

Thesis 2671

**Representation of Change and Gender Identity:  
A Study of Women in Egyptian Cinema 1959-1998**

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## Abstract

This thesis identifies the extent to which roles for women in film changed alongside socio-economic shifts and ideological transformations in the country and considers how cultural conditions contribute to the demarcation of gender roles and cultural identity. It analyses the representation of female protagonists in Egyptian films by looking at their position in the narrative structure and their treatment within the filmic discourse. It also examines to what extent this is a reflection of reality with particular emphasis on the position of women in society.

It looks at the ancestry of female protagonists but its focus is films made after 1970. Many films made after 1970 present a society in conflict and transition. When President Sadat modified the personal status law in 1979 he was the first Egyptian Head of State to address this highly controversial area of family life since the 1920s. As the public examined the 'appropriate' place for women in society, conflicting trends competed for women's attentions. This thesis illustrates to what extent the films are a reflection of events: if they are a celebration of women's newly acquired freedom and a rejection of tradition, or if they reflect a move back to patriarchy with the growth of Islamism.

In the 1980s women began to emerge as directors and gained access to the symbolic order. Each chapter analyses a pair of films with a similar theme. Where possible, one film is directed by a man and the other by a woman. This thesis, therefore, is also structured as a comparative study of the representation of women on screen by male and female directors.

## Table of Contents

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Title Page                          | 1   |
| Abstract                            | 2   |
| Table of Contents                   | 3   |
| Preliminary Note                    | 4   |
| Acknowledgements                    | 5   |
| Introduction                        | 6   |
| Chapter 1                           | 64  |
| The Ancestry of Female Protagonists |     |
| Chapter 2                           | 103 |
| The Rights of Personal Status       |     |
| Chapter 3                           | 143 |
| Women Punished for their Action     |     |
| Chapter 4                           | 181 |
| Triumphant Women                    |     |
| Chapter 5                           | 216 |
| Female Friendship                   |     |
| Conclusion                          | 254 |
| Filmography                         | 276 |
| Bibliography                        | 285 |

## Preliminary Note

The standard system of transliteration has been adopted except in words which are familiar to most people in the West such as place names in Egypt, e.g. Port Said, the names of the presidents, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, and titles such as Imam.

Arab names and Arabic words in quotations are kept in their original form.

The final *tā' marbūṭa* is marked as *a* except in an *idāfa* construction where it appears as *t*.

The first reference to books and journals written in Arabic will include the title in Arabic and the English translation. All subsequent references will use the English translation only.

Names of Arab authors of critical studies written in English are given in the form in which they appear and not in transliteration.

All films in this thesis have been produced in Egypt unless otherwise stated. The first reference made to Egyptian films will include the title in Arabic, the English translation, the director's name, and the year of production. All subsequent references will use the English translation only.

The following abbreviations have been used: AWSA for Arab Women's Solidarity Association; EFU for Egyptian Feminist Union; UN for United Nations; VCR for video cassette recorder.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Studying women in any society is an integral part of understanding that culture.<sup>1</sup> The continued redefinition of the role of women in Egyptian society has always been inextricably linked to the changing social, political and economic factors of the times. The changing position of Egyptian women in society and culture is fundamental to the understanding of Egyptian feminism. Egyptian feminisms, therefore, must be defined within the context of the Egyptian experience.

Feminism denotes both a consciousness, based on the awareness that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, and a social movement, that is, actual attempts to change these inequalities and overcome domination by patriarchal systems.<sup>2</sup> Unsettling a common claim that 'feminism is Western', Margot Badran, in her studies on Egyptian feminism, demonstrates how the Egyptian feminist movement in the first half of the twentieth century advanced the nationalistic cause and worked within the parameters of Islam. Combining feminist struggle with anti-colonialist conflict suggests Egyptian feminism is closer to that of Third World countries than to that of the West.<sup>3</sup> Some Third World women then, question the term 'feminism', which originated in the West, because Western feminist movements define the meaning of gender in terms of middle class, white experience. Thus, in post-colonial, Arab, Muslim societies the term conjures up many stereotypes. In her study of the Egyptian women's movement, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, Nadjé Al-Ali uses the term 'women's activism' rather than 'feminism' because many of the

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<sup>1</sup> Soha Abdel Kader, *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society 1899-1987* (Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), 7

<sup>2</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1994), 5

<sup>3</sup> Margot Badran, 'Independent Women: More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt', in Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women: Old Boundaries New Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993), 130

women she interviewed rejected the label 'feminist' for pragmatic and ideological reasons:

The English term 'feminist' evokes antagonism and animosity, and sometimes even anxiety, among a great number of women activists, who seem to have eternalised the way feminists are being portrayed in prevailing Egyptian discourses: men-hating, aggressive, possibly lesbian (but most likely to be obsessed with sex) and certainly westernised. The reluctance of many Egyptian women to identify themselves with feminism is not only related to its negative image in society, but is also linked to the conviction that it detracts from such 'larger issues' as imperialism, class struggle and Zionism.<sup>4</sup>

The history of Egyptian feminism has traditionally been grounded in charitable social work but with time many women have participated directly in political activities in an attempt to change women's lives. Azza Karam has identified three main types of feminist thought operating in Egypt today: secular feminism, Muslim feminism and Islamist feminism, highlighting the multiplicity of voices through which Egyptian women activists speak and act.<sup>5</sup> Differences among the groups include social backgrounds and political convictions. Nevertheless, it is important to see the commonalities of their struggles and goals despite their varied means.

As a general conceptual framework I have chosen to use the term feminism in its broadest sense to mean any demands for change in the position of women. The *Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary of Current Usage* translates feminist as 'someone who advocates equal rights for men and women' and feminism as 'the belief in the equality of the sexes'. The principles of feminism address the essence of patriarchy, a system of male authority, which oppresses women through its social,

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<sup>4</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4-5

<sup>5</sup> Azza Karam, *Women, Islamists and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (Hampshire and London, Macmillan Press, 1998), 6

political and economic policies. In this thesis, therefore, I have used the term 'feminist' to describe any individual or group that is aware of the restrictions placed upon women because of their gender and has attempted to remove these constraints through thought and action.

The introduction is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the reality of women's lives in Egypt from the end of the nineteenth century to the present - a chronological account from seclusion and veiling, through early feminist thought, nationalism, social activism, a return to the veil, and current feminist activism. It pays particular attention to the consequences of government policy that affected the lives of women under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. The second part is a summary of the film industry in Egypt with particular reference to the role of women on and off screen. The focus is women producers and directors, and films with female protagonists. The final part outlines and accounts for the structure of the thesis.

## 1. Women in Egypt

Early in the nineteenth century Muḥammad 'Alī broke with Ottoman control and established himself as ruler of Egypt. He embarked on a programme of 'modernisation.' He built a strong army, initiated industrialisation schemes, created modern health and education systems, set up the country's first printing press and made urban improvements. By the 1860s and 1870s modernisation was accelerated under the rule of Khedive Ismā'īl and the basis of a modern transportation and communications system was laid out. Technocrats were brought from Europe while Egyptian men were sent abroad for training. Europeans and Americans visited Egypt on organised group tours and Western female travellers included visits to harems as part of the package. Initially there was limited exchange between the Egyptian and Western

women but by the end of the nineteenth century French had become the everyday language of the elite, opening up greater possibilities for communication. Wealthy Egyptian women began to travel to Europe, accompanying their husbands, fathers and brothers. Once outside Egypt the customary segregation of the sexes was set aside; the women removed their veils and cloaks and enjoyed a much more liberal experience compared to harem life.<sup>6</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century women of the upper classes had begun to experience social change.

In the Arab world, the period from the 1870s to the early 1920s saw the evolution of what Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke have termed 'invisible feminism', which was found in books produced by upper-class women which were circulated in the harems and in women's journals.<sup>7</sup> This emerging feminist consciousness, mainly centred in Egypt, turned into early social feminism and became a highly visible organised activism after 1923 following the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union or EFU (*al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i al-Miṣri*). This second period witnessed the rise of women's organised movements but in the 1950s the state began to repress this public feminist voice and articulated its own agenda for women. The third period, from the 1970s to the present saw a resurgence of feminist expression. However, the rise of Islamic activism<sup>8</sup> has increasingly inhibited any undertaking to advance the position of women. It is explicitly clear from my reading that feminists in Egypt have been most successful in the public sphere and most opposed in the private sphere. Society's patriarchal control has been

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<sup>6</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995), 6-8

<sup>7</sup> In *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London, Virago Press, 1990), Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke have organised a collection of Arab women's writing within a feminist framework. It brings together many women's voices in such diverse documents as personal letters, memoirs, speeches, fiction and poetry.

<sup>8</sup> The terms 'Islamic activists' and 'Islamists' have been used as umbrella terms describing militant and non-violent advocates of an Islamic order. I use the terms Islamic activism and Islamism to refer generally to all proponents of an Islamic social alternative in Egypt.

most vividly expressed in the preservation of repressive personal status laws.<sup>9</sup>

### Egyptian Women at the End of the Nineteenth Century

At the end of the nineteenth century men and women of the upper and middle classes in the cities led strictly separate lives. Veiling and high seclusion of women were evidence of men's wealth and prestige. The Muslim home was divided into two distinct areas: the men's rooms and the rooms devoted exclusively to the women and children. Veiling and the harem system were social conventions connected to economic standing and were not Islamic traditions, as is so often thought in the West. In her book, *The Women of Egypt*, published in 1914, Elizabeth Cooper states that the seclusion of women was unknown in the first Islamic era, when Arab customs had not been mixed with those of later invaders:

From the beginning of the 'Omayyah' dynasty, when the Empire began to spread and when Arabs mixed with the peoples of other countries by commerce and marriage, they added the customs of the conquered countries to their own. One of these was the seclusion of the women, one which did not mean imprisonment. It arose out of the old-time border warfare, when the different tribes were continually making raids against each other. When one of these warring parties came down upon the village of its enemies, the first thing they did was to carry off the women, children and cattle. The only means of protection being to put the helpless, non-fighting population in the inner rooms of the houses where they could be defended, it naturally happened that the higher the rank of the family the more isolated were its females.<sup>10</sup>

The custom of seclusion was introduced gradually, retained and became

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<sup>9</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit.; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992); Badran, 'Independent Women'; Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York and West Sussex, Columbia University Press, 1999)

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Cooper, *The Women of Egypt* (Connecticut, Hyperion Press Inc., 1914), 180-183. Cooper was an American woman who travelled to Egypt to learn more about the lives of Egyptian women at first hand.

a mark of superior social standing. Restricting the movement of women and hiding them from public view was seen as necessary for the preservation of their sexual purity, which was linked to the honour of men and families.<sup>11</sup>

It was the responsibility of the men to work in the public domain and to provide for their womenfolk and children. The women in the harem took care of the day-to-day running of the home but the women's main functions were to be good wives, and above all to procreate; sons were especially valued. These women spent the greater part of their days within the confines of their homes. Younger, unmarried girls enjoyed some degree of freedom until puberty when they were veiled and also kept in seclusion. In all classes, girls were commonly married around the age of thirteen. Traditional marriage arrangements were accepted across all social classes. Marriages were arranged with consideration for equal rank and class, and cousins often married, solidifying family ties. Couples seldom met before their wedding day and once married, the bride left her family home to live in the home of her husband.

Marriage was considered the prominent desire of the majority of women and Cooper suggests that it was a disgrace for an Egyptian woman to even consider the possibility of not marrying.<sup>12</sup> Divorce was granted to women only on the grounds of male insanity, impotence or non-maintenance.<sup>13</sup> Men, however, had the unilateral right to divorce. Barren women lost their claims to status and prestige and even women who bore only daughters may well have been divorced or found that their husbands had taken another wife.<sup>14</sup> 'To be childless is the greatest sorrow that can come to an Egyptian wife, and children . . . seem to be

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<sup>11</sup> In *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (5), Badran states that Jewish and Christian women practised domestic seclusion but Botman in *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (19), maintained that Jewish and Christian women were not segregated in their households. However, both authors agree that Jewish and Christian women did practice the tradition of veiling when they ventured outside of the home.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, op. cit., 211

<sup>13</sup> Botman, op. cit., 19

<sup>14</sup> In *The Women of Egypt* (286), Cooper states that this love for boys is descended from tribal days when the most valued possessions of a man were male heirs, who would strengthen his tribe.

the all-important subject of conversation between Egyptian mothers.<sup>15</sup>

As part of his ongoing effort to modernise Egypt, Muḥammad ‘Alī established a school of midwifery in 1830. At first, families refused to send their daughters to the school and so he imported slaves to provide the school with its first students. This remained the only school for women until foreign missionaries established two primary schools for girls in the middle of the century. The Egyptian government opened the first state primary school for girls, *al-Madrasa al-Siyufiyya*, in 1873, and in 1889 it also established *al-Madrasa al-Sanīyya*, which later instituted a teachers’ training programme. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for the first time, upper-class girls began to attend school. Until this time some girls had been taught at home by European women. The first state institution offering secondary education for girls on an equal level with boys opened in 1925. Educational opportunities for girls were therefore limited and female education developed slowly. By 1907 only 0.55% of Egyptian women were literate.<sup>16</sup>

The most visible class of women in writings of nineteenth century Egypt are harem women. Belonging exclusively to the upper and middle classes, Soha Abdel Kader, in her study of Egyptian women, estimates that these women constituted perhaps no more than 2% of Egypt’s five million female population.<sup>17</sup> The lifestyle of harem women was considered an ideal by other classes of women and the seclusion of women was thought of as a luxury which the majority could not afford. In contrast, the poor of both sexes shared the same limited space at home, but working-class women still veiled when they were outside the home. Although uneducated, some lower-class urban women worked. Some women were hired by wealthy families as wet nurses. Others were

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<sup>15</sup> Cooper, op. cit., 285

<sup>16</sup> In *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society* (38), Abdel Kader suggests that even this figure fluctuates because the education of the literate was transitory so that as time passed some women lapsed into illiteracy.

<sup>17</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 17

lace makers and dressmakers who worked at home and delivered their finished products to the clients' homes. Coffee-cup readers and fortune-tellers were popular. Women who worked as cleaners, ticket sellers, bookkeepers and masseuses serviced the women's public bath. Thus, to a certain extent, lower-class urban women created a public world of their own.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the major cities, 85% of Egyptian women were peasants. Peasant women worked inside and outside the home and often worked alongside men in the fields. They went unveiled in public, perhaps because villagers regarded themselves as extended family.<sup>19</sup> However, as Abdel Kader points out, this did not necessarily mean that they had greater freedom than urban women:

A strict 'modesty code' prescribed every facet of their daily existence. This 'modesty code' encompassed all aspects of their lives: coverage of certain parts of the body, behaviour in public places, assumptions as to women's character traits, and the requirements of chastity, virginity and purity . . . The virginity, chastity and purity of womenfolk were connected closely with family honour, of which men were the guardians and beneficiaries. This is manifested in two of the common rituals of village people: circumcision and virginity tests.<sup>20</sup>

Although it did not originate in Islamic tradition, the common belief concerning female circumcision is that it is a means of protecting female modesty and chastity, which are highly valued in Islam. According to popular belief, the practice diminishes sexual drive, protecting the woman from her oversexed nature and thus saving her from temptation. The origins of female circumcision in Egypt are unknown. Both Muslims and Christians have circumcised their daughters since early times. It may be a Pharaonic custom that meshed with Egyptian culture

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 29-30

<sup>19</sup> Botman, op. cit., 20. In *The Women of Egypt* (145) Cooper notes that although the peasant woman wears no face veil, on meeting a stranger she would draw the end of her long black head covering across her mouth.

<sup>20</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 35-36

and then spread to other parts of Africa.<sup>21</sup> Closely related to the strict codes of chastity is the virginity test:

. . . (a) practice whereby a bridegroom or a midwife on the wedding night, using the finger or a sharp object, breaks the virgin bride's hymen and then publicly, amid jubilation and cheering, displays the resulting blood on a white kerchief or scarf. Should the bride prove not to be a virgin, she is put to death immediately by her bridegroom or by the male members of her own family. If the practice of circumcision is shrouded in secrecy, the virginity test rites are even more so.<sup>22</sup>

Until today, the status of women in family law remains the major problem for Egyptian women. While the law pertaining to civil matters is based on the French Napoleonic code, family and personal status issues are governed by *sharī'a* (Islamic law). Whereas all institutions of Egyptian society were secularised<sup>23</sup> and most segments of the population were liberated from direct religious control, the lives of Egyptian women remained circumscribed by religion. The codes of the personal status laws enacted by the *sharī'a* courts at the end of the nineteenth century maintained that a husband had the right to take up to four wives, despite any opposition the first wife might make. The husband had the right of obedience or *ḥabs*. The word *ḥabs* means detention and implies the right of the husband to keep his wife in the marital home. She is not allowed to leave without his permission. This practice became known as the house of obedience (*bayt al-tā'a*) and according to this procedure a man could ask the police to arrest his wife and return her home. The husband also had the unilateral right to divorce, whenever he wished, whether the wife agreed or not.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>23</sup> I have used the term secularism throughout this thesis to refer to a trend opposing the permeation of religion in all aspects of social and political life. However, the term implies a non-religious orientation that has never really existed in Egypt. The Constitution specifies that Islam is the state religion.

<sup>24</sup> In *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society* (44), Abdel Kader points out that liberal religious scholars maintain that these laws are based on misinterpretations of the *Qur'ān*.

## Qāsim Amīn

Condemnation of the secluded lives of upper-class women at the end of the nineteenth century was voiced by men. The actual voices of the women themselves were rarely heard. This is perhaps proven by the fact that the most visible and well-known attack on the harem system was written by a man. Qāsim Amīn wrote *The Liberation of Women* (*Tahrīr al-Mar'a*) in 1899 and attacked the harem as an instrument for the oppression of women.<sup>25</sup> Born in Alexandria in 1863, Amīn received the best education available at the time in Egypt and after graduating spent four years in France practicing law. He returned to Egypt in 1885. His exposure in Paris to the work of Nietzsche, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, his knowledge of Islam and the progressive work of Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abdu, mufti of Egypt from 1899 to 1905, all influenced the presentation of his arguments in his later writing.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Liberation of Women*, Amīn argued that the status of Egyptian women was the most important aspect of Egyptian society in need of reform.<sup>27</sup> He analysed the status of Muslim women in society and attributed their low status to a misinterpretation of Islam rather than Islam itself. For society to progress and prosper, women needed education, employment and respect:

Women comprise at least half the total population of the world. Perpetuating their ignorance denies a country the

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<sup>25</sup> In 1894, a young Coptic lawyer, Marqus Fahmi, published a drama called *The Women in the East* (*al-Mar'a fi-l-Sharq*) attributing Egypt's 'backwardness' to the condition of women and the family. He was critical of the seclusion of women and argued that when women in ancient Egypt and early Islam had enjoyed rights, society had flourished. His play was privately printed and had a restricted circulation but received none of the angry protest that greeted Amīn.

<sup>26</sup> Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abdu advocated the education of girls and the necessity for reform in the social conditions and customs affecting the lives of Muslim women. According to the teachings of Islam he believed that women and men are equal.

<sup>27</sup> The Duc d'Harcourt published *L'Egyte et les Egyptiens* in 1893. It described the backward conditions of Egyptians with particular focus on the low status of Egyptian women and the use of the veil. On reading d'Harcourt's book Qāsim Amīn was so incensed that he wrote a reply in French entitled, *Les Egyptiens: Réponse à M le Duc d'Harcourt*, in which he defended the use of the veil as a safeguard of society and criticised the promiscuity of European social life. From that time Amīn began to study the relation of women in society which led him to believe there was some truth in d'Harcourt's allegations.

benefits of the abilities of half its population, with obvious negative consequences . . .

Our present situation resembles that of a very wealthy man who locks up his gold chest. This man unlocks his chest daily for the mere pleasure of seeing his treasure. If he knew better, he could invest his gold and double his wealth in a short period of time.<sup>28</sup>

Islamic *sharīʿa* gives women the right to inherit and bequeath property and guarantees them the right to full control of their wealth. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, due to prevailing customs, many women were deprived of their legal rights. Amīn argued that the ignorance of harem women undermined their legal property rights and that education would allow them to manage their own affairs. Perhaps most importantly, for Amīn, educating women meant educating mothers and in turn educating Egypt's next generation.

Amīn was quite adamant about the detrimental effect of seclusion on girls and women. He believed the seclusion of girls when they reached puberty did nothing more than stunt their growth at a period in their lives when emotional development should be flourishing and the ability to gain knowledge came from interaction with other people. He also had the courage to point out that the assumption that seclusion is a prerequisite for preserving women's honour and preventing immoral behaviour has not been proven. The increase or decrease in immorality is not due to seclusion alone, but to many other interrelated factors, including the way a country educates each generation in the preservation of moral values. He concluded that, 'a free, unsecluded woman who guards her own honour and safeguards herself from immorality should . . . be given double the merit given to a secluded woman, for the latter's honour is forced upon her, while the former

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<sup>28</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman*, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), 12-13

chooses it.<sup>29</sup>

*The Liberation of Women* elicited an impassioned response from men who produced more than thirty books and pamphlets attacking Amīn.<sup>30</sup> His response was to publish *The New Woman (al-Mar'a al-Jadida)* the following year. While in *The Liberation of Women* Amīn used religious interpretations to address the status of women, in *The New Woman* he integrated the doctrine of natural rights and the idea of progress in a wider intellectual argument for the emancipation of women and for the advantages of Westernisation in general. Amīn had touched the very core of Egyptian society, the division between a man's world and a woman's world. The emancipation of women would have meant a challenge to the power men held in the existing social order. Amīn died in 1908 and 'his great contribution to Egyptian women was that he put the issue of their emancipation on the agenda of public debate.'<sup>31</sup>

### The Invisible Feminists

Egyptian women produced a discourse that can be identified as feminist before there was an explicit term for feminism, but much of Egyptian women's feminist expression has eluded people because of its invisibility. Badran and Cooke attribute this to the fact that the voice of early feminist consciousness for the most part was confined to the secluded world of women. Amīn's book is often considered the pioneering discourse because it was 'seen', but it was not the first.<sup>32</sup> Badran has noted fundamental differences between early female and male generated discourses in Egypt. The starting points of the two

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>30</sup> In *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society* (61-63) Abdel Kader suggests Amīn's ideas led far beyond the problems of women and this explains the force of the objections raised by his adversaries. The reaction was an expression of hostility to the idea of westernisation, rather than to the emancipation of women as such. Two of his most prominent opponents were Muṣṭafā Kāmil, the nationalist leader, and Tala't Harb who published two books in response to Amīn branding the movement for emancipation of women as just another plot to weaken the Egyptian nation and to transfer the immorality and decadence of the West to Egyptian society.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>32</sup> Badran and Cooke, op. cit., xxix

discourses were different. Men's pro-feminist stand arose out of contact with European society in which women were generally visible, and a search for the roots of their country's backwardness. Women's feminism was initially an upper-class phenomenon which grew out of observation of their own lives during times of great change.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1890s women began to analyse their own condition. Eugénie Le Brun, a Frenchwoman who had married Ḥusayn Rushdi, from the landowning elite, opened the first salon for women which served as a forum for upper-class women to meet and debate. Veiling and seclusion were among the topics of discussion. As a convert to Islam, Le Brun, in her studies had discovered that the seclusion of women and covering the face were not religious prescriptions but simply social demands. Huda Sha'rāwi, one of the most important figures in the fight for women's rights in Egypt, was the youngest woman to attend the salon. Evidence of such salons is only found in memoirs and family letters of the period, as these discussions had no public outlet. Speaking of Le Brun, Sha'rāwi wrote in her memoirs:

In spite of my extreme youth I attracted her attention . . . She soon became a dear friend and valued mentor. She guided my first steps in 'society' and looked out for my reputation . . . (she) also nourished my mind and spirit.

I began to attend her Saturday salon . . . There were debates about social practices, especially veiling. She confessed that although she admired the dress of Egyptian women, she thought the veil stood in their way of advancement. It also gave rise to false impressions in the minds of foreigners. They regarded the veil as a convenient mask for immorality.<sup>34</sup>

Sha'rāwi also wrote about her role in pioneering the first 'public lectures' for women (outside of private houses but in halls for women only), which carried the discussion of the salon to a wider circle.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., xix

<sup>34</sup> Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist 1879-1924*, trans. Margot Badran (London, Virago Press Limited, 1986), 76-80

Marguerite Clement arrived from France on tour of several eastern countries and gave a series of lectures for women about her travels. Shortly afterwards Sha'rāwi and other Egyptian women, with the backing of princesses of the royal family, established the Mabarrat Muḥammad 'Alī, bringing medical assistance and health education to poor women. This was the first and most well known of the secular philanthropic societies. In assisting needy women, the founders, all from the privileged elite, saw this as the first step in liberating the lives of lower-class women, and at the same time expanding their own lives by moving into 'public' space outside of the harem and creating new social roles based on accepted religious humanitarian traditions.<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneous to the 'hidden debate' in salons, middle-class women founded the women's press and created a forum for the discussion of women's issues. In 1892 Hind Nawfal, a Syrian woman living in Cairo, founded *The Young Girl (al-Fatah)*, the first women's journal in the Arab world. Three other journals appeared before the end of the century. Badran points out the importance of this step:

Though the women's press was not radical in content, its mere existence was. Through writing for publication, women collectively transcended their domestic confinement, beginning to acquire a public 'presence', and by claiming their names and voices they took responsibility for themselves and accepted accountability.<sup>36</sup>

It was women like Zaynab Fawwāz and 'Ā'isha 'Iṣmat al-Taymūriyya who were considered the most radical in their day. They wrote articles which were published in the mainstream 'male' press and were heralded as foremothers by the feminist activists of the early twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Zaynab Fawwāz studied the art of rhetoric, published poetry and wrote

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<sup>35</sup> Islam and Christianity in Egypt share a long history of assisting the poor. See *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (48-50) for an account of philanthropies prior to the establishment of secular philanthropic societies.

<sup>36</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 16

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

essays on the right of women to education and employment. She recognised the productive role women could play in society and demanded their independence from the private domain in which they were restricted. 'Ā'isha 'Iṣmat al-Taymūriyya received a traditional Islamic education in the arts of rhetoric and composition based on close study of the *Qur'ān*. She composed poetry in Arabic, Turkish and Persian but discontinued her literary pursuits when she married in 1854. After the death of her husband she returned to her writing. In an article entitled 'The Age of Education' ('Aṣr al-Ma'ārif'), first published in 1889 in *al-Ādāb* newspaper, she wrote how regrettable it was that this civilised society did not strive for the improvement of young girls through education.

A term 'connoting feminism' first appeared in Egypt when Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, using the pen name *Bāhithat al-Bādiya* (Searcher in the Desert), published a collection of articles and speeches in a book entitled *Feminist Pieces (al-Nisā'iyyāt)*.<sup>38</sup> Nāṣif received a teacher training diploma from *al-Madrassa al-Saniyya* in 1905 and then taught for two years until she married. When she joined her husband on his estate in Fayyum she learnt that he was already married and the father of a daughter who she was expected to tutor. He turned out to be an incompatible husband who had no respect for marriage and so she began to write and give speeches about her own difficult experience. *Feminist Pieces*, which appeared in *al-Jarīda*, the liberal nationalist newspaper of the *Umma* party, reached a wide circle of men and women, becoming a key text in Egyptian feminist history.<sup>39</sup>

Nāṣif gave one of the first 'public' lectures in a series begun by and for women in Cairo in 1909. She ended her talk with a programme for

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<sup>38</sup> Badran and Cooke use the term 'connoting feminism' because *nisā'iyyāt* signifies something about women. There is no Arabic equivalent of the term 'feminism'. The adjective, *nisā'iyya*, which was used, could mean 'women's' or 'feminist'; this could only be understood from the context.

<sup>39</sup> Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid was editor in chief of *al-Jarīda* and founder of the *Umma* party. An advocate of the concept of nationhood, he made a break with the Islamic framework wanting the Egyptian nation to be independent of both the Ottoman Empire and the British.

change, which was the basis of the more extensive set of demands she sent two years later to the Egyptian National Congress meeting in Heliopolis. She was not allowed to read her speech, as women were not allowed to appear before Congress, so a male representative presented her demands.<sup>40</sup> Although Nāṣif supported Amīn she was more conservative than him. She emphasised her strong allegiance to Islam and condemned imitation of the West. She called her demands reform rather than emancipation. She founded the Union for the Education of Women (*al-Ittiḥad al-Nisā'ī lil-Taḥīm*). She also made an effort to contact foreign women who visited Egypt to give them a true image of the lives of Egyptian women. Among the women she contacted was Elizabeth Cooper, author of *The Women of Egypt*.<sup>41</sup> Nāṣif died, much lamented, in October 1918.

Like Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, Nabawiyya Mūsā was a graduate of *al-Madrasa al-Saniyya*. In 1907 she petitioned the Ministry of Education for permission to sit for the secondary school certificate. She was the first and only woman to sit for the exam until after Independence. In her professional life she became a teacher, a school principal and the first female inspector in the Ministry of Education in 1924. After criticising the curriculum for girls she was dismissed but later established her own schools in Cairo and Alexandria. In 1920 Mūsā published *Women and Work (al-Mar'a wa al-'Amal)* promoting education and work for women and in which she attacked the notion of biological determinism, arguing that gender was a socially constructed category. She was a champion for gender equality and was one of the first to fight for equal pay for equal work when she demanded the same wage that male teachers were receiving. Her decision not to marry, when she found out that the Ministry of Education would not employ a

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<sup>40</sup> Botman, op. cit., 35

<sup>41</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 67

married woman as a teacher, showed her courage and determination to live her life on her own terms. She dedicated her life to teaching and writing.

Drawing on the memoirs of Huda Sha'rāwi, Badran finds in the oppressed existence of the harem women, the genesis of feminist consciousness which resulted in defiance of traditional social conventions, but Abdel Kader contends that the Egyptian women who became renowned figures in organised charitable work, or as renowned feminists, remain exceptions to the rule. When Cooper wrote her book, she noted that a new generation of young women was beginning to break down the rigid seclusion of harem life, but the older generation could not understand this desire to see the outside world. One old lady of her acquaintance, 'made the boast that she had not crossed the threshold of her house for forty years.'<sup>42</sup> She found that the older women were often more conservative in their ideas about seclusion than the men, believing it to be the desire 'of her husband to protect her, and if allowed unusual liberty would think herself unloved and neglected.'<sup>43</sup> It seems that the majority of Egyptian women at the end of the nineteenth century were willing collaborators in the perpetuation of the status quo. Many were more staunch upholders of the existing moral and social order than men were. But, questions Abdel Kader, whether a woman did so through conviction or through fear is open to debate.

### **Egyptian Feminism and Nationalism**

The first phase of Egyptian feminism came to a halt with the start of the First World War. Egypt was declared a British protectorate and ties were severed with the Ottoman Empire. After the war, when the British were slow to remove the protectorate status, the accumulation of

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<sup>42</sup> Cooper, *op. cit.*, 184

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 185

discontent and frustration of all classes soon exploded into the nationalist revolution of 1919. The main concern of the whole country was independence from British rule. Egyptian feminism in its early phase was a movement initiated by urban upper-class women and kept mainly in the confines of their secluded world. The movement's eruption into the public domain was due to political factors. Strong feelings regarding the rejection of foreign rule soon crystallised into a serious and sustained effort towards liberation. The huge growth of the press had significant implications for the rapid dissemination of information and it was in the press that nationalist ideas were presented. From 1919 to 1922 Egyptian women played key roles in the struggle for national independence alongside male nationalists and during their absence.<sup>44</sup>

Although upper-class women had taken the lead in the early period of feminist activity, during the 1919 Egyptian revolution women from all social classes were active in mass demonstrations. The participation of women in the anti-British demonstrations and political activities was allied closely to the *Wafd* (a nationalist party formed in November 1918). When the revolution stirred hope that the *Wafd* would soon win independence from the British, a thousand women of all classes were reported to have met in St. Marks Church in January 1920. Here Egyptian women, for the first time, became part of a political body, the Wafd Women's Central Committee (*Lajnat al-Wafd al-Markaziya lil-Sayyidāt*). At its founding meeting Huda Sha'rāwi was elected president. The women sent demands to the British government calling for an end to martial law, and the abolition of the protectorate. They also voted for an economic boycott of the British refusing to buy British goods and withdrawing money from British banks. Simultaneously, the women campaigned to buy Egyptian goods and support Bank Miṣr.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Many women continued the work of their husbands who had been arrested or exiled.

<sup>45</sup> Shaarawi, op. cit., 125

In 1922 Britain offered partial independence and the Egyptians established a new constitution. Article 3 of the new constitution proclaimed: 'All Egyptians are equal before the law.' Articles 74 and 82 granted universal suffrage in electing members of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. However, a subsequent electoral law restricted suffrage to males only. 'Half the Egyptian nation thus was excluded from full participation in the democratic process on the basis of sex alone.'<sup>46</sup> Badran suggests that patriarchy considered women's unconventional behaviour as defensive national acts. Despite women's crucial roles in the nationalist struggle, when it was over men deprived women of the formal political rights of citizenship, expected a return to patriarchal values, and for women to return to the home. While women's nationalist experience did not, itself, produce feminism, it did heighten women's awareness. 'Women argued that patriarchal domination was akin to foreign imperialist domination and that nationalist liberation was incomplete without women's liberation.'<sup>47</sup>

### Egyptian Feminism and Social Activism

The participation of Egyptian women in the nationalist movement had given women a taste of freedom and had taught them the techniques of organised struggle.<sup>48</sup> Undeterred by their defeat, Huda Sha'rāwi, Nabawiyya Mūsa and Sīzā Nabarāwi founded the EFU in 1923, 'the first organised feminist movement led by women in Egyptian history.'<sup>49</sup>

Sha'rāwi, the daughter of Sultan Pasha, a notable from the town of Minya in Upper Egypt, was born in 1879. She grew up in a wealthy household in Cairo and belonged to the last generation of women to experience harem life from childhood through to adulthood. In her

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<sup>46</sup> Abdel Kader, *op. cit.*, 87

<sup>47</sup> Badran, 'Independent Women', 135

<sup>48</sup> Abdel Kader, *op. cit.*, 77

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

memoirs she tells of the education she received from private tutors alongside her brother (unusual at that time for a girl) and her marriage at thirteen to her older cousin, 'Alī Sha'rāwi, a man in his forties already with a family. After her husband's death in 1922 she devoted herself to the women's cause and the EFU, serving as president until 1947. In the introduction to Sha'rāwi's memoirs, Margot Badran explains why she became the symbol of Egyptian feminism:

When the nationalist independence movement took to the streets she was ready to play an active role and also capitalized on her husband's role as a leading figure in the nationalist movement. However, when independence was announced and the call went out for 'normalization', for women to return to their old harem lives, Huda was free from the controls of a patriarchal family - husband, father and brother were gone. She was a mature woman in her forties. She was ideologically and practically prepared. She had control over vast personal wealth. She had the respect conferred by family and class, sustained by her own impeccable behaviour, and enhanced by her important role in the independence struggle. Perhaps most important of all, she had courage and commitment.<sup>50</sup>

Her most radical act was the public removal of her veil in May 1923. On returning from a conference of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in Rome, as delegates of the EFU, she and her trusted associate Sīzā Nabarāwi removed their veils at Cairo train station. 'Although conservatives criticized this gesture, it was not a crime, so they could not be punished by the state.'<sup>51</sup>

Women were denied the vote and excluded from the opening of the first parliament (unless they were wives of ministers and other officials). Sīzā Nabarāwi, an ardent campaigner for women's liberation and editor of *L'Egyptienne* (the newspaper of the EFU) was denied entry to the third session of parliament in 1925. She protested this exclusion in her

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<sup>50</sup> Shaarawi, op. cit., 22

<sup>51</sup> Botman, op. cit., 39

article 'Double Standard':

Last Monday was the memorable day of the third convocation of parliament . . .

Allowing my humble person into such an honourable assembly would signal that the state was honouring Egyptian women and Egyptian men equally. The presence of the wives of ministers . . . does not signify representation of women. The Egyptian woman who constitutes half the nation was therefore totally forgotten.<sup>52</sup>

The Egyptian feminist movement had finally become a movement with a more defined set of goals. Members wanted to overcome women's disadvantaged status by achieving equality with men in both the public and private domains. They had feminist, social and political demands and believed the achievement of their goals would benefit the whole of society. EFU members made it explicit that although they were feminist they were Muslim feminists and in seeking reform of the *sharī'a* they were opposing traditions and misinterpretations of the *Qur'ān* and not Islam itself.

The EFU became the principle vehicle for Egyptian feminists and its membership had reached two hundred and fifty women by 1929.<sup>53</sup> The women who joined were predominantly from the upper class. That this feminist consciousness and activism came from the class of Egyptian women who were traditionally the most secluded in Egyptian society may seem ironic but Abdel Kader suggests several reasons for this. To begin with, a certain amount of education and exposure to alternatives through contact with other cultures was needed for women to begin questioning their traditional place in society; these opportunities existed only for upper-class women. As members of socially esteemed families these women had a better chance of making changes deemed respectable and acceptable, they were wealthy enough

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<sup>52</sup> Badran and Cooke, op. cit., 280-281

<sup>53</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 92

to finance themselves and often had access to powerful contacts through their husbands, fathers and brothers.<sup>54</sup>

In its lifetime the EFU did not accomplish its main goals but it was an important foundation for all future activists and reformers. It helped advance Arab feminism as a whole in holding the first Pan-Arab Feminist Conference which resulted in the establishment of the Arab Feminist Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i al-'Arabi al-'Āmm*) in 1944 under the presidency of Sha'rāwi. With the death of Sha'rāwi in 1947 the EFU needed new momentum; from the mid 1940s onwards there was a move away from the upper-class structure of the feminist community and a shift towards predominantly middle-class women who were prepared to engage in more aggressive strategies for change. They accelerated the campaign for political rights for women, tried to help lower-class urban and rural women achieve economic and social liberation, and kept up the struggle to reform personal status laws. Fāṭima Ni'mat Rāshid, Durriyya Shafiq and Inge Aflāṭūn emerged as three leaders. Among the new associations founded was the National Feminist Party (*al-Ḥizb al-Nisā'i al-Waṭani*). Established in 1944 by journalist and writer Fāṭima Ni'mat Rāshid, it intended to step up the campaign for women's political rights but also adopted a broad agenda of economic and social reforms. Members were predominantly middle-class professionals, writers, journalists and teachers but the party did not have wide appeal.

Durriyya Shafiq, a protégée of Huda Sha'rāwi, founded an organisation called Daughter of the Nile (*Bint al-Nīl*), in 1949 with other educated middle-class women. The organisation established a broad base in the provinces opening up centres for teaching literacy and hygiene to poor women, and campaigning for female suffrage, representation in Parliament and equal political rights. Shafiq organised a march on parliament in 1952; the demonstration provoked *al-Azhar* to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 92

respond, stating that women were unfit to vote on the grounds that they, 'are swayed by emotion and are of unstable judgement. Whereas men are impartial and balanced, women stray from the path of wisdom even when they have the advantages of good education.'<sup>55</sup> However, Shafiq continued her political activity, gained publicity writing newspaper articles and giving lectures, and even undertook a hunger strike in 1954 with colleagues and supporters demanding that women be included in the constitution.

Meanwhile, leftist women set up a new group in 1945 called The League of Universities and Institutes Young Women (*Rābiṭat Fatayāt al-Jām'iat wa-al-Ma'āhid*). The League called for the right of women to vote, equal pay for equal work and the responsibility of the state to set up children's nurseries and guarantee social insurance and security.<sup>56</sup> The first World Congress of Women was held in Paris in November of 1945 and the League sent Inge Aflāṭūn, amongst others, as representatives. The events prompted Aflāṭūn to write her first book entitled, *Eighty Million Women Are With Us* (*Thānanūn Milyūn Imra'a Ma'anā*), locating class and gender oppression within the framework of imperialism. In 1949 she published *We Egyptian Women* (*Naḥnu al-Nisā' al-Miṣriyyāt*) which was an analysis of women's oppression and national oppression. On the issue of women and political rights she wrote:

The problem of the political rights of women has taken on an international magnitude . . . the UN charter states the necessity of equality between men and women. Likewise, the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly . . . upholds this equality . . . The deprivation of the Egyptian woman of her political rights is a blatant violation of the United Nations Charter, of the Declaration of Human Rights, as well as of the recommendations of the UN General Assembly of which Egypt is a member.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 96

<sup>56</sup> Botman, *op. cit.*, 45

<sup>57</sup> Badran and Cooke, *op. cit.*, 345-351

Upper- and middle-class women had significantly pushed back the boundaries of seclusion through their voluntary social activities, support for the expansion of education for girls, and their nationalist and feminist campaigns. In contrast, however, women had made no progression in their 'personal' lives; the patriarchal structure of the family remained fully intact. Personal status codes were not just traditions, but were laws allowing men almost total control over the lives of women. Feminists such as Huda Sha'rāwi and Durriyya Shafiq fought continuously to change these laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance but such feminist efforts were largely ignored.

### Women and Nasser's Regime

The 1952 revolution led by army officers meant the collapse of the liberal democratic system which had been in place since the First World War. The new revolutionary government under Gamal Abdel Nasser implemented a socialist programme directed against the British, the corrupt Egyptian ruling class and Western style liberalism. Some goals of the women's movement were appropriated by the regime as part of its efforts to modernise society.<sup>58</sup> The revolutionary government aimed to raise the education standard. Every child was to have a free and compulsory minimal education of six years and provisions were made for adult education. Traditional views regarding the role of women still existed particularly in rural and lower-class urban areas. Sons remained valued over daughters and in large families with a limited income parents gave priority to the education of sons. Education meant greater freedom for girls and parents were often unwilling to compromise the reputation of their daughters and preferred to keep them at home. Also,

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<sup>58</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the following information and figures regarding education, labour laws, and family planning are taken from Abdel Kader, *op. cit.*, 110-119.

if girls completed secondary level education it could mean a postponement of marriage which was frowned upon as high value was placed on marrying girls at puberty or upon reaching sixteen (the legal minimum age for girls to marry). Nasser's policies did have a positive effect on female education in general: literacy rates among women in the labour force increased greatly, female enrolment in secondary education increased and there was a steady increase in the enrolment of women in faculties such as medicine, engineering and dentistry, which had previously been considered exclusively male subjects.

The 1959 labour code set minimum wages, maximum working hours and gave workers a share of the profits. The government made a conscious effort to increase the participation of women in the labour force and so the code stipulated that women be provided with special social services by employers: seating arrangements where appropriate, exclusion from arduous and night work, two half-hour breaks per day for mothers of infants during the eighteen months following delivery and fifty day delivery leave. The code also stipulated that women could not be dismissed from work as the result of marriage, pregnancy or delivery, and that any establishment with more than one hundred women should provide a day-care centre.

Despite these efforts, the overall participation of women in the labour force remained relatively low. The female work participation rate that was 2.3% in 1947, only increased to 6.4% in 1961 where it remained stable until 1969. But many lower- and middle-class families came to depend upon the income of both husband and wife. Teaching and medicine remained the most socially acceptable professions for women.

Nasser's regime had to deal with the serious problem of a high population growth rate. A family planning programme was launched in 1966 but the programme was not a great success. In *Engendering*

*Citizenship in Egypt*, Selma Botman makes an interesting point, that while in Western society birth control and abortion rights often constitute the core of the feminist movement, during Nasser's regime the family planning campaign did not have a consciously feminist dimension.<sup>59</sup> Although its failure was attributed to many factors, the traditional status of Egyptian women and the importance placed on having children was the most evident. By 1970 there were four thousand, nine hundred and ninety-two women's voluntary organisations working in the social welfare field. Although the contribution of these centres to fertility control was limited, it became evident that many women had at some point resorted to illegal abortions and so the centres did contribute to the general health and well-being of many women.

The accomplishments of state feminism in the 1950s and 1960s were impressive, transforming women's public lives. The government provided education, employment, health care, child care and other social benefits but the most significant reform of Nasser's government was that in 1956 women were given the right to vote, the right to hold public office and entered government employment. Despite demonstrable advances, however, Botman points out that there were also sharp contradictions. The state proclaimed important public advances for women but Nasser left untouched personal status laws:

Women's rights to full citizenship were restricted because of the patriarchal construction of family life, which determined that women had no independent status once they married and were subordinated to the personal power of their husbands. Women's lives in the family structure remained unreformed.<sup>60</sup>

Another contradiction of the period was that feminist organisations were banned. The government, which had finally granted women the vote, withdrew from them the right to organise politically:

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<sup>59</sup> Botman, op. cit., 61

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 52

The EFU was forced to confine itself to welfare work and to change its name (it became the Huda Sha'rawi Association; the word 'feminist' was no longer acceptable). The following year Aflatun, as a communist, was sent to prison, where she remained for four years. Shafiq was under house arrest. Rashid's feminist party was dissolved. Nabarawi was silenced. Women's activist feminism inaugurated in the aftermath of the 1919 nationalist revolution was suppressed after three and a half decades of independent struggle.<sup>61</sup>

Even though this is considered a progressive period for women, the majority of men still perceived women essentially as wives and mothers.<sup>62</sup>

### Women and Sadat's Regime

When Nasser died in 1970 he was succeeded by Anwar Sadat who replaced Nasser's socialist policy with a more liberal agenda. The implementation of Sadat's *infitāh* policy resulted in Egypt forging new relationships with the West and with the Arab countries of the Gulf. *Infitāh* resulted in an influx of Western culture and simultaneously large-scale labour migration to Arab oil producing countries and the development of pan-Islamist loyalty. With Sadat's liberalisation of the economic and political systems (encouraging foreign investment, seeking foreign aid and stimulating consumption), and the increased emergence of Islamist movements, women were affected in many ways:

Islamists exhorted women to return to their rightful place in the home at the same time that improved female education and inadequate family resources drove women into the paid workforce. With fundamentalism on the rise, women's independence and their citizenship rights, never deeply rooted in Egyptian society, once again became subjects of intense controversy.<sup>63</sup>

Egypt's *infitāh*, intended as economic policy, had serious

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<sup>61</sup> Badran, 'Independent Women', 140

<sup>62</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit.; Badran, 'Independent Women'; Botman, op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Botman, op. cit., 79

consequences on the overall culture of the country. Economic liberalisation also meant westernisation. As the open door magnified Western presence in Egypt, Islam came to safeguard national identity and culture. The most visible manifestation of Islam in the 1970s was the increasing number of veiled women in urban public places. It was quite ironic, as Abdel Kader points out:

. . . that the veil that Egypt's feminist mothers - Huda Sha'rawi and her followers - had boldly, defiantly, and publicly discarded as a symbol of oppression was being voluntarily reinstated by the very women feminists had purported to represent.<sup>64</sup>

The concept of the veil has been hotly debated, partly due to this substantial rise in the number of urban women choosing to wear it. University students in major urban areas such as Cairo, Alexandria and Asyut initiated this so-called 'new veiling' as a form of political action. Veiling among women was the most visible indication of their affiliation with the Islamist trend. To the minds of many Egyptians, opening economic doors to Western goods opened the doors to moral laxity. For many women the veil was a symbolic act representing Islamic values. The spread of modest dress down to the lower-middle classes has been linked to economic necessity. Sadat's regime was plagued by economic crisis and the younger generation seemed particularly aware of this. They were simultaneously attracted to and targeted by the Islamists on college campuses. The Islamists suggested ways in which individuals could cope with declining incomes. Modest modes of dress were seen as respectable alternatives to expensive fashionable clothes and commercial feminine ideals. From the beginning modest modes of dress accommodated the individual's need for thriftiness but also implied

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<sup>64</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 134

religious devotion.<sup>65</sup> Also, as the number of working women increased, women took on a form of clothing that legitimised their move into public space and allowed easier work relations in mixed sex settings. Leila Ahmed describes this new concept of modest dress:

Although the term *veiling* is commonly used in English to refer to the new 'Islamic' dress - and in Arabic the women are referred to as *mutahajibat*, 'veiled ones' - the clothing that women wear often in fact does not include a veil in sense of a face covering, but rather includes a variety of styles of headgear and a variety of coverings for the face, which mask it to a greater or lesser degree - if worn at all. The garments, of whatever style, are intended to conform to the Islamic requirement that dress be modest, that is, not sexually enticing; the mandate applies to both men and women. It is generally taken to mean robes or loose-fitting, long-sleeved, ankle-length garments that do not reveal the contours of the body. Both men and women conforming to this code have developed styles of dress that are essentially quite new, neither the traditional dress of Egypt nor the dress of any other part of the Arab world, or the West, though they often combine features of all three. Although called Islamic dress (*al-ziyy al-islami*), the term means that they fulfil the Islamic requirement of modesty, not they derived, as a style of clothing, from an Islamic society of the past.<sup>66</sup>

Arlene MacLeod questioned whether the veil was a form of protest or an accommodation to the patriarchal system. For her the veil has a double face. For women who choose to work outside of the home the veil offers protection against the traditional view that women belong exclusively in the home. Yet accepting this modest dress also implies that women need protection when outside the safety of the family home. MacLeod has introduced the term 'accommodating protest' to explain this dichotomy.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, op. cit.; Mervat Hatem, 'Economic and Political Liberalization in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism', in Suha Sabbagh, ed., *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York, Olive Branch Press, 1996)

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, op. cit., 220

<sup>67</sup> Arlene Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993)

Girls' increased access to education and legislation designed to ensure women's equal standing in the work place resulted in an increase in the number of women who went to work. The economic impact of multi-national firms setting up in Cairo benefited the women who had jobs with these companies, and inflation had made two-income families a necessity for many Egyptians. Mervat Hatem, however, points out that continued conservative social outlooks accompanied this progressive framework to women's position within the family.<sup>68</sup> The personal status laws, concerned with the rights of women in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance, passed in the 1920s continued to be upheld in the 1970s. These laws defined women as the economic dependents of men. Divorce was a predominantly male prerogative without any major restrictions, while it was stipulated that a wife could only divorce her husband if he failed to support her or if he suffered from an irreversible fault such as madness or leprosy.<sup>69</sup>

When the state parted ways with the Islamists in 1977, following the assassination of the minister of religious affairs, the state used gender to rehabilitate its liberal credentials.<sup>70</sup> In response to the Islamist challenge, Jihān al-Sādāt began a campaign to reform the personal status laws. Until the mid-1970s her activities had been confined to social welfare projects. Her awareness of the chronic gender imbalance in Egypt came as a result of her visits to her husband's ancestral village of Mit Abū-l-Kūm in the Nile Delta. She set up a project training women to work, which became known as the Society for Social Development, became a volunteer for the Red Crescent during the war of 1973, enrolled at Cairo University at the age of forty-one, emphasising the importance of education for women and convened a conference of

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<sup>68</sup> Hatem, op. cit., (1996), 173

<sup>69</sup> Mervat Hatem, 'The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism and Patriarchy in Muslim Personal Status Laws: The Case of Modern Egypt', *Feminist Issues* (Spring 1986), 27

<sup>70</sup> Mervat Hatem, 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?', *Middle East Journal*, 48 (4), (Autumn 1994), 667

African and Arab women in Cairo.<sup>71</sup> She was an ardent supporter of women's rights. It was her involvement in the challenge to overcome discrimination in women's private lives, by changing the personal status laws, that placed her firmly in the political arena.<sup>72</sup>

The Islamist groups succeeded in influencing the public opinion against the law. They discredited Jihān al-Sādāt, who had campaigned rigorously for the changes, and the feminists who had supported her. Religious conservatives condemned her campaign for women's rights as Western orientated and un-Islamic.<sup>73</sup> To overcome its political isolation, 'Jihān's Law,' as it became known, was implemented by presidential decree (instead of securing prior parliamentary approval) along with another law that gave Egyptian women thirty seats in the Assembly and twenty percent of all seats in the local People's Councils. The reforms of Jihān's Law (Law no. 44/1979) were not radical changes; they did not challenge the male privilege of polygamy or give women the unqualified right to divorce, but they did represent changes in the right direction. Feminists since the turn of the century had called for modifications in personal status; women needed to win freedom at home in order to legitimise their public service. Hatem points out that for the first time a symbol of male privilege had been challenged, and Botman stresses that the importance of Sadat's initiative should not be minimised.<sup>74</sup>

### Current Feminist Activism under the Mubarak Regime

Nadje Al-Ali suggests, following the assassination of Sadat by Islamic militants in 1981; increased confrontation with the Islamists has pressured the Mubarak regime to legislate and implement more conservative laws and policies towards women, particularly in the realm

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<sup>71</sup> Jehan Sadat, *A Woman of Egypt* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987), 208, 222, 308, 323

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 2 for a detailed account of the history of Egypt's personal status laws.

