,” *The Madison Journal*, June 28, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064430/1919-06-28/ed-1/seq-1/>.

## “Egypt Awakened”

The following photo depicts a sculpture by Egyptian artist, Mahmoud Mukhtar, “unveiled” in 1928. Mukhtar belonged to a line of artists who fell in with a tradition of embracing ancient Egyptian imagery as well as nationalist imagery. The sculpture, titled “Egypt Awakened,” depicts a woman, lifting a veil, standing beside a sphinx, her arm on its head. Mukhtar had developed a smaller version years before, in 1920, and in the aftermath of Egyptian independence in 1923 was meant to represent Egypt at that moment in time. Mukhtar’s statement with this piece aligned with the feminist view of rejecting the religious veil and looking to a modern Egypt.<sup>39</sup>



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<sup>39</sup> Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Egypt Awakened*, 1928, University College London, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equiano-centre/educational-resources/fusion-worlds/artists/mahmoud-mukhtar-egypt-awakened>.



## “The Mother of Egyptians”

The image below is a political cartoon, published in a magazine, *Al-Kashkul*, and has later been made available online. *Al-Kashkul* was founded by the Wafd Party and published similar images to aid in the fight against the British. It is dated to May 22, 1931, and depicts two of the early feminist leaders, Safiyya Zaghloul, one of the early feminist leaders, and Huda Sha’arawi, her spiritual successor, running from Egyptian police. The text at the bottom is dialogue from each of the two women. The top line reads “Huda Sha’arawi – Do you see, mother? Do you see how I’m running alongside you in the demonstrations, and I’m always trying to be a step ahead?” The second line depicts Safiyya Zaghloul’s response, “‘Mother?’ Who are you calling ‘mother,’ sister? I am not even the mother of this generation.” In the past, Zaghloul had been referred to as “the Mother of Egyptians.”<sup>40</sup>



<sup>40</sup> Gulsah Torunoglu, “Feminism in Egypt: New Alliances, Old Debates,” Ohio State University, <https://origins.osu.edu/article/feminism-egypt-new-alliances-old-debates/page/0/1>.



## Interview with the Sultan

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I found this document in an archive dedicated to Gamal Nasser, once president of Egypt. This document is an excerpt from a British communication from April 20, 1919, between General Sir Allenby, the then-governor of Egypt, and Earl Curzon, who was involved in the ongoing independence negotiations between the British and Egypt. This excerpt is from an interview that was attached to the communication, which took place 3 days prior. The interview was between a Colonel Symes, who had been stationed in Sudan prior to the interview, and the then-Sultan of Egypt on April 17, 1919. After a month since the beginning of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, this document reads into how the British and the Sultan viewed the feminist-nationalist groups, with particular note to Safiyya Zaghloul, who is here referred to by her husband's name. The interview also mentions Prince Omar Toussoun, a relative of the Sultan, who had worked for Egyptian independence years earlier.<sup>41</sup>

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— His Highness gave instances of the intrigues of Omar Toussoun and other members of his family with the two principal Nationalist groups, and of his own unsuccessful efforts to induce various notables, previously reasonable, to appreciate the futility of their present courses. He remarked on the extraordinary influence of the women, and particularly of Mme. Saad Zaghiul, in exciting native hostility to the British. He had just heard, but had difficulty in accepting the story as true, that

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<sup>41</sup> "Colonel Symes' Note on Interview with the Sultan, April 17, 1919," No. 286, FO 407/184, [http://nasser.bibalex.org/Data/Docs/BritishDocumentsMerged/FO\\_407\\_184-merged.pdf](http://nasser.bibalex.org/Data/Docs/BritishDocumentsMerged/FO_407_184-merged.pdf).

## “Rising Feminism Bewilders Egypt”

On the eve of the Egyptian revolution of 1952, Egyptian feminists stormed the Egyptian parliament, demanding their voices be heard. The protesters were part of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), first established by Huda Sha'rawi. Doria Shafik, a feminist leader in the EFU, led the women protestors into the building, making her into the office of the president of the Senate, where she was able to talk to him and convince him to let the Egyptian women be heard. This was reported in the United States, in the *New York Times*, with the title “Rising Feminism Bewilders Egypt.” Included with the article is an image depicting the event.<sup>42</sup>

### DEMAND POLITICAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN IN EGYPT



Suffragettes marching on Parliament in Cairo on Feb. 19



Mme. Doria Shafik, president of the Bent el-Nil Union, who led the demonstration, reads to her two daughters, Gehane, left, 7 years old, and Aziza, 9.