<sup>73</sup> Sadat, *op. cit.*, 360

<sup>74</sup> Hatem, 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender', 668; Botman, *op. cit.*, 83

of personal status, and to diminish its support for women's political representation. But the government under Mubarak has also had to deal with outside criticism. While Islamist forces still constituted a powerful constituency within the contemporary Egyptian state, there had been increasing pressure on the Egyptian government to adhere to UN conventions concerning women's rights.<sup>75</sup>

In 1985 there was a national discussion regarding the personal status law which sparked controversy between conservative Islamists, women's organisations and feminist activists. Egypt's High Constitutional Court ruled on 4th May 1985 that Law no. 44/1979 was unconstitutional.<sup>76</sup> The ruling caused uproar among various women's groups, and a Committee for the Defence of the Rights of Women and the Family was formed to oppose return to the 1929 law and to lobby passage of a new law that would respond to the social needs addressed by the 1979 law.

Representatives of the State faced the embarrassing prospects of going to the International Women's Conference in Nairobi, marking the end of the UN Decade for Women, after having struck down a law that gave women new rights. 'Mubarak was torn between his preference for a liberal legislation required by Egypt's commitment to modernity, and his awareness of the power of the religious conservatives and fundamentalists.'<sup>77</sup> Law no. 44/1979 was replaced with Law no. 100 in July 1985; it addressed the same issues but diluted the modest gains given to women by the 1979 law.

The High Constitutional Court also decided to void the law that had established reserved seating for women on the grounds that the law

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<sup>75</sup> Nadje Al-Ali, 'Feminism and Contemporary Debates in Egypt', in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo, eds., *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East* (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1997), 180

<sup>76</sup> Ghada Hashem Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt* (Florida, University of Florida Press, 1996), 119; Fauzi M. Najjar, 'Egypt's Laws of Personal Status', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 10 (3), (1988), 337

<sup>77</sup> Najjar, op. cit., 340

undermined the constitutional principle of gender equality in its preferential treatment of women. The state's diminishing support for the political representation of women encouraged women to organise themselves into formal and informal groups. The Islamists encouraged young college women to organise themselves into support groups, but the leaders of these groups were always men. As Hatem points out, despite the visibility of women in the Islamist movement, they were largely represented at the lowest levels. The only female figure who occupied a national leadership position in an Islamic organisation was Zaynab al-Ghazali, founder and president of the Muslim Women's Association (*Rabi'at al-Mar'a al-Islamiyya*). It was al-Ghazali's imprisonment and torture, under Nasser's regime that established her as a revered figure in the movement.<sup>78</sup>

In response to the organisational successes of the Islamists, secular and feminist women of the middle classes started to form their own organisations: the Progressive Women's Union (*al-Ihīhād al-Nisā'i al-Taqadummi*) affiliated with the leftist *Tagammu'* party, the non-governmental organisations Daughter of the Earth (*Jami'yat Bint al-Ard*) and The New Woman's Group (*al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*), and Nūr Arab Women's Publishing House to name just a few.<sup>79</sup> The Arab Women's Solidarity Association or AWSA (*Jami'yat Taḍāmun al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya*) founded by Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī in 1985 has overshadowed all. Al-Sa'dāwī has been a prominent activist for women's rights ever since the publication of her book *Woman and Sex (al-Mar'a wa al-Jins)* in 1971. She discussed in public what was considered private and taboo. She publicised the harm done to women's bodies by clitoridectomy and demonstrated that such practices had been falsely attributed to Islam and were simply forms of patriarchal control of women. Not surprisingly

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<sup>78</sup> Hatem, 'Economic and Political Liberalization', 188-189

<sup>79</sup> Hatem, *ibid.*, 190; Al-Ali, 'Feminism and Contemporary Debates', 182

there was an outcry from patriarchal forces and she lost her job as Director of Health Education in the Ministry of Public Health.

AWSA met resistance from the authorities and was banned in 1991 by the Ministry of Social Affairs. State opposition was partially inspired by al-Sa'dāwi's controversial reputation. This has been a subject of much debate as Al-Ali suggests:

Nawal El-Saadawi and AWSA were an easy target for both the Egyptian government and anti-feminist forces within Egypt. Not only was its feminism highly confrontational and outspokenly critical of Islamist positions on gender, but El-Saadawi's 'autocratic rule' within the organization and the involvement of her family in AWSA also alienated many Egyptian women and men. Nevertheless, many contemporary activists state that Nawal El-Saadawi's books and lectures were crucial in shaping their initial ideas about women's oppression in Egypt.<sup>80</sup>

There are many secular-orientated women's organisations, the majority based in Cairo. Each differs in their ideological background and orientation and their activities range from charity and social work to conscious-raising through conferences, discussion groups, and the publishing of pamphlets, magazines and books. Also, their positions regarding Islamic tendencies are variable, but 'the majority of women today believe that the only feasible way to reach Egyptian women and men is to reinterpret Islam and stress women's rights within the frame of Islam.'<sup>81</sup> Discussion of many subjects, however, is still deemed unacceptable:

Women's political participation, education and work rank high on the agendas of most groups. However, issues touching upon what is perceived to constitute the private sphere, such as women's reproductive rights or violence against women, are widely considered as Egyptian cultural taboos. Only a few women have taken up these sensitive issues . . . Being considered 'radical feminists' at best and as blindly following

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<sup>80</sup> Al-Ali, 'Feminism and Contemporary Debates', 179-180

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 183

'Western agendas' at worst, these activists are actively engaged in the attempt to expand the concepts of *qadaya al-mar'a* and *huquq al-mar'a* (woman's rights) and thereby to overcome the forged boundaries of 'the public' and 'the private'.<sup>82</sup>

Caught between Islamist, government and nationalist discourses, women's rights activists are constantly under attack. But what is striking about feminism in Egypt is that women have maintained the independent feminist tradition they initiated, placing their arguments within an Islamic framework to legitimise their entry into the public sphere. After a century, however, despite some gains, the personal status law continues to reflect patriarchal domination.

## 2. The Film Industry in Egypt

Anthropologist Walter Armbrust writes that one often encounters the opinion that 'serious' Egyptian cinema dates from the 1960s, the reason being that the state partially nationalised the cinema, thereby allowing some directors 'to produce films according to criteria other than marketability.'<sup>83</sup> But while many intellectuals and film critics have turned their backs on early Egyptian films, there was always a large audience for the product. Film historian Roy Armes makes the same point, that the Egyptian film industry 'is customarily attacked for its triviality and indulgence in melodramatic excess, but any consideration of its output over seventy or so years shows that it has genuine popular appeal throughout the Arab world.'<sup>84</sup>

The history of film in Egypt dates back to 1896; the first showing of a film was in Alexandria, less than a year after the first Lumière Brothers cinematograph exhibition in Paris. Due to its early contact

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 189-190

<sup>83</sup> Walter Armbrust, 'The Golden Age Before the Golden Age: Commercial Egyptian Cinema Before the 1960s', in Walter Armbrust, ed., *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2000), 292

<sup>84</sup> Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London and New Jersey, Zed Books, Ltd., 1991), 47

with modern Western culture, Egypt emerged as the centre of production for the majority of Arab films, just as it had been the Arab centre for the development of theatre. The first Egyptian short film was produced in 1924, the first feature in 1927, and the first talkie in 1932. Production began to increase and in 1945 forty-two films were produced - almost double the total of any previous year. The following year saw a rise in production to fifty-two films and from that point on production has stayed fairly constant.<sup>85</sup> Stable production for half a century, however, did not mean that Egyptian films did not undergo changes; the industry has grown in the face of many obstacles and the films contain vital information about a continually changing society.<sup>86</sup>

### Women Pioneers

In May 1923, Huda Sha‘rāwi and Sīzā Nabarāwi removed the veils covering their faces at Cairo train station as a public political act. This act not only signified their adherence to the liberation of women, but also associated this emancipation with the liberation of the nation. Amazingly, only five years later, ‘Azīza Amīr stood in front of a camera for the first time and was soon followed by Assia Dāghir, Bahīja Ḥāfīz, Amīna Rizq, Mary Queeny and Laylā Murād. All of these women pursued their careers in the film industry despite conservative thought forbidding women to appear in public, let alone on the screen. Amīr, Dāghir and Ḥāfīz, passionate about this new art form, went on to produce and direct many significant films. During the late 1920s and early 1930s production was still independent – dependent on individual

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<sup>85</sup> In *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1998) Viola Shafik, states that Egypt far exceeds any other Arab country in terms of film production with a total of more than 2,500 feature films (not including films made for television). For a comprehensive list of every feature film made in Egypt from 1923 to 1994 see Magda Wassef, ed., *Egypte: 100 ans de cinéma* (Paris, Institute du Monde Arabe, 1995).

<sup>86</sup> In ‘The Golden Age Before the Golden Age’ (301) Armbrust considers early Egyptian films an important aspect in the construction of Egyptian nationalism and the ambiguous status of early films should in fact be a point of analysis rather than a reason to ignore them. He goes on to give an in-depth analysis of *The Flirtation of Girls* (*Ghazal al-Banāt*, Anwar Wagdi, 1949) considering the film to be ‘an incredibly rich slice of Egyptian history’, despite its weak plot.

interest and moderate investment. Filmmaking in these years was dominated at first by a considerable number of foreign residents, in particular women.

‘Azīza Amīr, born Mufida Muḥammad Ghunaym, in Damietta in 1901, was raised by her mother in Alexandria and then Cairo. She travelled to Europe, and visited many cinema studios in France. She returned to Cairo to become an actress in Yūsuf Wahbi’s theatrical company.<sup>87</sup> Amīr founded Isis Films to produce her first feature length film, *Laylā* (Widād ‘Urfi and Istefane Rosti, 1927). Much controversy surrounded the making of the film when ‘Urfi, the original director, withdrew and was replaced by Istefane Rosti, a young Egyptian actor. Credit for seeing the film to the end is attributed to Amīr, its producer and star. The film was first shown in the Metropole Theatre in Cairo and was successful with both critics and the public. *Laylā* is widely acknowledged as the first Egyptian feature length film, therefore placing Amīr as one of the most important pioneers of Egyptian cinema. The film is also important because it incorporates many aspects which, over the years, became staples of Egyptian films: melodrama focusing on the vulnerability of women in a traditional society, the Bedouin hero who defends the honour of his tribe, a veiled criticism of foreigners, and the inevitable dance sequence.

Among the extras in *Laylā* was nineteen-year-old Assia Dāghir. Born Almāza Dāghir in 1908 in Tannurin, a small Lebanese village, she came to Cairo in 1922. Two years after she had been an extra in *Laylā* she had produced and starred in her own production, *The Desert Beauty* (*Ghādat al-Ṣaḥrā*’, Widad ‘Urfi, 1929). The film is significant, not just as Assia’s debut but because it was the first Egyptian feature shown outside Egypt and was awarded the grand prize for film at the Damascus

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<sup>87</sup> Wassef, op. cit., 76

fair by Syrian officials.<sup>88</sup> *The Desert Beauty* featured Assia, Aḥmad Jalāl and Assia's niece, Mary Queeny. This trio were to become an important driving force in the Egyptian film industry over the next eleven years. From *The Desert Beauty* to *Rebellious Girl* (*Fatā Mutamarrida*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1940) the trio participated in every production of Assia's company, Lotus Films, with the exception of one film. For all of the other films, Assia produced and took the leading role while Jalāl directed. The titles all indicate films about women: *When the Woman Loves* ('*Indamā Tuḥib al-Mar'a*', 1933), *Bewitching Eyes* ('*Uyūn Sāhira*', 1934), *The Substitute Wife* (*Zawja bil-Niyāba*, 1936) and *Search for the Woman* (*Fattish 'an al-Mar'a*, 1939).

*Shajarat al-Durr* (Aḥmad Jalāl, 1935), another pioneering film, is regarded as the first historic film of Arab cinema. Assia adapted the historic novel of the same title by Jūrjī Zaydān for the screen, and starred in the role of the legendary Mamluk queen. With the film industry still in its infancy, the objective of the film was to dazzle the audience with Assia's charm and with the sumptuous historical sets which were framed by the Heliopolis Palace Hotel and the House of Islamic Monuments, emphasising the Arabs' former glories at a time when negotiations with the British were ongoing. Almost thirty years later Assia produced the most important historical film in Egyptian cinema, *Saladin* (*al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1963). The film was another story of Arab victory, this time over the Crusaders, and corresponds to the contemporary Arab world and the Nasserist discourse of the time.

Assia's success can also be accredited to her discovery of new talent. She gave numerous young directors their first chance after which they became famous: Aḥmad Jalāl directed *When the Woman Loves* in

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<sup>88</sup> Samir Farid, 'Periodization of Egyptian Cinema', in Alia Arasoughly, ed., *Screens of Life: Critical Writing from the Arab World* (St. Hyacinthe, World Heritage Press, 1996), 17

1933, Henri Barakāt directed *The Vagabond* (*al-Shārid*) in 1942, and Hasan al-Imām directed *Two Orphan Girls* (*al-Yatīmatān*) in 1948. Barakāt went on to become one of Egypt's greatest directors, directing many of the masterpieces of Egyptian cinema and forging a formidable partnership with Fātin Ḥamāma. She was the heroine in nineteen of his films. Al-Imām became famous for his melodramas, adapted from popular French novels. His greatest discovery was Hind Rustum who very successfully played the role of seductress from the mid 1950s to the early 1960s.

Egyptian film production companies and new names continued to appear. Bahīja Ḥāfīz, an accomplished musician, composer and actress, most famous for her role in *Zaynab* (Muḥammad Karīm, 1930), founded The Fanār Film Company and produced her first film, *The Victims* (*al-Daḥāyā*, Ibrahim Lama) in 1932. This was followed by *The Accusation* (*al-Ittihām*, Mario Volpi, 1934) and then *Laylā Daughter of the Desert* (*Laylā Bint al-Ṣaḥrā'*, 1937), which she also directed.

The actress and belly dancer Amīna Muḥammad acted in, directed and produced her first and only film, *Tita Wung* in 1937. This was the last Egyptian feature film directed by a woman until 1966 when the actress Mājida al-Ṣabbāḥi made the unsuccessful *Whom I Love* (*Mann Uḥibb*).

Laylā Murād perhaps stands out as one of the most prominent actresses of the early years. Her first film role was in Bahīja Ḥāfīz's *The Victims* and six years later in *Long Live Love* (*Yaḥyā al-Ḥubb*, Muḥammad Karīm, 1938) she was given her first principal role. She became famous in the melodramas of Togo Mizrahi, particularly with the four films with him that used her name in the title: *Laylā the Country Girl* (*Laylā Bint al-Rīf*, 1941), *Laylā the Schoolgirl* (*Laylā Bint Madāris*, 1941), *Laylā* (1942) and *Laylā in the Shadow* (*Laylā fi al-Zalām*, 1944). The use of Murād's name in the titles shows how

marketable she was as an actress. The films were a great success and Murad continued to make films with Anwar Wagdi (whom she married in 1945) including, *Laylā Daughter of the Poor* (*Laylā Bint al-Fuqarā*, 1945) and *Laylā Daughter of the Rich* (*Laylā Bint al-Aghniyā*, 1946).

It is Amīna Rizq, however, whose acting career, spanning eighty years, most reflects the progression of the art of acting in Egypt. In 1924 Rizq travelled to Cairo from her hometown, Tanta, and joined the Ramsis Troupe, a theatrical company founded by Yūsuf Wahbi. Her first film appearance was in *Su'ād the Gipsy* (*Su'ād al-Ghajariyya*, Jacques Schutz, 1928), her first principal role was in *The Doctor* (*al-Duktūr*, Niyāzi Muṣṭafā, 1939) and her most recent appearance was in *Nasser 56* (*al-Nāṣir 56*, Muḥammad Fāḍil, 1996). Even in her youth she played the role of the mother. She embodied the emotions of motherhood for several generations of Egyptians, a role for which she is fondly remembered.

### Development

When Studio Miṣr opened in 1935 it was the first real film studio in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. 'The studio, founded by Egypt's leading financial institution, Bank Miṣr, had the resources to purchase modern equipment and hire foreign technical staff.'<sup>89</sup> The studio was nationalised in 1960 and still today the films produced by the company are considered some of the most important films in the history of Egyptian cinema.

The Egyptian film industry became firmly established on the Hollywood model. The most popular genres were the musical, comedy and melodrama, all of which were heavily influenced by popular theatre. In the course of the 1930s many stars of Egyptian theatre invested in cinema and attained great influence in the developing art of filmmaking.

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<sup>89</sup> Malkmus and Armes, op. cit., 30-31

Simultaneously a star system emerged. Samir Farid notes that by the post-war period, Laylā Murād's fee jumped to twelve thousand Egyptian pounds, almost half of an average film budget.<sup>90</sup> As production costs went up, the potential for making a profit went down. Previously, films had covered their production costs from the domestic market and made profits from foreign distribution. However, the competition from American and European films rose and to make matters worse some of the Arab states closed their markets to Egyptian films with the adoption of Nasser's Socialism. Farid states that Nasser's regime had no plans to nationalise the studios but it was pushed into his policy by the private production, distribution and exhibition companies who wanted compensation for the loss of foreign markets. The state established the Arts Agency (*Maslahat al-Funun*) in 1955 to support film culture, the Higher Institute of Cinema (*al-Ma'had al-'Āli li-l-Sinimā*) in 1957 to teach filmmaking, and the General Organisation of Egyptian Cinema (*Muassasat Da'm al-Sinimā*) in 1961. This relationship between the state and culture was very much Western influenced.<sup>91</sup>

The state produced most of the films during the period 1963-1971, but the activity in the public sector in terms of production was terminated by the partial re-privatisation initiated under Sadat's *infitāḥ* policy, which, however, did not include the studios and laboratories. Despite this, those involved in film production look back on the 1960s as 'a golden age of nationalized, protected cinema . . . dedicated to Egypt and the Arabs in the name of land, and to solidarity and integrity in the name of the family.'<sup>92</sup>

Apart from the *infitāḥ* and accompanying attempts at privatisation, Viola Shafik cites two other factors that shaped Egypt's cinema

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<sup>90</sup> Farid, op. cit., 8

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 9-10

<sup>92</sup> Lizbeth Malkmus, 'The New Egyptian Cinema: Adapting Genre Conventions to a Changing Society', *Cineaste*, XVI (3) (1988), 33

decisively during the 1970s and 1980s: the introduction of national television and the spread of the video cassette recorder (VCR). It is not clear how much the introduction of television contributed to the drop in film production of the same period but one of its positive effects was that it contributed to the preservation and dissemination of old Egyptian films by constantly airing them. These films were transformed into a cultural legacy for generations of filmmakers. The introduction of the VCR changed habits of spectatorship, encouraging women and families to stay at home instead of going to the cinema, and opened new markets for Egyptian cinema in the Gulf region. This led eventually to what is known in the Egyptian cinema industry as *muqāwalāt*, or entrepreneur film, directed by mediocre directors, featuring second-rate actors and shot and distributed on video. The composition of genres also changed and the traditional musical and melodrama decreased in favour of action and gangster films with a few low-quality karate imitations.

### New Realism and Changing Roles for Women

While the 1970s are generally recognised as one of the low points of Egyptian filmmaking, with a marked decline in the quality of films rather than quantity, the early 1980s saw a revival of realism with the generation of 'New Realists' - young directors with a more experimental approach to filmmaking. Egyptian new realism integrated cinematic innovations that had been prominent in Europe since the 1960s but were new to Egyptian cinema: location shooting, an emphasis on marginal characters and a move away from formulaic plots. The informal grouping (whose representatives include Muḥammed Khān, Ra'fat al-Miḥi, 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib, Bashīr al-Dīk, Khairy Bishāra and Dawūd 'Abd al-Sayyid) is of filmmakers immersed in the traditions of Egyptian cinema, working within its production structures and constraints. But, suggests Lizbeth Malkmus, 'instead of echoing the past, they rework the

genre conventions, invert the clichés and offer radically new roles to the popular stars of the day.<sup>93</sup> This new generation of filmmakers used the cinema to explore the social dynamics of a changing society and this included a change in the screen presentation of women.

Melodrama has been the most widely used genre in Egyptian cinema drawing on the melodramatic elements of Egyptian theatre in the late nineteenth century. Melodrama can be found in *Laylā* produced in 1927 and from there on the genre has been combined with many others, including the musical, dance films and realist films. Realism is another important genre that dates back to the beginnings of Egyptian cinema. Kāmal Saḥīm made Egypt's most important realist film *Determination (al-'Azīma)* in 1939. For the first time an Egyptian director had dealt realistically with social problems drawn from real life. The setting was the environment of the protagonist and for the first time the surroundings of ordinary Egyptians were central to the narrative of the film.

In the past, women were mainly portrayed in melodrama or romance. In melodrama, in particular, women suffered, mostly in silence. While heroines were usually pure at heart, their future left to fate, society around them was often cruel and corrupt. The attitude to social conditions was fatalist and the individual was rendered helpless to circumstance. And, as Malkmus suggests, in older films 'if an individual deviated too far from legal or social norms she would have to die': *The Accused (al-Muttahama)*, Barakāt, 1942), *Girls of the Night (Banāt al-Layl)*, Ḥasan al-Imām, 1955), *The Beginning and the End (Bidāya wa Nihāya)*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1960), *The Sin (al-Ḥarām)*, Barakāt, 1965) and *The Lost Love (al-Ḥubb al-Dā'i')*, Barakāt, 1970). This no longer seems to be the case. In *Arab and African Filmmaking* Malkmus gives a comprehensive analysis of many Egyptian films including a good

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<sup>93</sup> Malkmus and Armes, op. cit., 56

number from the 1980s. She suggests where a female character was once subdued and sensitive, there seems to be a new tendency to allow her frustrations to explode on screen.<sup>94</sup> *For Lack of Sufficient Proof* (*Li 'Adam Kifāyat al-Ādilla*, Ashraf Fahmi, 1987) illustrates her point. A husband's lies have deprived a woman of her child and on temporary release from a mental hospital she batters her husband to death.

In *Victims or Actors? Centering Women in Egyptian Commercial Film*, Sherifa Zuhur concerns herself with films from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. She analyses films which feature female protagonists and deal with various gender issues. She states that themes relating to gender have provided a great deal of subject matter especially attuned to conflict, change and continuity in Egyptian cinema and television. Zuhur chose the 1980s because it was a period that 'witnessed both changes and setbacks (changes and continuity) for women and a greatly broadened forum for discussion of gender issues given the public debate over the reforms.'<sup>95</sup> The films of the period reflect concerns over women's status but Zuhur reminds us that there were also fears that too much change would throw society out of balance and this is often reflected in the films.

Screen heroines were changing. 'The range of action and reaction for female protagonists' was expanding but 'viewers were intended to understand that even these strengthened female figures face trials and tribulations that they have brought upon themselves by moving in conflict with society.'<sup>96</sup> In *The Iron Woman* (*al-Mar'a al-Ḥadīdiyya*, 'Abd al-Laṭīf Zakī, 1987), Mājida, the protagonist, intends to kill her husband's murderers one by one. By the time she gets to the fourth killing the police catch her. The film portrays a woman who takes

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>95</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, 'Victims or Actors? Centering Women in Egyptian Commercial Film', in Sherifa Zuhur, ed., *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 215

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 214-215

control of her life. Mājida actively seeks revenge for her husband's death but she is severely punished for her actions. The audience is offered the chance to see a strong, independent woman, but at the end of the day, 'society's rules are given priority over individual desires'<sup>97</sup> and the presentation of a highly restricted society has not changed. Independence does not matter; it is still a woman's place that is important. In *I Want a Solution* ('*Urīd Ḥallā*, Sa'īd Marzūq, 1974) the honour of the protagonist is compromised when she moves out of the family home in the hope of divorce. And, in *On File for Morals* (*Malaf fi al-Ādāb*, 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib, 1986) a totally innocent situation is turned into a case for the moral police when neighbours mistakenly report prostitution in the building.

The 1970s and 1980s were undoubtedly decades of great change socially and politically in Egypt. The major themes of many of the films of this period included those of shame and honour, family life, social problems and bureaucracy, often with women as the protagonists. Malkmus and Zuhur both offer insightful analysis of Egyptian films with female protagonists but both have shortcomings. Malkmus presents specific patterns that she considers most typical of Arab cinema but does not place the films within a socio-political context, and Zuhur's study is limited to eight films over a period of ten years in a short article. Zuhur's comments in particular offer stimulating insight into a society questioning itself, concerned with its own identity, but there are many more films to be considered through narrative structure and detailed textual analysis to give a more coherent view.

Some new heroines were given the opportunity to take the initiative, with more positive results. In *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* (*Malaf Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi*, Nādir Jalāl, 1988) the central character, Sāmīyā, knows what she wants and makes sure she gets it - by any

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<sup>97</sup> Malkmus, op. cit., 106

means possible. She's not a particularly good role model but she outsmarts everyone and one cannot help but feel a hint of pleasure when she triumphantly pulls out a suitcase of money from under the bed at the end of the film. Sāmīyā might even be considered one of the few Egyptian anti-heroines. The heroine of *The World on the Wing of a Dove* (*al-Dunyā 'ala Janāḥ Yamāma*, 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib, 1988) has a vision. She not only speaks out, but also takes action. She might need a man in order for her vision to be complete, but she is the one who initiates his rescue from the mental hospital in which he is incarcerated. One of the most interesting films of this period is *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* (*Āḥlām Hind wa Kāmīlyā*, Muḥammad Khān, 1988). Two housemaids, one from the city and one from the country, develop a friendship, something that is unusual in Egyptian cinema. The traditional family structure, so important in Egyptian society, is subverted when the two women start a new life together with 'their' daughter Āḥlām (the Arabic word for dreams).

### Women Directors

One of the most significant changes in Egyptian filmmaking in the past twenty years has been the emergence of female directors. After al-Ṣabbāḥi's *Whom I Love* in 1966 no woman succeeded in directing a narrative feature film until the appearance of Nādiya Ḥamza's *Sea of Illusions* (*Baḥr al-Awhām*) in 1984. The following year three films directed by women were released: Nādiya Sālīm's *The Doorkeeper Became the Building's Manager* (*Ṣāḥib al-Idāra Bawāb al-'Imāra*), *The Women* (*al-Nisā'*) by Nādiya Ḥamza and Inās al-Dughaydi's *Excuse Me, Oh Law* (*'Afwā Ayyuhā al-Qānūn*). Subsequently, al-Dughaydi has become the most established mainstream female director having directed fourteen films since 1985. However, her work is often dismissed as vulgar. Less successful were Asmā' al-Bakrī and Nādiya Ḥamza, but

more recently the films of Sandra Nash'at have come to the forefront of commercial filmmaking.

While studying at the Higher Institute of Cinema in Cairo, Inās al-Dughaydi assisted such outstanding directors as Barakāt and Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf. She attracted immediate attention with her first film *Excuse Me, Oh Law* in which she speaks out against a penal code which is unjust towards women. She directed a sequel, *The Challenge (al-Taḥaddī)* three years later. Al-Dughaydi is well known for the feminist dimension she brings to her films and the audacity of her vision. Her examination of what are often considered 'taboo' subjects frequently arouse controversy amongst audiences and critics: *The Murderess (al-Qātila, 1992)* examines the devastating psychological effects of rape, *Disco Disco (1994)* questions the effects of drug abuse on society, *Cheap Flesh (Laḥm Rakhīṣ, 1995)* deals with the problem of poor young peasant girls being sold for 'marriage' to rich Arabs from the Gulf, *Lace (Dāntīlā, 1998)* examines the issue of polygamy, *Night Talk (Kalām al-Layl, 1999)* explores different dimensions of prostitution and *Diary of a Teenager (Mudhakkirāt Murāhiqa, 2002)* is a critique of marriage investigating the false values prescribed to virginity and marriage in traditional Arab society. Al-Dughaydi continually questions the place of women in society, but in commercially attractive formats. Her most recent film, *Women in Search of Freedom (al-Bāḥithāt 'an al-Ḥurriya, 2003)* set in Paris is a tale of three Arab women exploring their identities. They realise freedom is not a place but a human condition they must find within themselves.

Asmā' al-Bakrī began her career in the film industry assisting prominent directors including Yūsuf Shāhīn and Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf. She also worked on the set of several foreign films made in Egypt including *Death on the Nile* (John Guillermin, GB, 1978), *Sphinx* (Franklin J Schaffner, USA, 1980) and *Ruby Cairo* (Graeme Clifford, USA, 1992).

Her training led her to documentary filmmaking initially, before she made her first feature film *Beggars and Noblemen* (*Shahḥādhūn wa Nubalāʾ*) in 1991, based on the novel of the same title by Albert Cossery. She has received critical acclaim for the film abroad and won first prize for best newcomer at The First Biennial of Arab Cinema organised by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 1992.

Nādiya Ḥamza's feature films to date, *The Women, Women Behind Bars* (*Nisā' Khalf al-Qudbān*, 1986), *Resent of a Woman* (*Ḥiqd Imra'a*, 1987), *The Woman and the Law* (*al-Mar'a wa al-Qānūn*, 1988), *Alas, She's a Woman* (*Imra'a Lil-Asaf*, 1988), *The Battle of Nādiya* (*Ma'rakat al-Naqib Nādiya*, 1990), *Sleazy Women* (*Nisā' Ṣa'alik*, 1991) and *Women Against the Law* (*Nisā' Didd al-Qānūn*, 1991) all make reference to women in the title. In *The Woman and the Law*, Ḥamza deals with the controversial subject of rape and women's honour. The rape is the centre of the film but Ḥamza also draws our attention to the injustices of a modern society where traditional values still dominate, where the rape victim is considered the guilty party and her honour is questioned immediately, and where a mother is prevented from killing for honour.

After directing a number of notable video clips for the music industry and working as assistant director to Yusry Naṣralla on several features, Sandrā Nash'at was thrust into the public eye with her feature *Why do you Make me Love You?* (*Laih Khalitni Aḥibak?*) in 2000. A light romantic comedy, it was the highest grossing of the six Egyptian films released for the *Eid* in early 2001. It made one million Egyptian pounds in its first week.<sup>98</sup> She has made two more films, *Thieves in KG2* (*Haramiyya fi KG2*, 2002) and *Thieves in Thailand* (*Haramiyya fi Thailand*, 2003), successfully combining traits of the Western gangster movie with Egyptian comedy conventions. Using the same cast and crew, the second film is not a sequel but what Nash'at describes as a

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<sup>98</sup> Tarek Atia, 'Flirting with the Formula', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 516, 11-17 January 2001

new take on the life of a group of by now familiar types.<sup>99</sup>

Hāla Khalil's first feature, *Best of Times* (*Ahlā al-Awqāt*, 2004) marks a new interest in social drama in Egyptian cinema. The protagonist is a young woman who struggles with the overwhelming sense of loneliness following the unexpected death of her mother. A series of anonymous letters and a cassette send her on a journey on which she rediscovers her past and reassesses her relationship with her estranged stepfather. Moving between the contrasting neighbourhoods of residential Maadi and popular Shubra the film portrays social change and class distinctions without relying on melodramatic excess or succumbing to comic formulas. *Best of Times* is also a sensitive portrayal of female friendship.

Until now female directors have remained under-represented in fiction films. Apart from the general lack of balance of women's representation in many professions, morality is certainly a decisive element. Show business, in particular dancing and acting, is followed with fascination. However, it is basically associated with immorality. Increasingly since the 1970s, women who spend a significant time in public, either by choice or necessity, wear the *ḥijāb*. There is, however, a sharp disjunction between the way most middle-class women dress and the way women dress in films. Armbrust notes that although film narratives are frequently set in the middle class, women in *ḥijāb* are rare in Egyptian cinema, and it is rarer still for women in *ḥijāb* to have speaking roles.<sup>100</sup> The 1980s and early 1990s were marked by a new morality on and off screen, in dress, behaviour and public opinion. As a result, Egypt's stars were used to confirm the Islamist idea. This was

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<sup>99</sup> Nash'at chose the names of the films in the tradition of the Ismā'īl Yāsīn films. The comedian first appeared on the screen in 1939. Subsequently he became the star of a whole series of films dedicated to his persona. It started with *Ismā'īl Yāsīn in the Army* (*Ismā'īl Yāsīn fi-l-Jaysh*, Faṭīn 'Abd al-Wahab, 1955) and went on with Yāsīn in the police, the navy, the airforce and so on.

<sup>100</sup> Walter Armbrust, 'When the Lights Go Down in Cairo: Cinema as Secular Ritual', *Visual Anthropology*, 10 (1998), 421. Hāla Khalil's feature *Best of Times* is an exception. Hind Sabri plays the role of Yusria, a young veiled woman, who is one of the main characters.

achieved through the phenomenon of veiling, which spread among mostly second and third category female performers. In 'Prostitute for a Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt', Shafik states that by 1994 up to twenty-one actresses had decided to wear the *ḥijāb*. The most spectacular case was singer and actress Shadya, who had appeared between 1949 and 1983 in some one hundred feature films. After donning the veil in 1987 she hardly appeared in public and refused to attend her honouring during the Cairo International Film Festival in 1995. Other well-known performers who took up the veil included Huda Sulṭān, Shams al-Bārūdi and Madīḥa Kāmil.<sup>101</sup>

The public attention given to the retreat of actresses was due to the strong symbolic and politically mobilizing potential of the veil.<sup>102</sup> However, the veiling of performers is clearly distinct from the accommodated 'new veiling' that was adopted in the 1980s by women from all social classes who were still complying with the modernist agenda in their way of life. The veiling of performers was an advertisement for the new Islamist wave with the clear message to send women back home. Unlike Iranian actresses, once veiled, Egyptian actresses (with the exception of Huda Sulṭān) stopped working, thereby asserting a strict division between the performing arts and Muslim piety, the public and the private. Thus, there is not only a paucity of roles for women who wear the *ḥijāb*, but also few actresses who wear the *ḥijāb* continue working.

The question of women and sexuality was not only used by fundamentalists in their attack on performing arts but also by secularists in their counterattacks. The fundamentalist position was criticised in the

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<sup>101</sup> Viola Shafik, 'Prostitute for a Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24,6 (2001), 716. See also Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Movie Stars and Islamic Morality in Egypt', *Social Text*, 42,1 (1995), 53-67.

<sup>102</sup> The secular press suspected the apparently remorseful performers of having accepted immense sums of money from Muslim fundamentalist circles. In 'Prostitute for a Good Reason', Shafik goes on to state that the political magazine *Rūz al-Yūsuf* reported that the actress Ilhām Shāhīn had refused one million US dollars, which were supposedly offered to her for that reason.

secular press and challenged in a number of cinematic narratives. In *Disco Disco* Īnās al-Dughaydi presented a morally strong single woman; a headmistress who fights against ethical decay, criminality and last but not least, Islamism. Women, therefore have been turned into the main subject of negotiation between both major ideological currents.

Shafik suggests that the presence and activity of female pioneers in early cinema was probably facilitated by their privileged social backgrounds which enabled them to invest their own private money.<sup>103</sup> Hampered by traditional morality, many contemporary female filmmakers have chosen more marginal fields such as short and documentary filmmaking. With a small local audience and lack of funding, the most successful filmmakers are those who have been able to distribute their work abroad and those who have managed to attain funding from abroad.

Documentary filmmaker 'Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi inaugurated a new era for Arab documentary film with her film *Horse of Mud* (*Hussan al-Ṭin*) in 1971. In this twelve minute black and white short film she films one of the hundreds of small brick factories along the banks of the Nile – a silent observation of women and men in the brick industry. Trained at the Higher Institute of Cinema and at the London Film School, al-Abnūdi has made more than twenty full length and short documentaries over the past thirty years. Her films portray social issues revolving around the lives of Egyptians, usually from the lower classes: *Sad Song of Tūḥa* (*Ughniyat Tūḥa al-Ḥazīna*, 1971) is a portrait of Cairo's street performers, *Seas of Thirst* (*Bihār al-'Atash*, 1981) exposes the unbearable conditions of the inhabitants of a fishing village in the north of Egypt, who fight a daily battle to obtain potable water necessary for their survival, *Sellers and Buyers* (*Illi-Bā' wa ill Ishtarā*, 1992) portrays

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<sup>103</sup> Viola Shafik, 'Egyptian Cinema', in Oliver Leaman, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), 37

women in Cairo who work and take care of their families without the support of a man, *Girls Still Dream* (*Āhlām al-Banāt*, 1995) addresses the issue of early marriage and *Days of Democracy* (*Ayām al-Dimuqrāṭiyya*, 1998) follows the campaigns of female candidates during the 1997 parliamentary elections. Her work has been consistently acclaimed in the West where she is regarded as the finest exponent of documentary cinema in Egypt and the Arab world, but her films rarely appear in Egypt.

Tahāni Rāshid is another well established documentary filmmaker whose work is better known outside her home country. Born in Cairo in 1947, she settled in Canada in 1966 and began her filmmaking career in 1973. Throughout her career Rāshid has documented social issues, including the day to day struggle of the Lebanese in war torn Beirut, poverty in Montréal and people living with HIV and AIDS. In 1997 she returned to her native Egypt and made *Four Women of Egypt* (*Arba' Nisā' min Miṣr*), a candid dialogue between four friends, set against a backdrop of tremendous political and social change in Egypt that began with the ascent of Nasser.

Women are underrepresented in Egyptian cinema, in every respect. Just as women have been marginalized in real life they have not had a prominent voice on either side of the screen. As the initial female pioneers of film production retired from the film industry they were never really replaced. In recent years, a number of women have entered the industry as directors, but the number is very few. Of course, Egyptian audiences have not been denied access to strong female protagonists, but films such as *Solicitor Fāṭima* (*al-Astādha Fāṭima*, Faṭīn 'Abd al-Wahāb, 1952), *I am Free* (*Anā Hurra*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1959), *Wife Number 13* (*al-Zawja Raqam 13*, Faṭīn 'Abd al-Wahāb, 1962), *The Open Door* (*al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*, Barakāt, 1963) and *The Second Wife* (*al-Zawja al-Thāniyya*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1967) cannot be

considered the norm. Female characters representing passive and endangered virtue have remained popular to this day, (currently enacted by Ilhām Shāhīn, Laylā ‘Ulwi and Najla’ Fathī) although they are presented in a less melodramatic manner, instead appearing in the framework of social drama. On the other hand, Huda Sulṭān, Taḥiyya Carioca and Hind Rustum (who starred between the 1940s and 1960s) and in particular Nādiya al-Jindi (since the early 1980s) relied primarily on female charm and sex appeal and were thus cast in the role of the vamp and *femme fatale*. Some actresses such as Nādiya Lutfi, Su‘ad Ḥusni, Madīḥa Kāmil and Yusrā, have, however, succeeded in representing both sides; innocent despite their vices.

As explained in the first part of this introduction, issues of love, marriage, divorce and honour are central to the lives of Egyptian women and their fight for liberation. These subjects have been central to many films over the years and still are today, but has interpretation changed with the increase in new directors? Do women directors consciously try to invalidate predominating discourses on women’s liberation? What space are women given in the narrative, and does this space offer empowerment? How do directors interpret public space (hostile) and private space (intimate and unthreatening)? Are Egyptian screen heroines given the chance to find a coherent voice, or are they doomed to repeat the mistakes of their past, thereby perpetuating their negative status in Egyptian society? The same actress appears as both mother and daughter in Yūsuf Shāhīn’s *Lady on the Train* (*Sayyidat al-Qiṭār*, 1952) and more recently in Khairy Bishāra’s *The Necklace and the Bracelet* (*al-Ṭawq wa-Iswira*, 1987). This device suggests Malkmus signals the inevitability that both mother and daughter will suffer the same fate.<sup>104</sup> Another version of repetition is to have the same actress play the same role in film after film. Fātin Ḥamāma’s strong screen presence in more

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<sup>104</sup> Malkmus and Armes, op. cit., 101

than one hundred films has earned her the title of 'The First Lady of Arab Cinema.' She is beautiful, distinguished and sensitive but has played the long-suffering Egyptian woman from very early on in her film career, in Barakāt's *Call of the Curlew (Du'ā' al-Karawān)* made in 1959, until more recently in Dawūd 'Abd al-Sayyid's *Land of Dreams (Arḍ al-Āhlām)* in 1993. Is the image of Egyptian woman on screen 'still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning'?<sup>105</sup>

### 3. Structure

The objective of my research is to identify the way Egyptian films construct and re-present the reality of women by way of narrative structure, codes and conventions. In doing so I identify the extent to which roles for women in film changed alongside socio-economic shifts and ideological transformations in the country, and consider how cultural conditions contribute to the demarcation of gender roles.

The purpose of this research is to analyse the representation of women in Egyptian films. The focus of my research will be films with a female protagonist. This fact alone suggests that the films would raise various gender issues. I will analyse the image of the protagonist by looking at her position in the structure of the film and by her treatment within the filmic discourse. I will also examine to what extent this is a reflection of reality in terms of the position of women in society. This will, in turn, lead to discussion of wider discourses, such as Middle Eastern patriarchy, Islam, theories of gender and feminist film theory.<sup>106</sup>

My interest in Egyptian films lies in the years after Sadat became president for three reasons. Firstly, I think those years present a society

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<sup>105</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Feminism and Film* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 35

<sup>106</sup> The structure of Nadjé Al-Ali's *Gender Writing/Writing Gender* has been useful in considering the structure and methodology of my own research.

in conflict and transition. When Sadat modified the personal status law he was the first Egyptian Head of State to address the highly controversial area of family life. As the public examined the 'appropriate' place for women in society, two conflicting trends competed for women's attention: secularists approved of women's participation in education and the marketplace but Muslim fundamentalists articulated a restricted view of permissible behaviour for women. Are the films a reflection of these events? Are the films a celebration of women's newly acquired freedom, or are they a rejection of tradition reflecting a move back to patriarchy with the growth of Islamism? Secondly, the early 1980s onwards saw a revival of realist filmmaking produced by a younger generation of filmmakers. This is an exciting change following what is usually considered one of the low points of Egyptian filmmaking. Thirdly, the past twenty years have witnessed an emergence of women directors who have primarily dealt with issues relating to women's lives. Women are not only the object of the film but also have become the subject, generating the discourse with the ability to challenge the symbolic order. To what extent do they challenge the social order?

The campaign for women's rights in Egypt has been a constant fight for women's validity in public space and in the private sphere. What space are women given in the narrative of films? How is women's space represented and to what extent does this space empower women? By focusing on women and women's space, to what extent do these films challenge the patriarchal order?

Women directors are still a relatively new phenomena in Egypt and are not as renowned as many male directors, (Īnās al-Dughaydi is perhaps an exception). More women filmmakers does not in itself guarantee more feminist films. Films by women may or may not be feminist and it is possible to argue that men may produce feminist work.

Films produced by men are not generally concerned with a feminist critique and assess to what extent these film directors might be considered 'feminist'.

I have organised each chapter around two films on a similar theme: the ancestry of female protagonists, the rights of personal status, women who are punished for their action, triumphant women and female friendship. In each chapter I analyse two films in detail. With the exception of the first chapter I have chosen to include a film directed by a man and a film directed by a woman to give a comparative dimension to the study. In chapter one both films are directed by men due to the lack of films directed by women in that period. This has been compensated for by discussing one film based on a novel by a man and the other film based on a novel by a woman. As far as possible I have chosen films by different directors, although I have included two films by Īnās al-Dughaydi because the choice of women filmmakers is limited. The inclusion of two of her films is justified because she is the most prolific of the female directors.

In the first chapter I have looked back at the ancestry of female protagonists with films made before 1970. Films with female protagonists prior to 1970 generally fall into two genres: romance and melodrama. In each of these genres the women tend to be identified by their place within the family structure and their femininity validated by their relationship to a man. Women had no independent status and the patriarchal structure remained fully intact. The path of love did not always run smoothly for Egyptian heroines, but true love and a happy, albeit traditional marriage did conquer all in conventional romances. In melodrama, heroines were often sensitive and pure at heart and left their future to fate. If an individual deviated too far from legal or social norms, she would have to die. There are, however, some notable exceptions, two of which will be discussed in this chapter. In both films,

*I Am Free* and *The Open Door*, the young female protagonist undertakes a journey of liberation and personal freedom within a traditional society.

The rights of women with regard to marriage, divorce, polygamy and child custody have been a constant theme in films throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more often than not with unhappy or unresolved endings. Women are given a voice in the filmic discourse but society does not listen to them. Is this newfound voice, in actual fact, redundant? In chapter two I discuss the rights of personal status presented in *I Want a Solution* and *Cheap Flesh*.

In the third chapter I look at *The Iron Woman* and *The Woman and the Law*. The women in these films are driven to distraction, usually by the men in their lives. Unlike the heroines of 1950s and 1960s melodrama who would rather die than be judged for their sins, these modern women are driven to commit crimes and are prepared to undertake the consequences of their action. They are punished for moving in conflict with society.

The focus of chapter four is also active women but this time their activity leads to triumph rather than punishment. The protagonist in *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rawī* is victorious in her action, but hers is a hollow victory set within a world of escapism. The women of Tahāni Rāshid's documentary *Four Women of Egypt* in comparison present real achievements and rich lives in a dialogue covering nationalism in Egypt, Arab feminism, secularism and Islam.

Women's identity is so often validated by their relationship to men but *Dreams of Hind* and *Kāmīlyā* and *Lace* pave the way for a new approach. Female solidarity has not been a predominant theme in the past and in some films the heroine has had most to fear from other women. However, in the films discussed in chapter five, female friendship can be a source of enduring strength, allowing women to reject the shifting confines of conservatism and traditionalism. Both

films end with an alternatively structured family group: two women and a child.

While addressing all of the above points, my study will attempt to maintain a balance between the drama of sexual difference and the importance of the socio-historical context within which the films were made. I hope that my conclusions in this respect will not only be relevant to Egyptian cinema, but also to film studies in general across cultural and linguistic boundaries. The conclusion is followed by a filmography giving full credits of each of the ten primary films analysed and the title, date and director of the secondary films referred to in the thesis.

## Chapter 1

### The Ancestry of Female Protagonists

*I am Free* (*Anā Hurra*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1959)

*The Open Door* (*al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*, Barakāt, 1963)

From the beginning of film production women have been central to the story in Egyptian cinema: Egypt's first feature film, *Laylā* is named after its protagonist. Despite the advances upper- and middle-class women had gained through increased access to education and employment, traditional values of purity and honour still lingered on, and were reflected in the passive and fatalistic nature of heroines in films. The heroine of *The Accused* is accused of adultery by her husband and forbidden access to their son. The husband learns of her innocence but not before she dies after many years of suffering. The protagonist of Yūsuf Shāhīn's *Lady on the Train* is a virtuous woman who, to support her debt-ridden husband, allows him to collect her life insurance while she remains locked in an abandoned house for years.

Women who veered from the socially accepted norms of a patriarchal society suffered the consequences. Transgressions such as sex outside of marriage lead to death for many female protagonists. In *Girls of the Night* a dancer falls to her death in a cabaret act following the birth of her illegitimate daughter. The middle aged owner of a flour mill in *A Woman's Youth* (*Shabāb Imra'a*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1956) lures a naive student into a relationship of sexual dependency. She entices the young man by dancing for him. This dance, filmed as a circular movement around him, alludes to the spinning of a web.<sup>1</sup> The woman is ultimately crushed to death by her own millstone. In *The Beginning and the End* a young woman is forced to commit suicide when she turns to

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<sup>1</sup> Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London and New Jersey, Zed Books, Ltd., 1991), 129

the street to support herself and finance her younger brother's education.

In many narratives, individual happiness and love stood on one side, while tradition and family rested on the other. The main characters were the loving woman (or man) and the patriarchal father, or some other authoritarian figure. In *Mortal Revenge* (*Sira' fi-l-Wādi*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1954) and *Ḥasan and Na'īma* (*Ḥasan wa Na'īma*, Barakāt, 1959) the couple are reunited, but not before the opposition has been removed in some form of conflict. Ḥasan and Na'īma's spontaneous love is brought into question by 'Aṭwa, Na'īma's cousin. The crisis develops until Ḥasan's life is threatened. The inhabitants of the village support Ḥasan's fight against 'Aṭwa but the situation can only be resolved with the death of the villain.

With all things considered, the independent vision of the female protagonists in *I Am Free* and *The Open Door*, the subjects of this chapter, is striking. Where so many women, particularly in melodrama, have suffered in silence, these two protagonists have a voice and determination with which they fight to liberate themselves from within a patriarchal context. For this younger generation of women personal freedom was inseparable from political freedom.<sup>2</sup> Amīna, in *I Am Free*, discovers that knowledge and work are two conditions of emancipation. Liberated from ignorance and economically independent, she realises her objectives fighting against colonialism and the royalist power with her partner, a militant nationalist journalist. Laylā, in *The Open Door*, escapes a potentially suffocating arranged marriage to leave for Suez with her true love, to fight for the national liberation movement. Both films are interpretations of contemporary novels.

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary Kilpatrick, 'The Egyptian Novel from Zaynab to 1980', in M.M. Badawi, ed., *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 250-251; Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995), 167; Latifa al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Cairo and New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), xx

## The Legacy of the Egyptian Novel

The Egyptian cinema, like other cinemas, has taken inspiration from novels from its very beginning. *Zaynab*, directed by Muḥammad Karīm in 1930, and based on the novel of the same name by Muḥammad Husain Haykal, was the first. The film is faithful to the novel and tells the story of the peasant girl, Zaynab, who is forced to marry someone other than her beloved, with fatal consequences. Literature played an important role in establishing realist cinema (often with a clear melodramatic inclination) and has resulted in the realisation of some of the most accomplished works of the Egyptian film industry: *The Beginning and the End*, *The Sin*, *Cairo 30* (*al-Qāhira 30*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1966), *The Earth* (*al-Arḍ*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1968) and *The Necklace and the Bracelet*.<sup>3</sup> Literary works were a rich source of ideas, visions, sentiments and characters.

In *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, Roger Allen suggests that conflict has been a major theme of many works of modern Arabic fiction, reflecting the reality of the recent history of the Middle East region. Alongside the international, national and communal conflicts involving weapons of destruction, there have also been conflicts of politics and ideology.<sup>4</sup> The realist inclination of the 1950s and 1960s was not only portraying issues of national liberation and class struggle but also questions of development. The voice of the female protagonist and the resulting discord when this voice challenges the dominant patriarchal order make *I Am Free* written by Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs in 1954 and *The Open Door* written by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt in 1960 particularly significant for this period.

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<sup>3</sup> Kamal Ramzi, ‘Les sources littéraires’, in Magda Wassef, ed., *Egypte: 100 ans de cinéma* (Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 1995) 237; Viola Shafik, ‘Egyptian Cinema’, in Oliver Leaman, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), 61

<sup>4</sup> Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1995), 64

Born in Cairo in 1919, Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs was generally considered to be one of the Arab world’s most popular writers of fiction.<sup>5</sup> He worked as a staff member and was later chief editor of the weekly *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, founded by and named after his mother in 1925.<sup>6</sup> After the 1952 revolution he produced a whole series of works of romantic fiction. How he dealt with his subject in these particular short stories and novels was considered refreshing. Much of his writing revolved around sexual themes, the structure of the family and the position of women within it, particularly the search for emancipation by young Egyptian women. He also reflected the psychological climate of the time when thoughts of political independence and social and economic equity were at their height. The trusting certainty of being able to determine freely one’s fate was predominant. Many of his stories were adapted for radio, television and cinema; his novels and short stories have inspired more films than those by any other writer.<sup>7</sup>

The female protagonist of *I Am Free* proclaims a defiant message that appealed to successive generations of adolescents faced with the reconciliation of tradition and the changes of post revolutionary Egypt. Amīna eventually wins her freedom from parental and social chains only to find herself selling that freedom in return for a salary. Seeking to show that freedom does not exist the story is prefaced by the following words:

There is no freedom. The most free of us is really a slave to the principles in which s/he believes and the aims for which s/he strives. We seek freedom only as a means to serve our

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Arabic Novel* Allen states that more copies of the works of ‘Abd al-Quddūs have been sold than of any other Arab novelist. In the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998) Paul Starkey suggests that the Arabic style of ‘Abd al-Quddūs, making few demands on his readers, probably accounts for his popularity with the average Egyptian; a poll conducted in 1954 for the American University in Cairo found him to be the most popular living Arab writer.

<sup>6</sup> *Rūz al-Yūsuf* was one of the most respected weekly political magazines in the Arab world. As al-Yūsuf became more involved in politics she published a daily newspaper of the same name for a couple of years, but then it reverted to its weekly publication.

<sup>7</sup> Ramzi, op. cit., 226

aims. Before you demand your freedom ask yourself: 'To what aim shall I dedicate my freedom?'

The novel was adapted for the cinema by Najīb Maḥfūz. The film, directed by Ābū Sayf in 1959, is prefaced by the same words.

Egyptian women had also been writing and publishing fiction since before the turn of the twentieth century, but they had not confronted issues of personal freedom and sexuality in the context of traditional social expectations and constraints. Women had published fiction in women's magazines that began to appear in the 1890s. Marilyn Booth suggests, by the 1930s, as notions about women's status in society were slowly shifting in tandem with nationalist ideologies and programmes, women could participate more visibly in cultural production. The first short story collection by a woman to be published in Egypt was in 1935. The collection, *My Grandmother's Tales (Aḥadīth Jaddati)* written by Saḥīr al-Qalamāwi, differed from that of contemporary male writers; 'It was a critique founded in what some critics have seen as a characteristic of women's writing, a 'dailiness' that captures the everyday, supposedly trivial but in fact fundamental events that shape us.'<sup>8</sup>

Twenty-five years later, as more women were writing fiction, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt published *The Open Door*.<sup>9</sup> Born in the Delta town of Damietta in 1923, al-Zayyāt was a generation older than her protagonist, Laylā. She earned her doctorate in 1957 and went on to become Professor of English Literary Criticism at 'Ain Shams University in Cairo, and also served as Director of the Arts Academy in the early 1970s. She published many books and articles on literary criticism, as well as many works of fiction. She was awarded the State

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Zayyat, op. cit., xvii

<sup>9</sup> In 1958, *I Live (Ana aḥyā)*, written by the Lebanese writer Laylā Ba'albakkī, was heralded as the beginning of the present explosion of feminist writing in the Arab world and the entry of female Arab writers into the modern literary canon. The primary focus of the novel was the position of the girl within the family and her view of herself. In *The Arabic Novel* Allen quotes Khālida Sa'īd. For Sa'īd this novel was 'a *cri de coeur*, protesting against not only the enslavement of women but also the female syndrome, daughter-wife-mother, which restricted her entire existence to the level of biological functions.'

Prize for Literature in 1996. In her fiction, al-Zayyāt drew on her own experiences as a political activist in the student movements of the 1940s. *The Open Door* opens with the demonstrations of 1946, and closes with the Suez Crisis of 1956.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Zayyāt presents a feminist quest for self-discovery in the form of Laylā, a young Egyptian girl from a middle-class family. Laylā's journey brings her into conflict with the backward traditions upheld by her family, and the patriarchal society in which she lives. As she 'opens the door' to herself, her journey includes the social and political, as well as the personal. The journey toward maturity developed in the novel, is also the driving force of the film adaptation directed by Barakāt in 1963.

Booth suggests al-Zayyāt's novel pointed to some of the ways in which the Arabic novel would develop, interweaving two kinds of marginality: one social, putting a female perspective at the centre within a family context and one literary, using everyday rather than literary diction, in this case the colloquial Arabic of the urbanised middle classes.<sup>11</sup> The spoken word of the film is almost an exact replica of the written word of the novel; 'this adherence to the exact words of the written source has been a specific request of the author who collaborated with Barakāt . . . in setting the script of the film.'<sup>12</sup>

*I Am Free* and *The Open Door* both fed into the modernist discourse of gender equality which had arisen with Nasser. The emergence of the woman's voice, a reflection of reality, expressed a desire for profound changes in attitude and behaviour. In both films, the understanding of personal liberation is tied to the liberation of Egypt from the British. When Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal in July 1956,

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<sup>10</sup> During her years of study al-Zayyāt became associated with left-wing intellectuals. She became one of the prominent leaders of the Student's and Worker's Committee (*Lajnat al-talaba wa-al-'ummā*) in 1946. In 1949 her political activism took her to jail. During Sadat's regime, al-Zayyāt found out later, her house was under constant surveillance and in 1981 she was imprisoned again for her political activities.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Zayyat, op. cit., xvii

<sup>12</sup> Ghada Helmy, 'The Plight of Women in Literary Text and Filmic Adaptation', *Alif* 15 (1995), 181

the Arab World heralded him as a hero; he became a symbol of resistance to western imperialism. This triumphant moment marked the end of a decade of turbulent political activity in Egypt. Egypt was trying to free itself from British occupation and from the political system of the past.<sup>13</sup> This period in the history of modern Egypt is the setting for *I Am Free* and *The Open Door*. The political upheaval does not only form the setting but also plays an integral part in the narrative of both films. For this reason, it is important to detail the main events of the time, from the demonstrations of 1946 to the Suez Crisis of 1956.

In December 1945 the Egyptian Prime Minister, Maḥmūd al-Nurqrāshi, demanded from the British government abrogation of the treaty of 1936 (to remove British troops from the cities). The Egyptian people reacted strongly to the lack of action from the British, resulting in riots and demonstrations in Cairo and Alexandria in 1946. Renegotiations culminated in British troops withdrawing from Cairo and the Delta in 1951, but they remained in the Canal Zone, reluctant to let go of their strategic presence in Egypt. The Suez Canal Company was an international company with headquarters in Paris. The canal had been built with French and Egyptian money but in 1875 the British government purchased the Egyptian shares and the British considered the Suez Canal an imperial lifeline. Fighting broke out between British forces and Egyptian guerrillas, and in January 1952 Egyptians took to the streets, burning and destroying institutions and neighbourhoods associated with the British presence in what became known as Black Saturday and the Cairo Fire. Black Saturday was the beginning of the end of the monarchical regime.

In July 1952, taking advantage of the resulting political instability, the Free Officers seized power and the King was forced to abdicate. He sailed into exile on 24th July, three days after the coup. After nearly two

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Zayyat, op. cit., ix

years, with no-one strong enough to oppose him Nasser became Prime Minister on 18th April 1954. Institutionalised military rule had begun in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> The end of the monarchy, however, did not mean the end of a British presence. Only after further negotiations, in October 1954, did the British agree to withdraw their forces from their base at the Suez Canal within twenty months from that date.

The next drama to unfold was the withdrawal of financial aid, from the United States of America and Great Britain, to build the High Dam at Aswan. Nasser found himself, 'maneuvering between the imperative of acquiring massive aid for arms and for development on the one hand, and the imperative of maintaining independence from Western financial and political institutions on the other.'<sup>15</sup> While Nasser was considering his options, the United States withdrew its offer of a loan in July 1956. To the astonishment of the world Nasser announced that Egypt was nationalising the Suez Canal Company, explaining that its revenues would go to projects that Western governments were unwilling to finance.<sup>16</sup> In his account of Egypt's recent history Derek Hopwood suggests, that this was 'the final step in Egypt's liberation, claiming as her own the symbol of and the reason for past imperial domination.'<sup>17</sup> Opposition from Great Britain, France and Israel, however, resulted in an Israeli invasion of Sinai in October 1956, followed by a wave of British bombing of military targets and British and French occupation of part of the Canal Zone. A UN ceasefire marked the end of the advance and British, French and Israeli troops withdrew. Booth suggests that although this had not been a military victory for Egypt, it was a political

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945-90* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 39

<sup>15</sup> Al-Zayyat, *op. cit.*, xxii

<sup>16</sup> In July 1956, the anniversary of King Farouk's exile, Nasser gave a three hour speech in Alexandria covering recent political development. He mentioned Ferdinand de Lessops, the French engineer who had the original idea to build the Suez Canal. This seemingly irrelevant mention of de Lessops was the codeword for the Egyptians to occupy the premises of the Suez Canal Company in Port Said.

<sup>17</sup> Hopwood, *op. cit.*, 47

victory for Nasser and a defining moment for the nation.<sup>18</sup>

## *I Am Free*

### Synopsis

Amīna (played by Lubnā ‘Abd al-‘Azīz) lives with her aunt, uncle and cousin ‘Alī, in Abbāsiyya, a middle class suburb of Cairo. As Amīna and ‘Alī leave for school one morning she talks of running away. She is tired of the restrictions imposed by her aunt and uncle but she has nowhere to go: her father is always travelling and her mother has remarried. For now she is content with playing truant from school and walking through the streets of Cairo. Amīna visits her friend Vicky and later leaves longing for the same independence and freedom that Vicky is granted by her mother. Abbās, a neighbour, and his friends are deep in conversation about the possibility of demonstrating against the colonialists and those who support them from the government.

In the first of four dream sequences, Amīna appears as a tiny figure in a vast black space, lit by one ray of light. A voice (possibly her inner conscience) asks her if the freedom to miss school and lie to her uncle and aunt is really the freedom she is searching for.

Amīna joins Vicky and her friends at a party one afternoon, returns home after dark and is severely reprimanded. The next day her movements are restricted to socialising with her aunt and a group of older women in the house of Abbās and his mother. Furious to hear one of the women gossiping about her arrival home the previous evening, Amīna storms out of the gathering but is stopped by Abbās in the hallway. Genuinely concerned about her reputation, and not that of her family, Abbās tries to make Amīna aware of the consequences of her actions.

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Zayyat, op. cit., xxiii

Amīna refuses to give up her fight for personal freedom and the conflict with her aunt and uncle increases, until eventually her aunt tells her she no longer cares. In the second dream sequence a voice questions what Amīna will do with her freedom now that she has become responsible for it. Amīna realises she has a chance to prove her maturity with this newfound freedom. Through her reading she begins to realise that freedom has many different meanings. She decides to continue her education in order to work; once she gets a job she will have truly gained her freedom.

After finishing school Amīna agrees to meet with Aḥmad, a potential husband, but he is too conservative for her tastes. A third dream questions Amīna's stubborn determination to achieve what she believes to be her freedom at any cost. She goes to live with her father and enrolls at university. After graduating she joins a large company, but becomes a slave to her job as her boss requests she work ever-longer hours.

Amīna returns to Abbāsiyya following a suicide attempt by 'Alī. On failing his exams his father destroyed the violin he was passionate about. She reacquaints herself with Abbās, now a political journalist and publisher. Once more in a dream she questions the real meaning of freedom. She joins Abbās in his political fight. Caught printing papers for the revolutionaries, Amīna is arrested along with Abbās. They are found guilty of conspiracy against the ruling government and are both imprisoned for five years. They marry in prison on 21st July 1952, three days before the revolution.

### Structure

The overall structure of the film confirms expectations grounded in the canonic story format. With the first scene we are introduced to the main characters, the setting, the primary state of affairs and the basic

dramatic conflicts of the narrative: authoritarian patriarch versus the rest of the family, and freedom versus confinement. The goal of the protagonist is simple: to be free. When this goal is achieved there is resolution.

This is Amīna's story and the narrative is structured from her point of view. The title, *I Am Free*, is a statement; it is a declaration without apology. From the outset, Amīna is in no doubt that freedom is the most important concept in the world and she defiantly constructs a journey to achieve her personal liberation. The freedom she achieves at the end of the film is very different from her expectations set out at the beginning. The concept of freedom is redefined throughout the narrative as the protagonist goes through a process of maturation. The surface plot portrays the protagonist resisting her socially constructed role as daughter, wife or mother while the submerged plot charts her awakening to the limitations which she imposes on herself. Her subconscious is articulated through a discourse of dreams, resulting in a disruption of linear time. The surface plot and submerged plot articulate the tension between Amīna's external activity and her internal desires. Only after she has questioned her experience in isolation is she able to challenge her limitations.

Amīna's journey is acted out through the binary structure of the film. This works on several levels. On an ideological level Amīna is caught between the traditional/liberal polarity. She is restricted by the traditional elements of society represented by her patriarchal uncle, submissive aunt, the women of the neighbourhood, and Aḥmad. On her journey towards freedom, however, she encounters alternative models to the limiting traditional one. The liberal discourse is represented by her friend Vicky, Vicky's family and friends, her father, and Abbās. The binary structure consistently reveals itself in the progression of the action and the network of relationships that make up its plot. The binary

opposition of several pairs of characters reveal the themes of the film.

The first pair of characters are Amīna and Vicky. At the beginning of the film Vicky symbolises freedom for Amīna and everything she associates with it. Amīna lives in a middle-class suburb while Vicky lives in the Jewish area of Cairo, the Zāhir quarter. For Amīna, Vicky represents the exotic and the forbidden: Vicky works while Amīna is still at school; Vicky speaks French while Amīna aspires to speak another language; Vicky wears her hair long, and dresses in the latest fashions while Amīna appears less sophisticated in her school uniform and flat shoes. The character of Vicky is clearly constructed as a contrast to Amīna. The first time we see Vicky she is at home with a male friend and Amīna is shocked by this irregularity. Vicky explains that her mother would rather she bring her friends home than walk with them in the street. Amīna wishes she were like Vicky: 'This is what I have been dreaming of, to do what I like, to wear what I like, to go out and stay out late and return whenever I feel like it.' There is no evidence of a father in Vicky's life and this absence could explain her lack of conformity. With no domineering patriarch, Vicky and her mother have been able to create their own space defined by their own boundaries. The alternative model offered by Vicky serves to emphasise the conflict between the confinement Amīna experiences and the freedom she craves.

The second pair of characters are 'Alī and Abbās. We are introduced to 'Alī in the first scene. He is playing the violin in his room. Already agitated by Amīna's unacceptable behaviour on the balcony, his father confiscates the instrument. 'Alī, despite being male, is dominated to the same extent as Amīna in the patriarchal household. In contrast, Abbās is a young man who is prepared to confront authority at any cost. He is a writer who represents the liberal ideology of the period and we are introduced to him discussing (with his friends) the possibility of

demonstrating against the colonialists and those who support them in the government. This short scene serves several purposes: it sets the story in 1946, before the revolution; establishes Abbās as the male protagonist, intimating a possible romance; and the juxtaposition with the previous scene of Amīna and ‘Alī’s light hearted antics introduces a serious note to the narrative. Having failed as a student and as a musician ‘Alī then fails in his suicide attempt. The nature of limitations is usually gender specific. The onset of puberty and the consequent awakening to the limitations of the female body brings awareness of limitations of voice and space. This necessarily creates a different experience in the social world between young women and their male counterpart. Women are stereotyped as emotional objects and men as active subjects but this is not so in the case of ‘Alī. Ābū Sayf inverts the gender stereotype and we see that it is not only women who succumb to patriarchal domination; ‘Alī also has no voice in the patriarchal household. The stereotype of passive female / active male is reversed. Following ‘Alī’s suicide attempt Abbās is reintroduced into the narrative and we see clearly the use of doubling once again. Just as Amīna is the opposite of Vicky, ‘Alī is the antithesis of Abbās. Now a successful political journalist and publisher, he is persistent in his continued confrontation of authority. Those who give in, such as ‘Alī, are destroyed. Abbās is sent to prison for his opposition to the government but achieves victory when it is overthrown.

The narrative of *I Am Free* is centred on the conflict of traditional and liberal ideology. This is not necessarily a conflict between the old generation and the young, as one might assume. The binary structure of the narrative is also evident in the characters of the older generation. Amīna’s aunt and her friends symbolise a traditional and conservative ideology, while Vicky’s mother is representative of a more liberal ideology. Amīna’s aunt is dominated by her husband and does not

question her position within the patriarchal structure. On several occasions when she reprimands Amīna for her unacceptable behaviour she tells Amīna she is only hard on her for her own good, not wanting Amīna to ruin her reputation. In reality she disciplines her niece because she is concerned about her own reputation amongst the other women of the community (who we know are prone to gossip). In contrast, Vicky's mother is able to create her own environment. With no imperious patriarch she is able to define her own boundaries for her children's behaviour. She is independent of the conservative society around her.

The second pair of characters within the older generation are Amīna's uncle and her father. There is no meaningful communication between Amīna and her uncle. Social traditions and male authority oppress her within the patriarchal household. Amīna's journey involves the dismantling of rigid boundaries and by implication a dismantling of the male/female polarity. This is partly achieved through the articulation of space. Thus we see Amīna moving from the restricted space of the patriarchal home, having rejected Aḥmad's proposal of marriage, to autonomy within her father's house where the discourse of traditional values no longer dominates. When the protagonist rids herself of one set of limitations she encounters another; a discourse of confinement still dominates at this point (through her work) but it is not her father who denies her subjectivity or suppresses her voice.

### *The Open Door*

#### Synopsis

The opening shots of the film depict the demonstrations of 1946. While young men demonstrate in the streets, groups of schoolgirls, confined within the school grounds, listen to their headmistress voicing the opinion that women should stay at home. Laylā, one of the students, (played by Fātin Ḥamāma) demands that the school gates are opened

and that the girls are allowed to participate in the demonstrations. Laylā's cousin, Jamīla, informs Laylā's parents of her participation in the demonstrations and when Laylā returns home she is punished by her father for her 'scandalous' behaviour. 'Iṣām, Jamīla's brother, tries to comfort her, revealing more than platonic affection.

Jamīla agrees to marry an old, but wealthy man. Maḥmūd, Laylā's brother, joins the liberation army despite the protestations of his conservative parents while 'Iṣām remains at home. The evening of Jamīla's engagement party is crosscut with images of the young men fighting on the borders of the Canal Zone. At the party, 'Iṣām jealously views Laylā from across the room as she is approached by another young man. Later, when Laylā and 'Iṣām are alone, he tries to attack her. Realising his mistake 'Iṣām attempts to kiss Laylā but she escapes from his clutches.

Laylā and 'Iṣām are reconciled. Maḥmūd is injured and returns home. Laylā is introduced to his friend and comrade Ḥusayn. 'Iṣām visits Maḥmūd and Jamīla informs Laylā that Sayyida, the servant, is 'Iṣām's 'girlfriend'. Devastated, Laylā runs out of the flat but within moments there is shouting from below and they all run up to the roof of the building to see the city in flames. 'Iṣām joins Laylā but she pushes him away.

Maḥmūd and Ḥusayn are arrested and imprisoned but six months later, when the revolution successfully overthrows the government, they are released. Ḥusayn tries to tell Laylā of his feelings for her and to make her reciprocate his love but his attempts are in vain. He departs for Germany to complete his studies, leaving their relationship in the hands of fate.

Laylā attends university but her freedom is limited by the constant judging of those around her: the other students and arrogant Professor Ramzī. Shamed by the situation and encouraged by her friend 'Adila,

who insists that receiving Ḥusayn's letters is subjecting her to gossip that will ruin her reputation, Laylā ends her correspondence with him.

Political events take a turn: in 1956 the United States and Great Britain refuse to sponsor the High Dam project and in response Nasser declares the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Simultaneously, Professor Ramzī visits Laylā's father with an offer of marriage and Laylā complies with her parents wishes. At their engagement party Ramzī lusts after Jamīla. As Laylā enters one of the bedrooms she interrupts Jamīla with another man. Jamīla talks of her unhappy marriage and Laylā realises that by agreeing to marry Ramzī she has accepted the same fate. Maḥmūd announces his engagement to Sanā' and, despite his parents protestations that she is not a suitable wife, they leave together for Port Said.

Ḥusayn returns to Cairo, questions Laylā as to why she has accepted to marry someone she does not love and informs her that he will travel to Port Said the next day. He asks her to join him. Disappointed by her own lack of courage she asks him to leave.

The next day Laylā, her parents and Ramzī are at the train station having decided to take refuge from the fighting in Fayyum. An announcement is made informing passengers of the delay of all trains because of the priority given to trains to and from Port Said. The director cuts between Laylā in the waiting room and Ḥusayn boarding a train. To Ramzī's astonishment Laylā gives him her engagement ring. She walks through the crowds and along the platform, ignoring the protests of her father and then her mother. As the train begins to pull away Ḥusayn calls to her. She smiles and dozens of hands reach out to help her onto the train where she is united with Ḥusayn.

### Structure

The first two scenes of the film introduce the protagonist, the

setting, the primary state of affairs and the basic dramatic conflicts of the narrative: the freedom of men versus the confinement of women, and authoritarian patriarch versus the rest of the family. Laylā is moving from adolescence to adulthood at a time of political upheaval. This is her story and the narrative, like the narrative of *I Am Free*, is structured in the form of a journey. For Laylā, the path to maturity is an ongoing battle between the confinement of her family and expectations of society, and her personal internal desires and growing awareness of the political situation of the country. She spends much of her time vacillating from one ideology (traditional) to the other (liberal), playing out her socially constructed role as daughter but simultaneously awakening to the limitations this role imposes on her. Laylā spends much time in isolation with her own thoughts and, like Amīna, it is only after she questions her experience that she is able to challenge her limitations. The multiple layers of different discourses make for a complex structure.

The themes of the film are revealed through the binary oppositions of pairs of characters. The first pair are Laylā and her cousin Jamīla. Barakāt cuts from Laylā complaining to her brother about the unfairness of her situation, not being allowed to take part in the demonstrations, to her cousin Jamīla looking at her new engagement ring. The juxtaposition highlights the difference between Laylā and her superficial cousin who has agreed to marry an old, loathsome (but wealthy) man.

When Laylā attends a fitting for her engagement dress, Jamīla comments that the dress reminds her of her own dress, except that this one is closed (Ramzī's conservative taste) and hers was more open. The screen splits, the image is evoked in Laylā's mind, and we are reminded of Jamīla standing on the roof in her engagement dress with clouds of thick smoke from the city burning in the background surrounding her like a frame. Laylā comes to realise that she has unwittingly evolved

into the counterpart of her cousin whose loveless marriage is a complete sham. The suggestion that Laylā's fate will be identical to Jamīla's is enhanced by the fact that Jamīla will host Laylā's engagement party and has planned the whole event, down to the last detail, to be identical to her own. Ramzī's marriage proposal to Laylā juxtaposed with Jamīla's plea for a divorce is the final sign. Her decision not to marry Ramzī at the end of the film, however, signals her exclusion from this superficial world.

Just as Laylā is the opposite of Jamīla, Maḥmūd is the antithesis of 'Iṣām. Maḥmūd joins the liberation army despite the protestations of his conservative parents while 'Iṣām remains at home as a result of the feigned illness of his mother, who does not want him to enlist. Previously, having opened her heart to 'Iṣām, Laylā now closes the door to him the night Maḥmūd leaves, disappointed by 'Iṣām's lack of action.<sup>19</sup>

The film contrasts the evening of Jamīla's engagement party and the young men fighting on the borders of the Suez Canal. The jubilant shaking of the tambourine accompanying the voluptuous dancer at the party is filmed in close-up and followed by a shot of explosive gunfire in the dark of the battlefield. While Maḥmūd and his comrades are fighting for their lives and their country 'Iṣām's fake courage is symbolised in his jealous attack of Laylā. As she escapes from his clutches, Sayyida, the servant, appears in the doorway. As the music of the party builds to a crescendo the editing speeds up, cutting from 'Iṣām and Sayyida to the beating drums, back to 'Iṣām and Sayyida, the belly dancer and finally to Maḥmūd being injured in Suez. The juxtaposition of the two conflicting scenes contrasts the shallowness of the party with the seriousness of the cause the men are fighting for.<sup>20</sup> 'Iṣām's jealous

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<sup>19</sup> Coincidentally the actor Ḥasan Yūsuf who plays the part of 'Iṣām also plays the part of 'Alī in *I Am Free*.

<sup>20</sup> Helmy, op. cit., 183

preoccupation with Laylā and his later violation of Sayyida contrast with the men fighting amidst real danger. Struggling with his inner desire for Laylā, ‘Iṣām sees nothing wrong with his infringement of the servant. There are two types of women: those who spark desire, and mothers, wives and sisters. Sayyida, having transgressed the rules, placing herself in a position of availability for ‘Iṣām, no longer deserves further consideration. During ‘Iṣām’s first confrontation with Laylā at the party, Sayyida although watching them from a distance, is physically placed between them and later she will be the cause of the emotional rift between Laylā and ‘Iṣām. The double standard is reiterated later in the plot when Ramzī reveals himself to be a hypocrite of the highest order suggesting Maḥmud continue his relationship with Sanā’ without commitment (his parents do not accept her as a suitable wife for their son).

Ḥusayn, Maḥmūd’s friend and comrade, and Professor Ramzī are the third pair of characters in the film. Their differences are revealed in their treatment of Laylā. While Ramzī will attempt to suffocate Laylā in a stifling marriage, Ḥusayn will become her mentor. The epitome of male chauvinism, Ramzī, before asking for Laylā’s hand in marriage, attempts to manipulate and shape her into the way he thinks a woman should behave. He requests she remove the lipstick she is wearing, echoing the scene in *I Am Free* in which Aḥmad makes the same request of Amīna. Amīna is not compliant but to Ramzī’s pleasure Laylā is. Simultaneously, in the letters he writes to her from Germany, Ḥusayn offers Laylā autonomy and mutual support within a loving relationship. Laylā complies with Ramzī, however, and he is content with his choice of bride. Ḥusayn offers an alternative model of relationship to the traditional arranged form (also represented by Maḥmūd and his girlfriend Sanā’) but the forces of tradition heavily outweigh this element until the end of the film.

The 'open door' of the title works on two different levels: visual and symbolic. The literal opening and closing of doors and windows are a recurring motif throughout the film corresponding to the changing emotions of the protagonist. In the opening scene Laylā encourages the opening of the school gates, she opens the window allowing 'Iṣām into her heart and she opens the lift door to Ḥusayn on their first meeting. Just as easily, however, she closes the door and retreats into her room, standing alone at a distance from everyone else in the house: after being beaten by her father, disappointed by 'Iṣām's betrayal, and when she ends her relationship with Ḥusayn. The open door is also used visually as a revelatory device: opening the wardrobe door reveals 'Iṣām in the mirror, opening the door to 'Iṣām's bedroom reveals Sayyida inside, and Laylā's father opens the study door to reveal Ramzī and his proposal of marriage. Laylā realises that to reach womanhood is to enter a prison where the confines of her life are clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stand her father (and her mother) and Ramzī. The opening of the door becomes symbolic of her struggle between her natural tendency to express her feelings spontaneously and her desire to conform to her family's wishes. Ḥusayn encourages her 'to open the door wide to life.' The door has been open the whole time but she has to realise that for herself.

### **The Personal, The Social and The Political**

The narratives of *I Am Free* and *The Open Door* are structured around the same themes: the personal journey to freedom, the individual's interaction and conflict with society, and the political freedom of Egypt. It is difficult to distinguish where one ends and another begins. In fact, the three major themes are woven together to form the plot of both films. Amīna's fight for her liberty begins as a rejection of the conventional society she is part of. However, her

eventual understanding of personal freedom is marked by the political activity preceding the revolution. Laylā's journey is initiated by the same political activity but also develops in the years immediately following the revolution. A decade of struggle, beginning with the demonstrations of 1946 and ending with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, was also a decade of youth activism and optimism about the future of a newly independent country. Most parties or movements had student or youth sections and students at school and university played an active role in politics. Both films unify the cause of women with the cause of the nation.

The first theme is the individual's journey to freedom. Amīna rebels against the stifling code of conduct upheld in the home of her aunt and uncle and the narrative progresses as she gradually realises her goal. The structure of *I Am Free* is linear and it is Amīna's actions that forward the narrative as she becomes more socially and politically aware. Laylā, on the other hand, is unable to break free from patriarchal domination beyond occasional moments of respite. She does not control the narrative progression of the film in the way that Amīna does. She has no control of the social and political events that happen around her and resolves herself to her fate. Narrative resolution comes only when she is finally able to make a decision for herself. In contrast to the linear narrative that Amīna follows, this narrative is circular. Laylā's political awareness is brought to our attention from the opening shots of the film. After her father disciplines her for her part in the demonstration she is no longer able to participate directly in the liberal discourse. The political happenings are ever present throughout the film but Laylā experiences them through the letters of Maḥmūd and Ḥusayn. The film ends once she has gone full circle and is able to articulate her political convictions once again, by leaving Cairo for Port Said.

The title *I Am Free* is a statement; it is a declaration without

apology. Amīna's enthusiastic demand for her personal freedom contrasts sharply with the narrow vision adopted by the patriarchal society represented in her male-dominated family home. Laylā, in comparison, is more timid. Her defiant attitude shown at the beginning of the film has been thwarted by the second scene. It seems that it takes the rest of the film for her to recover from her father's punishment, until she finds some resolution to the limitations she has encountered. The door is open for Laylā, however, the narrative can only be resolved when she finally realises that for herself.

From the opening of *I Am Free* Amīna is defiant in her goal: to be free. This freedom, however, is not mediated through her own discourse. Amīna is rarely framed alone. She is either positioned between two authoritative figures (visual representation of the dominant patriarchal ideology) or shares the frame with characters representative of a more liberal ideology (visual clarification of her struggling to find her own discourse). Firstly Amīna's discourse is mediated through Vicky. Both girls have the same fractured home life. Both have absent fathers but where Vicky is able to subvert the patriarchal order, with the support of her mother, Amīna is dominated by another patriarchal figure, her uncle. She repeats the discourse of Vicky but soon realises it is not what she really wants. Although she craves the freedom that her friend possesses she finds herself unable to enjoy Vicky's liberal environment. She is uncomfortable dancing with Zaki, Vicky's brother, and is offended by the over familiarity of Vicky's male friends.

Amīna has to live through her own experiences - the gossip of the neighbours, a job with a large company, and imprisonment - before she can see a clear meaning to what she is rebelling against and fighting for. On several occasions Abbās attempts to show Amīna the true meaning of freedom and liberty. He offers her a possible new discourse but she is not ready to accept it yet. First she must follow her own path to

maturity. These kernels not only have a sense of connection but also logic of hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> With each kernel Amīna takes a significant step towards understanding the true meaning of freedom. The final and most important kernel, her imprisonment, brings narrative closure for the major plot lines. Amīna finally achieves her goal, she and Abbās marry, giving formal recognition to their relationship, and she is reconciled with her uncle.

Laylā is much more unsure of her path. The defiance of the opening scene of *The Open Door* is reduced to subservience when Laylā's father confronts her. She is frustrated by her own lack of action but is unable to challenge the patriarchal order. She reluctantly accepts the life her parents prescribe for her, including an arranged marriage. The static monologous discourse of Professor Ramzī, which allows no debate or discussion, dominates and the protagonist's desires are suppressed. Dinah Manisty suggests that due to this, 'Laylā develops a false consciousness in which she internalises the discourse of others: firstly 'Iṣām, then Professor Ramzī, both of whom appear in the guise of what she wants.'<sup>22</sup> Despite her love for 'Iṣām she adamantly resists his sexual advances. In a fit of jealousy he follows her into a room and attacks her screaming, 'You are mine!' She cries in reply, 'I am no-one's possession, I am a free person!', echoing the protestations of Amīna in *I Am Free*. The words become a symbol for Laylā as she fights all forms of sexual, social and political repression. By asserting this basic right she overcomes her first obstacle – male sexual dominance. Disillusioned with love and romance following 'Iṣām's betrayal she is able to consider a life of 'ease and security' (a reference to Jamīla's choice of marriage) as a possible option for herself. She accepts to marry Ramzī

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<sup>21</sup> In *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1978), Seymour Chatman distinguishes between kernels (major events which advance the plot by raising and answering questions) and satellites (minor events which are crucial but fill-in, elaborate or complete the kernel).

<sup>22</sup> Dinah Manisty, 'Changing Limitations: A Study of the Women's Novel in Egypt 1960-1991', PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (1993), 89

relinquishing any thoughts of making her own life choices. His imposing attempts to 'improve' her personality are in fact the disguised efforts of an insensitive man to manipulate and shape her according to his own theories. On the evening of their engagement she suddenly realises that she is repeating the discourse of her cousin. From this point on she questions her motivations and realises that she too has a choice and is able to articulate her own discourse. The final and most important kernel, Laylā's decision to go with Ḥusayn to Port Said, brings the narrative to a conclusion. We have enough information to assume that Laylā and Ḥusayn will continue to fight for the nationalist cause together.

Both protagonists question their actions in moments of solitude: Amīna through a discourse of dreams and Laylā when she literally retreats behind the closed door of her room. Both young women, however, must interact with society before they find a resolution.

In the first of four dream sequences, Amīna appears as a tiny figure in a vast black space, lit by one ray of light. A voice (her inner conscience) asks her if the freedom to miss school and lie to her uncle and aunt is really the freedom she is searching for. Amīna is adamant that her choice is the right one. Each dream sequence is structured visually in the same way as the first. Each sequence allows Amīna to redefine her understanding of the word freedom. In the second a voice questions what she will do with her freedom now that she has become responsible for it. In this new context Amīna is able to act independently and is perceived to have achieved some accommodation with the social world. Having triumphed over traditions of her family, and those of Abbāsiyya, she begins to feel a responsibility for herself and having thought she had achieved her goal she now has to redefine it. She decides she must study first in order to work; once she gets a job she will have truly gained her freedom. The third sequence once again

questions Amīna's stubborn determination to achieve what she believes is her freedom, at any cost. Her meetings with Aḥmad reconfirm that a husband will only impede her freedom. She is now convinced that a university education will free her from the restrictions of a husband.

To fulfil her dream of complete freedom, Amīna gets a job that will give her economic independence from her father and uncle, and most importantly from a husband. She reacquaints herself with Abbās whose comments make her question her achievements once more. It is true she is free from Abbāsiyya, from traditions and from marriage but Abbās tells her she lacks freedom itself. In the fourth and final dream her conscience tells her, 'It's true that you got your freedom but you don't know how to use it as you should. You must use it for a purpose. Freedom is a means not an end.' It is only in these moments of isolation that Amīna is able to articulate the realisation of her true desire.

With time Amīna begins to understand and she joins Abbās in his political fight. Revolting against tradition has led to imprisonment of a different kind but one that she is able to accept. For this protagonist real experience takes place in isolation, in conditions of mental and physical enclosure. Her spatial movement has resulted in confinement rather than expansion. When her father and uncle visit her in prison she tells them, 'I'll put up with this period of imprisonment because it is the only evidence that I got my freedom . . . Only now could I say that I am free.' She is no longer trapped in the middle of conflicting thoughts or between two people and for the first time she is positioned in the frame sitting to one side of her father and uncle. The protagonist has achieved her goal and narrative resolution is realised.

Laylā's moments of isolation are in the sanctuary of her room. After her father's chastisement at the beginning of the film Laylā retreats behind the closed door of her room. From this point on, at each consecutive moment of emotional drama, Laylā repeats this action.

Following 'Iṣām's betrayal with Sayyida he tries to make contact with Laylā but she chooses to keep her door closed to him. When Maḥmūd and Ḥusayn are arrested and sent to prison Laylā retreats behind her door again. Her room becomes a prison but simultaneously a place of safety. When Ḥusayn departs for Germany he leaves their future in the hands of fate. He will eventually become Laylā's mentor, as Abbās became Amīna's, but Laylā is not ready to accept that yet. As he leaves, she closes the door without looking back. Is she afraid of her feelings for Ḥusayn, is she disillusioned with love after her experience with 'Iṣām, or, is she simply conditioned to accept her role that involves relinquishing any thoughts of making her own life choices? Laylā moves from the enclosed space of her room to the partial autonomy of university but her freedom is limited by the constant judging of those around her. As Laylā dictates a letter to 'Adila ending her correspondence with Ḥusayn, she closes the shutters of the window of her room, leaving the screen in complete darkness. Once again she has closed the door.

Social limitations impinge on Laylā and she is forced to suppress her desires beneath a muted form of discourse. It is not until the final scene at the train station that she is finally able to break free from all restrictions. An announcement is made informing passengers of the delay of all trains because of the priority given to trains to and from Port Said. Helmy suggests 'this seems to expose Ramzi her family and above all (Laila) herself. She suddenly sees them all in a new light, as selfish hypocritical human beings.'<sup>23</sup> Finally, no longer trapped by the discourse of traditional values, Laylā can move from the closed space of her room to freedom in Port Said.

The second theme is the female protagonists' conflict with society. In her study of fate reflected in modern Arabic literature Dayla Cohen-

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<sup>23</sup> Helmy, *op. cit.*, 187

Mor suggests that, 'fate in the Arab world assumes the role of gender: to be born a girl is to be destined for a harsh life; to be born a boy is to be destined for a more privileged life.'<sup>24</sup> The differential treatment of women is manifested in many areas in their private lives (marriage laws, divorce, and inheritance) and in their public lives (work opportunities). The majority of women are largely relegated to a dependent social and economic position. Women's domain is the home and their traditional roles are those of wife and mother. The headmistress in *The Open Door* voices the opinion the film seeks to undermine: 'A woman's sole occupation is motherhood; her proper place the home. Struggle and war are the domains of men only!' The strict allocation of space prevents many women from active participation in public life and protects men from the temptation (*fitna*) of women.

Amīna, standing on the balcony in the opening shots of *I Am Free*, although confined within the boundaries of the home, has deliberately positioned herself to attract attention. The camera does little to discourage this initial negative view of the protagonist. The film opens with a close-up shot of Amīna; the camera lingers on her legs and slowly tilts up to reveal the rest of her body before we see her face. This voyeuristic shot, casts Amīna as the 'bad girl' introducing her to the audience as a sexual object. She is standing on the balcony looking down onto the street below. A small group of men look up towards her. She is quite aware that she is drawing attention to herself. Her aunt is furious to see her so obviously attracting unwanted male attention and when Amīna's uncle learns of her behaviour he immediately blames his wife for allowing such conduct. His concern is Amīna's reputation, which is actually his reputation.

The initial shots of Laylā in *The Open Door*, encouraging her

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<sup>24</sup> Dayla Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate: The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 131

fellow pupils to fight for nationalism, prominent amongst the crowds of demonstrators, reveal an independent mind. However, her father beats any vibrancy that she did have at the beginning of the film out of her when he reprimands her for attending the demonstrations. He is unable to consider any kind of action that goes beyond the traditional accepted role for girls. He too, like Amīna's uncle, is first and foremost concerned about his reputation, which is reliant upon the behaviour of his daughter. The ignorant customs that Amīna's uncle and Laylā's father uphold hinder their ability to consider any kind of action that resists the traditional, accepted role for girls.

The attitude of the two patriarchs is understood in the context of female sexuality, which is surrounded by strict taboos designed to discourage girls from sexual contact before marriage. 'The most powerful deterrent is the value attached to virginity. In traditional Arab society, virginity . . . represents not only the honour of the girl but also that of her family.'<sup>25</sup> The behaviour of both young women is deemed inappropriate from the start.

The alternative model offered by Vicky serves to emphasize the conflict between the confinement Amīna experiences and the freedom she craves. Amīna joins Vicky and her friends at a party and samples the freedom she has been dreaming about for so long but must suffer the consequences when she returns home. Her uncle refuses to allow her into the house. Trapped within the domestic boundaries, her uncle and the discourse of his traditional values still dominate at this point in the film. To impede Amīna's freedom further is the only foreseeable way forward. The next day Amīna's movements are restricted to socialising with her aunt and a group of older women. Fatima Mernissi addresses this issue with particular reference to women in the Middle East: to define and limit women's space is a means of control over their sexual propriety

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen-Mor, *op. cit.*, 133

which preserves male sexual honour and the interests of the patriarchal social order at the same time.<sup>26</sup> The women encourage Amīna to dance for them and they tie a scarf about her hips. This *baladi* dancing in front of other women in private is totally acceptable and stands in stark contrast to the western style dancing that Vicky and her friends enjoyed at the party which relies on contact between men and women.

Having reached adolescence, both Amīna and Laylā discover that they are now subject to a set of elaborate rules affecting almost every aspect of their lives: what they may or may not say, where they are allowed to go and with whom, what they are allowed to wear, and what is and what is not deemed polite behaviour. The two protagonists are dynamic individuals at odds with a static society, but the two women react in different ways on their personal journeys to maturity. Where Amīna plunges full steam ahead, without considering the consequences, Laylā plays out her socially constructed role as daughter, submerging her internal desires.

The conflict both protagonists encounter is not just prescribed by men but is also enforced by the women of the older generation: mothers, aunts and neighbours. Helmy suggests, 'the dilemma of Arab women emerges as a condition not only imposed by a discriminative society but in many cases by women upon themselves.'<sup>27</sup> Amīna's aunt complains of the scandal that Amīna brings to the family by standing on the balcony. She gives the appearance of being in control, disciplining her niece, but when they enter the apartment she is immediately subservient to her husband; she kneels at his feet and cleans his shoes. Amīna looks at them; this is not the life she wants for herself. Amīna's uncle constantly reproaches his wife for allowing Amīna to behave in such a way and in return the aunt berates Amīna for the trouble she causes. There is no

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<sup>26</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, revised edition (London, Al Saqi Books, 1985)

<sup>27</sup> Helmy, op. cit., 199

female solidarity and no understanding of Amīna's wishes to break free from the traditional mould. Laylā's mother has no role except to obey her husband. She is powerless to stop his attacks on her daughter and Laylā's declaration of independence at the end of the film is with no thanks to her mother. It becomes evident that in some situations it is the compliant acceptance and passivity of women that prolongs their entrapment in specific social roles. Both films expose the aunt/mother's relegation to silence and marginality in a system dominated by the uncle/father. A constant presence urging obedience, it is the aunt and mother's submissive behaviour that Amīna and Laylā adamantly resist in their proclamation of independence.

The theme of marriage as an empowering strategy for women is explored through the mothers; their status is often derived through achieving good marriages for their children. Amīna's aunt is allowed the independence of finding a suitable husband for her niece and takes great pride in having found who she considers to be a suitable match. While Laylā's mother is not actively involved in the choice of husband for her daughter, she is satisfied with what she considers to be a very acceptable alliance. Neither the aunt nor the mother can understand the reluctant attitude of Amīna and Laylā to accept the proposals of Aḥmad and Ramzī, respectively, in a society in which material possessions and status rank far higher than authentic feeling. The debate on love and marriage is one example of the dichotomy between the two generations. At Jamīla's engagement party Laylā comments that it was clear for their mothers but that women of their generation are confused. Songs talk of love and books talk of freedom but in reality if a girl believes these things she is considered ill bred. The older women understand the tenacious position of the younger generation and carefully guard them until they can be married off to a suitably prosperous husband. Amīna's aunt can only worry about the shame Amīna brings to the family and the

resulting fear of not finding a suitable husband. Once married the women's situation does not improve. When Jamīla talks of the possibility of divorce her mother refuses to even consider such a scandal. Honour and shame go hand in hand and both are to be heavily protected. By revealing the perseverance of the female protagonists who are faced with societal pressure, the films urge a radical revision of the ideology that continues to inflict injustice and restriction on the lives of women.

The theme of the individual in conflict with society runs parallel with Egypt's political struggle for independence. The third theme, Egypt's fight for independence from foreign control, is linked symbolically to the heroines' quest for freedom from oppression. The opening shots of *The Open Door* depict the demonstrations of 1946, establishing immediately the instability of the period. Barakāt adds a realistic quality by inserting documentary footage showing the real life demonstrations that spread throughout Egypt at the time, with a deep, authoritative voice-over commenting on the events. Laylā gets her first taste of uninhibited self-expression and she and her friends join the crowds of demonstrators. The bright daylight of the demonstration and Laylā's euphoric state are juxtaposed with the silence of her parents home where her cousin, Jamīla, has informed them of Laylā's participation in the demonstration. Laylā's sarcastic lamentations to her brother Maḥmūd, 'I was wrong to express my feelings like a human being. I forgot that I am not a human being. I am only a girl,' express the unfairness of her situation. Laylā retreats behind the closed door of her room. Helmy suggests that the:

. . . alternation between the shots of collective whole-hearted action on the streets and the suffocating atmosphere of her home with the dreadful father awaiting her comeback strikes home. It is the former liberated vision that the novel (and film) urges for women while it is the home, representing patriarchy and unlimited male control that is being registered

as an ideological context.<sup>28</sup>

Laylā's personal journey to emancipation is inextricably linked to the progression of Egypt's liberation. The kernels of her personal life coincide with important political events. Devastated by the discovery that her cousin, 'Iṣām, who professes to love her, is having an affair with a servant, Laylā is (rather melodramatically) driven to the verge of suicide. As she contemplates taking her own life the city is burning; 'disaster hits the country at the same time that Laylā's emotions are shattered.'<sup>29</sup> Laylā's discovery of 'Iṣām's betrayal coincides with the Great Fire of Cairo. Devastated, Laylā runs out of the flat and considers throwing herself down the stairwell but within moments there is shouting from below and they all run up to the roof to see the city in flames. We see the disillusioned protagonist and the collapse of the country in one shot. The political and historical past of the country, Laylā's emotional present and her future (political and emotional with Ḥusayn) all meet at this point. As they watch the fire from the rooftop it is Ḥusayn who reassures her that, 'This is not the end. We will make the end ourselves. You, I and Maḥmūd, and all the people who love Egypt.'

This is not Laylā's last disturbing experience of the deceit of men. The withdrawal of the United States and the Great Britain from sponsoring the Aswan High Dam coincides with the marriage proposal of Professor Ramzī. The backdrop of political events is presented to us by newspaper headlines and the awe-inspiring voice of Nasser, followed by the roar of approval from the crowds. Laylā's enthusiasm for such events is thwarted by Ramzī's proposal. In response to the withdrawal of funds, Nasser declares the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Laylā, however, does not have the courage to liberate herself from the domineering Professor. He is only interested in Laylā because she is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 184

compliant and quiet. Congratulated by her father and smothered in kisses by her excited mother, Laylā is informed of Ramzī's intentions. She asks in astonishment why no-one has asked her opinion on the matter but her question is ignored. She finds herself once again oppressed by social traditions and male authority. Her domineering fiancé leaves no room for debate or discussion and once again we find Laylā without a voice.

When Maḥmūd volunteers for the nationalist cause his act takes on a symbolic significance for Laylā. Her thwarted desire to participate in national events focuses on her spatial seclusion from the public sphere. This highlights the different options available to male and female characters. Gender restrictions limit Laylā's activity and prompt a new level of discourse. It is through the letters of firstly Maḥmūd and then Ḥusayn that Laylā learns of the new world they are experiencing. They become intermediaries between two worlds and Laylā fluctuates between the traditional and liberal discourse. Ḥusayn's letters, sent to her at university, become a metaphor for a possible new discourse. Laylā comes to recognize the essential ties linking personal and national identities: the goal of freeing Egypt from foreign powers is similar to her determination to free herself from backward social customs.

Personal liberation for Laylā coincides with the height of the Suez crisis after Ḥusayn informs her in one of his letters, 'You've become a symbol of all that I love in the homeland. When I think of Egypt I think of you.' Laylā wanders along the platform at the train station; the sight of the injured arriving from Port Said injects sudden life into her. Ramzī appears and reproaches her for disappearing. His voice is silenced as her thoughts are spoken aloud for the first time in the film. Previously he had the power to interrupt the words of Ḥusayn but at this point it is Laylā's voice that obscures Ramzī's words: 'The whole world is nothing but chains, appearances and fear. I won't build my life on fear. I see you

all clearly now, as you really are. Life to you is a door closed on your selfishness. Life to me is a door which opens on to hope and the future.' For the first time she is provided with the courage to challenge the patriarchal opposition of her father and Ramzī.