### RISING FEMINISM BEWILDERS EGYPT

Moslem Conservatives Shocked by Suffragettes' Behavior in Invading Parliament

By MICHAEL CLARK

Special to The New York Times.

CAIRO, Feb. 27.—The unlady-like behavior of the suffragettes who burst into the august precincts of the Egyptian Parliament recently shouting slogans, scattering leaflets, blowing automobile horns and puncturing tires has made conservative Egyptians wonder what sort of a Pandora's box this feminist movement is anyway.

The Deputy who, in the courtyard of the Parliament building, told Mme. Doria Shafik, president of the Bent el-Nil (Daughters of the Nile) Union, and her female cohorts that they were acting "most incorrectly" expressed in a word the bewilderment and dismay of many of his colleagues.

The feminist movement is not new in Egypt, however. Twenty-eight years ago the late Mme. Hoda Sharaoui, Egypt's Susan B. Anthony, founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, an organization that has done much to emancipate Egyptian women. Barely a generation ago women in Egypt were still severely veiled and sequestered according to Moslem tradition. If much has been accomplished since then, the right to vote and to be a candidate for election has yet to be won.

An innocuous-seeming "feminist congress"—Egypt's first—was called for the afternoon of Feb. 19 in Ewart Memorial Hall of the American University at Cairo.

There was a reason for both time and place. At little distance away, in Parliament, the Deputies were, on that particular afternoon, scheduled to convene to consider a point raised by Mohamed Tewfik Khachaba, Deputy from Asyut, in connection with Egypt's national aspirations.

The "congress" had lasted for thirty minutes when Mme. Shafik, 34-year-old mother of two, rose to speak.

"My sisters," she said, "this is our first parliament; it represents one-half of the nation. Luckily, it has met at the same hour and in the same part of town as the parliament of the other half of the nation. I propose that we go there, strong in the knowledge of our right, and tell the Deputies and Senators that their assemblies are illegal so long as our representatives are excluded, that the Egyptian Parliament cannot be a true reflection of the entire nation un-

til women are admitted. Forward to Parliament!"

Just as the feminine phalanx approached the wrought iron gates of Parliament, these swung open to make way for an entering car. Before the startled guards could collect their wits and close the gates, a thousand furies were inside.

Soon afterward, Mme. Shafik had got into the office of the president of the Senate, Aly Zaki el-Orabi Pasha, one of Egypt's most eminent jurists. As luck would have it, the legislator was ill and confined to his home. All undaunted, Mme. Shafik took the telephone and booked a call.

As soon as a most surprised Orabi Pasha was on the other end of the line, Mme. Shafik said: "I am speaking from your own office. A thousand women are outside demanding their political rights. They know that, according to your own interpretation of the Constitution, they should have the right to vote and to sit in Parliament. We are convinced that you will not disavow your own words."

Replied the Pasha, finally: "I promise to take this question personally in hand."

Emerging from the building, Mme. Shafik repeated the Pasha's promise. From the throng a voice shouted, "We'll see that he keeps his word."

The New York Times  
Published: March 5, 1951  
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<sup>42</sup> Michael Clark, "Rising Feminism Bewilders Egypt," *New York Times*, March 5, 1951, <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/03/05/archives/rising-feminism-bewilders-egypt-demand-political-rights-for-women.html>.



## Women in "The Charter"

In 1962, the Egyptian president, Gamal Nasser, published "The Charter," which outlined his view for Egypt, and the reforms that needed to happen. Nasser believed that Egypt needed to modernize, and that key to modernization meant liberal freedoms for all Egyptian citizens. He believed socialism would unite the Arab people and make Egypt the leader of the Arab world. The document below is an excerpt from the end of "The Charter," and lists the significance of women and the family to the Egyptian nation. Calling for change in addressing the needs of citizens, Nasser makes clear that women are equal to men, therefore also arguing for the rights he just discussed to be applied to women, as well.<sup>43</sup>

dependent on a certain price. This care should be within the reach of every citizen, in every part of the country, and in easy circumstances rendering service possible. Health insurance must be expanded to embrace all citizens.

*Second* : The right of each citizen to receive education which suits his abilities and talents. Education is the means of consolidating and honouring human freedom ; it is also the energy which can rejuvenate national action and daily adds new ideas to it and bring in leading and serious elements in its various fields.

*Third*.—The right of each citizen to secure the job which accords with his abilities and interests and the type of education he has received. Beside being of economic importance in a man's life, work is an assertion of human existence itself.