Through the narrative structure of *The Open Door* Barakāt suggests an intimate and inseparable relation between personal liberation and the political freedom of self-determination. In *I Am Free*, the political struggle of the nation is not present until the final quarter of the film. From this point on, however, it dominates the narrative as Amīna becomes more involved in Abbās's life. Her devotion to nationalism is rooted in her devotion to Abbās. Although not consistently politically motivated, Amīna turns to nationalism and the affirmation of Egypt's independence as an alternative ideology which enables her to see herself not as an isolated individual pitting her strength against a whole class but as a member learning to shape its own destiny.

Rather than mediating the social through the political, both films subject one to the other. Neither of the protagonists would have found freedom from a restrictive society if they had not had the cause of the country to fight for. And the political fight would not have been as strong if women such as Amīna and Laylā had not supported it. Badran notes that by the second half of the 1940s there were three women's organisations with the shared goal of political rights for women. They were unable to unify in a struggle for their own political rights but were able to form a broad coalition in nationalist struggles against colonialism.<sup>30</sup> For many women, it was often necessary to defer liberation of oneself and one's gender in favour of liberating the country. However, Amīna and Laylā find personal fulfilment through political

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<sup>30</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995), 215

commitment.

A new kind of novel with female protagonists had emerged in Egypt. 'Abd al-Quddūs's romantic novels with feisty heroines were the precursors for the heroines developed by female authors in the 1960s. Al-Zayyāt's *The Open Door* is generally accepted as the landmark of women's writing in Egypt, forcing her protagonist to find some resolution to the limitations encountered. To confront issues of personal freedom and sexuality and to do so as a woman writing about female experience was shocking. A later generation of women remembers reading or hearing about *The Open Door*. In a reminiscence offered to a conference on al-Zayyāt in 1996, Hala Badri remarked:

In my childhood, the name Latifa al-Zayyat echoed around me as one of the icons of national liberation. The great writer remained in my imagination merely a name, until the film version of *The Open Door* came out. Our home witnessed many conversations about the boldness of its themes. The adults re-read the novel . . . and began to discuss it. What arrested them was not the point that choosing the way one lives privately is inseparable from public commitment, but rather the courageous conclusions that emerge through the dialogues. For conversations between the heroine and her female cousin hint that a woman's body becomes parched when her relationship with a man is unsatisfying. This might appear obvious to us now, but at that time it was startling and provocative. The women around me were quietly thankful to this woman who had been able to express an experience that they could not articulate out loud though it was common among them.<sup>31</sup>

The dominance of the colloquial language used by al-Zayyāt enhances her portrayal of the mundane, of the everyday as a political arena, more specifically of the interrelationships between the gendering of expectations and behaviour on the one hand, and the politics of national liberation on the other. In her introduction to her translation of *The Open Door*, Booth suggests that this deployment of language can be

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in al-Zayyat, op. cit., x

seen as a feminist act, 'as basic to al-Zayyāt's production of what is unquestionably a feminist text in its assumptions, its authorial stance, as well as in its subject matter.'<sup>32</sup> The novel questions the culture's consignment to the margins of female experience and articulation and, the language that is the medium of everyday experience. Booth continues, describing al-Zayyāt's language as lively, precise, and above all else, female. Characters emerge in their choice of expression: Layla's mother betrays her allegiance to received behaviour patterns through her choice of expressions and proverbs, which her children mimic satirically; Jamīla and her mother betray their social aspirations; and adolescent girlhood is captured in the three-way conversations among Laylā, 'Adila and Sanā'.<sup>33</sup> All characterisations are captured equally well in the film. The realistic interplay of the dialogue with the themes of the film point to the fineness of the original text.

Narrative closure is often dependent on the resolution of enigmas centring on heterosexual courtship. If a woman transgresses the traditional role there seems to be a tendency to recuperate her into the male/female bond by the closures of the film. The film's resolution depends on the resolution of the particular 'woman-question' set up by its narrative: woman may thus have to be returned to her place so that order is restored to the world. In classic Hollywood cinema, this recuperation manifests itself thematically in a limited number of ways: a woman character may be restored to the family by falling in love, by getting married, or otherwise accepting a 'normative' female role.

In the novels *I Am Free* and *The Open Door*, the conventional love story plot was shunned. Amīna chooses to sacrifice her freedom to devote her life to making Abbās happy, but also rejects a traditional

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<sup>32</sup> Al-Zayyat, op. cit., xxvi-xxvii

<sup>33</sup> In the novel al-Zayyāt refers to Laylā's mother and aunt as Umm Laylā and Umm Jamīla ('Mother of Laylā' and 'Mother of Jamīla') rather than as Saniya and Samira. Booth questions whether in a society where the expected label would be to call these women after their sons (thus Umm Maḥmūd and Umm 'Iṣām), is al-Zayyāt deliberately replacing this practice with female genealogy?

marriage (she and Abbās remain partners rather than becoming husband and wife), while Laylā's liberation develops through the self rather than her relationship with Ḥusayn. She takes a teaching position in Port Said; she does not go to Port Said because of Ḥusayn. The endings have been changed in the film adaptations. Al-Zayyāt herself criticises the ending of the film:

The ending of the film suffered an alteration which undermined the general meaning, for the liberation of Laila stems from the self and through the activism developed by that self, but in the film this development is to some extent dependent on a man (Hussein) which is exactly what I tried to avoid in the novel.<sup>34</sup>

The protagonists leave home to find their own space, rejecting the dominant patriarchal discourse which denies their subjectivity and suppresses their voices and rejecting conventional marriage. The feminist debate in both novels can be seen as an attack on the traditions passed down by patriarchal authorities, and both offer an alternative for the heroines.

Both films question embedded patterns of dominant ideology and prescribed behaviour and oppose the silencing of women by opening up the feminist discourse. However, in both films, the complete happiness of the protagonists, once liberated from the conventions of society, relies on a man. Amīna realises her objectives when she devotes herself to Abbās. Laylā goes to Port Said to join the volunteers but not without Ḥusayn. The proposed arranged marriages for Amīna and Laylā would have meant continued limitation and inequality much like the marriages described by Elizabeth Cooper:

. . . one discovers that it (marriage) seldom means real companionship between the man and the woman; it never means equality; indeed it does not necessarily mean love. It is simply a universal custom, a necessity for the continuance of

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<sup>34</sup> Helmy, *op. cit.*, 186

the home, or too frequently a merely selfish or sensual relationship for the perpetuation of the family. To be married gives no new knowledge, no broader field for the use of her faculties, no sense of responsibilities for Egyptian womanhood.<sup>35</sup>

Amīna's choice to marry Abbās and Laylā's choice to re-establish her relationship with Ḥusayn exemplify the type of marriage favoured by Qāsim Amīn. In *The Liberation of Women* Amīn advocated marriage based on harmony between the personalities, manners and minds of the two people and mutual physical attraction, suggesting that a marriage based on this type of harmony would inevitably result in a relationship of mutual respect. Both films, then, offer the female protagonist comfortable transgression rather than extreme transgression. Abbās and Ḥusayn are far from stereotypical patriarchal men but still they are men. The point here is that neither protagonist is given the opportunity to make entirely independent life choices. Was the cinema audience not ready to accept its heroines making such radically different choices as they do in the novels?

Amīna and Laylā undertake a journey towards personal liberation. By finding their own discourse, the protagonists undermine the social and political order underlying the prevalent discourse. The heroines symbolise an alternative discourse from that of their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. However, Abbās and Ḥusayn imply the end of those journeys. Amīna joins Abbās in his fight for national independence but while he is fighting for freedom from foreign control Amīna is fighting for the freedom to be able to devote herself entirely to making Abbās happy. She wanted only from life what Abbās wanted. To accomplish all this Amīna sacrificed her freedom. She lived only to be of service to him in whatever form he desired. No longer imprisoned by patriarchy she is instead imprisoned by the government. The political confinement of a

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Cooper, *The Women of Egypt* (Connecticut, Hyperion Press Inc., 1914), 212

woman suggests a radical change from the conventional happy ending but her marriage to Abbās and the assumption she will be released soon after the revolution moderate the denouement. Laylā realises the potential defeat of the invaders (national goal) and the potential of a fulfilling emotional relationship with Ḥusayn (personal goal) simultaneously.

The protagonists in *I Am Free* and *The Open Door* achieve their identity through their relationship with the greater whole. The directors place their heroines in the midst of turbulent national events, enabling them to identify with national aspirations through active participation. This begs the question: is it not possible for women to be liberated for the sake of themselves rather than for a bigger issue, in this case the nation? In an environment of increasing conservatism, in a global situation where women's rights to choose their own futures are not certain, the social and political struggles that the films present are indeed not entirely a thing of the past.

## Chapter 2

### The Rights of Personal Status

*I Want a Solution* ('Urīd Ḥalla, Sa'īd Marzūq, 1974)

*Cheap Flesh* (Laḥm Rakhīṣ, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1995)

*I Am Free* and *The Open Door* were films which negotiated women's place in society and their right to define themselves. This emancipatory interest has continued sporadically through the 1970s until the present. Produced in 1974 at the height of the debate on the personal status law, *I Want a Solution*, very appropriately, explores the devastating effect this legislation can have on women's lives. It depicted the hopeless efforts of an upper-class wife to obtain a divorce from her unjust and vengeful husband. The film is set in the late 1960s, prior to Sadat's reformation of the personal status law in 1979 and shows the pressures of family and society on the wife, the legal apparatus at the disposal of the husband and the jury's lack of sympathy for the woman.

The injustices of the law were also central to the narratives of many films made in the 1980s. In *The Sparkle of Your Eyes* (*Barīq 'Aynayk*, Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīz, 1982) it is only after the heroine has married that she finds out her husband is already married. When he is assumed dead in an aeroplane crash, she falls in love with another man and embarks on a new relationship. Four years later her husband returns; he refuses to give her a divorce. Fighting for the custody of her children, the heroine of *The Lost One* (*al-Dā'i*, 'Aṭif Sālam, 1986) finds the law, her husband and her husband's second wife against her. She is driven to desperate measures and loses everything. The heroine of *For Lack of Sufficient Proof* is driven mad by injustice. Despite the help and support of a female lawyer, the protagonist's husband refuses to acknowledge that she is his wife and his lies deprive her of their

child. As well as finding themselves in opposition to the law and the bureaucracy surrounding it, women also had to fight against traditional beliefs and customs. *Tears Without Sins* (*Damū bilā Khaṭāyā*, Ḥasan Yūsuf, 1980) depicted the subject of infertility. Fayza falls in love with her physician, Kamāl. They marry but when she cannot conceive her husband takes a second wife. The film shows that 'liberal' Kamāl is as subject to family pressure to produce an heir as any other man and so regards his infidelity as a licit act. So strong is her desire to have a child (and to keep her husband) Fayza resorts to visiting a 'spiritual' healer and she eventually conceives. Kamāl as physician also represents rational medicine in opposition to female-guided superstition and popular treatments.

The themes of these films were not new to Egyptian cinema. In *Fāṭima* made in 1946 (Aḥmad Badrakhān), the heroine, a nurse played by Umm Kulthūm, falls in love with Faṭḥi, the younger brother of a Pasha. They marry, but with an 'urfi contract.<sup>1</sup> He abandons her for another woman of his own social class and is persuaded by his brother to destroy the wedding contract. With no legal rights Fāṭima resigns herself and their unborn child to fate. When Faṭḥi discovers his unfaithful fiancé with another man he realises his mistake and is reunited with Fāṭima and their young son. Although the subject matter was the same, what was different about the films made in the 1980s was the unresolved endings, the heroine often succumbing to violence or insanity.

A decade later directors were still portraying female protagonists who found themselves in opposition to a patriarchal society and the law. In *Cheap Flesh*, produced in 1995, Īnās al-Dughaydi depicted the growing phenomenon of young peasant women being 'sold' to wealthy men from the Gulf. She investigates these so-called marriages and the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Urfi is a category of law derived from customary practice and tribal law. 'Urfi marriages are legal in Egypt (although considered by many to be *ḥarām* or sinful) but they are unregistered.

resulting problems they cause for the women involved. But unlike the female protagonists of many of the films made during the 1980s the heroine of *Cheap Flesh* has the courage and ability to transgress society's prescribed place for her.

### The Rights of Personal Status

The personal status laws and their effect on women's lives are an integral part of the narratives of *I Want a Solution* and *Cheap Flesh*, the films discussed in this chapter. It is essential, therefore, to understand the history of these often-controversial laws.<sup>2</sup> In January 2000, Egypt passed a new personal status law, Law no. 1/2000, which created a family court able to facilitate divorce cases and a family insurance system to guarantee payment of maintenance to wives and children.<sup>3</sup> The most hotly contested clause, however, involved a woman's right to invoke *khul'*, meaning that a woman may initiate divorce on any grounds, as long as she return the groom's gifts of jewellery (*shabka*) and dowry payment (*mahr*). The new law also prohibited men from divorcing their wives without immediately informing them. Finally, the law recognised '*urfi* marriages and granted women the right of divorce.<sup>4</sup> These are the most recent improvements to a law which has a long and contentious history in Egypt.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Egypt, under the leadership of Khedive Ismā'īl, underwent a rapid process of westernisation which

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<sup>2</sup> The provisions governing marriage and divorce which are derived from *shari'a* do not apply to non-Muslims, who are subject to the rules of their respective religions.

<sup>3</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, 'The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt During the 1990s', *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 5 (1), (2001)

<sup>4</sup> Previously, '*Urfi* marriages did not invest the wife with the rights she would have under a notarised marriage contract and could only be dissolved by the husband. Writing for The Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights, Nehad Abu el-Komsan states that the verdict for divorce in the '*urfi* marriage does not have an effect beyond ending the marital bond of this marriage but at least it will enable women to have a legal documented marriage if they so wish to. In 'The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt' Zuhur states that '*urfi* marriage is to date an Egyptian phenomenon. Many young Egyptians resort to '*urfi* marriages because regular marriage is beyond their financial means. If not for this alternative, young people would have to postpone marriage for many years and in the meantime are not, according to local custom and Islamic law, supposed to have sexual relations.

included the adoption of modern codes of law modelled on the French Napoleonic code. Unlike its civil law, however, Egypt's family law resisted the reforms and remained the province of traditional *shari'a*. The personal status law, concerned with the rights of women as gendered individuals, included marriage, divorce and inheritance. Debates over this law first emerged at the turn of the twentieth century when customs of female seclusion and the lack of education for women were also questioned. Law no. 24/1920 gave women some grounds for divorce by incorporating principles outside the strict *Hanafi* legal code but acceptable in the more lenient *Maliki* version. These included desertion by the husband, his incarceration, if the husband suffered from a terminal illness, failure to support his wife financially, and sexual defects such as the husband's impotence or sterility. Law no. 25/1929 offered the concept of harm (*darar*) as a reason for divorce. 'Harm' was not specifically defined but mental, physical and emotional anguish became justifications for a woman's demand for divorce. Unfortunately, however, the law left the determination of whether or not harm had occurred to male judges. Consequently, as Mervat Hatem points out in her study of personal status laws in modern Egypt:

Divorce . . . continued to be a predominantly male prerogative without any major restrictions. At the same time that it did not specify the grounds which justify the male exercise of the right to divorce, it very narrowly specified the grounds which women can use to file for divorce.<sup>5</sup>

Other attempts were made to adapt the personal status law to Egypt's development but without success. In 1967 there were protests over eleven proposed amendments to the 1929 law but the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war forced the government to delay the proposal, to the satisfaction of the religious conservatives.<sup>6</sup> Although deferred, the issue

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<sup>5</sup> Mervat Hatem, 'The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism and Patriarchy in Muslim Personal Status Laws: The Case for Modern Egypt', *Feminist Issues* (Spring 1986), 27

<sup>6</sup> Fauzi M. Najjar, 'Egypt's Law of Personal Status', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10 (3), (1988), 321

was not forgotten and subsequent efforts ensued. ‘Ā’isha Ratib, Minister of Social Affairs at the time, announced yet another draft law intended to safeguard women’s rights which in 1975 caused heated debate between supporters and opponents.

It was another four years, however, and numerous proposals and counter-proposals later, before President Sadat issued a decree promulgating Law no. 44/1979. The Law was intended to elaborate women’s rights without negating the personal status law; it amended Law no. 25/1929. The most controversial segment of the Law decreed that taking a second wife, without the first wife’s consent, constituted an injury to the first wife and therefore could be considered grounds for divorce. It stipulated that husbands must officially register their divorce decrees and inform their wives of their decision. This was intended to put an end to the practice of summary divorce. The divorced wife retained custody of her children – until the age of ten for a boy and twelve for a girl – and was entitled to remain in the conjugal home for the duration of custody. The law also increased a wife’s maintenance allowance if she was repudiated without her consent and without apparent cause on her part.

Furthermore, the law ended the practice of house of obedience (*bayt al-tā’a*) wherein the husband could lock up his wife at home until he obtained her ‘obedience’ if she tried to leave the marriage or initiate divorce.<sup>7</sup> Islamic law recognises the wife’s right to maintenance and the husband’s responsibility to provide for his wife. Since the *Qur’ān* considered men to be the protectors and keepers of women, a wife owed her husband obedience if he fulfilled his obligations toward her. The wife lost her right to maintenance if she failed to fulfil her obligations, which included maintaining the family home, caring for the children, obeying her husband and giving him sexual enjoyment. If the wife

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<sup>7</sup> Hatem, op. cit., 36; Najjar, op. cit., 323-324; Ghada Hashem Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt* (Florida, University Press of Florida, 1996), 114

refused to obey her husband, by leaving the home without prior approval, for example, the husband was entitled to discipline her. A husband could summon the wife to his house by serving notice through a court bailiff. Even though the amendments did not challenge the male privilege of divorce and polygamy, they represented changes in the right direction as far as women were concerned. Women could no longer be divorced with impunity; their right to seek divorce was enhanced, as well as their right to the custody of minors and to more liberal financial compensation.

The new law became known as 'Jihān's Law' because of Jihān al-Sādāt's relentless campaigning to gain support for the legislation. Opponents accused the President's wife of totally disregarding fundamental Islamic precepts. With the new law, the government sought to protect women, but not to restrict the husband's right to divorce, a right clearly sanctioned by *sharī'a*. However, inside and outside of the Assembly, the law was challenged by Muslim conservatives on the grounds that it did violate *sharī'a*. In its response, the government went to great lengths to show that the new law was consistent with religious law and was supported by eminent religious authorities.<sup>8</sup> Muslim conservatives continued to dispute the law. Hatem suggests, 'the resistance which the law met . . . is indicative of the strength of male and religious opposition to any movement on the question of women's rights.'<sup>9</sup>

The most serious challenge, and the one that finally led to the annulment of Law no. 44/1979, was the case of a woman who had brought suit against her husband before the Badrawi Summary Court, demanding maintenance.<sup>10</sup> In the process of examining the case the lower court entertained some doubt about the Law's constitutionality,

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<sup>8</sup> In 'Egypt's Laws of Personal Status', 323-336, Najjar details opposition to the substance of Law no. 44/1979 in terms of the People's Assembly debates and the opinions of writers and scholars.

<sup>9</sup> Hatem, op. cit., 37

<sup>10</sup> Najjar, op. cit., 337; Talhami, op. cit., 119-120

and referred the matter to the High Constitutional Court. In May 1985 the High Court ruled Law no. 44/1979 unconstitutional on the grounds that the procedure of its promulgation was in violation of Article 147 of the 1971 Constitution. The 1979 law had been presented to the Assembly as a *fait accompli* when parliament returned from summer recess. 'Aggravated by the intensity and polarisation of the debate, Sadat decided to end the confrontation by issuing the reform as a presidential decree instead of securing prior parliamentary approval.'<sup>11</sup> The court argued that the reform of family law was not a matter of sufficient urgency to justify the use of exceptional presidential powers to pass this piece of legislation.

The government was then under pressure to either re-enact Law no. 44/1979 through normal legislative procedures or enact a new law that would make certain concessions to the Islamic fundamentalists who opposed the 1979 law, but without jeopardising some of the basic rights women had obtained. President Mubarak pursued a middle course. In July 1985 Law no. 100 was passed. Except for two concessions to the traditionalist position, the revised law was a copy of its predecessor. The first eliminated the most controversial provision in the previous law; it demanded that a wife prove material or psychological harm before requesting a divorce upon the husband's second marriage. No longer would the addition of a second wife prove incontestably that the first wife had suffered injury. The second concession eliminated the custodial mother's automatic right to the conjugal home, although the husband was still expected to find her a suitable place to live. In both cases the judge became an arbiter in the process and not just an executor of the law. This law remained unchanged until Law no. 1/2000.

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<sup>11</sup> Talhami, *op. cit.*, 114

## *I Want a Solution*

### Synopsis

After having said goodbye to their son at Cairo airport, Durriyya (played by Fātin Ḥamāma) and Midḥat (played by Rushdī Abāza) return home. Unhappy since the day she married, Durriyya tells Midḥat that her life with him has had no meaning. She has only stayed with him for the sake of their son and now that he has grown up she informs Midḥat that she wants him to divorce her. He refuses.

Durriyya moves out of the family home and begins a petition for divorce. A flashback reveals the circumstances in which the couple first met: theirs was an arranged marriage before she had completed her school education. They moved to Geneva where Durriyya found herself a prisoner in her own home, taking care of their son, while Midḥat led an independent adulterous life. On returning to Egypt several years later Durriyya found her personal situation little altered.

Back in the present, Midḥat takes all possible steps to block Durriyya's divorce petition. She is forced to flee from her new home when she is served with an order of obedience. She escapes from the police and seeks refuge in a house used by her brother, Fu'ād, and his artist friends. There she meets Ra'ūf. To him it seems incredible that a law passed in 1929 is still imposed today, when so much has changed in terms of gender equality.

Durriyya and her friend, Nādiya, visit a minister and question the validity today of the law from 1929. Durriyya suggests that the law is not in accordance with Islam. She reminds the minister that Muḥammad allowed a woman to divorce her husband on condition that she give back to him the gift he gave her for their wedding (in this context a garden). Durriyya leaves encouraged that the minister will find a solution to this law. Soon after, the newspapers report the cancellation

of the order of obedience.

Ra'ūf declares his love for Durriyya but they are unable to develop a relationship in public through fear of Midḥat finding out. While waiting in the corridors of the court Durriyya sees many women in disturbing predicaments. She finds herself sitting next to Sayyida (played by Amīna Rizq) a woman whom she remembers from her first visit to the court. She listens to her story and sympathises with the old woman.

Many months later, in a private hearing, Durriyya and Midḥat present their cases to a judge. When they return to the court for the verdict, Durriyya is saddened to hear that Sayidda has died. The judge refuses Durriyya her divorce and asks her to pay the court costs. She walks out of the courtroom unable to comprehend the words she has just heard. Her lawyer can only suggest that they start the proceedings again but Durriyya's devastation is clear: 'After four years I will have to start all over again?' She leans against a wall crying uncontrollably and in place of 'the end' the statement, 'Ten years later and the court is still dealing with this case' fills the screen.

### Structure

From the moment Durriyya's son leaves home, her life (and the filmic narrative) is devoted to her trying to get a divorce. Enraged by Durriyya's request in the opening scene, Midḥat slaps her across the face and storms out of the house shouting, 'I can divorce you whenever I want.' The camera remains on Durriyya's face, the action is halted and the title of the film appears. This still shot in close-up presents Durriyya as the protagonist. All subsequent plot events focus on the process of her trying to achieve her goal. Durriyya's narrative charts the present but also reveals to us the past (in flashback) disrupting linear pattern in plot and time but simultaneously enabling us to understand the severity

of her present situation. Disrupting linear time through flashback articulates the tension between the protagonist's socially constructed role as wife and mother, and the limitations which this role imposes on her. The final shot of the film (a still shot of Durriyya in close-up) mirrors the still shot of the opening credits reflecting the static position of the protagonist who by the end of the film has achieved nothing (in terms of her goal).

Narrative in cinema tends to follow one of the following triadic patterns: order/disorder/order-restored or order/enigma/resolution. The beginning of the film puts in place an event which disrupts the apparently harmonious order. In this case it is Durriyya's wish for a divorce. Cause and effect serve to move the narrative along and at the end of the film disorder has been resolved and order is once again in place. In *I Want a Solution*, however, the narrative does not achieve closure; Durriyya does not achieve her goal. The classic narrative, for the most part, negates the female point of view. In dominant cinema women do not tell their own stories or control their images but this is not the case in *I Want a Solution*; the majority of the film is seen from Durriyya's point of view. However, despite the fact that the presentation of the woman's world is mediated through Durriyya, she is not in control of it: neither in the narrative events nor in her treatment by the camera. It is her story but she has no voice because she is ideologically positioned in patriarchal terms.

Following the opening credits, an exterior shot of a large building, followed by an interior shot, establishes the setting: the law courts. Durriyya surveys her surroundings. From her optical point of view we see several different situations: a woman sitting with a baby asleep in her arms, a father walking away from his wife and their two children, a mother and her two young children, and an elderly woman and her daughter. Sitting amongst these women in the corridors of the court, she

reflects on her own situation.

Two flashbacks give an explanation of the state of affairs as Durriyya's mind wanders from the present to the past. As Durriyya walks through the garden of a villa, she hears the congratulatory shrill associated with a happy occasion. Arrangements for her wedding are being made inside the villa but she has no part in them. This is a traditional, arranged marriage and Midḥat, her fiancé, is much older than she is. The shots of the flashback present far more information than a verbal description could. When Durriyya enters the room and offers *sharabat* to the group, she is standing while everyone else is sitting. Her head is cut off by the edge of the frame, symbolising her place within her own family and within her new family as an object of little importance rather than a subject. In contrast, when her father stands, the camera readjusts itself to position him centrally in the frame. While her father and Midḥat are always placed centrally, Durriyya is consistently positioned in the background or at the edge of the frame. This is her flashback, yet she has no control over it, the event it is recounting or its visual presentation.

A second flashback shows Midḥat and Durriyya at a party in Geneva. She confronts Midḥat when she sees him kissing another woman and demands to go back to Egypt. Her brother is sympathetic but her father will not contemplate the idea of divorce, 'No-one divorces in our family!' and her mother tells her, 'We are nothing without our husbands, think about the baby in your stomach.' Once again Durriyya has no control over events. Defeated, she returns to Geneva, where her son becomes her priority and Midḥat continues his adulterous lifestyle. While the static, monologous discourse dominates, which allows no debate or discussion, Durriyya has no effective voice to articulate her desires. Passive contemplation turns into a desire to challenge limitations and to find her own discourse to express this

desire. Practical reality and social limitations, however, continue to impinge on her progress.

Even after she has moved out of the marital home, Midḥat continues to control her life. The threat posed by the liberated woman means, in this case, literal containment of the female protagonist. While she remains trapped in the domestic circle – she is still Midḥat’s wife – the patriarchal discourse dominates. She is no longer contained within the family home but her new home is not safe until the order of obedience has been cancelled and so she hides herself away, in forced confinement. When Durriyya does finally return to her apartment, Midḥat flagrantly invades her private space. One evening, as she is preparing to go out, the doorbell rings. We assume it is Ra’ūf. A close-up of Durriyya’s point of view as she opens the door reveals Midḥat standing in a cloud of cigar smoke. Cut to a medium close-up of Durriyya but Midḥat’s back covers four fifths of the screen. He literally dominates the screen (in the same way that he dominates her life) as he enters the apartment without invitation and slams the door shut. The doorbell rings again; this time it *must* be Ra’ūf. Midḥat answers the door. It is a man selling milk and we breathe a sigh of relief because we find ourselves looking at the door as expectantly as Durriyya. From her point of view we watch – we are as helpless as she is – as Midḥat wanders in and out of each room dominating her personal space. Once again, a scene from Durriyya’s point of view and once again a situation she has no control over. Her only option is to flee from the scene, just as she fled from the police earlier. Despite having left the marital home, Durriyya is still imprisoned by the patriarchal discourse, just as she was in her flashbacks.

Durriyya’s status is further denied through the undermining of her point of view. The majority of the narrative is offered from her perspective but she is denied access to a few short scenes when the

camera steps out of her field of knowledge. The moments when Midhat is alone with his friends delineate actions unknown to Durriyya and, therefore, obviate her point of view. Midhat's world, in contrast to Durriyya's is filled with friends and lovers in the public sphere. In these scenes, of which there are four (not lasting more than a couple of minutes each) Midhat plans each move of his counter attack. With only a few minutes screen time, Midhat is able to create maximum impact on Durriyya.

The binary structure of *I Want a Solution* is conservative versus liberal. Midhat is the stereotypical patriarchal male who lives his life by one set of rules but expects his wife to abide by an altogether different set. He chooses a young bride whom he is sure will be a subservient wife and a good mother (echoing the ideology of Ramzi in *The Open Door*). Meanwhile he lives a flagrantly adulterous double existence, blaming his wife's lack of education (which he himself cut short) for her not understanding (or accepting) his ways. His lawyer actually defends his behaviour, as part of a European culture that Durriyya was unable to adapt herself to, because of her lack of education.

Durriyya's father is also a traditional patriarch dominating his daughter until he finds her a suitable husband to take his place. When Durriyya first returns from Geneva, it is her father who makes the decision whether she can divorce or not. Durriyya's mother supports her husband with the traditional attitude that women are nothing without their husbands. Within the patriarchal household there is minimal dialogue and no female solidarity. Durriyya's status is defined by her relationship to the men in her life. She is a daughter, a wife, and a mother, but at no point is she an autonomous woman.

On an ideological level, Durriyya vacillates between the traditional/liberal polarity. The traditional element of society is represented by those in authority (usually male) particularly her father

and Midḥat. The liberal element of society is represented by Fu'ād, Ra'ūf and Nādiya all of whom support Durriyya in her quest for freedom. Fu'ād and Ra'ūf are progressive in terms of their lifestyle and attitude. Nādiya is a divorced woman herself and can empathise with Durriyya. For her there is no point to marriage if there is no love between a husband and wife. She is an independent woman who supports herself through her work as a journalist and so is the antithesis of the traditional wife. When she gives evidence against Midḥat in court, his lawyer tries to discredit her character by informing the judge that she is a divorced woman living alone. The liberal discourse is never allowed to dominate.

Durriyya herself is the epitome of a traditional and conservative woman. After the initial shock of her far from idyllic marriage and her minor rebellion, she becomes a passive wife and doting mother. She sacrifices her happiness for the security of her child. After twenty years of passivity she takes an enormous step towards activity but her conservative attitude unfairly hinders her progress. While male authority oppresses her from without, social traditions obstruct her from within. She initiates the divorce but is unable to stand up to her convictions. In order to achieve her goal, Durriyya must talk about her personal life in public and accuse Midḥat of deserting the marital bed. Midḥat will always be the father of her son and for the sake of her son she does not want to ruin Midḥat's reputation. The judge cannot understand why Durriyya has not asked for a divorce before now if she has been so unhappy. She explains that her son was the most important part of her marriage. Now that he has grown up and left home she wants the chance to live freely. 'I have been living without rights and now I want the right to start my life that has been paralysed for the past twenty years: the right to live freely.' She sacrificed the past twenty years of her life for the sake of her son but the men in the courtroom are

unable (or unwilling) to understand (or appreciate) what this means. Midḥat's lawyer does his best to show her as a stereotypical emotional female, while Midḥat is the rational male.

A sub-plot foreshadows the main plot of *I Want a Solution*. While awaiting her turn in the courtroom at the beginning of the film, Durriyya listens to Sayyida explaining her situation to the judge. The elderly woman had been married for thirty years when her husband ran off with a younger woman. She has no money and nowhere to live. There is no sympathy from the judge and he sends her away. In the first shot of Sayyida speaking to the judge she has her back to the camera and is therefore faceless. She is not an individual but an image symbolising the thousands of other women who have stood in her place and have been dominated by this patriarchal society and its laws. Durriyya is next in front of the judge; Midḥat is not present so the case is adjourned. This is the beginning of a long and wearisome process, for both women.

Midḥat is informed by his lawyer that if he does not attend the first two hearings they will be adjourned. If he does not attend the third, the police will send him a notification but this can be easily ignored as well. Perhaps we should assume that Sayyida's husband creates similar diversions and at the next court hearing the women's paths cross again. The old woman explains her situation to Durriyya. 'I came to ask for maintenance and now they are charging me for the cost of the court case. I was married for thirty years, I served my husband and did nothing wrong. I am worried that there will be no one to put me in a coffin.' Durriyya empathises with her but can do nothing to help.

It is a poignant moment in terms of the narrative, but it is also significant because the scene brings together two of Egypt's best-loved

actresses.<sup>12</sup> Fātin Ḥamāma had starred in a huge variety of films. She was the ideal embodiment of helpless and vulnerable, yet always virtuous, middle- or upper-class women thrown into turmoil. She succeeded equally in representing long-suffering working-class and rural women. Her fate was very often in the oppressive hands of others. As the 'First Lady of the Arab Cinema', it was totally appropriate that she play the protagonist in a film which honestly depicted the horror and frustration of many women's lives. Amīna Rizq was a great theatre actress before she came to cinema. Their reputations as serious and virtuous actresses add authority to an important subject.

The final scene of the film is a repetition of the scene in which Durriyya first sees Sayyida. Then she was at the beginning of the process, but now she is waiting in the courtroom for the judge's verdict. Sayyida has died and her husband has come to inform the court. In flashback Durriyya remembers the first time they met. Then she approaches the judge. We see her in close-up as the judge reads the verdict. He refuses the divorce and informs Durriyya she must pay the court costs, just as Sayyida was instructed to do. The last still shot of Durriyya's face mirrors the still shot from the beginning, symbolic of her situation: after four years she is in the same place she was at the beginning of the film. We are left to wonder if Durriyya will follow the same fate as Sayyida. The repression of the discourse of the woman, of woman's narrative voice, is achieved in this case by cutting-off Durriyya's control of the film's enunciation.

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<sup>12</sup> Amīna Rizq and Fātin Ḥamāma teamed up more recently in 1993 in Dawūd 'Abd al-Sayyid's *Land of Dreams*. Rizq plays Ḥamāma's mother.

## *Cheap Flesh*

### Synopsis

The opening shots establish the subject of the film. The camera pans across headlines in a magazine revealing the words, 'entering by force into a bedroom' and 'marriage for pleasure'. Hajj Sālīm arrives at a rural village to choose a bride. Mabruk (the local *mu'allim*) presents a number of young women to him. Amongst them are Tawhida (played by Ilhām Shāhīn) and her two friends, Ikhlaṣ and Najafa.

The women set off for their new lives in the city. Tawhida has agreed to work in the home of a foreign couple, Ikhlaṣ has agreed to marry a wealthy man from the Gulf, and Najafa will go to Saudi Arabia as the wife of Hajj Sālīm. On the journey the friends chat about their different situations. Najafa wants children, particularly a son, whom she will be able to lean on in the future. Ikhlaṣ wants to marry in order to enjoy herself and be rich. Tawhida, by contrast, will only marry if her heart chooses.

Tawhida arrives at the home of a young, wealthy, western couple, Joshua and his wife Rose. She is very happy with her new situation. Ikhlaṣ and her mother meet Diyā', the man she will marry. She barter for as much as she can get and threatens to postpone the marriage but they come to an agreement. She is happy and her mother is satisfied that her daughter has made a good match. In private Diyā', the new husband, pays Mabruk for his bride and pays 'Abd al-Ghani, a dishonest lawyer, for his copy and the bride's copy of the wedding contract. Najafa arrives at her new home only to find that she is Hajj Sālīm's fourth wife.

Drunk one evening, and with his wife away, Joshua tries to seduce Tawhida. She resists him, refuses to accept this kind of behaviour and instead goes to work for Mabruk. Ikhlaṣ enjoys a life of frivolous luxury

with her new husband. Meanwhile Najafa, unhappy in her situation, realises that there is no way out of her predicament.

The friends are reunited in their village: Ikhlāṣ and Najafa are both pregnant. Tawḥīda begins to sell visas to men going to work abroad. One step ahead of Mabruk she infiltrates his territory and begins to make money for herself. She buys a couple of knitting machines and sets up a small business. She speaks to Hishām, a neighbour, who is an official in a bank, about how to obtain a bank loan. Some time later Hishām reveals his admiration for Tawḥīda's business achievements and declares his love for her.

Once again the three friends are reunited in their village. For Najafa, giving birth to Hajj Sālīm's first son brings with it alienation and resentment from her co-wives and their daughters. Afraid for their son's life, Hajj Sālīm allows Najafa to return to Egypt, but only after she gives up her rights. Ikhlāṣ has also given birth to a son. Diyā' has disappeared and she has no way of contacting him, neither does she have proof that she was ever married to him.

In desperate need of money to pay for the residency of her son to remain in Egypt, Najafa approaches Mabruk for help. She agrees to marry a man for one week in return for an unspecified amount of money.<sup>13</sup> There is no flat for the couple to frequent and so Mabruk suggests they stay with Tawḥīda. She is outraged by Najafa's actions but does not let her friend down. Tipped off by Mabruk, the vice squad raid Tawḥīda's apartment. They find Najafa and her 'husband' without a marriage contract and another couple who were planted by Mabruk. Tawḥīda is arrested and charged with keeping a house of disrepute.

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<sup>13</sup> *Muta' a*, or pleasure, is a marriage for just that reason. It has specific terms and is a temporary marriage, set for a period of time, involving an exchange of money which some say mirrors legalised prostitution. It is not legal in Egypt but if both parties agree to a sexual relationship there is no punishment. Debate surrounds the origins of the *muta' a* marriage. According to Ibn Mas'ūd and al-Bukhārī men on military expeditions and absent from their wives for long periods were permitted to contract a marriage with a woman until a specified date in return for giving her a garment as dowry. Others, however, believe the prophet forbade the practice when the Islamic legislative process was complete.

Meanwhile, unable to cope with the shame of her situation, Ikhlās abandons her baby.

At the police station Hishām states that Tawhīda is innocent until it is proven otherwise and therefore he will pay her bail. Anyway, he is going to marry her. In the final scene a train pulls up to a station in the countryside at night. Four coffins are carried from the train followed by Mabruk. He is guilty of sending many young men to their death when he found jobs for them abroad. The villagers, carrying torches of fire, surround him.

### Structure

*Cheap Flesh* is the story of three young women; three friends who come from the same village but who make different life choices. It is the story of unjust and outdated laws concerning their rights as women, but also of victory over patriarchal abuse and domination. Following the title and credits, the camera tracks across green palm trees and the cultivated land of the countryside until it arrives at an avenue of trees where it tilts down to reveal three young women walking along a path. The peace and quiet of this rural environment is shattered with the arrival of Hajj Sālim whose first words, after greeting Mabruk are, 'Prepare the goods quickly.' We then see 'the goods'; in medium close-up the camera tracks along a line of girls, including the three young women from the opening shot.

The structure of *Cheap Flesh* has multiple layers within which can be found a number of binary oppositions. The male characters, with the exception of Hishām, emphasise the patriarchal structure of society. They stand in direct opposition to the women. The symbiotic relationship of the women is the antithesis of the hierarchical relationships of the men. The basis of the women's relationship is solidarity while male relationships in the film are based on control and

power. Tawḥīda is the heroine who opposes patriarchal dominance but Najafa and Ikhḷāṣ share equal weight in terms of narrative events and screen time. We first see the women in their native environment. This village is where they return to several times throughout the film. These reunions allow the women to keep their friendship alive, to offer solidarity in times of hardship and support in times of ignorance.

The parallel structure is also revealed within the divergent situations of the friends. Each meeting of the three women emphasises the growing disparity between Tawḥīda and her friends' lives. At the first reunion Nagafa and Ikhḷāṣ are pregnant and by the second, they have both given birth to sons. While Tawḥīda is achieving autonomy through the success of her business, Nagafa and Ikhḷāṣ are being defeated by patriarchy and the law. In between these meetings their situations are juxtaposed articulating the independent/dependent polarity.

In the early feminist classic, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes about the independent woman. This is appropriate for Tawḥīda. De Beauvoir states it is only through gainful employment that a woman's liberty may be guaranteed:

Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator . . . When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject; in the connection with the aims she pursues, with the money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Tawḥīda gains complete independence when her business becomes successful, unlike Najafa and Ikhḷāṣ who do not escape from the traditional feminine world where the patriarchal discourse dominates.

Instead of raising her status in the traditional tribal family, giving

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<sup>14</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H M Parshley (London, Picador Classics, 1988), 689

birth to a son only brings alienation and resentment for Najafa from the other women in the house. She fears for her son's life but by returning to Egypt she has had to give up her rights. Ikhlāṣ cannot register her child without the father's passport and she must face up to the reality and consequences of her 'fake' marriage. It is a common occurrence for Arab men from the Gulf to go to Egypt and take a bride for an unspecified period of time. These temporary marriages are an abuse of mainly low-class, uneducated girls. The men have a contract, pay a dowry and then divorce when it suits them. The marriage contract that Ḍiyā' paid for was falsified, Ikhāṣ was never legally married and her child is therefore illegitimate.

In the midst of the bureaucracy, Tawḥīda continues on her journey to success. She procures a loan from the bank and her business goes from strength to strength. In comparison, Najafa and Ikhlāṣ reach a low. A close-up shot of a marriage certificate signals yet another disaster for Najafa, who finds herself in a lamentable position once again needing money to pay for her son's residency. And, unable to cope with her situation Ikhlāṣ abandons her baby. She cannot afford to keep the child and tradition dictates she is in an unacceptable position – unmarried with an illegitimate child.

In Egyptian society, Tawḥīda's desire for independence and autonomy is an unconventional goal. She will consider marriage in the future but only if she falls in love. Ikhlāṣ and Najafa only consider marriage. Although they both follow the traditional path to marriage and motherhood the marriage arrangements represent two extremes, a further binary opposition within the structure of the film. Najafa enters a traditional marriage only realising when it is too late that she is Hajj Sālim's fourth wife. As she arrives at her new home, the camera reveals his three wives and countless daughters. In close-up the camera tracks along the three faces of the women, a repetition of the earlier line-up of

the three friends. While Najafa finds herself dominated by her husband, his wives and his daughters, Ikhlāṣ experiences the frivolous delights of champagne, diamonds and nightclubs.

Their wedding nights are juxtaposed to emphasise the difference. The camera and *mise-en-scène* create a romantic environment in which Ikhlāṣ and Ḍiyā' make love. The couple are positioned centrally in the frame in medium close-up as they kiss and caress. Soft lighting, a predominance of white (the bed sheets and her negligee) and a series of dissolves create a romantic ambience. The atmosphere is shattered however by the accompanying music. The contradiction suggested by the soft images accompanied by the discordant music make us aware of the reality of Ikhlāṣ's situation. Soft lighting is replaced by stark lighting and pleasure replaced by duty. The bare, pale body of the Hajj Sālīm is contrasted with the much younger, bronzed and muscular body of Ḍiyā'. Najafa, upset by the reality of her circumstances and physically repulsed by her husband, tries to resist his advances but has no choice other than to comply with his wishes. The camera returns to Ikhlāṣ and Ḍiyā' and follows them alternately and together in close-up as they dance for each other, drink champagne, kiss and cavort in pleasure.

In *Swept Away: Why Women Fear Their Own Sexuality*, psychologist Carol Cassell suggests a theory concerning female romanticism. Women allow themselves to be 'swept off their feet' in order to justify their repressed sexuality: 'Swept Away is a sexual strategy, a coping mechanism, which allows women to be sexual in a society that is . . . condemnatory of female sexuality.'<sup>15</sup> Both De Beauvoir and Cassell see the woman in love as creating illusions that represent her situation as more genial than it is. Cassell states:

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Cassell, *Swept Away: Why Women Fear Their Own Sexuality* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1981), 25

The romantic aura is false and confusing. We become deceived about the meaning of our experience . . . We use this syndrome to inject the thrill of romance into our lives, lives still subject to the constraints imposed on us because we are women, the female gender.<sup>16</sup>

De Beauvoir suggests, that in living through man, woman obliterates her own existence, 'let's her . . . world collapse in contingency.'<sup>17</sup> Ikh̄lās lives through her husband/lover, which makes his abandonment of her all the more catastrophic: 'the abandoned woman no longer is anything, no longer has anything.'<sup>18</sup> When Ikh̄lās left the village she was defined in terms of her relationship to her husband and all that came with him. From the moment he deserts her she becomes invisible to Mabruk, society and the law.

A further binary opposition is that of Tawh̄ida and Mabruk. He is guilty of trafficking in people. Not only does he sell young girls to wealthy men but he also sends young men abroad to their deaths. He is not alone in his greed for wealth at others' expense. He is not short of accomplices. The most prominent is the corrupt lawyer. With such characters there is little hope of change in society. When Tawh̄ida becomes successful, however, she tries to help other girls from her village by teaching them a trade. Like De Beauvoir's independent woman, Tawh̄ida 'refuses to confine herself to her role as female, because she will not accept mutilation.'<sup>19</sup> However, Tawh̄ida subverts de Beauvoir's portrait of a woman in love. De Beauvoir makes the crucial point that love has a different meaning for men and women. She notes that women devote themselves to men in order to partake of male power, a sphere from which they are otherwise excluded.<sup>20</sup> The opposite is true of Tawh̄ida. She is able to succeed, in what is usually the domain

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26-27

<sup>17</sup> De Beauvoir, op. cit., 663

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 676

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 691

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 652-653

of men, through intelligence and hard work, not through devotion to a man. It is clear that the men in the film do not deserve her success.

### The Individual, Society and the Law

By focusing on the individual, *I Want a Solution* and *Cheap Flesh* offer intimate portraits of their heroines. They also, however, reveal a huge amount about the society in which they are set. Both films depict the reality of the plight of many women trapped by traditional values and the law.

*I Want a Solution* is based on the true story of a journalist who worked for the daily newspaper, *Akhbar al-Yawm*. Moved by her friend's plight, Ḥusn Shāh, visited Abidin and Zananiri common law courts in Cairo to understand the extent of the issue. There she spent a month recording the stories of unhappy women who had wasted many years fighting for a divorce. From these she wrote several stories which she hoped to make into a television programme but instead, with the encouragement of her childhood friend, Fātin Ḥamāma, they became the basis for the script of *I Want a Solution*.<sup>21</sup> As Durriyya's tragic situation unfolds in the film, we begin to comprehend the depth of the problem which affects a great number of women in Egypt. Through Durriyya we see the enormity of the issues women face in their daily lives. When she enters the court building for the first time she finds herself immersed in a sea of women, each with her own story to tell.

By depicting the problems of Ikhlaṣ and Najafa, *Cheap Flesh* also reveals the plight of many women. The film shows plenty more girls and young women from the same village who would be willing to 'sell' themselves in the hope of a better life. Furthermore, when Ikhlaṣ goes to the Embassy in search of information about Ḍiyā' the story she tells the official is one he has heard many times before. She is not the first

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<sup>21</sup> Ḥusn Shāh, 'My Story with Fātin Ḥamāma', *Al-Mara'a al-Yawm* (February 2000) (no page numbers)

Egyptian woman to have been placed in this predicament and it seems that she will not be the last. The film does not condemn the actions of the two women but instead treats both women's situations sympathetically.

Both films offer a view of society through the portraits of their female protagonists. In *Cheap Flesh* each of the three women desires to leave the rural environment they grew up in to improve their situation, placing themselves in the hands of the local *mu'allim* (encouraged by their families) without realising the consequences of their actions. Najafa wants children, particularly a son, thinking he will bring her security. Ikhlaṣ wants a rich husband and to enjoy herself. Tawhida states her desire for independence and to earn a good salary. She will only marry for love. This poor rural village is where the three friends return on several occasions during the course of the narrative, providing each other with emotional support. By the film's conclusion, only Tawhida has successfully navigated the course to maturity. Through the portrayal of these different women, the film represents the reality of the struggle of women's lives, but also suggests an alternative option.

Najafa and Ikhlaṣ represent two extremes of a traditional role. Najafa's marriage to Hajj Sālim is extremely conservative. Memissi sites territoriality as one of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim sexuality setting patterns of rank, task and authority. 'Spatially confined, women were taken care of materially by the men who possessed them, in return for total obedience and sexual reproductive services.'<sup>22</sup> Although accepting of the circumstances of her arranged marriage, it is not until she arrives in Saudi Arabia that Najafa comprehends the reality of her situation. Being the fourth wife, and a foreigner, she is treated as a slave by the other wives and their daughters and is used for sexual services by her husband.

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<sup>22</sup> Fatima Memissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, revised edition (London, Al Saqi Books, 1985), 169

Ikhlaṣ also agrees to an arranged marriage but she is not as conservative as Najafa. The juxtaposition of the scenes of each wedding night emphasises the difference. Where Najafa is sexually passive, Ikhlaṣ is active. If woman is *fitna* 'the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representation of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential'<sup>23</sup> the unleashing of Ikhlaṣ's active sexuality could have been the embodiment of destruction. However, she can only achieve the lifestyle she aspires to through her husband and so she is content being his source of pleasure. There is pleasure in her own submission to her husband's conquest. She is rewarded for her submission, being taken from her working-class environment and thrown into a life of luxury (if only momentarily).

Neither marriage, however, leads to long-term fulfilment; instead, the result of each is single parenthood and a return to poverty. Najafa finds her situation intolerable when she becomes worried for her son's life. She is able to leave the marriage but only after forsaking her rights. Ikhlaṣ's enjoyment is cut short when Ḍiyā' disappears. She then realises that she has been deceived by her husband, Mabrūk and the lawyer, 'Abd al-Ghani. Both marriages lead to disaster.

Feminist activist, Nawal al-Sa'dāwī, states that the majority of Arab women are 'terrorised by the word divorce which means hunger, no home and the unrelenting remarks of those around them.'<sup>24</sup> As a result women accept any treatment at the hands of their husbands without complaining or rebelling. In this context Durriyya transgresses the passivity associated with women in this situation but she is punished continuously for this irregularity.

When a woman enters male space she is trespassing, because she is, by definition, a foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she

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<sup>23</sup> Memissi, op. cit., 44

<sup>24</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Dr Sherif Hetata (London and New York, Zed Books Ltd., 1980), 205

enters them she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind, and if the woman is unveiled the situation is aggravated. Mernissi states that the Moroccan term for a woman who is not veiled is *'uryana* meaning nude. The two elements together – trespassing and trespassing in the nude – constitute an open act of exhibitionism.<sup>25</sup> Durriyya and Tawhīda both enter public spaces and, therefore, violate spatial rules. Any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power. Durriyya is literally beaten into submission for her disruptive behaviour, but Tawhīda is much stronger in her challenge of the existing social order.

When Durriyya first enters the law courts she is visibly uncomfortable in these unfamiliar surroundings and her lawyer's assistant (a man) takes control. The dimly lit interior is crowded, predominantly with women, but this is the domain of men. The men are the cause of these women's problems. Once in court, unsavoury men play on the women's vulnerability and the one person who has the power to help them, the judge, is a patriarchal male. Durriyya relies on Fu'ād to take her to a safe house, following her escape from the police. She sits and looks out onto the street below from behind the *mashrabiyya* windows. The house is Islamic in style with an enclosed courtyard. At the turn of the century when middle- and upper-class women lived in relative seclusion, the *mashrabiyya* offered them a glimpse of the outside world. In the novel *Palace Walk (Bayn al-Qasrayn)*, Najīb Maḥfūz reveals the public and private world of the tyrannical patriarch Aḥmad 'Abd al-Jawad at the turn of the twentieth century. Maḥfūz detailed 'Abd al-Jawad's role in society and the secluded world of his wife and daughters. His wife had been confined to the house for most of her married life, 'leaving it only on infrequent

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<sup>25</sup> Mernissi, op. cit., 144

occasions to visit her mother' and even then closely chaperoned by her husband. From the interior of the house, 'Ā'isha, the younger daughter, 'peered through the holes of the grille with interest and longing' on to the street below.<sup>26</sup> Looking through the *mashrabiyya* was the way in which such women viewed the world. Nearly seventy years after Qāsim Amīn championed women's rights this secluded environment offers Durriyya a form of protection from the outside world.

Memissi talks of the concept of spatial boundaries in Islam:

The spatial division according to sex reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not. The division is based on the physical separation of the *umma* (the public sphere) from the domestic universe. These two universes of social interaction are regulated by antithetical concepts of human relations, one based on community, the other on conflict.<sup>27</sup>

The universe of the *umma* is communal. Members unite in a democratic collectivity geared to produce integration and consolidation of all members who participate in the unifying task. The men in both films are active in the public sphere and they are unified in their domination of women. With the exception of Ra'ūf, Fu'ād and Hishām, the men flaunt their mastery. Both films depict the husbands evading the law and/or escaping their obligations because the law itself is deficient and indulgent towards men. The conflict relationship then, takes place in the domestic sphere where citizens are not united, but are divided into two categories: men, who have power, and women, who obey. Having been identified as primarily citizens of the domestic sphere, 'women are then deprived of power even within the world in which they are confined since it is the man who wields authority within the family.'<sup>28</sup> Najafa, Ikhlāṣ, Durriyya and Sayyida are symbols of this inequality and

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<sup>26</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 35 and 24

<sup>27</sup> Memissi, *op. cit.*, 138

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 139

Tawhīda alone is a symbol of transgression.

Durriyya articulates the frustrated female quest for a more valid sense of sexual and creative self which society cannot accommodate. Oppositions of confinement and escape show that a preoccupation with boundaries and space is frequently the result of being positioned on the margins of the dominant discourse. The metaphoric use of space is linked to the degree of progression achieved. Durriyya's extension of space is minimal and she remains largely static spatially and psychologically: her father's home, her husband's home, her own home, protected home. When Durriyya is banished to a safe house the notion of spatial extension is thus parodied since spatial movement results not in expansion but in confinement.

Najafa's progression is marked by her move from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, from the countryside to the city, where she finds herself silenced by the patriarchal discourse articulated by her husband and the law. She is confined within the patriarchal household where there is minimal dialogue and finds her movements restricted outside of the home. If she tries to leave the country without her husband's consent she will be denied access at the airport. In Islamic law, women require the permission or presence of a *mahram*, a close male relative who acts as a guardian for travel.<sup>29</sup> Ikhlaṣ's progression is also denoted by her move from the country to the city. The sinister music playing while she looks around her new home premeditates her disastrous decision to marry. The confinement of her marriage is one of false security; her socially perceived identity as a successfully married woman belies the truth.

For Tawhīda the failure of her friends awakens her to the

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<sup>29</sup> In 'The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt During the 1990s' Zuhur states that Article 26 of Law no. 1/2000 dealt with a woman's right to travel without her husband's consent. The Egyptian government decided to drop Article 26 from the draft law just before passage as a concession to its opponents, although Shaykh al-Azhar, Muḥammad Sayyid Tantawi had supported the new law with that provision (and was criticised by the Islamists for this support).

realisation that, for a woman, the 'art of living' is difficult or impossible; overcoming one set of limitations frequently gives rise to another. Her desires prompt a new level of discourse and action. She rejects the spatial and psychological seclusion from the public sphere that Najafa and Ikhlāṣ accept and as a result her experience in the social world differs from her two friends.

Tawḥīda refuses the traditional social role – to marry and have children – therefore, she is a threat to the social structure. For most of the film she is in the precarious position of a woman without a man. She needs to be controlled, because in particular she is upsetting the hierarchy of Mabruk's social order. Her action is viewed as potentially destructive in a patriarchal society. Unlike Durriyya, Tawḥīda refuses the role of victim. She does not accept Joshua's physical abuse and she does not allow herself to be intimidated by Mabruk. Tawḥīda is a symbol of liberated, self-sufficient femininity. As the narrative progresses she develops a more mature personality, gaining confidence to act upon her desires and to choose her own path to self-fulfilment. Marriage provides one of the areas of tension between the dominant ideology and the Tawḥīda's desires. Marriage, in its traditional 'arranged' form is challenged as a new alternative model is presented through the relationship of Tawḥīda and Hishām. We can conclude that her experience of marriage will be a happy and fulfilling one because she has proved her independence before choosing her marriage partner.

Narrative discourse is an arena in which the protagonist can manipulate language to debate, undermine and subvert the prevalent discourse and consequently the social and political order underlying it. Tawḥīda transgresses the dictates of classic narrative cinema which is fixed in phallogocentric language. Traditionally, the narrative discourse denies woman her subjectivity, and as such sets up the binary gender divide, whereby male is active holder of the gaze and female is passive

and the object of male desire. The other women all fulfil the role of object. Tawhīda's dismantling of rigid social boundaries is by implication a dismantling of the male/female polarity.

For traditional heterosexual romance to work the woman must assume the role of passive spectator of masculine power. Her narrative does not recount the achievements of her romantic goal, but rather charts her role in the fulfilment of male desire. Teresa de Lauretis writes:

The end of the girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince Charming. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find a woman waiting at the end of *his* journey.<sup>30</sup>

Although at the end of the film it is Hishām who supports Tawhīda when her reputation is brought into question by the police, until that point he has been passive. Al-Dughaydi allows her protagonist to be the bearer of the look. Tawhīda establishes herself and takes the first gaze when she encounters Hishām. Here we find feminine desire being actively aimed at the passive male. Tania Modleski has noted, in the woman's film, it is 'not the virile, masculinized male . . . who elicits woman's desire . . . (but the) attractive, cosmopolitan type . . . or the well-bred, charming foreigner.'<sup>31</sup> In this case Tawhīda's desire for freedom from a patriarchal authority is projected on to Hishām, her attractive, well-bred, charming, but passive neighbour. In Laura Mulvey's polemic article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she suggests dominant cinema deploys unconscious mechanisms in which the image of woman functions as signifier of sexual difference, confirming man as subject and maker of meaning and woman as object.

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<sup>30</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), 133

<sup>31</sup> Tania Modleski, 'Time and Desire in the Woman's Film', *Cinema Journal* 23 (3), (Spring 1984), 26

These mechanisms are built into the structure of the gaze and the narrative itself through the manipulation of time and space by point of view, framing, editing and other codes. As Mulvey observed, 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.'<sup>32</sup> Tawhīda's dominant gaze ensures that she becomes the active female.

Tawhīda is condemned by Mabruk but not by the director. Her expression of desire is rewarded with the man her heart has chosen; therefore, her desire is presented as natural and entirely appropriate. Mulvey maintained that visual pleasure in narrative film is built around two contradictory processes: the first involves objectification of the image and the second identification with it. The first process depends upon direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for (the spectator's) enjoyment. This form of pleasure requires the separation of the 'erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen.' This 'distance' between spectator and screen contributes to the voyeuristic pleasure of looking in on a private world. The second form of pleasure depends upon the opposite process, identification with the image on the screen. The process of identification in the cinema, Mulvey argued, like the process of objectification is structured by the narrative. Mulvey's analysis of the operations of voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia in narrative cinema and the constitution of woman as spectacle suggests that the spectator is male: or perhaps, that such a cinema addresses itself to male spectators. It offers the spectator the pleasurable identification with the main male protagonist, and through him the power to indirectly possess the female character displayed as sexual object for his pleasure. The look of the male character moves the narrative forward and identification with it thus implies a sense of sharing in the power of his active look. The gaze structure in *Cheap*

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<sup>32</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Feminism and Film* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 39

*Flesh*, therefore, violates dominant classical conventions that assign the look and accompanying mechanisms of desire exclusively to male characters. Tawhīda is an actively desiring subject and Hishām is the object of the female gaze and of female desire. *Cheap Flesh* presents women's development as involving the formation of a core self-structure based on the desire for autonomy. Tawhīda gets her man, but only after she has achieved independence.

When the three friends are lined up in front of Hajj Sālīm at the beginning of *Cheap Flesh*, Tawhīda complains about their treatment. Walking out of the room she questions, 'What do you think we are, cows, at Friday's market?' Her subsequent behaviour can be measured against her character traits displayed in this introductory scene. Her subversion of dominant heterosexual ideology is emphasised by the comparison with Najafa and Ikh̄lāṣ. Najafa is visually diminished to the status of object through the eyes of Hajj Sālīm. When he first sees Najafa, the camera encircles her and reveals parts of her curvaceous body in close-up. She is flattered by his attentions and subserviently lowers her gaze. She is no longer a whole person but a number of sensualised body parts. Her body is cut up by a practice of editing which fragments the body of the woman in the film image. Once married, Najafa is judged only for her reproductive skills. Ikh̄lāṣ engages in pleasure with Ḍiyā' but never dominates. She becomes an object of pleasure for her husband. Although she believes their pleasure is equal she is deceived: he has control. In comparison, where Najafa and Ikh̄lāṣ are objects of man's desire, Tawhīda is the subject *with* desire.

Durriyya is literally reduced to nothing more than an object by her husband. Infuriated by her small, but significant act of defiance, Midḥat joins a group of friends at a night club. They question his motives and ask why he does not just leave his wife, 'Do you still love her?' His reply, 'I don't want the woman. I just want her in the house like any

other object.’ In living her life through men she has obliterated her own existence. Durriyya is invisible to Midḥat. She is his possession but is not cherished so she must escape from his ownership. When she becomes active and seeks a divorce, the possession becomes a threat. Her punishment is to remain as an object, never becoming the subject.

A dominant theme in both films is the obvious inequality of the law, the resulting effect on women’s lives and the need for change. In *I Want a Solution*, Durriyya is fighting against patriarchy in every sense of the word. First and foremost the opposition is Midḥat, her husband. He also has the support of his friends, one of whom is his lawyer, the men who work for the court (his notification to appear in court goes undelivered) and the law itself, written by men. According to Law no. 25/1929 Durriyya has the right to ask for divorce because her husband deserted the marital bed but it is her word against his. After the preliminary hearing, the judge orders a six-month investigation, after which Durriyya must provide evidence to support her accusations. As Zulficar states in *Women and Development: A Legal Study*, ‘evidence of prejudice or incompatibility, or even sexual defects is difficult to procure and the procedures applicable are quite strict. Even in cases where the woman has witnesses, it often happens that the husband is able to procure witnesses to the contrary.’<sup>33</sup> Proving harm or injury, therefore, in order to obtain a divorce was extremely difficult and even then it was up to the judge to determine whether or not harm had occurred. The judge becomes an arbiter in the process and ‘it has been demonstrated that proving damage before the courts by the wife is extremely difficult and takes an average of five to seven years in many cases, without success.’<sup>34</sup> This inequality is evident from the very beginning of the film when Midḥat tells Durriyya, ‘I can divorce you whenever I want.’ He chooses not to. The significant point here is the

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<sup>33</sup> Mona Zulficar, *Women in Development: A Legal Study* (UNESCO, 1995) (no page numbers)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

fact that he has the choice. If a woman decides to leave her husband, 'she will find all the doors to divorce securely locked. For the law is severe, very severe, and the judge also is severe, even more severe than the law.'<sup>35</sup> Instead of gaining her freedom, Durriyya suffers further punishment: she is denied the divorce she desperately wants and is expected to pay the costs of the court case.

*I Want a Solution* also brings to light *bayt al-tā'a* which many Egyptians regarded as a regressive process. Speaking at The American University in Beirut in 1928 Ihsān al-Qūṣi (one of the founding members of the EFU) insisted *bayt al-tā'a* was:

. . . more dangerous (for women) than prisons for criminals. Prisoners are guarded by men invested with authority by the law. They are not driven by hate or animosity to take revenge or to transgress the bounds of legally bestowed authority. The husband is clearly an involved guard. No one controls him . . . He can claim that his incarcerated wife has disobeyed him, so he can insult her and hit her and the courts will not consider this behaviour to be outside his legal rights. All these injustices are committed even though the state has a public legislation order that punishes anyone who hurts anyone else. All citizens enjoy the protection of this legislation, that is, all except this poor woman.<sup>36</sup>

Numerous attempts were made to eliminate this embarrassing practice, but it was not until 1967 that the Egyptian government issued a ministerial decree suspending its legal enforcement. This decree is incorporated into the plot of the film. The action by the minister of justice was challenged by *sharī'a* supporters in the National Assembly on the grounds that a law could not be changed by ministerial decree. In his response, the minister stated that he had not eliminated the law; he had only suspended its enforcement. In actual practice this meant that the police would refuse to drag a woman back to her husband against

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<sup>35</sup> El Saadawi, op. cit., 205

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995), 132

her will. Eventually, the personal status law of 1979 eliminated *bayt al-tā'a* but it was substituted with the penalty of loss of maintenance. Under the new law, court-mediated reconciliation would be offered, failing which the judge would be obligated to sanction divorce.<sup>37</sup>

Whatever the state of the law, there have always been discrepancies between theory and practice as a result of social practices and economic restraints. Although marriage in Islam is seen as a contract, implying equality between the parties concerned, in practice, a woman's interests are seldom given equal weight. Article 16.1 of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women from 1981 provides the equal rights to enter into marriage and to choose a spouse with free will and full consent.<sup>38</sup> This is guaranteed under *sharī'a*, in theory, as the consent of the bride is required to conclude the marriage contract or to authorise her father or a close male relative to sign such a contract on her behalf. However, in real life, due to poverty, lack of education and conventional traditions and customs, girls are given in marriage by their fathers, in many cases without their consent. Fathers are tempted to do so by financial considerations, particularly when the husbands are rich, and because of pressure from tradition adopted by both mothers and fathers who perceive early marriage as security for the young woman of the family as opposed to education or work.

These issues are depicted clearly in *Cheap Flesh*. The fathers of both Najafa and Ikhlaṣ, tempted by a payment in dollars, allow their daughters to marry men they know nothing about. The women are not forced into marriage, however, I would suggest that neither Najafa nor Ikhlaṣ are aware of the consequences of their actions. Due to their diminished rights the women are extremely vulnerable, and poor and illiterate women are often unaware of the few rights they do have. Al-

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<sup>37</sup> Najjar, op. cit., 331-332; Talhami, op. cit., 116

<sup>38</sup> Zulficar, op. cit.

Sa'dāwī suggests that the vast majority of families pay little attention to the human values of equality and freedom when a decision has to be made regarding the marriage of a daughter. 'Here tradition, custom, class and money remain the overriding considerations.'<sup>39</sup> The decision is always taken in conformity with the interests of the family and not those of the woman.

Following separation or divorce it is the mother who most often assumes the responsibility for bringing up and educating children. For poor women this can be an enormous burden. Najafa and Ikhlāṣ react in different ways. In order to keep her son with her in Egypt Najafa must apply for his residency. Egyptian women who marry a non-Egyptian man still may not confer their citizenship to their children. Children of an Egyptian mother who are born outside of Egypt are not entitled to acquire nationality, though they may apply, subject to complicated procedures and conditions.<sup>40</sup> The social, political and economic implications of Law no. 26/1975 extend far beyond the blatant differentiation between men and women. One implication is that the children of Egyptian mothers married to non-Egyptians are deprived of all the rights and privileges of Egyptian citizens. According to the law Najafa's son must have residency to stay in Egypt. She is devastated when she finds out this will cost seven thousand Egyptian pounds. Her inferior position and feeling of maternal responsibility lead her to make the same mistake twice. She gives herself completely for her child without considering the consequences of her actions. For Ikhlāṣ, her

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<sup>39</sup> El Saadawi, op. cit., 48

<sup>40</sup> Law no. 26/1975 states that any child born to an Egyptian father is Egyptian. Children of an Egyptian father have the right to acquire Egyptian nationality without any conditions, irrespective of their place of birth or the nationality of the mother. However, the law has made a distinction with respect to children born of an Egyptian mother. They do not have the same rights as they can only acquire Egyptian nationality in exceptional cases and subject to certain conditions. These conditions are: that the children should be born in Egypt, and that their father should either be unknown or have an unknown nationality or no nationality at all. Non-Egyptian women who marry Egyptian men are eligible for citizenship after two years and their children are Egyptian. See *Women In Development: A Legal Study* by Mona Zulficar for more details.

love for her child as a human being and as a mother and the burden of maternal responsibility imposed on her by society lead her to abandon her baby. She cannot cope with the responsibility of an illegitimate child in a society that is not sympathetic to such mistakes.

Lack of education and the carrying out of conventional traditions and customs are not only associated with poverty. Durriyya comes from a wealthy upper-class family that is steeped in tradition. She is not 'sold' into marriage but it is expected that she will marry a man much older than herself, chosen by her father. She has to leave school before finishing her education and her parents have no doubt that she will conform to the traditional role of wife and mother. No matter what has occurred in the first few months of her marriage, as far as her father is concerned, a divorce is inconceivable. The domination of men over women and the inequality of the law are cultural issues, not only class issues.

The dis-equilibrium in the relationship between husband and wife has been partially eliminated by Law no. 1/2000 allowing the woman's right of *khul'*, a principal of *shari'a*, giving women equal rights to divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. Divorce will be subject to a court judgement, irrespective of whether it is requested by the husband or wife. However, there are still many more issues yet to be resolved, not only legal but from a cultural perspective as well.

Important changes served to enhance the integration of Egyptian women into the public sphere but state commitment to a nationalist ideology worked against the introduction of changes in the private sphere. The defence of Islam against continued Western attacks made the maintenance of the private Muslim mechanisms of control within the family defensible and acceptable to men and women in the name of cultural nationalism. The personal status laws passed in the 1920s represented minimal interference by the state in the patriarchal

household. While increasingly accepting women's public role, the state was reluctant to push for women's rights as equals within the family. It is this patriarchal pressure and resistance to change, fuelled by cultural nationalism in opposition to the West, and reluctance to give up the private Muslim mechanisms, that has distinguished the operation of the Egyptian patriarchal system in the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> The intensity of the battle over the personal status law was a reflection of the clash of cultures, one modern and secular, the other traditionalist and communal, each with its own version of the public and private roles of women.<sup>42</sup> Law is an instrument of social change but it can only be effective if it is implemented in practice. In certain cases, it is the law that induces change in behavioural patterns and in other cases it is social change that induces a change in the law. In both circumstances, the interested party must be active and must exert pressure on the institutions concerned. A woman's movement in Egypt is vital in order to initiate and monitor such change.<sup>43</sup>

The political message of both films is clear: the law needs to be changed, but in terms of legal reform there is no positive resolution in either film. *I Want a Solution* depicts a discriminatory law and its devastating effects on a woman but the ending offers no solution. Ten years on *Durriyya* is still fighting the same battle. *Cheap Flesh* also depicts the unjustified abuse of women but confronts the issue by offering a solution: Tawḥīda. She is an anomaly. Not only does she 'trespass' into the public sphere, she contests her lowly status within it and triumphs over patriarchy. While critiquing male dominance and patriarchal marriage, the film supports women's sense of self-worth, personal development and independence. *Cheap Flesh* offers an alternative model to *Durriyya*, *Najafa* and *Ikhlas*. Tawḥīda is a feisty

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<sup>41</sup> Hatem, op. cit., 26

<sup>42</sup> Talhami, op. cit., 122

<sup>43</sup> Zulficar, op. cit.

heroine of her own making. Her independent character is obvious from the start. She refuses to be looked at like an 'animal in a market' and will only go to Cairo to earn a good salary, not to marry. Tawhīda, in contrast to the other women, is the bearer rather than the receiver of the gaze, thereby adopting the dominant role. Very often the woman's gaze is punished by the narrative process but in this case Tawhīda wins in all respects. She is a successful businesswoman and she keeps her man.

*Cheap Flesh* suggests that women in today's society are offered not only the chance of romance but also the opportunity to express their individuality through education, social mobility, self-expression and sexual desire. The concluding celebration of women's right to personal fulfilment through the exercise of different life choices is progressive. The film is an affirmation of a woman's right to equal opportunities; however, women's struggle for equal rights and opportunities is not over on a personal level or on a societal level. Despite the film's ending it is still clear that gender and class barriers to women's success have not been entirely eliminated but they can be overcome (although not easily). Tawhīda challenges the existing social order but the inequality of the law is still present. Patriarchy has not been reformed and women are not offered unlimited opportunities. However, the film ends by celebrating a female victory.

## Chapter 3

### Women Punished for their Action

*The Iron Woman (al-Mar'a al-Hadīdiyya, 'Abd al-Laṭīf Zaki, 1987)*

*The Woman and the Law (al-Mar'a wa al-Qānūn, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1988)*

Gender in films has always played an important role in defining social boundaries but in the films of the 1980s it is particularly prominent. In her study of Egyptian films from the 1980s with a female protagonist, Sherifa Zuhur points out that in commercial films, 'changes and arguments over gender roles took place alongside socio-economic shifts and ideological transformations in the country.'<sup>1</sup> Writers, filmmakers, and producers were expanding the range of roles and the range of action for female protagonists, but at a price. In a number of films produced in the 1980s the women are punished for their action, usually by the law and the patriarchal society which created it. Just as Hollywood during the 1970s responded to the women's movement by making films detailing the problems faced by women in achieving independence, films by Egyptian directors reflected women's growing visibility and also the dichotomy of society at the time. They display women's activity but also concerns over the status of women and question if this activity will have a negative effect on society. 'These strengthened female figures face trials and tribulations that they have brought upon themselves by moving in conflict with society' suggests Zuhur.<sup>2</sup> Directors offer screen heroines a newfound freedom and independence; simultaneously they cruelly take it away by displaying the pessimistic outcome of independent action.

*The Iron Woman* is a hybrid film combining genre conventions of

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<sup>1</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, 'Victims or Actors? Centering Women in Egyptian Commercial Film', in Sherifa Zuhur, ed., *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 214

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

the action film, crime thriller and revenge drama. Despite the relatively unbelievable scenario, Mājida, the protagonist, holds my attention because she is a female action heroine. Many films focus on active women but Mājida is particularly interesting because she combines femininity with physical power and strength. Transformation is central to the narrative of *The Iron Woman* as Mājida moves from the position of victim to that of aggressor/criminal via the activity of investigation and revenge, and finally to maturity. Yvonne Tasker suggests the term 'criminal woman' serves to signal transgression in a literal sense, a woman who breaks the law, and potentially in a more symbolic sense, battling a corrupt establishment. What is interesting about Mājida is the challenge she poses to women's traditional social roles and to her representation within the cinema's patriarchal order. She is a woman who transgresses both the law and traditional Egyptian conventions of female behaviour. The most extreme articulation of this female criminality in this double sense culminates in the form of the rape-revenge movie.<sup>3</sup> For Mājida, the death of her husband the day after their wedding is an emotional violation but for Nādiya in *The Woman and the Law* the violation is physical. The film places the conservative discourse of modesty into a modern setting. The director utilises the narrative structure and cinematography to show the subject of rape from the point of view of the victim, the rapist and the victim's mother. Involving a transformation from victim to vigilante, the rape-revenge scenario foregrounds concerns of female sexuality, point of view and the law. The female victim/heroine is the one whose experience structures the action from beginning to end. *The Woman and the Law* recasts the rape revenge film around an avenging mother.

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<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998), 109

## The Changing Role of Women

When Sadat declared that *infitāh* would 'free the country from the economic restrictions that had bound it for so long,'<sup>4</sup> Egypt's socialism was reversed in favour of an open door economic policy. In urban areas private firms, multinational joint ventures and the tourist industry provided new work opportunities for women as well as men. Many well paying jobs, usually defined as women's work (secretaries, tourist guides and waitresses) were created. Within a relatively short period of time, Sadat's economic policy had created a new class of business entrepreneurs. Although, according to official figures in 1976, only 1.7% of the female labour force occupied executive or managerial positions, Egyptians witnessed a new phenomenon in the emergence of women as top 'businessmen' in Egypt's private sector.<sup>5</sup> Women entrepreneurs represent an extremely thin stratum of Egyptian women, nevertheless, their achievements are significant. Earl Sullivan's *Women in Egyptian Public Life* focuses on a small group of Egyptian women most visible to the general public: parliamentary women, opposition women, presidential wives and top business women. Combined, these prominent women make up a small minority of working women but their individual achievements have each added to the ongoing effort to improve the role of women in Egypt. In general terms, working women became more numerous and therefore more visible.

An influx of western ideas came with foreign investors, the importing of consumer goods and the influence of foreign films and television shows. Egyptians were presented with an abundance of images of supposedly ideal lifestyles. However, as Soha Abdel Kader points out in *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society 1899-1987*, 'as the

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<sup>4</sup> Soha Abdel Kader, *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society 1899-1987* (Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), 121

<sup>5</sup> Earl Sullivan, *Women in Egyptian Public Life* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1986), 133

open door magnified Western presence, Islam and Islamic symbols came to safeguard national identity and culture.<sup>6</sup> For many Egyptians westernisation was associated with moral laxity leading to social disruption.

Society became quick to judge individuals basing discrimination on assumption rather than proof. In 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib's *On File for Morals*, made in 1986, the female protagonist goes to her prospective fiancé's flat chaperoned by two female friends from work. Following a tip-off, the vice squad bursts in on the six friends eating dinner; three men and three women make three potential couples, and the women are arrested. The court finally finds the women innocent, but as the heroine cries out at the end of the film, it is too late as they have already been found guilty by the press and their reputations are ruined.

Following much debate initiated by Sadat about women's status in society and their rights within the family, the People's Assembly passed Law no. 44/1979 amending the Personal Status Law which had been in effect since 1929. Revision of the Law in June 1985, however, sparked controversy and debate between women's organisations, feminist activists and conservative Islamists.<sup>7</sup> Both sides of the argument were zealously debated in the popular media - in newspaper articles and books, and on radio and television programmes. Despite the disappointing setbacks of the revised law public debate over the reforms in such accessible forms meant improved awareness of women's issues. However, with the gains in women's rights, and their ever-increasing prominence in public life, came opposition in the form of conservatives and Islamists who encouraged women to accept their traditional role and stay at home. 'While Islamists (were) transmitting their message of religious piety and social conservatism . . . they (were) simultaneously

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<sup>6</sup> Abdel Kader, *op. cit.*, 125

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2 for a detailed account of the history of Egypt's personal status laws.

reviving society's cultural predisposition against women being active in the public arena.<sup>8</sup>

Many aspects of the law remained discriminatory. Though much of the gender discrimination that takes place is due to interpretation of the text and its application, which are left to the discretion of a predominantly male judicial body, there is also a differentiation between genders in the body of the text. A notable example is the difference in the penalty for the murder of one's spouse upon discovery of adultery. Whereas men are given a light prison sentence for murdering their adulterous wives, women are often sentenced to hard labour for life for murdering their unfaithful husbands. This difference is justified by the widespread attitude that a man's honour is dependent upon his wife's virtue. Consequently, his violent reaction to his wife's adultery becomes excusable, especially if committed in the heat of the moment. In *Īnās al-Dughaydi's Excuse Me, Oh Law*, made in 1985, Huda, the perfect wife, rescues her husband from prolonged impotence. Once 'Alī is cured he has an affair with the wife of a friend. When Huda finds them together she shoots them both. 'Alī later dies in hospital while Huda is giving birth to their son. She is sentenced to life imprisonment and 'Alī's father claims his grandson. The irony of the film being that the cause of 'Alī's impotence was seeing his father shoot his mother and her lover when he found them in bed together. The father is guilty of the same crime that Huda is being tried for but he was acquitted in a civil court whereas Huda is sentenced in a criminal court. It is clear from the film that the modern legal system unfairly continues to punish women. Al-Dughaydi directed a sequel, *The Challenge*, three years later. Huda, once released from prison, tries to gain custody of her son, but once again finds herself on the wrong side of her father-in-law, a symbol of the worst of Middle

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<sup>8</sup> Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York and West Sussex, Columbia University Press, 1999), 97

Eastern patriarchy.

Increased oil prices after the 1973 October War opened up employment opportunities in oil rich Arab countries. For many lower- and middle-class Egyptian labourers and professionals it was the only opportunity for employment. This migration of Egyptian males meant increased responsibilities for the women left behind. They had to manage finances, discipline their children and deal with individuals and institutions outside of the household. It is easy to see these developments as new steps in the emancipation of Egyptian women, but Abdel Kader reveals the opposite is true in many cases.<sup>9</sup> A whole new generation of Egyptian children grew up in single-parent families with the other parent a periodic visitor. For migrant wives in rural areas, living in an extended rather than an independent household, the husbands' migration did not always bring about increased freedom, particularly if she was under the domination of her mother-in-law.

A large number of unaccompanied Egyptian women also migrated. Demand for female teachers was high in sex-segregated schools. Some women worked as maids and nannies, but the majority were professional women. Some of these women were married. Role reversal was hard to accept for husbands whose wives emigrated to hold high-paying jobs, leaving the men behind to care for the children. There is also evidence of increased incidents of divorce and polygamy. Husbands emigrating alone, making more money than ever before, or alone at home and receiving their wives' remittances, take on second wives, keeping the fact from their first wives or divorcing them.

The breakdown of the traditional Egyptian family as a symbol of the growing greed and materialism of Egyptian society is the subject of *The Lost One*, directed by 'Āṭif Sālam in 1986. The first part of the film focuses on Zaynab and her unpleasant experiences in the Gulf working

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<sup>9</sup> Abdel Kader, op. cit., 133-134

as a nurse. She sends all her earnings back to her husband and children in Egypt. On her return to Cairo she loses her children to her faithless husband in court and finds that her hard work has been financing her husband's new marriage. The heroine represents all the traditional values of self-sacrifice and hard work along with the modern hardships of immigrant labour yet still the court is unjust to her. She disintegrates into drug addiction, and her despair at the loss of her children drives her to shoot her husband, his wife and his wife's mother. She has extracted her revenge, but at a heavy price: her sanity. Although the film draws attention to practices that devalue women, the subsequent self-destruction of the protagonist lessens audience identification with her.

### *The Iron Woman*

#### Synopsis

Mājida, a karate champion and coach (played by Najla' Fathī), and Ḥasan (played by Fārūq al-Fīshāwy) are in love. Due to the financial commitments of marriage Ḥasan must go abroad to earn sufficient money before he and Mājida can marry. They say goodbye at the airport and as Mājida makes her way home she is attacked by the taxi driver and his friend. She defends herself admirably with her karate skills. Four years later Ḥasan returns from Germany and the couple marry. As they lie in bed together on the first night of their honeymoon, the image of the perfect couple, Ḥasan gives Mājida a gift of jewellery. She is thrilled. As she utters the words, 'May God protect you for me,' four masked men enter their room and shoot Ḥasan dead. They steal a suitcase (containing a large sum of money) from the room and disappear.

Due to lack of evidence the police are unable to make a conviction. Frustrated by their seeming lack of interest and devastated by the loss of her new husband, Mājida decides to take the situation into her own

hands. Helped only by a photograph which she finds amongst Ḥasan's papers, of him with four other men, Mājida seeks them out one by one: Shukri, a factory owner, Kamāl, the owner of a car showroom, Midḥat, an Islamic banker, and Bayyūmi, the owner of a nightclub. Mājida successfully identifies Shukri and interrogates him at his factory. She reveals her true identity and confronts him with his past responsibilities. A fight ensues and Mājida pushes him onto a piece of machinery, killing him instantly. She watches his funeral from a distance and identifies Kamāl from the photograph. She visits him at his showroom claiming to be interested in buying a sports car. They drive to a quiet spot in the desert and once again Mājida reveals that she is the widow of Ḥasan. She drives Kamāl off a cliff and he falls to his death. Mājida is left frustrated still not knowing the reason why Ḥasan was killed.

Following the deaths of Shukri and Kamāl, Midḥat (also in the photograph) embarks on his own investigation of Mājida. When she introduces herself to him as a potential investor, he already knows her true identity. He sends two men to her apartment to intimidate her but they are no match for her physical strength and karate expertise. When she confronts Midḥat with the responsibility of Ḥasan's death, he has already planned his response: to kill her. Mājida is forced to kill him in self-defence, with his own knife. Terrified of being Mājida's next victim, Bayyūmi goes to the police for protection. He reveals that all five men were engaged in a money forging operation. Ḥasan had double crossed his accomplices and taken their money so they killed him. As Mājida attempts to kill Bayyūmi she is caught by the police. They reveal to her the truth about Ḥasan.

### Structure

Action films are traditionally considered a 'male' genre. Common to the genre is a narrative structure involving fights and chases with an

emphasis on athletic feats and stunts. Often set in the romantic past or fantastical future, there are numerous opportunities for spectacular action. The vast majority of action films focus on a male protagonist and position women in supporting or secondary roles, often no more than a pretty appendage to the central male character. The heroines of action cinema have tended 'to be fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging.'<sup>10</sup> Female characters were passive rather than active figures. The genre evolved, however, particularly in Hollywood, with the increased inclusion of women in the central action roles following the success of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, USA, 1979) starring Sigourney Weaver. The word heroine no longer signified passivity, suggests Yvonne Tasker, in her study of gender in the action film.<sup>11</sup> These roles for women have developed into characters who have taken on conventionally masculine traits whilst simultaneously keeping their feminine attributes.

*The Iron Woman* opens with six static shots of Mājida: close-ups of her face and medium shots of her practising karate. These shots, combined with the title of the film which is superimposed on the fourth, fifth and sixth shots, introduce the female protagonist. This series of shots in quick succession, the title of the film and the introduction of karate, combined with the fast paced music, suggest we are about to see a film which involves action. In the first scenes (before the credit sequence) we are presented with Mājida and Ḥasan's relationship. They are a young couple, both from modest backgrounds, who are in love. They cannot afford to get married and as a result Ḥasan decides to go to Europe in the hope of earning more money. Mājida will wait for him. This feminine passivity however, is challenged in the following scene when Mājida takes a taxi from the airport after having said goodbye to

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<sup>10</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 17

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

Ḥasan. On the way home the taxi driver picks up a second passenger: a man. The driver offers Mājida a cigarette and then lewdly suggests that the three of them go home together. To his (and our) surprise, Mājida suggests the desert instead, which will be quiet, but is close by. When the driver stops in a secluded area Mājida jumps out of the car, onto the bonnet, and proceeds to beat both men to the ground in an elaborate display of her karate skills. The attack is shown in slow motion with Mājida dominating the screen space. Each significant punch or kick from Mājida is accompanied by a sound stressing her power and strength.<sup>12</sup>

Mājida drives a red sports car around Kamāl until he begs for mercy and then drives him off a cliff. She gazes, emotionless, at his body, tossing the car keys into the sand. With the simple reversal of the male identification with car-as-weapon, and the continuous insertion of clips of Mājida pumping iron and performing traditional karate cries in the gym images of the active female protagonist disrupt the conventional notion that women are represented exclusively through the codes of femininity. The female action hero poses a challenge to gendered binaries through her existence: her qualities of strength and determination and her labour and the body that enacts it, mark her out as ‘unfeminine’.<sup>13</sup> But it is the unusual combination of these conventionally masculine traits and her feminine attributes that allow the protagonist to achieve her goals. Mājida’s feminine charm means she can carry out her investigation of the men in the photograph, whom she believes were responsible for Ḥasan’s death, but the resulting acts of revenge are due to her ‘masculine’ physical strength.

The film is not just a showcase for action. There are also generic

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<sup>12</sup> The slow motion action shots are reminiscent of *The Bionic Woman*, a successful American television series of the mid 1970s in which the female protagonist, following a sky-diving accident, receives bionic replacements giving her incredible power and strength. Movement in slow motion and exaggerated sounds allows the audience to identify the use of the bionic parts. The series was one of many western imports which became popular in Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> Tasker, *Working Girls*, 69

elements of the crime thriller. In *Narration and the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell draws on a number of formalist concepts in his discussion of the detective film.<sup>14</sup> For Bordwell, the crux of the detective film is knowledge, and in particular its suppression and restriction:

The detective film justifies its gaps and retardations by controlling knowledge, self-consciousness, and communicativeness. The genre aims to create curiosity about past story events, suspense about upcoming events, and surprise with respect to unexpected disclosures about either story (fabula) or syuzhet. To promote all three emotional states, the narration must limit the viewer's knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The syuzhet (dramatic composition of the plot) of a detective or crime film is principally structured by the progress of the detective's investigation, and since the investigation is the basis of the syuzhet, the circumstances governing the investigation are typically explained compactly. Exposition about the investigation itself tends to be concentrated in preliminary portions of the syuzhet, while information about the motive, agent and circumstance of the crime will be summed up clearly in later portions. The syuzhet typically delays revelation of, in this case, the motive for Ḥasan's murder. The genre aims to create curiosity about past story events, for example, what did Ḥasan do abroad? To promote these emotional states the narration must limit the viewer's knowledge. We share the restricted knowledge possessed by Mājida. Our range of knowledge is the same as hers; we learn what she learns at the same time she does. Mājida, as the investigator, is given symbolic authority that is associated with that position. Her goal is not only to find her husband's murderers but also to find out why her husband's life was taken. Only occasionally do we glimpse omniscient narration. The camera steps out of Mājida's field of knowledge for example, when Midḥat begins his investigation of Mājida.

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<sup>14</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1985)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

*The Iron Woman* is based around the concept of investigation, but not from the point of view of the law. This is not a straightforward investigation. Women in crime fiction are typically positioned as the object of investigation, but Tasker notes in *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, that female protagonists can be located across three different domains: the active knowledge space of the investigator, the object of the investigation and the victim of the crime. She suggests it is quite feasible for female protagonists in crime thrillers to move between these three textual positions: the active, knowledgeable space of the investigator, that of the criminal/object of the investigation, and that of the victim of crime.<sup>16</sup> Initially Mājida is the victim of a crime, but following Ḥasan's murder her role changes quickly from that of victim to investigator. While assuming the role of investigator, she becomes the object under investigation, by Midḥat and then by the police. Thus, the protagonist exists across these three textual positions.

Mājida's investigation and elimination of the killers is marked by a repeated sequence of shots. Frustrated by the lack of action from the police and armed with the photograph, Mājida takes the initiative and starts her own investigation of each man. Her systematic approach is seen in the repetitive structure of the narrative and the repetition of particular shots. One by one Mājida identifies the men in the photograph. Once she has confirmation that he was one of the masked gunmen, we see her in action in the gym - a brief reminder that the feminine Mājida is not all that she seems. She then confronts her 'prey' in an isolated area where each comes to his own violent death. Then follows a close-up of the photograph and the individual's face disappears, emphasising the finality of each meeting.

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<sup>16</sup> Tasker, *Working Girls*, 92

The investigative structure of the film is also evident in the voyeuristic use of camerawork. When Ḥasan returns to Cairo after an absence of four years, he goes to the sporting club watches Mājida from a distance as she gives a karate class. This short series of shots confirms traditional relations of looking: man as 'bearer of the look', woman 'to be looked at'. The death of Ḥasan functions to mark a new phase in the narrative. The traditional discourse is eliminated; the conventional love story is ignored and a new narrative approach based on female experience is introduced. Mājida becomes the investigator ascertaining guilt and asserting control. The film's narrative trajectory would appear to reverse the traditional gendered relations of looking in the cinema. Mājida becomes the subject rather than the object of the voyeuristic gaze. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are the scenes in which Mājida views Kamāl (who becomes her second victim) at the funeral of Shukri (her first victim), and when she watches Midḥat (who becomes her third victim) as he leaves work. Midḥat begins his own investigation of Mājida and watches her from a distance, teaching at the sporting club. This repetition of the earlier shot of Ḥasan watching Mājida functions to re-establish the traditional relations of looking which Mājida has violated, and to establish the change from investigating and establishing the guilt of a man to investigating and establishing the guilt of a woman. The protagonist's inviolability is broken when Midḥat returns Mājida's gaze.

The female protagonist is granted agency in the narrative challenging the traditional cinematic association of activity exclusively with masculinity. Mājida remains in charge of her own fate throughout the film, frustrating all attempts at male control up to the very end when she has no choice but to submit to male authority.

## *The Woman and the Law*

### Synopsis

Nādiya a school student (played by Shirihān), is delighted when she passes her exams. She becomes engaged to Aḥmad a lawyer (played by Fārūq al-Fīshāwy), but her mother will not allow her to marry until she has finished university. A compromise is reached and on Aḥmad's insistence he and Nādiya do get married, but she remains in the family home with her mother. Maḥmūd, their landlord, is attracted to Nādiya. He asks for her hand in marriage but on discovering she has already been taken by Aḥmad, he proposes to her mother, Sayyida, instead. She accepts.

Maḥmūd collapses at home and then immediately goes to visit his drug supplier. When he returns home he watches Nādiya asleep through the keyhole of her bedroom door. As his obsession with Nādiya increases so does his physical pain and the following day he visits his supplier again. That night he watches Nādiya again. Maḥmūd is hospitalised as a result of his drug addiction. He dreams that he is a pharaoh and Nādiya is presented to him as a gift. When he wakes up he escapes from hospital, returns home, ties Nādiya to the bed and rapes her. When Sayyida discovers her daughter unconscious she shoots Maḥmūd dead and is arrested. Although Aḥmad defends Sayyida in court, his family urge him to divorce Nādiya. He does not inform Nādiya of the divorce until after it has taken place. After a brief spell in hospital Nādiya returns home to obscene graffiti scrawled on the walls of the building where she lives. She encounters the scorn of her neighbours who believe she brought the rape upon herself.

Nādiya is not allowed to testify in defence of her mother and the court sentences Sayyida to ten years hard labour for the murder. Because the crime had already taken place the murder would not have prevented

the crime, therefore, it becomes a new crime of revenge. Sayyida collapses, but it is not until Nādiya goes to kneel by her side that we realise she is dead. Nādiya reaches through the bars and closes her mother's eyes.

### Structure

The most prevalent characters of Egyptian mainstream cinema are constructed according to a largely conservative moral system which is ruled by clear binary oppositions – good and evil, virtuous and vicious. Females are often exposed to moral dangers, articulated within a contemporary social context. Melodrama as a popular cultural form takes this notion of social crisis and mediates it within a private context, the home. Dramatic action takes place between and not within the characters. It is a critical commonplace that film melodrama as a genre subordinates virtually everything to broad emotional impact. 'Whereas the detective story emphasises the act of unearthing what already occurred, the melodrama . . . plays down curiosity about the past, and maximises our urge to know what will happen next.'<sup>17</sup> *The Woman and the Law* presents the audience with an emerging situation and our principal interest arises from the question, what will happen next?

The film's opening credit sequence is constructed of a number of still photographs: a young beautiful woman, a young couple in love, mother and daughter, a middle aged man, the young woman now alone and looking frightened, the mother looking desperate, mother and daughter together again, ending with the young woman alone. This sequence of images foreshadows the plot of the film. The photographs are immediately followed by an external tracking shot of rooftops which is accompanied by the Muslim call to prayer on the soundtrack. An internal domestic scene follows this external establishing shot. In a

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<sup>17</sup> Bordwell, op. cit., 70

modest flat in Old Cairo Nādiya is studying in her bedroom. She walks through to the kitchen to make tea. A graphic match succeeds this; a round aluminium tray catching the light in the kitchen becomes a circular light on the ceiling of a hospital operating theatre. Nādiya's mother is a nurse working a night shift. This opening sequence sets up a distinction between internal and external spaces and situates Nādiya in the interior feminine space while her mother occupies the exterior masculine space. The film opens, then, with Nādiya's fractured home life: absent father and working mother. The sequence also sets up the social context of the film. As Sayyida returns home from work in the early morning, we hear the locals in the alley, gossiping. The men immediately suspect the worst and assume she must be some kind of entertainer - what other kind of woman would keep such hours? The comparison then is striking. While Nādiya and her mother are hard working, the people they live amongst are idle gossips.

The mother/daughter relationship is articulated through plot and cinematography in the first part of the film. Their loving relationship is clearly constructed by the camera which allows them the privilege of being centre stage. Particularly striking is the scene in which the two women meet in their local neighbourhood. Sayyida is walking down a busy street. From behind her she hears a voice, 'Mamma!' She turns around slowly and Nādiya is facing her. Nādiya has passed her exams with a high grade. The camera tracks right with Sayyida as she walks towards Nādiya. Then the camera tracks left with Nādiya as she walks towards her mother. Looking down on them from above, we watch the couple embrace in slow motion. Then they are centred in the frame in profile. We watch as they smile and hold each other, their hair flowing in the wind. It is a classic lover's embrace; they only have eyes for each other. Their separation is all the more traumatic after we have witnessed their intimacy.

To gain the maximum emotional expressiveness of the melodrama, the narration employs omniscience. Unrestricted knowledge is created in several different ways. Cutaways to action nearby, cross cutting and shots of characters which other characters do not see, all expand our range of knowledge. Signs, musical cues and establishing shots all contribute a degree of self-consciousness. Disaster and evil are personified in the rapist, and the audience is aware of this from early on. From his glances and stares, the camera work and the music, we know that Maḥmūd is an embodiment of evil, and something terrible is about to happen, before the female protagonists do. The music in particular that is associated with Maḥmūd announces the proximity of danger. The turning point in the narrative is marked by the scene where Nādiya, Sayyida, Aḥmad and Maḥmūd are sitting having lunch by the river Nile. As Maḥmūd states, 'I am at your service,' the music takes a sinister tone and a football knocks a glass, cutting Sayyida's hand. Blood on her hand from the broken glass is later mirrored by blood on her hand from Nādiya's rape wound. This functions to mark a new phase in the narrative; from this point on Maḥmūd brings disaster to Nādiya and her mother. His attraction and increased obsession with Nādiya becomes the focal point of the plot at this point and his point of view is prominent.

Suspense is formulated in two specific ways: firstly, through the localization of suspense in the familiarised female space of the home in relation to a close relative (in this case the step-father), and secondly in the violent investigating gaze of the rapist towards the female protagonist (who is also the victim). *The Woman and the Law* is confined mainly to the indoor space of home. It is an intimate portrayal of what is normally considered feminine space. In melodrama the male also finds himself in the domestic sphere (home). So he is in the site no longer of production but of reproduction. The home represents the ideological confrontation between the two. In *Notes on Sirk and*

*Melodrama*, Laura Mulvey argues that 'ideological contradiction is the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama . . . its excitement comes from the conflict not between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love.'<sup>18</sup> By marrying Sayyida, Maḥmūd is no longer in his typically ascribed space, in the work sphere, normally the sphere of action. He places himself in the domestic, female sphere which is normally non-active. The home, however, in *The Woman and the Law*, forms a centre of gravity for the actions of the people inhabiting it.

The relay of looks exemplified by such systems as point of view and shot/reverse shot, exist as a structural feature of the classical cinematic text. Sayyida's loving gaze towards her daughter, Nādiya's glances towards Aḥmad and Maḥmūd's objectification of Nādiya, culminate in Maḥmūd peering through the keyhole of Nādiya's door. This drama of seeing becomes invested with horror within the context of the home; there is no escape for Nādiya. Terror, which should by rights be external to domesticity, infiltrates the home. The film explores placing the female subject in crisis as she is displayed as spectacle for the male gaze. As Maḥmūd watches Nādiya through the keyhole we see her asleep from his point of view. We are placed in the uncomfortable position of voyeur. Equally discomfoting is the music accompanying Maḥmūd's voyeurism. Music is one of the foundations of melodrama and communicates characters' perceptions and attitudes. In this film it is especially identified with Maḥmūd, underlining such tense moments. The music is sinister and jarring, unpleasant to listen to.

Maḥmūd's drug addiction is confirmed, and related to this he suffers some sort of mental and physical pain as his obsession with Nādiya increases. The next morning Maḥmūd takes Nādiya to college. He asks if she wants anything, to which she replies no. Maḥmūd is

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' (updated), in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London, BFI Publishing, 1987), 75

physically hurt by her rejection and doubles up in pain. He sniffs in a repulsive manner, signifying his need for a fix. He continues to drive but has to stop because his vision becomes blurred as his pain increases. (Subjective distortion through blurring and loss of focus are typical signifiers of drunkenness and drug abuse.) The discourse of desire becomes a discourse of delirium as Maḥmūd's body and mind are slowly but painfully transformed. Later that night he is woken by the sound of Nādiya laughing. She is in her bedroom talking to Aḥmad on the telephone. Maḥmūd cannot resist the sound of Nādiya's giggles and creeps to her room. He places his eye to the keyhole and once again we partake in his voyeurism. He pushes the door open by mistake and Nādiya is alerted to his presence. 'The look' is used to construct distinctions between guilt and innocence and the act of 'breaking and entering' Nādiya's bedroom foreshadows the rape.