In this respect, it is indispensable that there should be a legally sanctioned minimum of wages. Similarly, justice rules that there should be a maximum of income fixed by the taxation system.

*Fourth*.—Insurance against old age and sickness must be provided on a much larger scale so that protection is afforded to those who have taken their share in the national struggle and for whom the time has come to be sure of their right to security and rest.

Since the children of to-day are the makers of our future, it is the duty of working generations to provide them with all the chances that will enable them later to assume successfully the responsibility of leadership.

Woman must be regarded as equal to man and must therefore, shed the remaining shackles that impede her free movement so that she might take a constructive and profound part in shaping life.

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The family is the first cell in a society and it must therefore, be afforded all means of protection so that it might be better able to preserve the national tradition, to rejuvenate its texture, and to carry along the whole of society in the direction of the goals set by the national struggle.

\* \* \*

The welfare society is able to formulate new moral values, not subject to the influence of the remaining pressures left over from ailments, from which our society had so long.

In their turn these new values must be reflected in a free national culture which awakens the sense of beauty in the life of the free individual.

The freedom of religious belief must be regarded as sacred in our new free life.

The eternal spiritual values derived from religions are capable of guiding man, of lighting the candle of faith in his life and of bestowing on him unlimited capacities for serving truth, good and love. In their essence all divine messages constituted human revolutions which aimed at the reinstatement of man's dignity and his happiness. It is the prime duty of religious thinkers, then, to preserve for each religion the essence of its divine message.

The essence of religious messages does not conflict with the facts of our life; the conflict arises only in certain situations as a result of attempts made by reactionary elements to exploit religion - against its nature and spirit - with a view to impeding progress. These elements fabricate false interpretations of religion in flagrant contradiction with its noble and divine wisdom.

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<sup>43</sup> "Production and Society," in *The Charter*, United Arab Republic (Cairo: Information Department, 1962), 84-85.

## Gamal Nasser Laughs at Hijab Requirement

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In 1958, following a discussion with the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Gamal Nasser delivered a speech, in which he elaborated on his views regarding “the veil,” and the idea of Egyptian women wearing a head covering. While a light-hearted speech, with laughter from the audience and Nasser himself, the video recording (of which clips are provided here) details Nasser’s opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood’s involvement in the personal lives of Egypt’s citizens.<sup>44</sup> A transcript of the video is below the clip.

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<sup>44</sup> “Gamal Abdel Nasser laughing at Muslim Brotherhood hijab requirement in 1958,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlqdrFeFBk>.



“The first thing [the Muslim Brotherhood] asked for was to make wearing a hijab mandatory in Egypt. And I told him, if I were to make that a law, they will say that we have returned to the days of Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who forbade people from walking at day and only allowed walking at night, and my opinion is that every person in his own house decides for himself the rules.”

## Interview with Nawal el-Saadawi

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Nawal el-Saadawi was an Egyptian feminist who came of age during Nasser's rule. In 1981, while Egypt was under the rule of Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, el-Saadawi gave an interview in an issue of *The Merip Reports*, a magazine produced by the Middle East Research and Information Project. In the interview, she discussed her beliefs regarding social reform and women under Sadat. Her words call back to the feminist fight that had been ongoing since the early days of modern Egyptian nationalism.<sup>45</sup>

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“Even if land reform gave a small piece of land to the family, the woman works for the husband and family in a patriarchy class system.... Maybe the family, instead of having nothing, has a piece of land it works together. You can say the family benefitted, but the role of women did not change much. The same laws, the same customs continue – they are not paid and are still dependent on the family and husband economically.”

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<sup>45</sup> Sarah Graham-Brown, “Feminism in Egypt: A Conversation with Nawal Saadawi,” *Merip Reports*, no. 95 (March-April 1981): 26.



## The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist

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Huda Sha'arawi (1879-1947) was the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, and along with Safiyya Zaghloul, one of the early pioneers of Egyptian nationalist feminism. After her husband's death in the early 1920s, she founded the organization, and with an act of defiance, refusing to wear her religious veil, even removing it in public, she became a signal of change. Much of the early campaigning of the Egyptian Feminist Union intended to reform laws restricting personal freedoms, particularly related to the family. In the 1940s, before her death, she recorded her memoirs. In the 1980s, Margot Badran, a feminist historian, edited and translated the memoirs into English. In the preface to the translation, Badran describes how the end of Sha'arawi's memoirs became fragmented, and an "epilogue" was written by Badran, intertwining Sha'arawi's fragments with historical commentary from Badran. The excerpt below comes from Sha'arawi's writing, quoted in the epilogue.<sup>46</sup>