A multiplicity and diversity of strategies can be activated to signify the subjective – a multiplicity necessary, suggests Mary Ann Doane, 'precisely because subjectivity is reduced to interiority, and interiority, by definition, is invisible, inaccessible to the camera.'<sup>19</sup> As well as the point of view shot, other signifiers include facial expression, music and optical devices such as dreams or daydreams. Maḥmūd is hospitalised for his drug addiction. He wakes up in the middle of the night; Sayyida is asleep in a chair by his side. He sneaks out of his room, down a corridor, turns a corner and heads towards the light. He enters their flat and once again looks through the keyhole into Nādiya's room. We watch from his point of view as two Nubian servants carry an enormous tray of fruit and place it on a table. It is a dream; for a brief moment we feel relief. Maḥmūd is a pharaoh and Nādiya is presented to him as a gift. She dances as the servants wrap strips of silk around her. She falls to the

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), 147

floor, caught in the silk. Maḥmūd pulls one end of the material and unravels her. Just as he is about to kiss her he is brought back to reality; a nurse wakes him to give him his medicine. Maḥmūd's dream articulates the tension between his respectable outward appearance as protector and provider and his internal desires. The next sequence of shots echo those of the dream: Maḥmūd sneaks out of his room, down a corridor, turns a corner and heads towards the light. This time we know it is not a dream. The opposition between internal and external has fused and for Maḥmūd the boundary between internal representation and exterior perception has been removed. We are horrified by the thought of what he will do to Nādiya this time.

Maḥmūd enters the flat and once again peers through the keyhole into Nādiya's room. The door is a surface which separates one space from another, activating the dialectic of concealing and revealing and Maḥmūd can no longer resist the temptation it offers. Nādiya senses his presence, wakes up, and shouts out to her mother. Simultaneously her mother wakes up and shouts out 'Nādiya!' She turns and sees that Maḥmūd has gone. This is the first of several cross cuts between Nādiya and her mother as she desperately tries to get to the flat to protect her daughter. For Nādiya there is no escape. This heightens the drama of rescuing her. The camera is more confined so the variety of shots used is limited which invoke a greater sense of entrapment. Sayyida is not at home to protect Nādiya, a point underlined in this sequence by the cutting between Nādiya trying to defend herself against Maḥmūd, and Sayyida trying to get home before it is too late. Shots of Aḥmad also trying to get to Nādiya are included in the cross cutting highlighting the point that Nādiya has not been securely placed in her own home with Aḥmad either. Sayyida is running in the street. Cut to Nādiya's arm being tied to the headboard of the bed. Aḥmad is running in the street. Cut to Nādiya's other arm being tied to the headboard of the bed.

Nādiya's mother hails a taxi. Aḥmad hails a taxi. Nādiya's mother tells the driver to, 'Hurry up!' A graphic match reveals Aḥmad also telling the driver to, 'Hurry up!' This cross cutting emphasises the desperation in their attempt to save Nādiya and heightens the suspense for the audience (Will they arrive in time?) because we know the consequences of Maḥmūd's actions will be devastating if they do not.

Sayyida enters the bedroom but is too late. She sees her daughter unconscious, tied to the bed like a sacrificial lamb. The camera tracks left to reveal Maḥmūd asleep on the sofa. Maḥmūd's long stares at Nādiya and his peering at her through the keyhole have culminated in her physical violation. The erotic display of Maḥmūd's dream has become a violent confrontation. Nādiya is made aware of his growing interest in her but is powerless to evade his attack. As Zuhur point out, 'the rape is an extension of Maḥmūd's voyeurism'<sup>20</sup> and thus exploits 'the problematic wherein male violence is delineated as an effect of the voyeuristic gaze.'<sup>21</sup> We are not witness to the rape but we do see on Sayyida's hand the bleeding associated with loss of virginity. The daughter is an extension of the mother and therefore the rape becomes a violation of the mother as well. Sayyida shoots Maḥmūd dead with his own gun. Rather than offering the protracted spectacle of a brutal rape the film portrays the rape in a non-voyeuristic fashion. The emphasis is then placed on Sayyida's response to the crime rather than on the rapist's pleasure.

The focus of the film then returns to the relationship of Nādiya and her mother, the consequences of the rape and subsequent murder. Following Sayyida's arrest we see two newspaper headlines. The first, accompanying a photograph of Nādiya, questions, 'Was there a relationship between the daughter and the stepfather?' The second,

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<sup>20</sup> Zuhur, op. cit., 223

<sup>21</sup> Doane, op. cit., 125

accompanying a photograph of Sayyida, states, 'Woman killed husband because she found him with daughter.' Both headlines make reference to Nādiya's relationship with Maḥmūd, neither mention the rape, and neither consider Nādiya as a victim. She is given a permit to visit her mother in prison. A close-up of Sayyida is followed by a close-up of Nādiya followed by a medium shot of the women in profile as they embrace each other. This sequence of shots echoes those from the beginning of the film when Nādiya had just received her exam results. By contrast this embrace is static and subdued. Nādiya is dressed in black while her mother is dressed in white with her hair covered. All aspects of the scene attest to the constraints of patriarchal domination: costume, camera movement, and dialogue.

Nādiya is denied the opportunity to articulate her experience of the rape and to become the subject of her own story. The two women are never allowed to speak for themselves. As is indicated most forcefully in the trial scene, it is the patriarchal discourse which defines and controls the women. The event of the rape is quite literally unspeakable, and the patriarchal discourse is able to legitimate the erosion of the women's story from the narrative. The repression of the female perspective is marked most strongly in the death of Sayyida.

### **Discourses of Female Identity, Modesty and Maternity**

The dominant themes of both films are the false security that men offer women and an exploration of women's place in society. All three women, Māgida, Nādiya and Sayyida seek a conventional marriage and its associated safety and security. For these women, however, marriage brings disaster. As a result *The Iron Woman* challenges limitations imposed on women and the socially constructed framework of feminine identity, while *The Woman and the Law* explores the maternal discourse and the discourse of female modesty within a patriarchal ideology.

The protagonist of *The Iron Woman* is a modern woman who can take care of herself, but who has roots in a conservative Egyptian family. Ḥasan and Mājida's relationship is presented as a traditional romance, but from the moment Ḥasan departs, Mājida is placed in danger from society and *must* take care of herself. This is first articulated when Mājida is propositioned by the taxi driver. Ḥasan's absence leaves his fiancé in a vulnerable position. The director makes reference to the well known Egyptian folk tale, Clever Boy Ḥasan, in which Ḥasan returns to his loved one bearing riches, having conquered the world. Following the credit sequence, the film proper starts with Ḥasan's return to Egypt. After an absence of four years he returns with an abundance of wealth. He buys a flat and marries Mājida. At long last her dreams have come true. Despite giving an outwardly modern, independent appearance, Mājida's ultimate happiness lies with Ḥasan and a conventional marriage. She no longer needs to be self-reliant but can enjoy the security and protection of her man. But this is an inversion of the folk tale; in reality Ḥasan has returned with nothing. Ḥasan's wealth is from fraudulent means and for this he pays with his life, leaving Mājida to take care of herself. Ḥasan becomes unscrupulous when he leaves Egypt and travels abroad, but in reality the corruption is much closer to home. Midḥat is symbolic of the corruption within Egypt. He manipulates Islam for his own benefit, a reference to real life con artists who, under the guise of legitimate Islamic bankers, swindled money from many innocent people in the mid 1980s.

Being unmarried, Sayyida is the subject of much gossip in her local neighbourhood. Encouraged by her work colleagues, she accepts Maḥmūd's proposal of marriage; she will lose her independence, but will gain security, albeit false security in this case. Her female colleagues confirm the position of women as the weaker sex, and tell her that in a few years time she will need someone to depend on. In her study of

contemporary lifestyles of women in Cairo, Karin Werner notes that in a patriarchal discourse influenced by Islam, a downgrading of employed work for women is countered by an upgrading of female domestic labour. 'Women can achieve the status of respected members of the local community . . . through becoming housewives and mothers, a status which is highly politicised throughout Egyptian society as inevitably connected with female nature or as female destiny.'<sup>22</sup> Sayyida's adherence to acceptable social norms, however, will be catastrophic, financially, physically and emotionally. Indebted to his dealer Maḥmūd has no option but to relinquish their flat. The security he offered to Sayyida is now in danger. Although shocked by her husband's addiction, Sayyida chooses to stand by Maḥmūd, dutifully, in her new traditional role. Sayyida has appropriated the traditionally masculine role of provider. She repositions herself within the patriarchal discourse by accepting Maḥmūd's marriage proposal. It is the lack of patriarchal authority in the home which allows Maḥmūd to be accepted into the feminine, indoor space. He brings with him destruction rather than the expected stability and security. The destruction is contained within the motif of remarriage.

Nādiya reveals to Aḥmad the unwelcome attention she is receiving from Maḥmūd, but he fails to protect her. He is incapable of finding an independent flat for himself and his wife, and his mother refuses to house them in her flat. In the Middle East such importance is placed on the masculine role of the provider, yet in this film Aḥmad is incompetent.<sup>23</sup> He offers no support, protection or security from Maḥmūd's advances. Nādiya is presumed to be guilty by Aḥmad's own family, and by her neighbours. After some deliberation Aḥmad succumbs

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<sup>22</sup> Karin Werner, *Between Westernization and the Veil: Contemporary Lifestyles of Women in Cairo* (Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 1997), 269

<sup>23</sup> By coincidence Aḥmad in *The Woman and the Law* and Ḥasan in *The Iron Woman* are played by the same actor, Fārūq al-Fishāwy. He fails to protect Nādiya in the same way that he fails to protect Mājida.

to social pressures and resigns himself to the situation. His association with Nādiya can only be seen as negative in a society where honour and reputation hold the utmost importance. Female chastity is representative of a patriarchal social order and dependability and loyalty are unquestionable characteristics of a good wife. The mere perception that a woman has contravened the code of sexual behavior damages honor. The regime of honor is unforgiving: women on whom suspicion has fallen are not given an opportunity to defend themselves. Faced with hampered career prospects and a sister who is afraid her husband will divorce her because of the family scandal, Aḥmad takes the cowardly way out, divorces Nādiya without her knowledge, and informs her two days later.

After one month the police can offer no conclusive evidence from their investigation into Ḥasan's murder, so the case is suspended pending further evidence. Mājida embarks on her own investigation; her life will never be the same again. She begins a journey of self-discovery in which she is forced to interact with society and challenge the limitations that society imposes on women. From an early age girls and boys are taught to accept their prescribed social roles. 'In Egypt men not only believe that they are duty bound to support, protect, and defend women, but women as well have internalised the assumption that men offer them safe haven.'<sup>24</sup> In Egyptian society the family is deemed more important than the individual and a woman's social position is defined by her marital status. Mājida loses her status as 'wife' and distanced from 'femininity' which is defined by passivity and hysteria, she rejects the support and protection of her closest male relative, her father. Mājida, then, is an anomaly. The degree of autonomy which she demonstrates stands in opposition to her traditional mother and the two other women in the film. Thoroughly modern Mājida is the antithesis of

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<sup>24</sup> Botman, op. cit., 105

her conservative mother. When she returns home to her new flat following Ḥasan's death, her mother tells her it is her fate. Women in the past were often portrayed in love stories blindly accepting whatever fate had to offer. Where once Mājida would have been resigned to her fate and quietly mourned the death of her husband, she now has a proactive response. At a later point in the film when a policeman summons Mājida from her home to the police station, her mother entreats her to wait until her father gets home to accompany her, but Mājida sees no need for her father's presence. She is an independent woman who does not need a man's protection. Roles for women were expanding. In *The Iron Woman*, passivity has been replaced with motivated vengeance.

Stasis is often associated with women in films, but Mājida is psychologically and physically active. Her journey is marked by her investigation, the quest for knowledge and infiltration into male space. She moves from the supposedly female space of the home to the supposedly male space of a timber factory, a car show room and an Islamic bank. The relationship of space in *The Iron Woman* is one about mastery relying heavily on shots of action occurring in open spaces or outdoors. This counters established notions of the female offender. While most theorists have noted that women generally kill in domestic settings, *The Iron Woman* places the act of murder outside of the home. Shukri's office is on a higher level than the factory floor. From its large windows he is able to view his factory from above which invokes a sense of mastery over the space. He is later killed below, however, in his own territory. Mājida torments and eventually kills Kāmal with a car from his own showroom and kills Miḍḥat with his own knife. Cinematic images of women who wield guns, and who take control of cars, computers and other technologies that have symbolised both power and freedom within the film world, mobilise a symbolically transgressive iconography.

Face to face with each man, Mājida is intelligent, confident and competent in conversation and action. These attributes often defined as uncharacteristic for a woman would often be shown in contrast, to other weaker women. In this film, however, Bayyūmi (Mājida's last potential victim) is the 'weak woman'. He is the antithesis of Mājida, revealing cowardly and vulnerable behaviour. She displays qualities of calmness in contrast to the panic stricken Bayyūmi. In an interesting twist of the male/female polarity it is Bayyūmi's 'feminine' traits which eventually lead to Mājida's downfall. His need for protection is articulated in the form of a night club bouncer, who is constantly by his side. His incessant worrying about being Mājida's next victim is made evident in the scenes of conversation following the deaths of Shukri and Kamāl. Following Midḥat's death, Bayyūmi can no longer contain himself and he runs to the police for protection. In doing so the police are able to lay a trap for Mājida before Bayyūmi becomes her fourth victim. The sexual stereotyping of woman as emotional object and man as reliable subject has been inverted.

The vulnerability of the female body is most often expressed through images of rape or sexual assault. The rape in *The Woman and the Law* largely functions to endorse and uphold traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Maḥmūd is stereotypically masculine; he is tall and powerful, with a deep voice. He is also fairly ugly. In so far as the binary ugliness/prettiness is inherently gendered uglification is virtually synonymous with masculinisation. Ugliness also carries with it connotations of sexual unattractiveness. Nādiya is petite, beautiful and softly spoken. He is the personification of evil and she is his innocent victim. The victim's volatility is a structural necessity for the narrational process of melodrama. The victim's innocence also functions to help legitimate the revenge. The purity of Nādiya is assured by defining her in relation to a man, as a wife, so necessitating and

legitimising the presence of a male avenger of her rape. For Nādiya, rape is represented as both a result of, and a violation of, her femininity and for Aḥmad as a violation of his masculine ability to protect Nādiya. In *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Jacinda Read states that men's revengeful response to rape is shown to arise out of nothing more than natural masculine behaviour. And, it is his role to bring about narrative resolution and restore the status quo and his actions are consequently rarely open to criticism.<sup>25</sup> However, as I have already pointed out Aḥmad is incompetent to protect Nādiya and as a result he is also unable to endorse the traditional position of avenger. Rape, real or threatened, has been a staple of cinema more or less from the beginning. The transformation of the rape-revenge film however is 'that rape has become not only a deed deserving of brutal retribution but a deed that women themselves (not cops, boyfriends or fathers) undertook to redress.'<sup>26</sup> The death of the rapist introduces the element of revenge. Read uses the term 'secondary revenge' to refer to those cases in which the rapist is killed by someone other than his victim, most usually a family member or loved one. While in general the rape of a loved one is shown to be sufficient justification for male violence to go unpunished, in those films featuring female revenge, the presence of additional punishment suggests that rape is not seen as sufficient justification for such unnatural behaviour. This rape-revenge structure functions to put women in their place by endorsing and upholding traditional conceptions of femininity.

The maternal is a primary way of defining the feminine in patriarchal culture and is a central discourse of *The Woman and the Law*. Sayyida is referred to as Umm Nādiya ('Mother of Nādiya')

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<sup>25</sup> Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2000)

<sup>26</sup> Carol Clover, High and Low: The Transformation of the Rape-Revenge Movie, Pam Cook and Philip Dodd, eds., *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993), 76

reminding us of how Nādiya is enmeshed in family, in this case a closely woven relationship between two women that excludes a male element. At the outset of the film Sayyida is single mother, working hard to bring up her daughter. Sayyida works out of necessity and not out of desire to be something else besides a mother. The loving embrace of mother and daughter after Nādiya receives her exam results does not only symbolise the bond between the two women, but also highlights the importance placed on Nādiya passing her exams and as a result being able to continue her education. The elaborate party that is thrown in celebration is a further reminder of the importance of her achievement. Nādiya's mother is working to make sure her daughter has a better life. She lives her dreams of social mobility through Nādiya. On passing her exams, Nādiya can enter medical college and fulfil her mother's dreams of seeing her daughter become a doctor (Sayyida herself is a nurse), and proactively raise their economic status. Like Mājida in *The Iron Woman* she refuses to leave their future to fate.

The first scenes of the film establish the economic status of the family. Nādiya's mother must sell her jewellery to prepare Nadiya for college while Aḥmad is incapable of finding the money needed in order to get married. Despite his financial situation, Aḥmad is keen for them to marry. Sayyida refuses until Nādiya has completed her degree, believing she is doing what is best for her daughter's future. A compromise is reached and on Aḥmad's insistence he and Nādiya do get married, but she stays in the family home. The consequences of their financial situation and the massive housing problems (exacerbated by the deregulation of rents and an acute shortage of low-cost housing) are devastating. By keeping her daughter at home Sayyida has unwittingly placed Nādiya within the rapists reach.

The coupling of a discourse of rape with a discourse of maternity mobilises women's issues largely in the service of patriarchal ideology.

In her study of parental rape-revenge films, Read observes that it is the failure of the legal system to adequately punish perpetrators of rape which drives mothers to take the law into their own hands and kill their daughters' rapists. She also suggests that due to neglect of maternal responsibilities within the home, it is maternal guilt rather than maternal love that drives these women to commit acts of revenge. By the end of this type of rape-revenge film, traditional gender roles have been re-established, with the mother returned to her prescribed place in the home.<sup>27</sup> These films present the ideal, happy family life at the beginning which is then disrupted by impending trauma. *The Woman and the Law* is an inversion of this structure. Disruption is caused through the motif of remarriage. Sayyida, then, must usurp the traditionally masculine role of avenger and defender of the family, not out of feminist principle but out of necessity, because the threat has come from within the family. She takes on a masculine role for the sake of her victimised child.

*The Iron Woman* and *The Woman and the Law* both address the position of a female avenger within a patriarchal ideology but the films differ in their representation of female identity. Where Nādiya is trapped within a discourse of female modesty Mājida is able to move between modes, functioning simultaneously or alternately as romantic interest, sexual object and active protagonist within the narrative. Mājida's search for the truth is also a journey of self-discovery, one in which she must challenge the limitations imposed on women by society. The director uses this journey to challenge the socially constructed framework of feminine identity. The opposition between femininity and masculinity is expressed through appearance, particularly costume and behaviour. Clothes are not accessories but are key elements in the

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<sup>27</sup> Read, op. cit., 207

construction of Mājida's identity. She has the ability to manipulate her social appearance through her clothes, hair, voice and mannerisms. Her appearance is always appropriate to the immediate situation. With Ḥasan she is carefree and feminine in pastel dresses with frills and matching hair bands - a stark contrast to the black she dons when she becomes a young widow in mourning. While Ḥasan is alive Mājida's femininity is natural, but following his death we see her construct an artificial femininity, by way of several different guises, for the job at hand. She constructs her femininity within a patriarchal social context and it is always validated by the presence of a man. The director deconstructs stereotypes and inverts traditional, expected images of women in Egyptian society.

Dressed in a silky blue and black dress with her hair flowing and a touch of makeup, Mājida is feminine and flirtatious when she meets Kamāl for the first time at his car showroom. She requests a sports car to complete her sexy image, and Kamāl is immediately smitten. Here, she plays the traditional role of the *femme fatale* more than at any other point in the film. She invites Kamāl to her place to discuss business, flaunting her independence, showing no signs of conservative etiquette. It is most unusual for a woman to invite a man to her home, particularly if she is single, and especially if she is alone. The home is traditionally considered a place of safety and security, not a place for strangers of the opposite sex. The director presents us with an inversion of the conventional Egyptian woman. Being no ordinary woman, Mājida uses the unconventional situation to her advantage. She drugs Kamāl, asks him some questions and gets the information she needs to place him at the scene of Ḥasan's murder. With Miḍḥat, the Islamic banker, she is able to stalk her prey by adopting modest dress. When she visits Miḍḥat's office for the first time, on the pretence of wanting to invest her money, Mājida adopts a traditional Islamic appearance wearing a

veil over her hair. Feminine and flirtatious has been transformed into devout and conservative. Midḥat is respectable of this outward modest appearance, and instead of being philandering, his conversation with Mājida is that of formalities and religious utterances.

An association between women, criminality and sexuality is evident in two stereotypes explored across different genres - the *femme fatale* and the prostitute. The figure of the *femme fatale* has interested feminist film critics because she is one of the few powerful female figures in classical Hollywood cinema. Defined by her desirable but dangerous sexuality, and simultaneously, as a textual space, she is a woman who functions at the centre of the narrative. Typically, the *femme fatale* combines glamour and sensuality with ambition and self-interest. Mājida spins a web of intrigue around Shukri and uses her seductive charms on Kamāl. Her combination of modest dress, demure behaviour and declaration of wealth lure Midḥat into perceiving her as 'easy' prey. But, of course, the opposite is true; to her victims, she is deadly. The *femme fatale* is a transgressive figure who is punished for her gains. This is true of Mājida. The *femme fatale's* punishment is necessary for narrative closure. As an investigator, she has uncovered the truth, but as a woman she has stepped out of line and it is required that she conform to a more traditional role. Though she is punished, she has a vibrancy absent from other women in the film, which is appealing to a female audience. Mājida has intelligence, physical strength and resolve when she targets the murderers and captures them one by one in her deadly trap. In her article 'Women in Film Noir', Janey Place states that despite her apparent power, the *femme fatale* 'ultimately loses physical strength' and is actually or symbolically imprisoned.<sup>28</sup> For Place, however, this visual and/or narrative containment is not what is retained

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<sup>28</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London, BFI Publishing, 1978), 45

from the film. Instead, it is the power of the *femme fatale* that we remember.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative of *The Woman and the Law* explores the discourse of female modesty. This discourse, particularly connected to the status of unmarried women, revolves around notions of *awra* (the eroticised body), *fitna* (female temptation causing social chaos) and the virgin virtue *haya'* (shyness). Women are vulnerable objects of men on the one hand, but tempters on the other. Nādiya, then, with her youth and beauty, is the source of *fitna* in a household where theoretically she should be safe from sexual predators. The male counter value of female modesty is *sharaf* (honour) which is represented by female social conduct. Werner suggests that the consequence of the invention of these gender specific characteristics is the unilateral control of women by male family members, whose responsibility it is to protect female modesty, particularly unmarried women who are considered to be the most vulnerable. 'The male threat conjured up is used to legitimise diverse forms of social control over female family members.'<sup>30</sup> What hope, then, does Nādiya have, when the threat is from within the family itself?

Nādiya is not only victimised but also disempowered in court when she is not allowed to be a witness. The court scene, in which Sayyida is on trial for murder, is an absurdity when the focus shifts from the crime of rape and subsequent murder, to that of Nādiya's virginity. Nādiya is not treated as a victim, but in fact is judged to be guilty of her own rape because she had been alone with her attacker. As al-Sa'dāwi suggests, a girl's virginity seems to be more precious than the girl herself:

A girl who does not preserve her virginity is liable to be punished with physical death, or with moral death, or at least with being divorced if she is found out at the time of marriage.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>30</sup> Werner, op. cit., 260

Such divorce is of course accompanied by a scandal, usually restricted to family circles, but which inevitably spreads far and wide. Yet such a girl may be completely innocent of any sexual relation, but incapable of proving her innocence. This is due to the fact that patriarchal class society has imposed premarital virginity on girls and ensured that the very honour of a girl, and her family, is closely linked to the preservation of this virginity. If virginity is lost, this brings almost everlasting shame which can only be 'wiped out in blood', as the common Arab saying goes.<sup>31</sup>

Sayyida is the only person who does not doubt her daughter's innocence. She also carries the burden of guilt for marrying Maḥmūd in the first place. The decision to kill the man who has raped her daughter would seem to be 'the ultimate act of maternal love and, therefore, morally justified'<sup>32</sup> but the ensuing narrative undermines such a reading. Sayyida is condemned by a legal system that fails to protect women and Nādiya must face a hostile society. She returns home alone, to be greeted by the scorn of her neighbours. The harassment of women is often the result of a focus on their sexuality. The words used to describe the unveiling woman (*sufūr*, *tabarruj*, *fitna*) translate as unveiling, adorning, and seducing are indicative of their representation as sexual objects. Holding them responsible for their victimisation is furthered through the propagation of imageries of debauchery and decadence. The stairwell of the building is scrawled with graffiti - the camera picks out phrases: 'get out of the alley, you whore' (*ukhrujī min al-ḥārah yā fājira*) and 'you contaminated our honour' (*ḥaṭṭītī ra'sanā fi al-tīn*) - while the neighbours shout obscene remarks. Werner suggests that usually, lower middle-class areas are characterised by the physical closeness of their inhabitants, which is often combined with the cultivation of strong social ties among neighbours. 'One component of the constitution of these strong ties is given by patriarchal discourses addressing young

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<sup>31</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Dr Sherif Hetata (London and New York, Zed Books Ltd., 1980), 26-27

<sup>32</sup> Read, op. cit., 224

women, who are evaluated according to their moral conduct.<sup>33</sup> These evaluations play an important role in the social relationships maintained in these environments and explain the reaction of Nādiya's neighbours. Nādiya closes the door of her apartment and sinks to the floor. Once again she is a prisoner in her own home. This time it is the danger outside that keeps her in.

In *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema*, Lucy Fischer states that 'the female killer has been deemed more perverse than the male, for she violates obtaining views of woman as life giver and nurturer – figurations that do not apply to men.' As a result, women, when they take to crime are seen to be 'worse' than men.<sup>34</sup> Mājida and Sayyida, then, present very different personifications of the criminal woman. Mājida's repeated acts of calculated revenge stand in direct contrast to Sayyida's 'crime of passion'. Hers is not a premeditated act of violence but an immediate impassioned response to a brutal act of violation. The final outcome of the rape is Sayyida's death.

In *The Iron Woman*, the audience can identify with the representation of heterosexual romance, Mājida's frustration as Ḥasan must travel abroad, and her ecstasy on his return. They may also be sympathetic to her plight when he is wrenched from her fingers in the most violent of deaths. However, the production of the female investigator does not function straightforwardly to articulate some new female heroism. The director has subverted the prevalent patriarchal discourse with his female protagonist. In Mājida's quest for knowledge and truth she finds herself fighting in a corrupt world. But, more importantly, she is forced to embark on a journey of discovery: of truth, of self, and of ability. Her journey began as one of revenge but becomes one of maturity. She does not deny her crimes when questioned by the

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<sup>33</sup> Werner, op. cit., 266

<sup>34</sup> Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema*, (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), 269

police. The final shot of the film is a close-up of Mājida's face. 'I am not sorry!' she declares. When she realises the whole truth about Ḥasan, that he was also corrupt and she was the victim of circumstance, she must readjust her vision. In between each murder, Mājida is seen selling, piece by piece, the jewellery Ḥasan gave her the night he was killed, reminding us of her loss but also relieving herself of the legacy of the past. By the end of the film she realises Ḥasan does not deserve her revenge and that her life has been built on an illusion. She is not sorry for her action because she was fighting for absolute justice and it is liberating for her to know the truth. The film challenges the gendered binary in which the terms 'male' and 'masculine', 'female' and 'feminine' are locked together but the audience understands that it is not necessarily supposed to admire this travesty of a contemporary black widow.

The rapist and the victim in *The Woman and the Law* are both stereotypes and consequently we should question if this limits the film's message about violence against women. The characterisation of the rapist helps to distance him from identification within society as a whole. The film uses the stereotype of the psychopath/drug addict which differentiates him from the majority of normal men. But in reality rape happens everyday to ordinary women. Zuhur questions whether it was necessary for Maḥmūd to be a drug addict, and suggests that the film justifies Maḥmūd's action because of his drug problem.<sup>35</sup> It does, however, allow for the socially ironic dimension of the film; in court Maḥmūd is shown to be a good Muslim by several male witnesses (all of whom are lying). As a result the judge questions how he could possibly have raped Nādiya. Aḥmad gives medical evidence of the rape, but even he blames Maḥmūd's behaviour on his addiction. The issue of male complicity in rape, therefore, is unresolved.

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<sup>35</sup> Zuhur, *op. cit.*, 223

What the film does do is question the morality of the law which prevents a mother killing for honour, but which often turns a blind eye if a male family member kills for the same reason. While male revenge on behalf of women continues to be depicted as inevitable and a morally justified aspect of masculine identity, maternal revenge continues to be the subject of punishment. The men in court fail to comprehend the nature and significance of the crime - a failure that is inherent in the law itself. Al-Sa'dāwi cites a story from an Arabic newspaper, in which a young man killed his sister on suspicion of her being pregnant. In the post mortem examination it transpired that she was still a virgin. He had been assailed by doubts about his sister's conduct and had committed the crime in defence of his family's honour. His doubts had been misplaced, but his intentions were good; the court set him free.<sup>36</sup>

The narrative turns to the law for a solution. How is a mother to protect her own daughter? But both women are failed by the legal system. The film suggests a feminist critique of a patriarchal legal system that is complicit with rapists – the courtroom is dominated by male judges and male lawyers. The law works to construct the mother, not as morally justified, but as guilty. Society is unable to legitimize her movement from the feminine private realm (of motherhood) to the masculine public realm (of revenge and violence) on the basis of moral righteousness. Sayyida, then, must not only be seen to be punished for her actions but the film's narrative trajectory must reinscribe her in the realm of the private. One might expect the circular narrative of melodrama to ultimately function to reposition Sayyida in the space of the home but this is not possible because she was absent from it at the beginning of the film. Like Mājida, this female avenger does not escape legal retribution, however, she is tried in an unfair legal system.

The protagonists of these films may be considered somewhat

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<sup>36</sup> El Saadawi, op. cit., 30

second rate - certainly not as independent, sexually active, or as free to determine their own lives as the women we see in films from the west. In discussing the role of women in Egypt's labour force, Sullivan points out that by western standards the progress achieved to date may be considered modest, but then:

. . . these are not western women, and it is a mistake to assume that . . . social liberation will take the same form as it has in the west. In the Egyptian context, the mere fact that education and employment take women outside the home, unsupervised by 'their' men for a good part of the day, is significant as a *de facto* challenge to the social limits placed on the public behaviour of women. For at least part of the day, these women have a private life in the public world, separate from the role of daughter, wife or household manager. Men may continue to hold the same ideas regarding the 'proper' limits on female behaviour, but women who work and go to school are challenging those limits (daily) in effective ways.<sup>37</sup>

The same rhetoric must be applied to the screen heroines discussed above. What these films do offer is a challenge to the socially imposed limitations on women so often seen in Egyptian films.

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<sup>37</sup> Sullivan, op. cit., 35

## Chapter 4 Triumphant Women

*The File on Sāmīyā Sha‘rāwi* (*Malaf Sāmīyā Sha‘rāwi*, Nādir Jalāl, 1988)<sup>1</sup>

*Four Women of Egypt* (*Arba‘ Nisā’ min Miṣr*, Tahāni Rāshid, 1997)

At the centre of each film discussed so far is a female protagonist moving the narrative forward as she negotiates a path (not always successfully) within the patriarchal discourse. The film heroine can change according to context. Amīna in *I Am Free* and Laylā in *The Open Door* demonstrate great initiative in their desire for independence. Durriyya in *I Want a Solution* is a heroine to be admired for her particular courage, within a discourse that allows her no voice, and Tawhīda in *Cheap Flesh* for her success in negotiating a place within what is often an impenetrable patriarchal discourse. Mājida in *The Iron Woman* is a protagonist who takes on traditionally masculine characteristics, while Nādiya in *The Woman and the Law* has typically feminine attributes. The protagonists of the films analysed in this chapter are active and triumphant, but in disparate contexts and to differing degrees. Sāmīyā, the protagonist of *The File on Sāmīyā Sha‘rāwi*, shows intelligence and determination, and alone outwits her male accomplice in crime and escapes with a suitcase of money. The protagonists of *Four Women of Egypt* reveal the heroism of the collectivity of real women who have each been exposed to the tumultuous political events of Egypt’s modern history.

### Heroines

Melodrama has been the most widely used genre in Egyptian cinema since its beginnings. The narratives of these films usually

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<sup>1</sup> Nādar Jalāl, is the son of director Aḥmad Jalāl and actress and producer Mary Queeny.

revolved around romantic love prevented by insurmountable class differences. In this context men were often placed in similarly passive positions as women which implied negotiating not only the place of women relative to men but also that of men (usually a son) relative to the male patriarch (usually his father). A major motif of Egyptian melodrama was seduction. The seduced or ruined – but nevertheless noble – woman became increasingly popular in mainstream cinema throughout the 1940s and 1950s and as Viola Shafik points out in her study of Egyptian cinema, ‘morally or physically threatened women are indispensable to Egyptian drama’, right up to the present day.<sup>2</sup> The heroines of these melodramas were ordinary women who suffered at the hands of a male patriarch, were treated badly by society or simply accepted their fate. Very few managed to prevail in the end.

By contrast, a number of notable comedies were made during the 1960s which allowed the female protagonist to successfully negotiate her place within traditional gender relations. In *Wife Number 13* and *My Wife is a General Director* (*Mirāṭi Muḍīr ‘Āmm*, 1966), both directed by Faṭīn ‘Abd al-Wahāb, chauvinistic men are taught a lesson. Both light comedies focusing on gender relations, the films fed into the modernist discourse of gender equality that was popular during Nasser’s presidency. In the first film, a young wife discovers that her husband has already divorced twelve women, and despite being in love with him decides to take revenge. In the second, a woman is made director of the company in which her husband works. Much to his annoyance, he eventually admits to her capabilities. These films did not rely on slapstick and vulgarity but were instead sophisticated social comedies.

A decline in melodrama saw a shift to more realist cinematic interpretation. Although addressing similar issues, such as class

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<sup>2</sup> Viola Shafik, ‘Egyptian Cinema’, in Oliver Leaman, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), 114

difference and social injustice, they favoured a less emotional approach. Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf successfully combined comedy with realism in *The Second Wife*, made in 1967. It tells the story of an old village mayor, married but childless, who wants an heir for his fortune. He falls in love with the beautiful young wife of a poor peasant and forces him to divorce her in order to marry the young woman himself. After a failed attempted escape together, husband and wife accept their fate. The peasant's wife is married to the mayor against her will and then seeks revenge. She skilfully uses the jealousy of the mayor's first wife in order to prevent him from consummating his new marriage. When she becomes pregnant by her former husband the mayor has to accept he has lost the situation.

*A Hot Night (Layla Sākhina, 1995)* was one of the last works of the late New Realist director 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib. The film aligns an essentially decent prostitute with a hard working taxi driver in a desperate attempt to raise a large sum of money needed in an utterly corrupt world. It features the taxi driver on a hot nocturnal pursuit through the city. His mother is in hospital and he needs money to pay for her surgery. One of his customers, the prostitute, has just been robbed by her clients. She also needs money, to pay for her and her sister's rent. The taxi driver is sympathetic to her situation and helps her find her runaway clients. On their way they pick up a man who sells foreign visas on the black market. After a subsequent gunfight the couple is left with a case full of money. The honest driver decides to hand it in at the police station but is taken into custody himself. When the policemen arrive in search of the case the prostitute proves to be more pragmatic. She has hidden the money and will, it is suggested (the film has an open ending), hire a lawyer and take care of the driver's family. The female prostitute is a positive heroine. Her immorality is placed in a social context which encourages sympathy: she financially supports her younger sister who

does not know about her sibling's profession. When she learns about the taxi driver's mother, despite having no money herself, she offers to give him her last piece of jewellery. The director offers a sensitive depiction of an urban lower-class environment.<sup>3</sup>

Many other films of the 1990s were made in the realist tradition and focused on gender issues. The women featured in *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* (discussed in the next chapter) and *My Life, My Passion* (*Ya Dunya Ya Gharami*, Magdi Aḥmad 'Alī, 1996) are confronted with a multitude of abuses, but do not succumb. *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* is centred on two female servants who have to cope with numerous problems, but whose friendship compensates for their hardships. They suffer at the hands of their abusers before establishing each other as their surrogate kin. *My Life, My Passion* tells the story of three, single, working-class thirty-something women, all with absent or incapacitated male guardians. Each must confront the marriage market and each makes compromises with the romantic ideal promoted in films and songs.

In *Apple of My Eye* (*Nur al-'Uyūn*, Ḥusain Kamāl, 1991) a young woman's father is murdered. Left with no effective guardian, she marries her cousin who tries to force her into a life of depravity. She becomes a dancer but resists the worst of his immorality. He frames her and she is imprisoned. After serving her sentence she takes revenge on all of the men who have oppressed her. At the end of the film she is not controlled by any man. However, the film was received by critics and the public as nothing more than a commercially exploitative vehicle for its belly-dancer star, Fifi 'Abdu.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwī* can be seen as one in a long line of films that focuses on al-Jindi's screen persona of the *femme fatale* possessed of unsurpassed powers of

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<sup>3</sup> Shafik, op. cit., 82-83

<sup>4</sup> Walter Armbrust, 'Transgressing Patriarchy: Sex and Marriage in Egyptian Film', in *Middle East Report*, Spring 1998, 31

seduction and conspiracy. In *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* Sāmīyā savours the sweet taste of success, thanks to her courage but also ruthlessness. Hers however, is a hollow victory within an escapist narrative, despite having a backdrop of real events.

A more successful integration of fiction within a historical context can be seen in *The Night of the Arrest of Fāṭima* (*Laylat al-Qabḍ 'ala Fāṭima*, Barakāt, 1984) in which Fāṭin Ḥamāma plays the heroine. She recounts out loud to all her neighbours, the years of self-sacrifice as sole supporter of her brothers and sisters, only to be grossly mistreated by the one she had protected most. Fāṭima summons up the past via flashback. She hoped one day to marry her sweetheart Sayyid but her brother, Galal, anticipated Sayyid's interference in his drugs and arms dealing during the war and set him up. After Sayyid was imprisoned Fāṭima discovered Galal's illicit dealings and confronted him in the middle of an arms delivery. Galal had intended to keep his payment and never actually supply the weapons to the *fāda'iyin*. Realising what was at stake for her nation, Fāṭima decided to deliver the arms herself. As a result of the ensuing victory Galal became a hero but never acknowledged his sister's role. Many years later when Sayyid was released from prison Fāṭima discovered Galal's previous betrayal of her sweetheart. When she confronted Galal, now a very wealthy man, his two henchmen tried to drown her. The film closes as another group under Galal's command capture her and drive her away in a vehicle. Fāṭima, her neighbours and the film audience become spectators of her life story, told in order to reveal the truth. With a powerful female voice she reclaims her proper role in past events, relating a history of female responsibility and male disloyalty, but the film suggests an ultimate silencing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Synopsis from Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and Africa Filmmaking* (London and New Jersey, Zed Books Ltd., 1991), 99-100

The culmination of all these heroines is found in the four female protagonists of Tahāni Rāshid's documentary *Four Women of Egypt*.<sup>6</sup> They are the real heroines of Egypt's present and recent past. The film explores the friendship and intimacy of four women with diametrically opposed beliefs. Their common history of personal tragedy, political upheaval and shared prison cells not only reflects the diverse and complex social and political history of Egypt, but also highlights the possibility of a common view in spite of divergent opinions. The women have maintained a committed friendship, arguing openly but with tolerance for their differences. These vivacious, articulate women exhibit admirable traits of idealism, courage and integrity.

### *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi*

#### Synopsis

Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi (played by Nādiya al-Jindi) is the widow of an Egyptian army officer who had died in Yemen in 1966.<sup>7</sup> When she claims a pension from the army, she finds out she is not entitled to it, as

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<sup>6</sup> Although born in Cairo in 1947, Rāshid has spent her adult life in Canada. She studied at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal before working as a community activist with several organisations. In 1973 she began her filmmaking career with the documentary *Pour faire changement*. Rāshid has since directed and co-directed numerous documentaries. In 1980 she joined the National Film Board of Canada where she has continued to document social issues.

<sup>7</sup> In *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945-90* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993, 64-65) Derek Hopwood gives a concise summary of Egypt's activities in Yemen. The ruler of Yemen, Imam Ahmad, known for his restrictive government, had little sympathy with Nasser or with the modern world in general. In March 1961 he was hit by an assassin's bullet and although not killed he was in poor health from then on. On 13 October he announced that his son Muḥammad al-Badr would succeed him. He had slightly more liberal tendencies than his father but was still committed to maintaining the traditional regime. Eight days after the old Imam's death, on 18 September 1962 the army rose in revolt under Brigadier Sallal, captured the capital Sanaa and declared a republic. Imam Muhammad joined loyal tribes in the mountainous north where he launched a counter attack in an attempt to preserve his authority. As Muḥammad obtained substantial support from Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Sallal appealed to Nasser for help. Nasser, the symbol of revolution, could not refuse, as in any case he had previously encouraged the revolt. Nasser underestimated the strength of resistance and the difficulties of the terrain. For five years part of the Egyptian army was trapped into fighting fellow Arabs and into a severe sacrifice of men, money and material. In the war in general a stalemate was reached. By August 1965 Nasser appeared convinced that the time had come to call a halt. Talks were opened between Nasser and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia but neither side was willing to compromise over the future form of government in Yemen. The Israeli attack on Egypt in June 1967 put an end to Egyptian troops remaining in Yemen. They were needed on the Suez front. After the Egyptians left fighting between the royalists and republicans continued until the summer of 1969 when most royalist leaders had been defeated or fled. Yemen remained a republic.

hers was an *'urfi* marriage contract.<sup>8</sup> She defends her position but is deprived of the right to receive any financial support. She meets Ashraf, another officer, who promises to help her and who very soon afterwards offers to marry her. Fed up with her unrewarding job as a switchboard operator she agrees. After the marriage she finds out that she is Ashraf's second wife. Sāmīyā is initially disappointed, but she decides to stay for the sake of the material and emotional benefits he can offer her. Ashraf is offered a large flat, extravagantly furnished, as a wedding gift from his boss and Sāmīyā is promoted at work to become the new Director of Communications. Ashraf's boss is invited for dinner and Sāmīyā dances for the entertainment of the men.

War breaks out with Israel and, following Egypt's defeat, Sāmīyā watches a televised broadcast of Nasser resignation speech. Thousands of stunned citizens pour into the streets of Cairo demanding that their leader remain; Nasser withdraws his resignation.

Ashraf meets his boss in an unknown location. Afraid he will be the one blamed for the defeat, he puts Ashraf in charge of securing a large sum of money which will enable them to attempt a coup against the government. Ashraf and Sāmīyā decide to leave the money with Ashraf's friend, Hilāl, for safe keeping, telling him that the suitcase contains important documents. The military attack the hiding place of Ashraf's boss. Ashraf is arrested, accused of planning a coup and is sentenced to fifteen years in prison.<sup>9</sup> Sāmīyā returns to work after the conviction to find she no longer has an office or a job. Meanwhile she is

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<sup>8</sup> See footnotes 1 and 4 in chapter 2 for a definition of *'urfi* marriage.

<sup>9</sup> The similarity of narrative events and reality would suggest the character of Ashraf's boss is based on 'Abd al-Hakīm 'Āmir, Nasser's friend and commander-in-chief. Following his resignation on 10 June 1967 'Nasser had first to consolidate his position internally. He rounded on the army, on those he felt pushed him to war, his closest friend Abd al-Hakim Amir and Shams Badran (The Minister of War). They both resigned and eleven other senior commanders resigned or were retired . . . Amir . . . felt strongly that the army had been betrayed by Nasser. He began plotting to regain his lost position and was even accused of planning the removal of Nasser . . . The solidarity of the original Free Officers was broken irrevocably. A newspaper campaign was waged against him (Āmir) and he was finally driven to suicide on 14 September . . . Others were accused of plotting and sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour including Shams Badran and the ex-director of the *mukhābarāt*, Salah Nasr.' (Hopwood, op. cit., 78)

hounded by the *mukhābarāt* (intelligence services) to reveal the whereabouts of the money. She is arrested and taken to a secret location. She discovers that Adham Bey, her interrogator, has, in fact, been dismissed from the *mukhābarāt* but, threatened with torture, she makes a deal to smuggle the money out of the country and then split it with him.

Sāmīyā contacts Hilāl for the suitcase. Suspicious of its contents he looks inside and mistrustful of Sāmīyā's intentions he takes the money to his father's home in a village for safe keeping. Threatened by Adham Bey, Hilāl is forced to reveal the whereabouts of the money. Adham Bey's henchmen attack the men from the village in order to get the money. In the gunfight Hilāl is killed. Adham Bey and Sāmīyā leave the village with the money.

Sāmīyā and Adham Bey pack the money into a suitcase and plan their escape to Europe. On the way to the airport she is thrown out of the car at gunpoint and left in the middle of nowhere. She returns home, phones a travel agent and books a ticket on the next plane to Rome. She pulls out a suitcase from under the bed, opens it and reveals the money. She has outwitted Adham Bey and kept everything for herself.

### Structure

Transformation is central to the narrative structure of *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi*. The film charts the social ascent of the protagonist as she moves from the position of victim to that of aggressor/criminal through the motif of revenge. Despite being a work of narrative fiction, the film also narrates Egypt's recent history through a historical discourse. The film opens with a convoy of army vehicles driving through the desert along with the inter-title: '1966, Yemen'. The convoy is ambushed and several men are killed. The camera zooms in on the face of one of the dead men. This scene is immediately followed by a

shot of the exterior of an army barracks and a woman dressed in black walks into the frame and enters the building. The juxtaposition infers a relationship between the dead soldier and the woman: Sāmīyā is widowed as a result of Egypt's intervention in Yemen. The narrative of *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* is fiction but it makes reference to real events.

The static, monologous discourse dominates at the beginning of the film. The protagonist is given no effective voice to articulate her desires. She tries to defend her position and claim her rights as the widow of an army officer but her 'urfi marriage contract does not invest her with the rights she would have had under a notarised marriage contract. Her entrapment by the patriarchal discourse is reinforced in the next series of shots. Ashraf enters the room and Sāmīya becomes the focus of his gaze. This sequence functions to corroborate traditional relations of looking: Ashraf confirms his position as subject while Sāmīyā is the object. She returns to work late and her unforgiving boss docks her salary. Women's professional work is presented in a critical light due to low income and oppressive power relations in the work place. The world of work is presented in terms of mundanities. Several repeated sequences of shots, at the beginning of the film, of Sāmīyā working as a telephone operator highlight the routine nature of the job.

Arlene Macleod's findings in her study of working women in Cairo show that lower middle-class women have ambiguous feelings towards the benefits of work outside the home.<sup>10</sup> Although nearly all the women in Macleod's study stated the need for income as the most important reason for working, the possible meeting of future husbands was also an important consideration. Macleod notes that while lower middle-class women hope to make a better life for themselves:

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<sup>10</sup> Arlene Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1991), 54

. . . their aspirations to rise on the social scale do not mean wanting to emulate the professional aspirations of women of the upper classes . . . While some women are pleased with their new opportunities and proud of their working status and income, many others hope to quit their jobs rather than rise to new responsibilities; they look to the home rather than the workplace for their future.<sup>11</sup>

Sāmīyā looks for marriage to improve her social position, much in line with Macleod's findings but with one significant difference. Sāmīyā turns down a proposal from a work colleague because she is not interested in marriage to an employee. She has set her sights much higher. She negotiates traditional positions of work and marriage. When Ashraf proposes an *'urfi* marriage she does not agree, so he relents to a notarised marriage. By the time she discovers she is actually his second wife, she has already had a taste of the material gains this collaboration will bring, including a luxuriously furnished apartment as a wedding gift from Ashraf's boss, so Sāmīyā decides to stay. She is further rewarded with a new position at work; her second husband uses his power to secure her a better position.<sup>12</sup>

Sāmīyā knows that if she plays straight she will remain marginal all her life. She loved her first husband, but following his death, she soon realises that sentimental attachment is not enough. She begins to understand the system and from this point on attaches herself to successful men and moves up through them. She makes up for the legal and social advantages given to men, like polygamy and access to institutional power and wealth, by her strength and pragmatism. As she becomes more aware of the hypocrisy and oppression surrounding her, passive contemplation turns into a desire to challenge limitations and to find a new discourse to express this desire. Sāmīyā attempts to accommodate femininity with power and activity.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>12</sup> The new position of Director of Communications gives her increased status rather than increased responsibility. She loses the appointment immediately after Ashraf's arrest.

The character of Sāmīyā is clearly constructed as an investigation of female power, femininity and seduction. Seduction constitutes the protagonist's major weapon in achieving her goals. She is unapologetic for her open allusions to sexuality and power. Initially it is her femininity on display. Sāmīyā's ability to manipulate costume and other aspects of her physical and social performance remind us of her movement between classes, her aspirations and her achievements in negotiating class boundaries. Yvonne Tasker suggests there is some kind of delight in sequences of transformation, enacting visually as well as narratively a process of 'becoming something other.'<sup>13</sup> This transformation is often presented through montage sequences with an upbeat soundtrack. In this film, the initial stage of Sāmīyā's transformation from working-class widow to seductress is offered as cinematic spectacle on her honeymoon. Shots of the lovers in the grounds of a beautiful hotel with the pyramids as a backdrop reveal unimaginable flamboyance. Her staid outfits from the beginning of the film have been replaced by feminine western fashions, matching sunglasses and headwear.<sup>14</sup> Sāmīyā's conservative western wardrobe has become a vulgar parody of western fashion. She is the antithesis of traditional working-class women, of the real women in Macleod's study. The lovers return from their honeymoon indicates a new phase in the narrative. This is marked visually through a change in *mise-en-scène* to images of excessiveness and indulgence. The couple move into a large, ostentatious flat bursting with gaudy furniture: sofas covered in chintz, mirrors with baroque frames and crystal chandeliers. Sāmīyā's outfits become ever more colourful and flamboyant with matching accessories. When they entertain Ashraf's boss in their home the table is laden with

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<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998), 27

<sup>14</sup> The film is set in the middle years of the 1960s. Sāmīyā's costumes, however, are typical of the fashions of the 1980s. Although symbolic of her move between class boundaries from a historical point of view they are entirely inappropriate.

dishes of every type of food imaginable.

Sāmīyā's transformation from modest widow to society hostess is symbolised in her quite self-conscious use of her body as spectacle, as object for the male gaze. The most blatant display of her sexuality is her dance performance at the party for her husband's boss. He first meets Sāmīyā at a party, held in his honour, in Sāmīyā and Ashraf's new home. Sāmīyā visually dominates the scene. From across the room Ashraf points out his new wife. In a medium shot from the men's point of view Sāmīyā first turns her head around and then her body and positions herself in a static pose as if she is on display for the men. In the following shot, a medium close-up of her head and upper body the guests on either side of her form a frame around her allowing her to stand out in a sea of people. Later in the evening two women are dancing. They approach Sāmīyā to join them but she is reluctant. She looks to Ashraf for reassurance but it is his boss who nods his head in agreement. For a moment she plays the role of the innocent young girl but as soon as she begins to dance she becomes a sexually manipulative woman. Although Sāmīyā dances in the middle of the room with guests all around her she continues to face Ashraf and his boss for the length of the dance. She is performing specifically for them. The medium close-up shots of Sāmīyā dancing interspersed with shots of the two men watching reinforce her unprecedented power to influence male desire for her own ends.