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Exceptional women appear at certain moments in history and are moved by special forces. Men view these women as supernatural beings and their deeds as miracles. Indeed, women are bright stars whose light penetrates dark clouds. They rise in times of trouble when the wills of men are tried. In moments of danger, when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women's great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men's views of women. Through their arrogance, men refuse to see the capabilities of women. Faced with contradiction, they prefer to raise women above the ordinary human plane instead of placing them on a level equal to their own. Men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on a pedestal to avoid recognizing the capabilities of all women. Women have felt this in their souls. Their dignity and self-esteem have been deeply touched. Women reflected on how they might elevate their status and worth in the eyes of men. They decided that the path lay in participating with men in public affairs. When they saw the way blocked, women rose up to demand their liberation, claiming their social, economic, and political rights. Their leap forward was greeted with ridicule and blame, but that did not weaken their will. Their resolve led to a struggle that would have ended in war, if men had not come to acknowledge the rights of women.

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<sup>46</sup> Huda Sha'arawi, "Epilogue," in *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, trans. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986), 131.

## Textbook Engagement

### Critique

This critique focuses on the New York edition of the Glencoe World History textbook, authored by Jackson Spielvogel, Ph.D.

The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Glencoe World History textbook is titled “Nationalism Around the World, 1919-1939,” and the first section is titled “Nationalism in the Middle East,” yet the section spends very little time on the question of nationalism in Egypt. The section does spend time discussing Arab Nationalism and the question of ‘Pan-Arabism,’ which was developed by Gamal Nasser, but when it comes to the history of nationalism in Egypt, the section is severely lacking.

As the section discusses the evolution of Arab nationalism following World War I, the most that it lends to Egypt is a diagram where they depict Egypt as being a British protectorate until 1922. While this is not entirely inaccurate, it fails to note the extent of British influence up until the 1952 revolution. The revolution ousted the Sultan of Egypt who was still closely tied to the British Empire. This historical detail is significant. One of the reasons for the revolution, and one of the central principles of the post-revolutionary government, headed by Gamal Nasser, was anti-imperialism. This anti-imperialism was largely directed against the British, due to their stranglehold on Egypt.

Furthermore, during this section on immediate post-WW1 nationalism, the textbook fails to mention the role of Egyptian feminism, which was closely tied to nationalism throughout the immediate pre- and post-revolution era. Saad and Safiyya Zaghloul were two historical figures in the pre-revolution of 1922 who played a significant role in the development



of the modern Egyptian nation. Saad Zaghloul was the head of the Wafd Party, a nationalist, pro-independence, party, while Safiyya Zaghloul, his wife, was a remarkable person in her own right, heading the Egyptian feminist movement, which especially began to pick up steam following the “official” independence from the British in 1922. Safiyya Zaghloul came to be called the “Mother of the Egyptians,” a title with both feminist and nationalist meaning. Yet the Glencoe textbook makes no mention of either of these people, or the intertwined nature of feminism and nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt.

Towards the end of the section, the textbook discusses “Middle East Changes,” with a focus on the modernization efforts in Turkey and Iran. While they could be forgiven for leaving out Egypt simply due to the time period they were focusing on, it becomes evident later that modernization in Egypt was not even a question.

The textbook runs into these problems in a later chapter, “Africa and the Middle East,” in a section titled, “Conflict in the Middle East.” With a brief few paragraphs on Gamal Nasser and the concept of “Pan-Arabism,” the textbook found itself in the perfect position to discuss modernization in Egypt, the tumultuous journey, and nationalism’s relationship with religion in Egypt. Key, of course, to modernization in Egypt was the state-led initiatives to integrate Egyptian women into more public sectors of society, opening up jobs and reforming family law. Unfortunately, nowhere in this textbook do we see any mention of Egypt in the post-World War Two era, with the exception of a general outline of Nasser and Arab unity. They ignore that a significant part of Nasser’s regime was modernizing Egypt.

As they go on to discuss Islam and its relationship to existing Middle Eastern nations, Egypt would have been the perfect example. In Egypt, during the time of Nasser’s rule, we first

see an attempt to move away from Islamic influence in the state and society. However, in the decades following, Islam became increasingly powerful in society. To this day, and especially during the Arab Spring in 2011, the debate over the rule of Islam in Egyptian society continues to be a point of contention between Egyptian politicians.

## New Section

This subsection is envisioned as an addition to the “Nationalism Around the World” chapter, in the section “Nationalism in the Middle East.” This subsection would be a smaller part of an existing subsection, “Middle East Changes.”