Power and sexuality are the two major associate pillars on which Sāmīyā's image rests (and al-Jindi's, but I will come to that later). The definition of women as sexual beings, and the female body as enticing, is thus a very powerful discourse and one that needs explanation at this point. In *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, Karin van Nieuwkerk states that according to Shaykh Nefzawi, the sixteenth-century author of the treatise on love, *The Perfumed Garden*,

the perfect woman is the woman with the perfect body. Yet, in order to be perfect and desirable, this beauty must be silent.<sup>15</sup> In *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* Fatna Sabbah takes the question of why silence, immobility and obedience are key criteria of female beauty as a starting point for deciphering Muslim discourses on the female body. The view of orthodox scholars, which demands women's seclusion, silence and obedience, is well known in the West, but there are other writings on the power of female beauty and sexuality which reveal other dimensions of the Muslim view of women. Van Nieuwkerk compares the orthodox discourse of Sabbah with what Fatima Mernissi terms the explicit theory of female sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

The orthodox discourse centres on the relationship between God and the male believer. Men are created to serve God. God possesses everything and the believer has access to material and immaterial goods only through the worship of God. Women and children are material riches that God has created for the male believer. In the relation between the sexes, economic support is likewise exchanged for affection and submission. Men are providers for women and the *Qur'ān* states that male superiority is justified by the fact that men provide women with *nafaqa*, the cost of living. In exchange for support, women should be obedient and serve their providers. They should keep their virginity until marriage, since their bodies are the possession of their future providers. After marriage, loyalty, chastity, and complete dedication to their husbands are the prerequisite for securing maintenance. Women cannot act on their own accord without the permission of their masters.

In the orthodox discourse, women are not perceived as lacking in passion – although theirs is less intense than men's passion – but they are not capable of resisting men. Hence, women should be secluded and

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<sup>15</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 146

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-152

kept away from unrelated men. They should, however, satisfy the sexual needs of their providers. They should fulfil this duty so as to prevent men from committing illicit intercourse. Lacking legal power, women have recourse only to their 'feminine power' to ensnare and control men. *Kayd*, 'the power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue',<sup>17</sup> a form of 'destructive intelligence',<sup>18</sup> is perceived as a general character trait of women. Besides cunning and magic, women only have their bodies to entice men. Tempting the husband and satisfying his desires are ways to secure maintenance. The powerlessness of women, however, can potentially be inverted if they can manage to ensnare men through cunning and seduction. Orthodox scholars acknowledge this danger and since men are primarily created to worship God, they warn against female seduction.

The belief that women should be reduced to objects, lest they lure men away from God, reveals women are perceived as potentially powerful. Mernissi, investigating the implicit theory of female sexuality, argues that women are feared for their destructive potential, *fitna*.<sup>19</sup> Seen from this perspective, several institutions usually interpreted as instruments of male power, such as seclusion and sexual segregation, can be explained as devices to protect men. Men must be protected against the powerful female sexuality. Women's ability to provoke *fitna* is thus mainly invested in their bodies and in the nature of their sexuality.

Female singers and dancers might be a symbol of *fitna*, since they work with their seductive bodies to earn money. They do not keep the rules as prescribed by the orthodox discourse. They are not invisible, secluded and devoting all their attention to the needs of the husband, the children and the home. All women have the power to seduce men with their sexual bodies. Female performers mainly differ from 'decent'

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<sup>17</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, revised edition (London, Al Saqi Books, 1985), 33

<sup>18</sup> Fatma Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York, Pergamon Press, 1984), 32

<sup>19</sup> Mernissi, *op. cit.*, 44

women because they publicly employ their potential to seduce. Instead of using their feminine power in the legal and private context of marriage, they tempt male customers in public. Female performers are more immoral than other women working in the male public space, because in entertainment, the bodily dimension is central. They use their sexual bodies as an instrument for earning money. It is generally recognised, however, that these 'bad' women engage in their profession to earn money, not because of an insatiable sexual appetite. Seduction is, then, an instrument for securing income rather than a way of satisfying their sexual desires. By seducing Ashraf's boss in this way Sāmīyā is securing her husband's position, knowing that she in turn will benefit. Seduction is thus an important weapon for earning money, yet it is in the seducers' own interest to manipulate this instrument subtly.

This extravagance and decadence are a veil covering the reality of the unstable political situation of the country and Sāmīyā's insecure situation. While the population listens to Nasser's offer of resignation in light of Egypt's defeat against Israel, Sāmīyā must accept that Ashraf is committed to his first wife and family. The court scene functions to mark a new phase in the narrative and the next stage in Sāmīyā's transformation begins. Ashraf stands up to hear his sentence. The camera zooms in on Sāmīyā sitting in the courtroom. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of Ashraf, from Sāmīyā's point of view, as his sentence is read out. But he does not return her gaze. Instead he sinks to his seat as he and his first wife clasp hands. The camera returns to Sāmīyā watching the couple. She is no longer the object of Ashraf's gaze. This interpretation is reinforced in the next shot as Sāmīyā walks out of the courtroom alone. She is no longer bound by the orthodox discourse. Total submission and attendance to the entire needs of her husband can no longer be expected as there will be no exchange for material support from this point on.

While the orthodox discourse mainly focuses on the strength of male desire, and the implicit theory considers the active sexuality of both sexes, the erotic discourse is chiefly centred on the aggressive nature of female passion. While male passion is perceived as intense and capricious in the orthodox view, it is viewed as weak and impotent in the erotic discourse. Female passion is active in the implicit theory, but it becomes aggressive, insatiable and threatening in the erotic discourse. This is personified in Sāmīyā who finds herself intimidated by Adham Bey. Using her aggressive sexuality she becomes the ultimate threat to Adham Bey.

Although there are differences between constructions of gender and sexuality, van Nieuwkerk notes that it is striking that they converge in their definition of women as primarily bodies, particularly sexual bodies.<sup>20</sup> Whether a woman passively tries to keep her legal husband's attention through being desirable, or actively seduces other men, in both cases her sexual dimension is central. In both discourses the female body is reduced to the sexual aspect and women are seen primarily as sexual beings. In most scenarios this inference would be negative, but in the case of Sāmīyā, she uses it to her advantage. She uses her sexuality consciously as a means of attaining influence over men and their dealings. She creates a *femme fatale* image and displays an awareness of the desiring male gaze. She deliberately uses her place as object of the male gaze, making the female spectator aware of this placing.

When she is taken for interrogation, she is initially the subordinate. She is arrested and taken to an unidentified location. When her blindfold is removed she finds herself in some sort of underground torture chamber. Adham Bey sits one side of a desk in front of an open fire with a large whip in his hand. Chains hang down from the ceiling to frame the

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<sup>20</sup> van Nieuwkerk, op. cit., 151 This view is not exclusive to Islam or the Middle East. It is a familiar concept in the West as well.

shot. Sāmīyā sits on the opposite side of the desk. He offers her a cigarette and asks her about the money. When she feigns ignorance he threatens to scar her face with acid. This physical threat seems to stir something in Sāmīyā and she immediately begins to manipulate the situation to her advantage. She stands up making her physical presence felt and begins to question her interrogator. He wants to know how she knows what she does about the ways of the intelligence service. 'Did you forget that all the secrets of the government used to sleep with me in the same bed?' He is no longer in the dominant position. She sits in his seat and picks up his whip while he sits opposite her on the other side of the desk, the reverse of the earlier shot. She offers him a cigarette and asks him about the money. With her information and his capabilities they can work together. She decides when to leave.

The narrative resolution comes about through Sāmīyā's actions. Her final victory, as she sends a man off with the wrong suitcase and pulls the right one (full of money) out from under her bed, drew a choke of disbelief as well as shock from one Arab observer: 'Oh people, oh heavens! Thus, with all ease, a woman wins out over a man of powerful position.'<sup>21</sup>

### *Four Women of Egypt*

#### Synopsis

The film opens with four middle-aged women walking on a bridge at the barrages north of Cairo. It is an idyllic scene: soft light falls on the trees and Nile waters. Al-Qanāṭir, the Women's Prison, where the strolling figures spent time, is off camera. Ṣāfināz Kāzim, a journalist, theatre critic and writer advocates strict adherence to Islamic law, including the wearing of the veil. Widād Mitri, a retired teacher, is a

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Malkmus and Armes, op. cit., 76

nationalist leader who was active in the women's suffrage movement. She is a Coptic Christian. Shāhinda Maqlad was a demonstrator in Egypt's national movement who lost her husband to a political assassination and then pursued political office herself. Amīna Rashīd, the granddaughter of Ismā'īl Ṣidqī (a former prime minister), grew up in a secular aristocratic household before embracing socialism. She teaches French literature at Cairo University.

As the four women speak animatedly about the nation, politics, culture and Islam we are shuttled back and forth between the present and the past. Amīna stands in front of the large house in which she grew up and recalls memories of her childhood. This is intercut with black and white family photographs. Widād rummages through the personal archives of her activist past and produces newspaper clippings of when she was the only woman elected to the student union at Cairo University in 1951. Shāhinda wanders through the streets of the Delta village of Kamshīsh, pointing to the site of her husband's assassination. This is intercut with documentary footage of Shāhinda participating in demonstrations in the mid 1960s. Ṣāfināz holds forth on an Abbāsiyya Street, recalling the neighbourhood of her childhood.

We also see the women in their homes in different quarters of Cairo, relaxing at a kebab house in the Musky and together watching documentary footage of 'Abd al-Nāṣir. We see them talking, laughing, teasing, agreeing and disagreeing. In the final scene the women meet at Shāhinda's house in the country. The women sit on the roof with their daughters. The film closes with Basma, Shāhinda's daughter, dancing on the roof.

### Structure

If there is any structural principle governing the organisation of feminist documentary film, it is provided by autobiographical discourse:

a picture of the ordinary details of women's lives and their thoughts told directly by the protagonists to the camera, organised in a linear manner characteristic of the plots of fictional narratives.<sup>22</sup> In *Four Women of Egypt* Tahāni Rāshid uses the film medium to convey a sense of female identity expressed both through the subjects' stories and through the tangible details of the subjects' milieu. The structure of *Four Women of Egypt*, however, is not a simple linear narrative but instead is a meandering conversation (and at times argument) between four friends. Although it may be argued that Ṣāfināz stands out as the most outspoken of the four women, no one of them is dominant. The women are given equal screen time and space. Each one's story is as relevant as the others. The protagonists of this film are women who talk about their own lives. Given that autobiographical discourse structures this documentary then clearly the enunciating voice of this film belongs to the female protagonists themselves.

Interweaving scenes of the daily lives of the women with documentary footage of Egypt before and after the 1952 Revolution, the film becomes a tapestry of modern Egypt's evolution and illustrates the complexity of Middle Eastern issues. Documentary footage of King Farouk, the Free Officers and street demonstrations, a recorded interview with 'Abd al-Nāṣir, black and white photographs and original newspaper clippings are all spliced in while the women are conversing in the present. The women 'connect the politics and ideologies of the past and present with the adhesive of their own experience.'<sup>23</sup> The autobiographical accounts contain a historical discourse and so the film functions in part as oral history. Annette Kuhn suggests oral history has been instrumental in inserting groups hitherto largely 'hidden from

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<sup>22</sup> Julia Lesage, 'The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 3 (4), Fall 1978, 507-508; Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London, Sydney and Wellington, Pandora), 1982, 148

<sup>23</sup> Margot Badran, 'Speaking Straight: Four Women of Egypt', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 4 (24), (1998) (no page numbers)

history' – women and the working class in particular – into the mainstream of historical discourse. 'In representing . . . women talking about events in their own past lives which also have a broader historical reference . . . suggest women can be subjects in history.'<sup>24</sup>

Widād and Shāhinda met through their resistance work in the 1950s. Shāhinda and Ṣāfināz met in the 1960s on the steps of Dar al-Hilal Publishing House after the assassination of Shāhinda's husband, Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn, an activist for peasants' rights. Widād met Ṣāfināz in the 1960s when she returned from work in Iraq where she first encountered Ṣāfināz through Ṣāfināz's writings in the Egyptian newspapers. Ṣāfināz and Shāhinda were in prison together in 1975 and again in 1981, where they met Amīna. Despite their different backgrounds, religious beliefs and opinions, they speak a common language: nationalism. The revolution of 1952 was a national turning point – the old class system was dismantled and a new social justice was introduced. The year 1956 was a high point in the history of the nation with the final expulsion of the British from Egypt, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the vote for women.

Already a committed student activist, in 1951 Widād joined the Women's Popular Resistance Committee, founded by the feminist Sīzā Nabarāwi, in order to take part in acts of resistance against the British occupation of the Suez Canal Zone. When Nasser extended the right to vote to women, Widād campaigned to convince women to register. She became Shāhinda's mentor; 'Shāhinda was young back then. I took her with me everywhere.'

On 15 May, 1964 the High Dam was inaugurated. Widād's daughter reads her mother's editorial from that day: 'We have, on this day, another indelible memory, that of 15 May, 1948, the day Palestine was lost. And while the construction of the dam is a great victory of the will,

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<sup>24</sup> Kuhn, op. cit., 152

our true victory will be to regain Palestine.' The four women were full of hope for the future of their country. At the time, Ṣāfināz was touring Europe with her sister: 'We defended the Egypt that we loved, the revolution we supported and our dreams which we knew would be fulfilled.'

Shāhinda and her new husband, taking Nasser's land reforms seriously, were fighting for peasant's rights, when in 1966, Ṣalāḥ was murdered by the Fiqi family, landlords in the Delta village of Kamshīsh.<sup>25</sup> Shāhinda demanded that the murder of her husband be investigated and she transformed herself into a modern woman of the people. The investigation that followed prompted the establishment of the Committee for Liquidating Feudalism (*Lajnat Taṣfiyat al-Iqtā'*).<sup>26</sup> Despite the many different attempted reforms there is still great inequality and Shāhinda is still an ardent campaigner for peasants' rights. This personal loss for Shāhinda was followed in 1967 by a national loss, Egypt's defeat during the war with Israel. The dream was fading and, with Nasser's death in 1970, the era had ended; Arab socialism was replaced with 'open door' capitalism.

In 1961 Amīna obtained a scholarship and left for France to study comparative literature. She stayed for fifteen years. After receiving her Doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1976 she returned to Egypt to teach French Literature at Cairo University. She married Sayyid al-Baḥrāwi, a colleague from university, thereby realising her lifelong dream of belonging to the people: 'From an early age I chose to live among the Egyptian people.'

The granddaughter of Ismā'īl Ṣidqī, several times the Prime Minister under the monarchy, she begins an account of her life with an

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<sup>25</sup> In *Egypt: Politics and Society* (125-126), Hopwood states that in 1952 some two thousand owners held twenty per cent of the land and at the other end of the scale more than two million owners held thirteen per cent of the land. In addition, at the very bottom of the scale were the millions of landless agricultural labourers.

<sup>26</sup> Fatemah Farag, 'Kamshish: Take Two', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 397, 1-7 October 1998

episode that seems to have marked her forever. It was 1946 or 1947. She was in the schoolyard. A little girl threw stones at her, shouting that her grandfather was a traitor.<sup>27</sup> Amīna felt, besides the humiliation and hurt at having been singled out so unfairly, a sense of guilt; 'My assailant was right.' She grew up in a palatial family home in a popular neighbourhood. French was spoken behind the high walls but Arabic was the language of the world outside. From this early memory she learnt the meaning of independence. Although she spent many years abroad, she was active in the Arab Students' Association (*Rabiṭat al-Tullāb al-'Arab*) in France and it was her political commitment that brought her back to Egypt. 'I had a good job at the CNRS Institute (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), a good salary, a nice flat, but my life seemed meaningless. One day I realised that its meaning was here in Egypt, my country. I hadn't led this struggle to live abroad.'

In September 1981 Ṣāfināz, Shāhinda and Amīna found themselves in prison together during Sadat's purge of all oppositionists. As Ṣāfināz puts it: 'Communists piled on Nasserists, nationalists on Islamists, Copts on Muslims, on top of women who weren't anything.' As Amīna stated at the beginning, it is the shared experience of ruptures in their national history and the resulting struggles, that unites the four women.

The credibility of the film rests specifically on the fact that Rāshid unites two forms of verisimilitude: a verisimilitude emerging from the transparency of documentary realism itself, and a verisimilitude which comes from the notion underpinning the practice of oral history that there is a 'truth' in accounts of the lived individual experiences of members of certain social groups. She makes use of newsreel, reportage

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<sup>27</sup> As is recorded in political history, in July 1946, the then Prime Minister, Ṣidqī, had hundreds of intellectuals, political and labour activists, students and professionals rounded up on charges of Communist activity. He ordered the dissolution of eleven political, cultural and labour organisations and had left-wing and Wafdist publications closed down. Having disposed of the opposition he then went to London and resumed negotiations with Ernest Bevin, Britain's Foreign Secretary. He signed the Ṣidqī-Bevin Treaty allowing British presence to remain in Egypt. Egyptians were very much opposed and there were demonstrations everywhere.

and other film footage, as well as still photographs, all from the 1950s, to 'illustrate' the stories of the protagonists. At the points when such archival material is intercut, the women's talk functions as a voice-over, and the image stands in evidence of the 'truth' of their spoken discourse. In this way, sound and image are mutually reinforcing throughout much of the film.

In *Four Women of Egypt*, Rāshid captures women's memories of the moment, and their reflections years later, in order to narrate national history and in particular to incorporate Nasser into the rendition of the nation. Ṣāfināz recounts, in an animated voice, how as a girl in 1952, she was looking out from her balcony as the triumphal procession of the Free Officers passed down Abbāsiyya Street (historical footage is spliced in) and believed Nasser looked directly at her. The film pans forward to four middle-aged women watching, with wry expressions, old clips of Nasser in the sixties, expounding on the promises of social and economic reform and on national security - years after disappointments and defeat set in. The women argue over Nasser: Was he good or bad? How was he good or bad, or good and bad? When the film cuts to the country in anguish as the dead leader's coffin was borne through the streets of Cairo, the women express the pain of loss and abandonment they experienced at that moment.

The protagonists of *Four Women of Egypt* are women with real lives – we are invited to witness the intimacy of the women's friendship and to share incredibly personal moments from their lives: the death of Shāhinda's husband, Ṣāfināz's reasons for choosing to wear the veil and Amīna's realisation of what it meant to be one of the ruling class. The women are filmed together in conversation but also individually amongst their personal possessions: Ṣāfināz in her bedroom, Shāhinda with her papers and letters, Amīna with her books and Widād with her archives, journals and photos. They cannot (or do not want to) escape

the past because it was so important to their ideologies in the present. Each woman has her own personal story within the greater story of Egypt's history that binds them together:

In the zigzag through history, the film makes palpable how memory, as a re-experiencing of the moment itself, and memory as a mode of processing the past, serves up 'multiple truths.' The film lays bare the archaeology of individual lives - those layers and sediments of which we are composed. If one loses the discourse of nationalism - and the discourse itself fades - one does not lose the imprints it made. In Widād's words: 'by your past people know you.' The film illuminates this, producing aching feelings and discordant sentiments.<sup>28</sup>

In documentary films, the main aim, it has been said, is to instruct or inform, unlike the primary object of narrative or fictional film: to divert or entertain. John Grierson, considered the first advocate of documentary filmmaking, not only outlined what he saw as the defining features of documentary but also reflected on the purposes to which documentary could be put. The documentary filmmaker must deploy a whole range of creative skills to fashion the fragments of reality into an artefact that has a specific social impact. This account must be, in Grierson's phrase, a 'creative treatment of actuality.'<sup>29</sup> Many critics have used Grierson's definition as a useful starting point for debating the form and function of documentary, but his concept of 'creative treatment' is by no means unproblematic. It attempts to bring together two elements that are not easily reconcilable: a commitment to construct an account based on observational reality and, in contrast, the recognition that to achieve the desired impact on the audience always requires a good deal of artifice.<sup>30</sup> Arising from this, there has been a lively debate amongst filmmakers and critics over the legitimacy of certain techniques in the shaping of the documentary film. Attempts to

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<sup>28</sup> Badran, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Forsyth Hardy ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London, Faber and Faber, 1979)

<sup>30</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991)

represent reality carry with them important ideological implications. The photographic realism is determined by the filmmaker's own preconceptions, by the perspective from which the events are witnessed and the careful assembly and editing of material. There will always be a greater or lesser degree of intervention on the part of the filmmaker.

We are made aware of the filmmaking process throughout *Four Women of Egypt*: at times the women talk directly to the camera, the filmmaker is heard asking them questions from off screen, and the women talk to the filmmaker. This interactive mode of documentary filmmaking at its most distinct is characterised by the film crew interacting with people in front of the lens. As the term suggests, deconstructive cinema works by a process of breaking down. It deconstructs and makes visible the codes and conventions characteristic of dominant cinema and exposes the function of the cinematic apparatus as an instrument of illusionist representation. This in turn suggests a transformation in spectator-text relations from the passive receptivity to a more active and questioning position. The film's discourse sets up the possibility of sexual difference in spectator-text relations by privileging a female voice in terms of narrativity, subjectivity and autobiography. Given the verisimilitude of the cinematic representation this structure sets the filmmaker in a mutual, non-hierarchical relation with her subjects, clearly valorising her subjects' words.

### **Fiction and Reality: Transgressing Stereotypes**

*The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi*, a work of narrative fiction, and *Four Women of Egypt*, a documentary film, present different approaches of narrating Egypt's recent history. Although a work of fiction, the reference to real events in *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* cannot go unnoticed: the war in Yemen in 1966, the war with Israel in 1967 and Nasser's subsequent resignation speech. And many of the fictional

events in the film find their cause in reality: Sāmīyā is widowed due to the war in Yemen; as a senior member of the army, Ashraf's boss is blamed for the defeat with Israel, and Ashraf is found guilty of planning a coup against the government. It is a work of escapist entertainment culminating in a resolution we weren't entirely expecting. The structure of *Four Women of Egypt*, in comparison, is a meandering conversation between four friends linking past, present and future. The film documents the lives of real women who have all played an active role, socially and politically, in Egypt's recent past. The film is a construction of the story of their lives, making reference to their aspirations and frustrations, their dreams of liberation and those dreams turned sour. The appeal of both films lies not only in having strong female protagonists but in the demonstration that some women have deliberately altered the rules of the game of sexual politics. Whatever their differences, there is one major similarity between all five protagonists: the women in both films debunk stereotypes.

An association between women, criminality and sexuality is evident in the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, explored across different genres. *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* reaffirms the extent to which women's work involves sexual display and/or sexual performance, but Sāmīyā transcends this stereotype. Her power and energy are linked to and also expressed through her sexuality. The figure of the *femme fatale*, 'has preoccupied feminist film criticism as both an archetype which suggests an equation between female sexuality, death and danger, and simultaneously as a textual space within which women function as the vibrant centre of the narrative.'<sup>31</sup> Sāmīyā is not only defined by her sexuality but also by the power that she generates. It is her energy and vitality that stands out. The *femme fatale* is a transgressive figure who misleads the hero and is punished for her pains but Sāmīyā survives to

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<sup>31</sup> Tasker, op. cit., 117

the end of the narrative and is successful in her schemes. Her appeal for a female audience lies in her transgressive refusal of patriarchal values.

The on screen image of Sāmīyā cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the off screen and star image of al-Jindi. The Egyptian star system dates back to the beginning of the Egyptian film industry. The formation of the industry was highly dependent on the exploitation of already existing theatre and music stars. Some of the earliest fiction films produced relied on the contribution of popular theatre actors and their troupes. Subsequently, stars have remained essential to the promotion of films in Egypt. In general, in Egypt today, the audience recognises a film by the names of the star performers involved. Since the 1980s, the importance of star performers has been fostered by the actual system of film financing as the majority of Egyptian producers raise production loans from domestic and international distributors. The amount of the loan depends on the status and popularity of the leading players. This hampers young actors from rising to the top. As a consequence, the major stars have remained largely the same for the last two decades, and forty and fifty year old performers are still asked to represent characters who are much younger.<sup>32</sup> At the age of sixty, al-Jindi mainly relies on belly dancing, seductive gestures and tight clothing to present the persona of the often mistreated, but nonetheless powerful, *femme fatale*.

Al-Jindi occupies the position of Egypt's top female star, in terms of payment and distribution loans. However, as Shafik points out, this does not necessarily mean that she is Egypt's best actress.<sup>33</sup> She is considered a top star by producers but dismissed as vulgar by the critics. The main arguments against al-Jindi are moral, evoking illicitness and decadence. The causes of this specific image are rooted equally in her

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<sup>32</sup> Viola Shaik, 'Prostitute for a Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (6), (2001), 713

<sup>33</sup> Shafik, 'Egyptian Cinema', 114

on- and off-screen representations. At the age of fifteen she married the then top star, 'Imad Hamdi, thirty-four years her senior, but asked for a divorce ten years later, in order to 'live her youth.'<sup>34</sup> From what is known of al-Jindi's life story and fame in the media, Shafik suggests it shows 'an ambitious and unsentimental self-made woman who used her feminine weapons to lure and utilise a much older famous husband as a ladder to success and who installed herself as a leading player without enjoying real popularity.'<sup>35</sup> This image was further confirmed by the fact that the earlier victimised characters in al-Jindi's filmography were soon eclipsed by the persona of the ferocious *femme fatale*, the seductive avenger and the ruthless intriguer.

Al-Jindi's first main part was that of a belly dancer in *Bamba Kashshar* (Ḥasan al-Imām, 1974), a melodramatic biography of a famous dancer of the 1920s. Her eminence was further cemented by the successful gangster melodrama *al-Baṭiniyya* (Husām al-Dīn Muṣṭafa, 1980) in which she was a young mother duped by a drug dealer. In *The Servant* (*al-Khādima*, Ashraf Fahmi, 1984) she sought social ascent by any means possible, and in doing so was killed by her lover. These early victimised characters were soon to be eclipsed by the persona of the dangerous *femme fatale* or seductive avenger. Nādir Jālal's collaborations with al-Jindi (and 'Adil Imām), were of major importance in his development as a director in the gangster and espionage genre. He directed eight films with al-Jindi, establishing her image as a courageous and seductive, yet patriotic woman.

Al-Jindi debunks the stereotype of the professional male/amateur female. She displays qualities of capability but her overt interest in her sexuality, as displayed in *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* suffices to perceive her as morally questionable. It is this aspiration to power, using

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<sup>34</sup> Shafik, 'Prostitute for a Good Reason', 721

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 721

her femininity as a tool of combat instead of submission that renders al-Jindi ambiguous and trivial in the eyes of the critics. She is popular at the box office, but tends to be associated with low artistic standards.

As much as it is clear that a star is produced by the industry and her/his consecutive film roles along with other mass-mediated texts and images, she or he may also, as Richard Dyer noted in his study of stars, become an 'author' who subverts or contradicts the film text.<sup>36</sup> Al-Jindi displays an awareness of the desiring male gaze, but at the same time she plays an active role in 'authoring' her position as subject. By analysing Marlene Dietrich, E. Ann Kaplan suggests we read the *femme fatale* as an 'erotic object (or narcissistic phallic replacement)' that transforms women into a fetish in order to curtail her castrating powers.<sup>37</sup> Al-Jindi, therefore, strives for the position of subject; an attempt that stands in clear opposition to the objectified position of the *femme fatale* described by Kaplan. Thus, as Shafik suggests, 'an important part of al-Jindi's disturbing appearance is her active participation in writing herself, not only as a sexual object, but also as a sexual subject.'<sup>38</sup>

The four women of Rāshid's documentary are nationalists and progressives; one among them is a veiled Islamist. The women defy the stereotypical notion that 'fundamentalists' and 'secularists' do not talk to each other, that they do not have shared experiences or common concerns. They assault the barriers of rigid ideologies of the Arab world and the West.

While the four women are bonded by common values, they also acknowledge their differences. Three are adamant about their desire for the continuation of a secular state – a state with space for religion, but

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London, BFI Publishing, 1979), 174

<sup>37</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York and London, Methuen, 1983), 59

<sup>38</sup> Shafik, 'Prostitute for a Good Reason', 724

not a religious state. Şāfināz alone among them wants an Islamic state. Shāhinda's parents were both Muslim but never prayed at home. She was taught that religion is about how you treat others. Amīna grew up in a house with a European culture. She chose socialism and Marxism. Last year, for the first time, she found herself praying, but it was in a personal relationship with God, not the framework of a religion. Growing up, Widād chose socialism, but she stresses this choice sprung from her Christian faith. Religion to her is a private matter between herself and God. It has nothing to do with the state and its laws.

Under conditions of confusion and disappointment, and in search of meaning, people, Christians and Muslims alike, are turning to religion, as Shāhinda reminds us. 'Everywhere people are seeking to cling to religion as an immutable doctrine; it comes from God. Whereas earthly values are subject to failure and questioning, adopting a religion becomes a protection.' Amīna, worrying about the implications, believes, 'we are suffering from obscurantism.' She continues, 'this may be more dangerous than physical violence.' Many cast Islamism in the context of cultural politics, often calling it a form of cultural nationalism in the face of Western intrusion. Amīna dismisses this idea, insisting that it is a matter of power politics; if the Islamists gained power and acted in the West's interests, the West would embrace it, she insists. Shāhinda says, along with many others, that the West needs to create an enemy and Islam is it. Speaking across all divisions, Şāfināz insists, 'I've discovered that deep down in every human culture the values - freedom, justice, tolerance, and human dignity - are the same.'

In 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization', Mervat Hatem argues that, feminist views of the relationship between liberalism and gender 'challenge the most cherished assumptions of the Orientalist literature on Middle Eastern cultures, that is, its belief in the existence of an 'essential difference' between modern/Western and

traditional/Islamic cultures in their attitudes toward women and the position women occupy in society.’<sup>39</sup> The stereotyped view holds that while Western societies are inclined to be supportive of women’s rights to equality and liberty, Islamic societies are traditionally oppressive towards women.<sup>40</sup>

While the Western assumptions about ‘essential differences’ can be challenged as stereotypes on the one hand, it should also be noted that the feminist discourse in the Arab world is qualitatively different from that found in the Western world – a point illustrated by the early experiences with Egyptian nationalism of the four women in the film. As Badran and Cooke argue in their introduction to an anthology of Arab feminist writings, Arab feminist discourse shares some universal concerns with feminist discourse in the Western world. However, it also contains elements not found in the west, and in particular, the inherently political quality of Arab feminist discourse and the integration between feminist and nationalist political movements.<sup>41</sup>

While the women dispute the aims, objectives and accomplishments of the Egyptian nationalist movement, they do agree that their initial political motivation was born in the movement. They agree that the feminist objectives subsumed within the nationalist movement represented a strike against the chains of colonialism, as much as they did a strike against perceptions of Arab/Islamic patriarchy.

The film also breaks stereotypes that Westerners may have about Muslims, especially women who adhere strictly to Islam’s rules. The contemporary Islamic feminist argues that it is not Islam or the *sharī‘a* which holds women back in the Middle East. Rather, they maintain, it

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<sup>39</sup> Mervat Hatem, ‘Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?’, *Middle East Journal*, 48 (4), (Autumn 1994), 663

<sup>40</sup> Badran, ‘Independent Women: More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt’, in Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women: Old Boundaries New Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993); Hatem, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London, Virago Press, 1990)

is a patriarchal Arab culture, the vestiges of a sexist colonial heritage, and years of custom and practice that result in the treatment of women as inferior to men.<sup>42</sup> In her study of Arab-Muslim women activists, Carolyn Fluerhr-Lobban argues that through the newly conceptualised Islamic feminism, the 'new' Arab woman has been given a social-ideological construct by which 'she can be both modern and Islamic, without any irreconcilable contradiction between the two.'<sup>43</sup>

In her early fifties, Ṣāfināz is of the generation that learned and was guided by Zaynab al-Ghazali and forms a link between her and the younger Islamists of the 1990s. Her initial education and training was in journalism and the arts, and her Islamic knowledge is derived from her extensive reading and study of Islam. In 1960 she went to graduate school in the United States: 'I learnt many things there, but above all, to be myself.' Upon her return to Egypt she became one of Egypt's youngest and most famous theatre critics. With her own creative style she attacked the traditional views so strongly protected by other critics. On her return she also embraced an Islamic discourse of social justice. By 1971 she was banned from writing, then imprisoned three times and branded a communist, despite the head cover she donned in 1972: 'This Islamic garment is the banner of my liberation.'

She speaks from the standpoint of a Muslim woman who was westernised in both outlook and demeanour, lived in the West for a few years in the sixties and 'came to Islam' as a result of these contacts with the Western world. She comes to Islam with first-hand experience of being a Muslim, Arab middle-class, woman intellectual who was faced with negative Western reactions to all these different aspects of her identity.

Preferring to work alone and not be part of any group or movement,

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<sup>42</sup> Therese Saliba, 'Arab Feminism at the Millennium', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25 (4), (2000)

<sup>43</sup> Carolyn Fluerhr-Lobban, 'Toward a Theory of Arab-Muslim Women as Activists in Secular and Religious Movements', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 15 (2), (Spring 1993), 104

Ṣāfināz affirms her lack of confidence in institutions and contemporary organisations. She decries state power, which does not treat people as citizens, but rather as hostages or captives with which it can do as it pleases. At the same time, however, she sees other civil institutions in society as being no better. She is describing the feelings reiterated by many Islamists, that both state and non-Islamic or secular institutions are a failure. This argument has a logical conclusion, which is encased in her call for an 'Islamic solution' to all problems. Avenues offered by the state and secular organisations have proved their inefficacy. She levels her criticism and proposals for alternatives principally through her pen.

None of the women are socially docile or politically naive. All four have fought for their beliefs without hesitation. Shāhinda states: 'I worked among the peasants, including those in the south. I am a woman, not a man, but I never once felt that being a woman was an obstacle.' She was in Alexandria giving birth to her daughter when her husband was shot. She made the decision to bury him in Kamshīsh and bore his coffin on her shoulder. 'That day, Shāhinda proved that the women of Egypt could meet any challenge. Nothing could stop them. Those strong and difficult moments forged solid ties among us,' says Widād.

As far as the results are concerned, the women have not been so successful. Their lives have not necessarily worked out according to their desires. Amīna states at the beginning: 'It's hard that things haven't changed in the forty years since what we call the revolution.' They have not forgotten their sufferings. But they are not alone. The lifetime bond of friendship between these women derives in part from a willingness to consider and accept a different other without perceiving it as a challenge to oneself. While none of the women believe they have achieved all of their political objectives, all of them are secure in the belief of themselves. At the stage of life where one tries to make sense of it all, these four Egyptian women are not necessarily triumphant, but

joyful. Conversations in *Four Women of Egypt*, the women's very redefining of experience is intended to challenge all the previously accepted indices of 'male superiority' and of women's supposedly 'natural' roles. They have each lived a rich life, and despite the defeats they have experienced, they symbolise real success precisely because they are not, unlike *Sāmīyā*, fictitious.

*The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwi* is about a woman whose methods are unprincipled. Villains in films are usually situated at one end of the spectrum with the hero or heroine at the other end to counter balance: virtue to show up the vice. Here *Sāmīyā* is the centre of all attention. There is a sense of triumph at the end of the film, that despite her methods, she has somehow got away with it. However, to live in peace and enjoy her gains she must run away, making her victory a hollow one. Her rapid social ascent will, in reality, lead to her self-destruction. Her triumph is one of escapist fantasy rather than actuality.

It is the combined voices of the women, talking in a simultaneous outburst or sharing observations, needs and experiences that allows them to be heard. *Sāmīyā*, however, realises that to achieve her personal goal she must remain alone, unlike the women in *Four Women of Egypt*, whose lives are intertwined, verbally – one starts a story and another continues – as well as physically. *Sāmīyā* has no commitment to family, friends or ideologies. We would normally expect there to be a reason why a woman is so determined to achieve such personal gain, but as Malkmus reminds us, 'no family intrudes on the screen, so no Freudian problems are provided as excuse for her behaviour.'<sup>44</sup> Writing about American films of the 1990s, which draw on the conventions of the woman's picture, Amelia Jones suggests films that narrate the rise and fall of career women in contemporary American life then 'work to punish these deviant women or re-inscribe them within traditional

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<sup>44</sup> Malkmus and Armes, op. cit., 76

family structures.<sup>45</sup> No united family, however, is provided to close this narrative. The four women activists, however much they deviated from the role of the traditional Egyptian woman, have all successfully combined their public lives with a strong, committed private life – Amīna with her husband and the other three with their daughters. The film closes with the women and their daughters together, talking about the future, suggesting the physical, emotional, intellectual and political selves of the women will live on through the next generation and that the broader struggles of history will go on, and be worked through, in the lives of their children.

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<sup>45</sup> Amelia Jones, 'She Was Bad News: Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman', *Camera Obscura* 25-26 (1991), 297

## Chapter 5

### Female Friendship

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* (*Āhlām Hind wa Kāmīlyā*, Muḥammad Khān, 1988)

*Lace* (*Dāntīlā*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1998)

New Realism developed in the early 1980s with a new generation of young directors. By addressing class difference and social injustice, some realist films had shown a clear melodramatic inclination, but these melodramatic features started vanishing with this second wave of realism in the post-Sadat era. New realism evolved from changed themes, including moral corruption, rapid social ascent and materialism, often related to the *infītāḥ* that was initiated by Sadat's government. Other films pointed simply to the difficult living conditions experienced by the lower classes. Muḥammad Khān was one of the first of this new wave of young directors to explore reality utilising original locations and offering sophisticated characters. *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* is centred on two female servants who have to cope with a multitude of problems, but whose friendship compensates for many troubles. The film is a sensitive exploration of feminine identity in a patriarchal society. Set in the urban landscape of Cairo in the 1980s, the film also considers the aftermath of the disintegrated dreams of Sadat's open door policy, and the relationship between the city and the country.

Īnās al-Dughaydi's sixth feature film, *Lace*, also explores the theme of female friendship and feminine identity in a patriarchal society. Set in Cairo and Alexandria in the 1990s, the film is centred on two middle-class women. Having been friends since childhood, they find themselves in a situation of conflict and jealousy when they desire the same man.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In *Night Talk*, made the following year, al-Dughaydi continued to explore the theme of female conflict. Kokitta seduces and manipulates men by blackmailing them with video tapes of their sexual encounters, which are recorded by her assistant Amīna. When Amīna wants to resign in order to get married, Kokitta frames her for prostitution in order for her to remain. In revenge, Amīna carefully plan's Kokitta's downfall using the videotapes.

Al-Dughaydi focuses on a female-oriented subject, but combines it with a spectacular plot and *mise-en-scène*, returning to a melodramatic formula which relied heavily on the emotions of the audience, and was popular in the 1940s and 1950s. Both films end on the same note, advocating female solidarity, in a patriarchal society where female attachment to a male is valuable and male approval inevitable.

### Female Friendship

In general, theorists agree that traditionally, friendships between women have been ignored. When friendship has been recognised it has almost always been male friendship. Lillian B. Rubin states, in her study of female friendship, 'just as women have been invisible in public life throughout the ages, so their private relations with each other have been unseen as well.'<sup>2</sup> Significant female friendships have either been ignored or have been portrayed with certain stereotypes or misconceptions. Friendship between women has often been viewed by theorists as trivial or superficial, not suitable for serious study and has, therefore, generally been neglected.

In her exploration of the nature and effects of friendships, Pat O'Connor suggests the move towards recognising the significance of female friendships has been most directly facilitated by an increasing concern with the association between personal relationships and various indicators of emotional well being, such as psychiatric health. She also sites a number of other developments that have also been extremely important contributions.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s, with its slogan 'the personal is the political' legitimated a concern with personal relationships. Secondly, the study of relationships as psychological constructs and the processes through which they were

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian B. Rubin, *Just Friends* (New York, Harper and Row, 1985), 59

<sup>3</sup> Pat O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review* (New York and London, The Guildford Press, 1992), 2

created and maintained.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, cross-cultural anthropological work highlighted the importance of locating discussion of friendship within a particular social and cultural context.<sup>5</sup>

More recent research by feminist historians proves that friendship, in fact, has played an extremely important part in the lives of many women. In her study of the correspondence and diaries of American men and women between the 1760s and 1880s, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests that due to the strong segregation of men and women, in many ways women were alone and isolated. However, through shared experience they were able to provide each other with mutual support, and many formed a strong sense of emotional attachment. Smith-Rosenberg went on to conclude that female relationships were not a peripheral part of the social system as previous studies had indicated, but were in fact an essential part of society.<sup>6</sup>

Theorists and scholars site numerous reasons for the lack of attention paid to friendships between women: stereotypes of female friendship have manifested a fear of lesbianism, part of the broader cultural anxiety about homosexuality, lack of encouragement for women to rejoice in their own kind and their own femininity, and the absence of mythic endorsement, compared to male friendships such as Achilles and Patroclus. Early feminist scholars saw this general lack of endorsement serving a very clear purpose for patriarchal society: 'to reinforce women's dependence on men.'<sup>7</sup> In her thesis on female friendship relationships, Virginia Curlee Koenig catalogues popular misconceptions

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<sup>4</sup> See R. A. Hinde, *Towards Understanding Relationships* (London, Academic Press, 1979) and Steve Duck and Daniel Perlman, eds., *Understanding Personal Relationships* (London, Sage, 1985)

<sup>5</sup> See Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1974)

<sup>6</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs: Journal of Women, Culture and Society*, 1 (1), (1975), 1-29. Although this specific study was limited to America I think the same point can be made of many other countries where segregation of men and women occurred.

<sup>7</sup> A. M. Seiden and B. Bart, 'Women to women: Is sisterhood powerful?' in Nona Glazer-Malbin, ed., *Old Family / New Family* (New York and London, Van Nostrand), 194. Quoted in Pat O'Connor, op. cit., 10

about female friendship: 'that women tend to mistrust each other . . . compete with one another for men,' and resist a 'tendency to bond,'<sup>8</sup> and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that hostility between women is almost inevitable, rooted as it is in sexual jealousy and/or in that desire for male approval which is almost inevitable in patriarchy.<sup>9</sup>

Robert R. Bell states reasons why male and female friendships should differ. Looking at the social structure of society, he suggests that usually it is easier for women to form friendships than it is for men. The social structures in which women traditionally operate, such as the home and the community, are more conducive to forming friendships than the work world where men 'are in competition with (each other) and in positions of greater or lesser power.'<sup>10</sup> Where male relationships are often based on competitiveness, relationships among women are more often based on trust and strength gained on having shared important feelings, thoughts and experiences. Rubin agrees that in general, women's friendships with each other rest on 'shared intimacies, self-revelation, nurturance and emotional support.'<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the biological differences may be, femininity and masculinity are social constructions which are defined by different cultures at different times. Behavioural expectations, therefore, are specific to time, place and culture. Boys are raised to be independent, active, tough and emotionally in control, while girls are taught to be dependent, passive and sensitive. These expectations are reinforced in many different ways: by parents, teachers and images presented through visual media. For an explanation of the success of this socialisation

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Curlee Koenig, *Intimacy in the Marital and Female Friendship Relationships of Women*, Ph.D thesis, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh (1983), 36. Quoted in Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), 219

<sup>9</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'The Queen's Looking Glass', in Jack Zipes, ed., *Don't Bet on the Prince* (Aldershot, Gower, 1986)

<sup>10</sup> Robert R. Bell, *Worlds of Friendship* (Beverly Hills, California and London, Sage Publications, 1981), 61

<sup>11</sup> Rubin, op. cit., 61

process, Rubin draws on the work of Nancy Chodorow. She finds that the difference in men and women's potential for friendship originates in their early childhood. In particular, their experience of the traditional family in which the mother is the primary caregiver and role model. It is within this context that 'children develop a sense of self and gender identity.'<sup>12</sup>

In order to consolidate his male sexuality, separation from his mother is required for a young boy. Rubin suggests that this is the beginning of the development of the kind of ego boundaries typical of men in general. They are barriers that are rigid and fixed, which separate self from other, and which often restrict and limit relationships with others. She also sees the competitive aspect of men's friendships as related to early childhood experience:

The boy child, whose developing sense of himself is so separate from others, easily learns to become the competitor. If relationships cannot be trusted to provide safety and security, then strength is the answer and winning the goal.<sup>13</sup>

For a young girl, the formation of gender identity is very different. It is difficult to establish boundaries between herself and other because of the likeness to her mother. As a woman she will develop ego boundaries that are more permeable than those of a man, therefore, not creating barriers against other people. It is at this early stage that women develop their empathic and relational capacities which serve them well in their friendships. A girl and her mother are the same gender, so a daughter will not have to separate herself completely, as a son must. As a result:

. . . her sense of herself is never as separate as his; she experiences herself always as more continuous with another; and the maintenance of close personal connections will

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin, *op. cit.*, 90

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

continue to be one of life's essential themes for her.<sup>14</sup>

Given this psychological information it is not surprising that women can cope better than men with same-sex relationships. For the same reason, their friendships are likely to be more successful than male friendships.

As Bell points out, women have been seen to operate exclusively within kinship structures, as opposed to men, who venture out into the world. It is assumed that all nonfamilial relations will be secondary to women: 'In many societies, men have friends and women have relatives.' Moreover, women themselves have had reason to devalue female friendship because they need to cultivate male power: 'Many women even today find that their adult status or prestige depends on their attachment to a male. And many women are willing to give up female friendships, if necessary in order to win a man.'<sup>15</sup> Radical feminists argue that it is impossible to understand women's experiences outside of the institutions by which men dominate women. In this situation friendships between women are an essential basis of solidarity. They argue that the single most important aspect of women's situation is their oppression, and in this context women are natural allies.

In an Arab society, female friendship can be a double-edged sword. Friendship can be a nurturing and psychologically enriching partnership, providing a much-appreciated confidante. But not all relationships between women are so. Women can often find themselves in competition with one another, which in turn leads to conflict. In many societies, the world of the domestic and familial is the world of women, and that of the public and political the world of men. Louise Lamphere, in her study on the cooperation and conflict among women in domestic groups, suggests that because of this we might expect that women within the same domestic group would share common interests and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 96

<sup>15</sup> Bell, *op. cit.*, 59-60

unite in solving problems arising out of daily activities. However:

. . . ethnographic reports show that many kinds of domestic groups are ridden with conflict and competition between women. Accounts of jealousy among co-wives, of the dominance of mother-in-law over daughter-in-law, and of quarrels between sisters-in-law provide some of the most common examples.<sup>16</sup>

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* and *Lace* both investigate the subject of female friendship within a patriarchal society. Female friendship is often portrayed as stimulating personal psychological growth, but it rarely leads to the promotion of significant social change. Its function is primarily to serve as a temporary respite from the problems women face in their heterosexual romantic encounters. However, the friendship at the centre of these films facilitates a process of transformation in which the women become strong, and gain independence through each other. The process by which they achieve this independence is significantly different. Where *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* offers an episodic structure defining moments of mutual support and encouragement, *Lace* introduces themes of jealousy and competition for a man which taps the familiar notion of females as opponents, particularly as configured in a heterosexual triangle.

### *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā*

#### Synopsis

Bright, multicoloured lights spell out the title of the film. Then the situations of the three main characters are established in three short scenes: Hind carrying the heavy child of her employer on her shoulders to the top of an enormous slide at the fairground; Kāmīlyā greeting her brother one morning and he responds with, 'Get me some tea!'; and 'Id

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<sup>16</sup> Louise Lamphere, 'Strategies, Cooperation and Conflict Among Women in Domestic Groups', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1974), 97

and his accomplice stealing a bag from a man in his car. Their lives are far removed from the bright, artificial lights of the fairground.

Sayyid, Kāmīlyā's brother, wants her to marry his boss, Osman, but she puts up some resistance. Kāmīlyā suggests to Hind that they live together but that is too unconventional for Hind. Hind returns to her village indefinitely; she would rather be a housewife than a servant. A year later Hind returns to the city. Kāmīlyā is now married to Osman. It is a marriage of convenience for Osman (he has someone to cook and take care of him) but an intolerable one for Kāmīlyā (he is old enough to be her father).

After an evening of seduction (a film at the cinema and a drink in a café) Hind and 'Id kiss in a darkened alley. The camera pulls back and leaves them in private. The next day Kāmīlyā warns Hind that 'Id is not trustworthy but she tells her they have agreed to marry as soon as he finds a job. 'Id and his friend Anwar steal from Hind's employers. Frightened, because the porter of the building knows which village she comes from, Hind accepts Kāmīlyā's offer to stay with her for a couple of nights. When Osman returns home that evening in a drunken stupor he demands that Hind leave. Kāmīlyā leaves with her. Hind admits to Kāmīlyā that she yielded to 'Id after he promised to marry her and she is now pregnant. Whatever the outcome Kāmīlyā will not leave her. 'Id eventually agrees to marry Hind, however, while Hind is waiting to sign the marriage papers 'Id is being arrested and is subsequently imprisoned.

Once released from prison, Hind and 'Id marry and soon after, Hind gives birth to a daughter. Kāmīlyā names her Āḥlām. Sayyid tricks Kāmīlyā into giving him some money. He and Anwar immediately use it to buy drugs. Despite 'Id's protestations of going straight, because he wants to bring his daughter up with honest money, he is soon back on the streets involved in petty crime. He makes a lucky escape from the police with a substantial amount of money. He tells Hind to take Āḥlām

and live with Kāmīlyā. The following morning Hind returns home to collect her clothes and finds Anwar waiting for ‘Id. He wants to know where the money is. That evening, when Hind has not returned ‘Id goes to look for her. As he approaches the apartment he sees Anwar leaving. He enters to find Hind on the floor beaten and bleeding. While he waits in the café on the corner for Anwar to return, he is arrested.

Three years pass. Playing outside one day Āḥlām finds a plastic bag buried in the ground. The women open it and find the money that ‘Id had just before he was arrested. Hind thinks they should wait for him before they spend it but Kāmīlyā tells her that he would only squander it. ‘Id attacks Anwar in prison with a razor blade.

That evening the two women take Āḥlām to the funfair. We are back at the fairground where we were first introduced to Hind. This time she is able to enjoy it with her own child. Having made the decision to follow their dreams the women take a taxi to Alexandria. They are oblivious to the looks of the driver who has noticed the gold jewellery the women are wearing. The taxi driver’s brother-in-law joins them. He offers Hind, Kāmīlyā and Āḥlām a drink of fruit juice. Hind and Kāmīlyā wake up in the desert. Robbed of their money and with their daughter missing the two women run in search of Āḥlām. They find her by the sea.