### **Arab Nationalism: Feminism in Egypt**

In 1882, the United Kingdom invaded Egypt, which was at the time in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. This marked the beginning of a rise in nationalism in the majority-Arab region. Though unofficial, Egypt became a *de facto* protectorate of the British Empire, subjecting the Egyptians to another foreign ruler, in addition to the formal sovereignty the Ottoman Empire held over the region. The British military occupation would go on to give rise to more than one revolution, and multiple changes in governance of Egypt.

#### *The Danshaway Incident of 1906*

An historical moment in 1906 sparked a strong rise in nationalism in British-occupied Egypt. The Danshaway (Denshawai) incident has been noted as a turning point in British occupation.

On June 13, 1906, a small group of British soldiers took turns shooting at pigeons in the local town of Danshaway. For the local residents, the pigeons were a source of livelihood. Concerned over this threat to their livelihood, the residents went to the soldiers to ask them to leave. As that request escalated into a fight, one of the British soldiers fired his gun into the crowd and wounded the wife of a local prayer leader. This attack further enraged the Egyptians who ran after the retreating British soldiers. When one of the soldiers collapsed and died outside the British camp, one of the villagers went to assist him. Other soldiers, assuming this

villager had killed the fallen soldier, killed that villager, and went on to arrest several other villagers.

In response to the incident, and concerned over growing nationalism in the region, the British decided to send more soldiers to the area the next day. Following the imprisonment of over 50 villagers, the British held a trial in which 4 of the villagers were declared guilty of killing the British soldier and sentenced to death. Rather than the intended effect of dampening growing Egyptian nationalism, this event further inflamed nationalist sentiments, and would have long-lasting effects on the ongoing relationship between Egypt and its colonial occupier.

*The First Generation of Feminist Nationalism: The Revolution of 1919*

Following World War I, Egyptian land transitioned from being under Ottoman control to becoming an English protectorate. Along with the creation of the Sultanate of Egypt, nationalist sentiments had never been stronger. **Saad Zaghloul**, the leader of the nationalist, pro-independence, Wafd Party, led the Egyptians in demonstrations against the British. Though he was exiled in 1919, his wife, **Safiyya Zaghloul**, took his position in the Wafd Party. Under her participation in the nationalist movements, as leader of the Women's Wafd, the feminist movement became increasingly intertwined with Egyptian nationalism. A nationalist family dynamic was created, with Safiyya Zaghloul referred to as "Mother of the Egyptians," and her home, known as the "House of the Nation." Taking the reins of the nationalist movement, Zaghloul led 500 women in a protest against the British, calling for Egyptian independence, in what later became known as the Revolution of 1919. One action that became notable during this revolution was removing the veil that Egyptian women had worn. The sculpture, "Egypt Awakened," represents this, depicting an Egyptian woman lifting her veil, standing next to a

sphinx. Though the revolution did not bring about immediate change, it directly led to official independence in 1922, though the British still occupied Egyptian land, and their influence continued well after granting independence.

### *The Second Generation*

Safiyya Zaghloul had marked the beginning of a new era of Egyptian nationalism, forever leaving nationalist ideas intertwined with the feminist fight for women's rights. Following the Revolution of 1919, a new generation of nationalist feminists came into power. The Wafdist Women's Central Committee, a group associated with the Wafd Party, was formed in 1920, and **Huda Sha'arawi**, an Egyptian woman who had taken part in the protests in 1919, was elected the first president of the organization. She had already served an important role in advancing the nationalist movement, as her husband, Pasha Sha'arawi, had been the vice president of the Wafd Party, and prepared Huda to take his place if he, or the other male members of the Wafd Party were arrested.

Following the death of her husband Pasha in 1922, Huda Sha'arawi brought about a shift in the women's movement, beginning with the symbolic act of removing her veil (which had been a mark of the 1919 protests) and trampled it under her feet. In 1923, Huda founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). Under her direction, the EFU fought for both nationalist and feminist freedoms, fighting against laws that restricted personal freedoms, such as family law, which had long been influenced by the role of the Islamic religion in Egyptian society. As a new Egyptian constitution was created in 1923, and the government formed the following year, Huda led the EFU to protest at the opening of the Egyptian Parliament. The EFU submitted a list of 32 nationalist and feminist demands, including improving education and healthcare for

women, which were ignored by the Wafd government. In response, Huda resigned from the Wafdist Women's Central Committee, but continued to lead the EFU until her death in 1947.

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