### Structure

The plot of the film is constructed of a number of different episodes where time passes and life continues without us really noticing. A black screen signifies the end of one episode and the beginning of the next. The structure of the film, within this episodic construction, is based on parallel sets of relational networks. This parallel structure reveals itself through every aspect of the film, from its title, the progression of the action and the organisation of relationships that make up its plot.

The Arabic title of the film, *Āḥlām Hind wa Kāmīlyā*, is ostensibly a very simple title, but it contains many of the keys to the various layers of meaning inherent in the film's structure. This is not only because of the double meaning of the word *Āḥlām* (dreams), which serves as the name of the little girl and as an indication of Hind and Kāmīlyā's frustrated dreams, but also because the grammatical structure of the title puts *Āḥlām* (the dreams) in a position of *idāfa* to the two main characters.<sup>17</sup> This means that it is an added element to their life as well as being a remote element. In the harsh reality portrayed in the film, the two women cannot afford to nourish their dreams of a better world in which they can escape poverty and the exploitation of their men folk.

On one level *Āḥlām* is the name given to Hind's daughter. However, she is not the daughter of Hind alone, but as the title suggests, she is the daughter of Hind and Kāmīlyā together. Not only does Kāmīlyā dissuade Hind from having an abortion, 'Have you gone mad? I'm dreaming of embracing it.' She is also present at the birth, gives the new born baby her name, pressures 'Id into marrying Hind, thereby saving the girl the fate of an illegitimate child, and provides *Āḥlām* with financial support while 'Id, the father, is in prison. This interpretation is reinforced at the birth, when the camera lingers with Hind, Kāmīlyā and *Āḥlām* for a moment; visually the three females have already formed a new family unit.

On the metaphorical level, Kāmīlyā is the real father of *Āḥlām*, playing a much more significant parental role in the child's life than 'Id ever will. The girl belongs both to Hind and Kāmīlyā and does not belong to the father whose name is registered on her birth certificate according to the dictates of the patriarchal system. In this manner, as Sabry Hafez suggests in his analysis of the film, the 'title attempts to subvert the patriarchal order and replace it with a matriarchal one by

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<sup>17</sup> Sabry Hafez, *Dreams of Hind and Kamilya*, unpublished paper

relating the girl to the two women and not to the father who obviously does not deserve her.’<sup>18</sup>

One of the main themes of the film is the exploration of the nature and meaning of friendship. The plot is structured therefore through pairs of characters. The first pair consists of the two title characters, Hind and Kāmīlyā, who work as maids in the homes of middle-class families and represent two dimensions of their social class. Hind comes from a rural background and was forced to come to the city on the death of her husband. Her short marriage was the only happiness she has experienced in her life. Kāmīlyā comes from a poor urban background. Unlike Hind, her first marriage was far from happy. She discovered that she could not have children, a fact that enhanced her desire for them, and her husband divorced her. Kāmīlyā is an urban, strong-willed woman who represents the conscious side of the women’s quest for realising their independence while Hind represents the honest simplicity of the rural approach which is capable by its very good nature of defeating the corruption represented by ‘Id and Anwar.

Although there is a marked difference between the two protagonists their common social predicament and destiny bind them together in the plot. A number of shots throughout the film also bind the women together visually. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are two sequences which function to establish their comparable situation. A close-up shot of Hind watching her uncle eat his lunch is followed by an extreme close-up of the old man’s mouth stuffed with food. This is followed by a medium close-up of Kāmīlyā watching Sayyid, her brother, eating his lunch. Both women are tied by the repulsive greed of their closest male relative. Later, alienated by her brother and his wife, Kāmīlyā watches television alone. A close-up of the television screen is used as a link. The camera tracks left to reveal Hind watching the same

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

film. The women are watching *The Beginning and the End* (well known amongst an Egyptian audience) directed by the distinguished master of Arab realist cinema Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf in 1960. The scenes selected from that film are those dealing with the heavy price which women pay for the desire of their menfolk to attain social mobility in an unjust patriarchal society. Khān's aspirations to the realist trend of Egyptian filmmaking is symbolised in his technique of the film inside the film; in this brief scene *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* aspires to belong to the realistic trend of Egyptian cinema. At the same time it suggests that Hind and Kāmīlyā are the 1980s version of Nafīsa, the heroine of *The Beginning and the End*, and will therefore suffer the same fate. We are not told when or how the women became friends but the visual intertwining of their daily lives suggests a close bond between two women who have taken responsibility for their own lives but are unable to break the ties of the male members of their family. Being both poor and women they realise that they are doomed to remain at the bottom of the social system, however, as the end of the film reveals, they attempt to alter this reality, and in doing so, the film offers its female viewers some sense of accomplishment and pride by celebrating the woman who transcends the traditional role of the female victim.

In addition to the depiction of the world of women, the film delineates the world of men – the sphere in which many females must operate. The men in this film are the cause of narrative problems which we watch women dealing with, 'an inversion of the countless narratives in which women bring chaos into men's worlds.'<sup>19</sup> The second pair of characters consists of 'Id and Anwar, who also develop a friendship but one that is radically different from that evolved between the two women. Their friendship is based on thuggery and treachery and it is not

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<sup>19</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998), 151

surprising that it ends in conflict and betrayal which leads both of them to prison. In prison, 'Id attacks Anwar with a razor blade. This short scene functions to authenticate 'Id's position in the masculine sphere of conflict based on duplicity and revenge and confirms the fact that he will not be released any time soon and, therefore, will remain an absent father.

The film's main structure rests on the interaction between these two different types of friendship. The friendship between the two female characters develops through understanding and mutual support in an attempt to confront the oppressive and exploitive conduct of the men. Like the women in Smith-Rosenberg's study the very structure of their relationships was (to varying degrees) influenced by the men's world. Hind and Kāmīlyā's friendship is formulated because of their shared experience in an oppressive patriarchal society, yet it is also one of integrity and independence. The men's friendship, however, progresses towards conflict and disintegration because each of the two men is occupied with saving himself alone, even if achieved at the expense of the other. As Rubin stated, female friendships are often based on nurturance and emotional support while male relations entail a more superficial bonding. She notes how relations between men are marked primarily by shared activities: 'that they tend to *do* rather than *be* together.'<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, we cannot help but contrast Anwar's betrayal of 'Id with Hind and Kāmīlyā's loyalty to one another. The lack of solid foundations facilitates the deterioration of 'Id and Anwar's relationship. The message is clear: men cannot be trusted. By showing such negative stereotypes the film refuses to promote male dominance or to advocate women's dependence on men.

Another pair of male characters is Kāmīlyā's brother, Sayyid, and Hind's uncle. Sayyid who is crushed under the hardship of poverty and

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<sup>20</sup> Rubin, op. cit., 61

unemployment continues to use the traditional concept of male chauvinism to exploit his sister economically and socially without any sense of gratitude. Not satisfied with Kāmīlyā's salary alone, which he uses to keep himself and his family, he forces her to marry a man old enough to be her father in order to achieve his own ends. His rural counterpart is Hind's uncle who comes to the city to take her wages each month. When she returns to the village, tired of work in the city, he forces her into the hands of a porter who exploits her further by putting her to work in the numerous flats of his block. Their mistreatment of the women is based on greed and deceit. When Kāmīlyā's marriage collapses and she leaves, Sayyid continues to exploit her in order to obtain money for drugs. He fabricates an elaborate story telling Kāmīlyā that two of his children have died in order to gain her sympathy. Hind's uncle tries to tempt her to buy a piece of land in the village. We can only assume that if she does it will be to his advantage.

In contrast to these six characters who represent the various facets of the lower classes the film presents a group of middle-class characters. The couple in whose house Hind works at the beginning of the film end up in a similar situation to that of their own maid when the husband goes to the same prison in which 'Id is detained as a result of writing a cheque without sufficient funds. Hafez suggests that this reflects the attempts of the middle class of the period to live beyond their means, a phenomenon which is characteristic of the era of Sadat's open door policy that left the country in debt.<sup>21</sup> There are also a number of middle-class characters dealing in illegal currency exchange along with 'Id and Anwar. The interaction between the two groups of characters provides the film with an opportunity to explore the many facets of their dilemma in the post Sadat's era, however, the lack of development of the middle-class characters means this opportunity is lost.

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<sup>21</sup> Hafez, *op. cit.*

Rather than create a world of masochistic feminine self-pity in which women reconcile themselves to their misery these women rebel against it. At the same time as presenting a realistic conception of women's relationships (rather than an idealistic presentation) the film also offers the female spectator an affirmation of female solidarity. These two ordinary women become extraordinary by rejecting their initial status as victims and overcoming pain and hardship in order to control their own fates. The film challenges articulations of conventional femininity in two ways: by portraying female friendship as an alternative to women's complete dependence on men and by defying traditional concepts of feminine passivity.

### *Lace*

#### Synopsis

A tracking shot of the coast establishes the setting as Alexandria. A young girl, Maryam, is saved from drowning by another young girl, Saḥar. Later we see Saḥar performing as a trapeze artist, spinning from a rope. Maryam is watching from the audience. The image of the spinning girl dissolves into an image of the actress Yusrā and the girl in the audience becomes the actress Ilhām Shāhīn. The black and white footage of the past is now the colour of the present.

Maryam's father wants her to marry a family friend, Wagdi, but she feels they are not suited. She goes to see Saḥar in Alexandria. Maryam watches Saḥar perform in a nightclub. She stays with Saḥar while she searches for an office in which to open her own law firm.

The following evening Saḥar is arrested for drunk driving. Maryam collects her from the police station. Ḥusām, the officer in charge, is attracted to Maryam. He begins to see the women socially. While he encounters a few romantic moments with Maryam he is unaware of Saḥar's growing attraction to him. Saḥar is unaware of Maryam and

Ḥusām's growing affection. Ḥusām invites Saḥar out for dinner. Certain that he will propose to her, she is devastated when he tells her he wants to marry Maryam. She returns home, fighting back the tears, to find Maryam gone. A voice-over informs us she has decided to marry Wagdi. She wishes the best to Saḥar and Ḥusām. Saḥar visits Maryam and informs her of Ḥusām's true feelings. Maryam will not disappoint her father and will not marry Ḥusām knowing that Saḥar is in love with him. Drunk, after attending Maryam's wedding, Ḥusām and Saḥar make love.<sup>22</sup> Afterwards, the feelings of guilt are obvious and she asks him to leave.

While Maryam emigrates to Canada with Wagdi, Saḥar throws herself into her career. Her image adorns magazine covers and she becomes a successful model and singer. Maryam is still in love with Ḥusām. She is unable to keep up the pretence any longer. As Maryam confesses her love for Ḥusām to Wagdi, Ḥusām admits to Saḥar that he loves her. As Maryam asks for a divorce from Wagdi, Ḥusām marries Saḥar. Maryam returns to Egypt and is shocked and angry to find that Saḥar and Ḥusām married. Ḥusām takes Maryam as his second wife. The three protagonists live together but this causes conflict between the two women. The situation turns to absurdity and Ḥusām demands the women stop their behaviour otherwise he will divorce them both.

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<sup>22</sup> In 'Egyptian Cinema' Viola Shafik states: 'Every feature film in Egypt passes censorship twice. First the screenplay and after completion another official licence is required in order to screen the film in public and to export it. Both steps leave much space for interference, as well as negotiation. The most important taboo zones kept under surveillance are religion, sexuality and politics. The latest censorship law, issued in 1976, forbids criticism of heavenly religions, justification of immoral actions, positive representation of heresy, images of naked human bodies and inordinate emphasis on individual erotic parts, sexually arousing scenes, alcohol consumption and drug use, obscene and indecent speech, and disrespect to parents, the sanctity of marriage or family values. Most importantly, the law does not allow films to represent social problems as hopeless, to upset the mind or to divide religions, classes and national unity.' I have seen two copies of *Lace*: the first, a video for distribution within Arabic speaking countries and the second, a DVD with English subtitles for wider distribution. The scene in which Saḥar and Ḥusām make love appears to have been censored in both copies. In the video copy we see the couple in the car together. Then a shot of them in a room (it is not clear as it is dark) is followed by a shot of them in their underwear in bed. From their conversation it is clear that they have just made love. The DVD copy cuts directly from the car to the couple in bed after they have made love. The two copies of the film are slightly different and neither has a smooth transition between the scene before they make love and the shots immediately after.

Maryam falls pregnant and Saḥar finds out that she is infertile. Saḥar has a car accident and is taken to hospital. She reconsiders their situation and asks Ḥusām to divorce her. Maryam and Ḥusām go on holiday together and when they return home Ḥusām visits Saḥar. He suggests they remarry and when she refuses he proposes they become lovers. Maryam overhears the conversation and later asks Ḥusām to divorce her. Maryam returns to live with Saḥar. She is present at the birth of Maryam's daughter. Several years pass. The final shot of the film is of the two women and Maryam's daughter, in Alexandria, running along the beach together.

### Structure

Unlike *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* which addresses working-class women, *Īnās al-Dughaydi* presents a white bourgeois world in *Lace*. The film's plot relies heavily on establishing a series of contrasts between the two friends. The opening shots of the film establish the different character traits of the protagonists. Maryam is conservative, quiet and timid while Saḥar is adventurous, gregarious and tantalizing. The women come from very different backgrounds and represent two very distinct lifestyles. Maryam is a well educated lawyer; Saḥar is an uneducated nightclub entertainer. Maryam is dependent on her family emotionally and financially, while Saḥar is independent with no familial ties. When Ḥusām first meets the women he comments to a friend that they are mismatched. The opening shots of the film suggest the roots of their friendship can be traced back to their childhood when Saḥar saves Maryam from drowning. Their bond, therefore, is very strong. The series of shots directly following the credit sequence reinforces the contrast between the two women. The juxtaposition of Maryam, solitary in her car, following a conversation about marriage with her father and Saḥar performing in a nightclub confirms their disparity but simultaneously

suggests that the girls from the outset of the film have remained friends.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger has examined the image of woman: 'Men act and women appear. Men look at women . . . Thus (woman is) . . . an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.'<sup>23</sup> Though Berger does not examine women's representation in the cinema, he does deal with the female nude in European oil painting and many of his insights are relevant to woman's semiotic placement in film. He notes, for example, the absent subject, the man who views the nude from outside the picture frame: 'In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator, in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man.'<sup>24</sup> During her nightclub performance Saḥar is positioned at the centre of the screen, with the camera initially watching her from an ideal theatre viewer's seat. As she descends the stairs into the audience the camera follows her, keeping her centrally in the frame. Shots are then rendered in close-up segmenting her body: her torso, her hips, her legs. Her tight fitting gaudy costume completes the image of the contemporary entertainer. She is fashioned to fulfil the fantasies of the male voyeur, who remains invisible, outside of the frame. Maryam enters the nightclub but is obviously less comfortable in such surroundings. The film sets up a good/bad girl scenario; a split that unequivocally reflects patriarchal assumptions about women suggests Fischer.<sup>25</sup> The film establishes the virgin/whore dichotomy, the domestic and the theatrical. Maryam gives up her (respectable) career as a lawyer to support her husband while Saḥar remains an entertainer. Saḥar is more assertive and controlling than her demure, retiring friend. Maryam is the good girl associated with feminine sweetness and passivity, while Saḥar is the bad girl, assertive and sexually promiscuous. Or is Saḥar a model of competent, fulfilling,

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<sup>23</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1978), 47

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>25</sup> Fischer, *op. cit.*, 180-181

independent femininity?

This interpretation is reinforced by the *mise-en-scène*. Maryam is associated with white and daylight while Saḥar lives for the night. When Saḥar is arrested she is still wearing one of her outfits from the nightclub. Maryam, in comparison, is at home covered from head to toe in a long white nightdress. Following Ḥusām and Saḥar's drunken sexual encounter a medium shot of Saḥar lighting a cigarette in her darkened bedroom dissolves into a shot of a white landscape. A medium close-up of Maryam and Wagdi in a car parallels the earlier shot of Saḥar and Ḥusām in a car leaving the wedding. Where Saḥar and Ḥusām's illicit, drunken encounter was hidden in the shadows of darkness, Maryam and Wagdi's 'acceptable' marriage is conducted in the light of day. While Maryam perseveres with her life in Canada, dedicated to her husband, Saḥar throws herself into her career. Maryam embodies the down to earth wife in contrast to Saḥar's more remote glamorous star persona, particularly when she is transformed from second class nightclub performer to celebrity.

Despite the women's differences their relationship is one of nurturance and support. When Maryam first visits Saḥar in Alexandria, the cinematography and *mise-en-scène* construct the two women as a couple. The interior domestic shots, subdued lighting, and relaxed conversation remind us of a heterosexual romance. The women acknowledge their differences but at the same time integrate themselves into the life of the other. Maryam reads poetry to Saḥar while Saḥar teaches Maryam to dance. Saḥar instils confidence in Maryam to open up her own law office and Maryam encourages Saḥar in her desire to be more than a nightclub entertainer. When the narrative introduces heterosexual romance into the dyad of female friendship the sense of the triangle is established through the configuration of the characters. Their relationship develops into a triangular form, the odd number

representing some kind of dilemma. As a much used form in cinematic imagery, triangles, unlike circles, denote a certain imbalance, or problem in the narrative.

The inclusion of Ḥusām creates a triangular relationship but the departure of Maryam to Canada, consequently, signals the collapse of the triangle. At this point in the narrative two separate dyads are formed. The regression of Maryam's relationship is then juxtaposed with the progression of Saḥar's. While Maryam realises the mistake she has made in marrying Wagdi, Ḥusām realises his love for Saḥar. And as Maryam asks Wagdi for a divorce, Saḥar and Ḥusām marry. From the dark night of Canada Maryam returns to the daylight of Egypt.

Maryam's return to Egypt marks a new phase in the narrative and the re-establishment of the triangle: physically, emotionally and visually. Desire, jealousy and betrayal form the foundation of the conflict between the female protagonists. Maryam protests, 'You have a line of men waiting for you, but you chose the only man that I love! I left him before because I didn't want to lose you; because your friendship was the most important thing in the world to me.' But Saḥar retorts, 'Do not try to make me feel guilty! I also sacrificed myself for you. I denied my true feelings so that you could marry him!' O'Connor indicates that real-life relationships are, in fact, complex constructs involving conflict, anxiety and personal pain as well as psychological and social rewards.<sup>26</sup> At this point in the film, for Maryam, years of nurturance and loyalty have resulted in the worst betrayal possible. Jane Flax argues that when female friendship succeeds in providing nurturance and autonomy, it can be a life-enhancing experience, but when it fails to nurture a woman's sense of self, it can create feelings of profound rage, hurt and betrayal.<sup>27</sup> The dynamics of the relationship change as the two women are

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<sup>26</sup> O'Connor, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Flax, 'The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, 4 (2), (1978), 179-180

positioned in competition for one man. The sequence of shots, between the three characters on Maryam's return, clearly establishes this dynamic. A series of shot reverse shots of Maryam and Saḥar in close-up is followed by a shot of the two women in medium close-up in the foreground. Ḥusām appears in the background and the characters reposition themselves so that Maryam is placed in-between Saḥar and Ḥusām (the couple). Maryam paces between them and eventually she is replaced in the foreground with Saḥar, with Ḥusām in the background. A clear triangle is formed with Ḥusām, although in the background, visually placed between the women. The focus is no longer on what binds the friends but on what pulls them apart. Maryam responds to the betrayal by initiating her marriage to Ḥusām.

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, René Girard discusses the presence of triangular desire in the work of five novelists.<sup>28</sup> Through close reading of the major texts of the authors he insists that all instances of novelistic desire necessarily involve a third party or mediator. The 'romantic' fictional understanding of desire sees human desire as linear, as simply a matter of a desiring person and her/his desire for another object. Girard's proposition adds a whole other dimension. The object of desire may take the form of a number of different things – an aspiration for wealth or improved social status or another person. Whatever the object, the desire for it is always triggered by a third party – the mediator. Despite Girard's claim in later works that his theory of desire is equally valid for women and men, the theoretical paradigm that he devises in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* fails almost completely to address female characters as subjects in their own right. The positions of subject and mediator rotate between the two male protagonists, while the woman remains the object; eternally passivised in the face of the apparent

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<sup>28</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965)

dynamism of the male relationship.

At the beginning of *Lace* Maryam is the object of Ḥusām's desire but she actively removes herself from the configuration. However, with the reintroduction of the triangular formation female desire becomes a structural component of the narrative, thus inverting Girard's positioning of woman as passive object. The film's triangular structure articulated by a female director excludes man from the arena of subjective desire just as the male paradigm marginalizes women. However, the female-female dyad in this case does not offer an affirmative female image but instead the relationship is founded on competitive behaviour (usually associated with the male). Girard observes, as the mediator comes closer to the subject, mimetic rivalry becomes more and more emotionally fraught, before long the subject is caught up in an intense and ambivalent relationship with the mediator. Jealousy and envy imply a third presence: subject (Maryam), object (Ḥusām) and a third person (Saḥar) toward whom the jealousy or envy is directed.

Maryam and Saḥar can only focus on their relationship with Ḥusām. Nothing else has any importance in their lives. Many of the short scenes that follow are shot indoors in soft muted romantic lighting. Inside is the space associated with woman: in this film the interior is used as an arena for conflict, for fighting over their man. Maryam and Saḥar initiate the majority of the action in the house but it is the 'passive' male who determines their actions and aims. The male is out of place in the domestic sphere; however, he dominates not through force of personality but simply through his position as patriarch. The women's motivation resides solely in the desire to be the perfect/preferred wife. Lamphere suggests there are examples of polygamous extended families where co-wife conflict is minimised by a set of rules that carefully govern how often a husband sleeps with each

wife (and how often she is obligated to cook for him).<sup>29</sup> The protagonists' conflict is purely emotional (there is no contention over the control of economic resources or control over decision making). The vignettes of conflict all revolve around the sexual objectification of Ḥusām, as the women compete for him in terms of quantity of sexual pleasure. Sexual desire is expressed by each woman but in dress and behaviour they construct themselves as objects for his gaze, confirming traditional relations of looking. Koenig sites one of the popular misconceptions about female friendship is that women compete with one another for a man and Bell points out that women themselves have had reason to devalue their relationships because they need to cultivate male power. Whether it is a misconception or not the behaviour of Saḥar and Maryam confirms this negative stereotype. It is not only the relationship between the two women that disintegrates but eventually the conflict leads to the disintegration of their relationship with Ḥusām.

Saḥar's car accident marks the final phase in the narrative and a return to the original dyadic structure of the beginning of the film. The women experience some sort of telepathic communication while Saḥar is in hospital indicating the strength of their friendship and the re-establishment of their couple. Saḥar removes herself from the triangular relationship, the first step in the women reaching a final equilibrium. Maryam's decision to ask Ḥusām for a divorce personifies Girard's argument that in any triangular relationship, the object of desire is in fact less important than the connection between the two parties who seek control or ownership of that object. Triangular desire itself is epitomised in the intense rivalry between Saḥar and Maryam for the possession of Ḥusām which finally necessitates his exclusion; he is rejected by both women. From a close-up of Ḥusām, the camera zooms out emphasising his abandonment. This interpretation is reinforced in

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<sup>29</sup> Lamphere, *op. cit.*, 108

the next shot, a medium close-up of Maryam and Saḥar back together. The juxtaposition of these shots establishes female friendship as equivalent as or more important than heterosexual romance.

They were divided in their competition for Ḥusām but they gain autonomy through solidarity. Al-Dughaydi resolves the contrast between the two female characters not by having the good girl triumph over and eventually destroy her bad double, but by merging the two women into a new female self that represents an active, autonomous femininity dedicated not to pleasing men but to pleasing each other. Elizabeth Abel argues that female friendship 'generates understanding through intimacy and the collaborative construction of meaning from experience.' By trying to know and understand her female friend, a woman comes to know herself, and through this self-knowledge she can begin to understand not only her friend's situation, but her own. Identification in female friendship is a means of mutual recognition and interpretation. This interpretive process requires the projection of the self onto the other and a consequent reshaping of one's own identity. Friendship, therefore, becomes a vehicle of self-knowledge, a uniquely valuable relationship.<sup>30</sup> By the film's conclusion, each of the female protagonists has grown up by enlarging her inner sense of relational being. Maryam and Saḥar form a partnership finding fulfilment in dedication to each other and Maryam's daughter.

### An Alternative Family Unit

Film theorist Mary Ann Doane distinguishes three characteristics of the woman's film: they are specifically directed to a female audience, their plots centre on the actions and emotions of a female protagonist(s), and they deal with an issue of particular interest to women.<sup>31</sup> Both

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Abel, '(E) Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 6 (3), (1981), 419-423

<sup>31</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987), 3

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* and *Lace* fulfil the above criteria. Both films also openly champion female independence while at the same time modifying the female protagonists' sense of independence by combining it with their devotion to motherhood, a much more traditionally feminine trait.

Typically, films often centre not on the women's friendship, but on their relationships with their men. And films that do deal with female bonding end up revolving around male-female relationships, reaffirming the female protagonists' dedication to men. These films begin by focusing on relationships between women, but as they develop the major narrative struggle involves a female protagonist and her male love interest. The narrative struggle of *Lace* involves two female protagonists and *their* love interest. Each woman feels betrayed by the other and so the narrative conflict focuses on their disagreement rather than on the oppressive situation they are in. Ḥusām's polygamous relationship reveals the worst of Middle Eastern patriarchy but is not questioned by either woman until Saḥar's car accident when she begins to 'see' more clearly. The various men around them exploit Hind and Kāmīlyā, however, *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* offers its female audience the pleasure of identifying with positive female characters providing images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women. In so doing it avoids advocating the submissive behaviour that so often characterises filmic portrayals of women's relationships with men, while by contrast the same submissive behaviour is central to the narrative of *Lace*. Both films, however, offer narrative resolution that constitutes female affirmation. These films challenge male dominance and the endings challenge existing social norms and 'encourage a rethinking of issues

related to women's traditional societal roles.'<sup>32</sup>

Despite the similarities in the films' general subject matter and resolutions, the artistic choice of the directors is very different. Khān's realism stands in direct contrast to al-Dughaydi's melodrama. Setting, *mise-en-scène* and characterisation all contribute to the overall generic style of each film. Khān creates a naturalistic sense of felt life by utilising a shooting style that is notable for its simplicity, accumulating surface detail and using non-glamorous characters as the protagonists. Al-Dughaydi constructs an environment of high drama within enclosed spaces, invoking the melodramatic genre, a genre that foregrounded female protagonists, the domestic sphere and socially mandated feminine concerns.<sup>33</sup> Khān's narrative appears seamless while al-Dughaydi utilises a number of cinematic conventions, including the use of black and white photography to represent the past and the use of a voice-over to symbolise Saḥar's 'out of body' experience, boldly calling attention to the process of the narratives own construction.

The melodrama as a popular cultural form takes the notion of social crisis and mediates it within a private context, the home. 'Melodrama serves to make sense of the family and in doing so perpetuates it, including the continuation of the subordination of the woman. However, there is a twist. In the melodrama the male finds himself in the domestic sphere.'<sup>34</sup> He is not in his typically ascribed space, in the work sphere, the sphere of action but instead finds himself in the domestic passive sphere. Even in the domestic sphere Ḥusām is in control. In addition, patriarchy does not allow for female achievements in the public sphere.

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<sup>32</sup> Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 106

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,' *Monogram* 4 (1972), Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976) and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama,' *Screen* 18,2 (1977), were the pioneers examining the genre from both a Marxist and a psychoanalytic point of view. By the late 1970s it was also taken on as a genre for investigation by feminist critics, given that it primarily foregrounded the female character.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), 216

Their careers are thwarted as Maryam and Saḥar's competition for Ḥusām intensifies and they become confined to the domestic sphere. The bedroom becomes the battlefield as each woman plans her strategy of seduction.

In her essay on melodrama, Laura Mulvey suggests that in order to achieve a successful resolution to the conflict the male has to function on terms that are appropriate to the domestic sphere. In this way he becomes less male and in the process more feminised – a process which has appeal for the female spectator. As for the male spectator, pleasure is derived from seeing the contradictions resolved. Mulvey argues that the female point of view often projects a fantasy that is in patriarchal terms, transgressive, and so cannot be fulfilled. Despite the fact that in the end the female protagonist might lose out, the female spectator identifies with and gains pleasure from her behaviour during the unfolding of the narrative.<sup>35</sup> In *Lace*, however, I would argue that there is no pleasure in watching Saḥar and Maryam. We are in the melodramatic world of sentiment and the protagonists' heightened excessive emotions lead to ridiculous (almost slapstick) behaviour in their attempt to win the affections of Ḥusām, the patriarch. Bell noted that friendships between women have often been viewed as trivial or amusing: women in small groups were not seen as team-mates or colleagues, but as the 'girls'.<sup>36</sup> The comic element of *Lace* detaches itself from the seriousness of the subject and the women's actions only confirm this negative stereotype. I would suggest that pleasure for the female spectator is only derived at the end of the film when Ḥusām is unable to uphold authority and the women finally resolve their conflict.

Khān draws his viewers in by emphasising authenticity rather than sentimentality. He constructs a naturalistic representation of female

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<sup>35</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London, BFI Publishing, 1987), 75-79

<sup>36</sup> Bell, op. cit., 67

friendship. Hind and Kāmīlyā drink tea, sitting on the back steps of the flat where Hind is working. Hind asks Kāmīlyā, ‘Do you have children?’ Kāmīlyā replies, ‘God doesn’t want me to enjoy them.’ And the two women return to work. There are no effusive displays of emotional attachment or attempts to portray the women as partaking of an idealised intimacy. The film pays attention to details of the urban landscape which is punctuated throughout the film by incomplete buildings, symbols of the disintegration of Dreams created by the failure of Sadat’s socio-political projects. The women struggle through this bleak, urban jungle, their only respite being the occasional gathering in a park in the centre of the grey, overcrowded city. The spaces Hind and Kāmīlyā inhabit are a far cry from Saḥar’s new home (following the success of her career) crammed with lavish furnishings and the peachy-pink interior of Saḥar and Maryam’s marital home. Susan Hayward suggests this type of over investment in *mise-en-scène* is a legacy of targeting a female audience through melodrama, the notion of excess indicating a heightening of emotions.<sup>37</sup>

Although *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* attempts to show the crucial importance of female friendship in women’s lives, it does not idealise female bonding; instead, it portrays honestly a realistic relationship. Relationships between women often generate intimacy, empathic communication and mutual helpfulness. By confiding her problems to a female friend, a woman can improve her mental state purely on the level of feeling. Hind finds the reassurance and support she needs in Kāmīlyā, not in ‘Id. Men provide many of the narrative problems against which women react and which their friendships help them to survive. This relationship seems to have the potential to support them in their struggles in a way that their relationships with men cannot.

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<sup>37</sup> Hayward, op. cit., 215

Hind's pregnancy could have employed great melodrama, but instead, Khān continues realistic presentation. However difficult life goes on for the women in the most mundane way. Three years pass and 'Id is still in prison. The women appear to be quite naturally stronger than the men. This strength is demonstrated not only in their accomplishments in the public sphere, but in their ability to withstand the pain, suffering and sacrifice that is represented as inevitably a part of their female domestic sphere. A montage sequence shows the women continuing their daily lives: cleaning, working, and sleeping, while a shot of 'Id in prison reminds us of his continued absence. Here we are reminded of Smith-Rosenberg's research results – that despite the structure of female friendship being influenced by an oppressive patriarchal society, the women are able to maintain relationships of integrity and independence. This picture of strong, emotionally important relationships between women receives cross-cultural validation, for example, in Lila Abu-Lughod's work on Bedouin women.<sup>38</sup> Their world existed in parallel to, rather than subordinate to, the men's world. This implies that the very segregation of women's world is conducive to the formation of strong ties between women. Khān validates Hind and Kāmīlyā's relationship by combining a tolerance of individual liberty with a concern for family responsibility. The women have created a universe where their personal identities can be validated within constraints imposed by their family responsibilities. The transgression here is that Hind and Kāmīlyā have combined friendship with an alternative family unit. Their friendship maintains a martial structure, once Āhlām is born, while at the same time creating personal space and autonomy within it.

The friendship of Maryam and Saḥar, in contrast, disintegrates

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<sup>38</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, 'A Community of Secrets: The Separate World of Bedouin Women', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 10 (4), (1985), 637-57

under the constraints of patriarchy. Lamphere's anthropological research suggests polygamy, for example, will 'reduce the unassigned power of each wife.' A second wife is a considerable threat to the first who will automatically lose 'some of her ability to gain compliance from her husband' and will receive less attention. Where children are involved the rivalry is more intense as each wife attempts to build a family at the expense of her co-wives children.<sup>39</sup> When Saḥar discovers she is barren she retreats from the competition and in contrast, when Kāmīlyā (who is also barren) discovers Hind is pregnant she realises this is the only chance to have a family for herself. Al-Dughaydi heightens the emotions in the most melodramatic way. On hearing the word divorce, Maryam faints. She is pregnant. Saḥar immediately visits her doctor in the hope that she too is pregnant but instead she comes away devastated by the news that she cannot have children. As she drives home, unable to control her tears, she has an accident and is taken to hospital. She stands in direct contrast to Kāmīlyā, who accepts her fate and immediately embraces Hind's unborn child as her own. Emotions rather than action structure the melodrama genre and the dramatic action takes place between and not within the characters.

Melodrama utilises narrative mechanisms that create a blockage to expression thereby forcing melodramatic enactments to clarify the dramatic stakes. The doctor tells Saḥar she has been given a new life and a voice-over of the two women's intimate conversation suggests that this is the beginning of a reunion for the friends. It is only after this near death experience that Saḥar is able to see clearly that the way she is living is not what she wants for herself or Maryam. Al-Dughaydi is only able to express the heightened emotions of the women verbally, unlike Khān who visually displays the symbiotic interaction of his protagonists.

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<sup>39</sup> Lamphere, *op. cit.*, 107

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* simply portrays its protagonists as confidantes and helpmates without having to explain their past. We are provided with no verbal explanation for their closeness but sense their solidarity is based on shared experiences. In *Lace*, the relationship between Maryam and Saḥar is initially exalted, even idealised for its intimate and emotional qualities. However, jealousy between the two women prevails and they bicker at every turn. The continuing antagonism finally erupts and the women's action becomes destructive to their friendship. Their goal becomes male centred as they compete for the same lover. Female friendship is at this point presented as involving jealousy, envy and competition for men. The relationship between Hind and Kāmīlyā is presented as a source of strength that helps them to cope with the problems they face in the larger society. The relationship between Maryam and Saḥar, by contrast, is presented with an aggressive, destructive element. Women's problems are blamed on other women. Karen Hollinger suggests that:

... by focusing ... on conflicts between women, they obscure other issues related to women's position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely.<sup>40</sup>

Each woman feels that the other has let her down – Saḥar, by marrying Ḥusām without informing Maryam and Maryam, for marrying Ḥusām without informing Saḥar. Ḥusām's actions are not questioned until he is accused of betrayal at the end of the film.

The characteristics of a classical Hollywood ending demand that the film conclude in the establishment of happy heterosexual relationships. The ending of both films, then, violates traditional norms because they imply that romantic love does not provide the answer for

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<sup>40</sup> Hollinger, op. cit., 207

its female characters and that an answer to their problems may not even be possible in a patriarchal society. Whatever the journey of the women, both films allow the audience to view them as autonomous individuals who undertake an unusual, but triumphant escape from the confines of society. We find inspiration, particularly in *Hind* and *Kāmīlyā*, in their determination to follow their dreams. They have lost all of their material possessions, and therefore, their security at the film's conclusion but somehow we know that they will survive.

Where so many films tell the female viewer that only a husband and family can provide a woman with lasting fulfilment, *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā*, and *Lace* suggest fulfilment in rejection of men. They offer the notion that women can escape from conventional society and that they can successfully escape the confines of a repressive social structure. They offer a very different trajectory for women's lives. The message of many films is that proper femininity is passive, self-sacrificing, safely asexual and totally devoted to men. The woman left on the screen at the film's end is shown to represent a purified female nature essentially compatible with patriarchal society. The final image of each of these films subverts this traditional presentation.

*Hind*, *Kāmīlyā*, *Maryam* and *Saḥar* become autonomous women who flee a patriarchal society for an exhilarating undefined transient future. Hollinger suggests, 'this easy solution makes women's problems seem completely solved by a simple flight into nonconformity.'<sup>41</sup> The endings do not so much challenge the status quo, as offer temporary relief from the strain of living in a world that unfortunately cannot be altered. The temporary liberation that it offers provides no practical solutions to the problems, particularly for working-class women like *Hind* and *Kāmīlyā*. The films do critique societal attitudes toward women's social roles and they do imply that change is needed; however,

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<sup>41</sup> Hollinger, op. cit., 98

they do not offer a solution to these problems. The films end on a note of victory and empowerment for their female characters, but they do not consider at what cost. With their financial loss, Hind and Kāmilyā's lives are characterised by continued struggle. The empowerment resulting from the relationship remains primarily personal; the women may remain isolated from the larger community. The liberating image is there but the substance of that liberation remains illusive.

Both endings also present female friendship as an alternative for women to the absolute primacy of the domestic family situation. The films end in motherhood, in female bonding that replicates heterosexual marriage even to the extent of the two women co-parenting a child. The conclusion validates motherhood as one source of fulfilment and eliminates the need for a father figure in the family construct. The woman who has more so called 'feminine' traits becomes the mother. Hind needs Kāmilyā's support to fulfil her dreams and Maryam needs Saḥar from the beginning of the film when she nearly drowns. But Kāmilyā also needs Hind and Saḥar needs Maryam because they are both barren and this relationship enables them to have a child.

While friendship between women is a source of strength in contemporary movies, 'the question of the closeness of that friendship to lesbian desire is in constant negotiation' suggest Tasker.<sup>42</sup> The four women have rejected heterosexual domesticity and in doing so have also rejected society. Their actions are a declaration of their love for each other, but a platonic love.

When the friends are together they are often situated in close proximity and are demonstrably affectionate. They are also frequently shown in close-up exchanging affectionate looks. The images of the women displaying any kind of affection and sharing intimate moments (including sleeping in the same bed) can only be interpreted, as

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<sup>42</sup> Tasker, *op. cit.*, 152

indicators of admiration and attachment between friends. Viewers are authorised to enjoy safely any erotic implications of attraction between Maryam and Saḥar (who demonstrably show more physical affection than Hind and Kāmīlyā) because their desire for Ḥusām and the heterosexual exchange of looks rule out any signs of lesbianism. The sequence of shots when Ḥusām and Maryam first meet is clearly constructed to confirm traditional relations of looking. A medium shot of Maryam walking into the room is followed by a medium close-up of Ḥusām. A cut to his point of view follows which is a medium shot of Maryam. The camera zooms in to a close-up of her face and she immediately lowers her gaze. Fischer suggests that lesbian desire and its cinematic expression in the lesbian gaze break the association of femininity with passivity and offer women access to an active desiring subjectivity that is independent of the male. While the films question women's complete reliance on men for romantic and sexual fulfilment they offer no sign of lesbian alternative to heterosexual relationships. Although all four women remain heterosexual, they cannot be defined entirely by their relationships with men; instead, they form at the film's conclusion what Hollinger describes as 'a symbolic marriage of sisterhood.'<sup>43</sup>

But is the positive identification encouraged by *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* and *Lace* ultimately enough? Do they pose a substantial challenge to the cinema or to mainstream culture? Within classical fiction, woman has a special role. As 'structure, character or both . . . (she) constitutes the motivator of the narrative, the 'trouble' that sets the plot in motion.' Frequently, she is 'recuperated' at the story's end to her 'proper place' within patriarchal culture.<sup>44</sup> By placing two women at the centre of the narrative, the films seem to present women as valuable

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<sup>43</sup> Hollinger, op. cit., 122

<sup>44</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982), 34-35

in their own right rather than merely as accessories to men. This affirmation of female friendship might lead to the conclusion that even in mainstream cinema, which is dominated by patriarchal notions, 'spaces can be found in certain female-oriented film genres where dominant ideas are challenged and shifts in representations of women do occur.'<sup>45</sup>

A number of film critics argue that contemporary woman's films are susceptible to multiple reading possibilities. Hollinger suggests that because they most likely have no strong idea of their target audience's sympathies towards feminist ideas, or because they fear that these sympathies might be divided, they create films that partake of what Julia Lesage terms 'ideologically-implicated ambiguities'. They offer both progressive and conservative textual elements to viewers, who are then left largely to construct the readings they prefer.<sup>46</sup> If the female bonding that takes place on the screen in the two films reaches out to involve the female viewer it must be considered positive. Female viewers may feel a deep feeling of solidarity and confiding, a history of shared experiences, and the assurance of complete acceptance. Much of the pleasure for female audiences in the female friendship film can be found in identification with and/or desire for the female characters on screen, and the female affirmation these portrayals afford.

In refusing narrative closure, the films avoid woman's containment within patriarchy. As Annette Khun writes:

The pleasure for the female spectator of films of this kind lies in several possible identifications: with a central character who is not only also a woman, but who may be similar in some respects to the spectator herself; . . . or with fictional events which evoke a degree of recognition; or with a resolution that constitutes a 'victory' for the central character. The address of the new woman's film may thus position the spectator not only as herself a potential 'winner,' but also a winner whose

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<sup>45</sup> Hollinger, *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

gender is instrumental in the victory: it may consequently offer the female spectator a degree of affirmation.<sup>47</sup>

The films subvert the exclusivity of the marriage bond by allowing for the public demonstration of solidarity among women. But neither film attempts to suggest the outcome of such a radical position. Jeanine Basinger claims such texts offer women a sense of temporary liberation. For a brief time at least, female viewers can escape into romantic love, sexual awareness, a luxurious lifestyle, or the temporary rejection of traditionally feminine roles.<sup>48</sup> The concluding image of each film is emblematic of female liberation but neither provides substantive suggestions for where this liberation might lead.

Both films argue effectively against the patriarchal notion that female friendship should be regarded merely as a temporary bond terminated by marriage. *Lace* focuses on the personal dynamics within highly charged emotional relationships between two women. The film supports women's sense of self-worth, personal development and autonomy while critiquing patriarchal marriage, and women's attempts to find self-definition entirely within the confines of conventional domesticity. *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* also moves beyond the personal to make a statement of significant social importance for women. Its attitude toward marriage and its effects on women is highly critical. It questions woman's traditional social roles under patriarchy. Social issues explored sensitively and realistically with films adopting a questioning rather than accepting position towards difficult problems. Neither film validates marriage as the only proper and ultimately fulfilling role for women. Both films suggest a need for a change in society and its patriarchal attitude. Their personal experiences lead to a socio-political statement.

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<sup>47</sup> Kuhn, op. cit., 136

<sup>48</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (New York, Knopf, 1993), 13

The female friendship film offers its female audience viewing pleasure that can be identified as specifically female. They affirm their female audience by presenting positive female characters who can serve as sympathetic figures of identification validating the self-worth of the female spectator. The female relationships portrayed also provide examples of relationships that offer alternatives to women's complete dependence on men for self-affirmation. The affirmation of female self-worth found in these films cannot but have a strengthening effect on women's characters. In the conclusion of her analyses of contemporary female friendship films, Hollinger suggests that this type of film 'validate(s) their female audience, instilling in them the self-confidence they need to interact more productively with other women and to cultivate more involvement in both private and public spheres.'<sup>49</sup>

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* ends on a more optimistic note: the two women and 'their' daughter on a bright day by the sea with its open horizon reflecting their open future full of hope. The director cannot offer any real solutions but simultaneously Khān does not want to present the issues raised in the film as irresolvable in the existing social structure and does not want to close the horizon before his protagonists. The film's final emphasis is on motherhood and the fulfilment found in the maternal role. The fact that the women (from both films) have produced daughters symbolises the future of women and sisterhood rather than patriarchy.

All four women affirm female self-worth, take action against male dominance, disrespect, and destruction, and establish their personal sense of self in the process. Each one is an inspiring figure of female triumph and solidarity. The spectator is left thinking about the problems of women in contemporary society but the final image of both films is one of solidarity and sisterhood. The final shots of *Dreams of Hind and*

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<sup>49</sup> Hollinger, op. cit., 245

*Kāmīlyā* in particular are of liberation. Khān cuts from the taxi at night to the blinding rays of the sun. The camera tilts down to the sand and tracks right to reveal a headscarf and then a body. As *Kāmīlyā* wakes up the camera pans right to reveal Hind. A long shot of the barren landscape places the women in what seems like the middle of nowhere. Robbed of their money and with their daughter missing the two women run in search of *Āhlām*. They find her by the sea. The three are reunited and the camera retreats slightly as they play on the beach together. A still shot leaves them looking towards the sea. The *mise-en-scène* represents liberation in the extreme long shots showing the women surrounded by wide-open space in contrast to the crowded, claustrophobic city spaces. The women are no longer in domestic space (female) or public space (male) but instead by the sea (nature's creation).

## Conclusion

Moves to integrate women more fully into all aspects of public life have been protracted and often accompanied by controversy. Simplistic dichotomies between the forces advocating religious conservatism versus those championing secular liberalism, for example, mask a more complex reality. Society's patriarchal control has been most vividly expressed in the preservation of the repressive personal status laws. Women in Egypt, therefore, have been most opposed in the private sphere. Patriarchy itself is a social order which structures norms of behaviour, patterns of expectations and modes of expression, but, as Sabry Hafez notes in his typology of women's narrative in modern Arabic literature:

. . . in Arabic culture it has acquired a divine dimension through religious ratification of the supremacy of men enshrined in the Qur'ān. The divine is masculine singular and enforces the patriarchal structural order which permeates all forms of social interaction.<sup>1</sup>

When Egypt's judicial system was modernised at the end of the nineteenth century all institutions of Egyptian society were secularised and most segments of the population were liberated from direct religious control, with the exception of the lives of Egyptian women which remained circumscribed by religion.

Modernists, such as Qāsim Amīn, Huda Sha'rawi and Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, did not question the idea that Islam is relevant to the new modern society, but focused their discussion on how major reforms like the extension of education and employment to women would show the capacity of Islamic societies to adjust to the needs of a modern society within their own boundaries. The emerging modern patriarchal systems

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<sup>1</sup> Sabry Hafez, 'Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology', in R. Allen, H. Kilpatrick and E. de Mour, eds., *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* (London, Al Saqi Books, 1995), 155

that allowed women increased public participation in education and employment, however, kept the asymmetrical definitions of gender roles and relations within the family. The family remained as a social arena where patriarchy and gender inequality was firmly entrenched.

In the 1920s and 1930s upper- and middle-class women significantly pushed back the boundaries of seclusion and veiling through their voluntary social activities, support for the expansion of girls' education, and their nationalist and feminist campaigns. The accomplishments of state feminism in the 1950s and 1960s were impressive, transforming women's public lives. The most significant reform of Nasser's government was that in 1956 women were given the right to vote, the right to hold public office, including top ministerial office, and they entered government employment. But still the personal status law was left untouched. Sadat's reforms in 1979 were the first for over fifty years. It was the first time a symbol of male privilege had been challenged, however, the modest advances women gained were soon diluted by Mubarak in 1985. After a century of struggle the personal status law continues to reflect patriarchal domination. The emancipation of women would have meant a challenge to the power men held in the existing social order. In their monograph on women's rights in Egypt, Nemat Guenena and Nadia Wassef contend that recent public discourse in Egypt is dominated by the conservative polemics of the Islamists and that the state, in its attempts to contain the Islamists has subordinated women's issues to its own concerns for security and legitimacy. Progress toward gender equity is compromised by the state's ambivalent commitment to the cause of women and by the growing influence of the Islamists. Renewed appeals urging women to retreat to the private sphere and the appearance of Islamic attire reflect the blurring of boundaries between 'secular' and 'religious'. They argue that this threatens to negate many of the gains acquired by Egyptian women

throughout the past century.<sup>2</sup>

In her study of feminist discourses in the Middle East, Mervat Hatem suggests that since both the conservatives and the modernist-nationalists use the defence of Islamic/Arab culture as a basis of their political legitimacy, their commitment to women's rights is at best secondary. The dominance of the theme of women's domesticity still today reveals the imperviousness of a predominantly male-dominated ideology to women's interests and concerns. Restricting women's options entails limiting their effective participation in society. Hatem maintains that:

The experience of this century has shown that this particular discourse has reached its limits in serving the personal and social needs of women. The problems . . . suggest that a new discourse would have to break with the modernist and Islamist assumptions that have crippled women in different ways. This post-Islamist and postmodernist discourse would have to deconstruct the categories of Islam, modernity, and women to begin a more fruitful discussion of the changing lives of women.<sup>3</sup>

Issues of love, marriage, divorce and honour are central to the lives of Egyptian women and their fight for liberation. These same subjects have been central to Egyptian cinema from its beginning and are still reflected today. Each film in this thesis reflects Egypt's political and/or social history and each film reflects the traditions and customs of Egyptian society. The central character of each film is a woman and thus the protagonist's awakening and/or development are against a world which is defined for her by marriage and motherhood. Family honour and good reputation, or the negative consequence of shame, rest most heavily upon the conduct of women. The films explore a number of

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<sup>2</sup> Nemat Guenena and Nadia Wassef, *Unfulfilled Promises: Women's Rights in Egypt* (Cairo, Population Council, 1999), 1

<sup>3</sup> Mervat Hatem, 'Towards the Development of Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East', in Judith E Tucker, ed., *Arab Women: Old Boundaries New Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993), 41-42

different discourses concerning the place of women in society: femininity, virginity, marriage, motherhood, modesty and honour.

### Stages of Female Consciousness

In her study of the female literary tradition in the English novel, Elaine Showalter identifies three distinct phases in the work of women writers:

First there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalisation of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second there is the phase of protest against these standards and values including a demand for autonomy. Finally there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages: Feminine, Feminist, and Female.<sup>4</sup>

In her study, these three phases seem to be neatly divided into equal historical periods. Showalter's typology corresponds to Julia Kristeva's concept of the various stages of the feminist consciousness and struggle for identity. She perceives the development of the feminist struggle as a three-tiered process which can be schematically summarised as follows:

1. Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.<sup>5</sup>

This terminology is useful in assessing to what extent the female discourse (of character, not necessarily of female director) questions woman's traditional social roles under patriarchy. Kristeva's system is not chronologically based and therefore allows for a degree of overlap and coexistence. The presence of features from one type does not

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1977). Quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), 56

<sup>5</sup> Moi, *op. cit.*, 12

necessarily result in the exclusion of all others. Although the three phases do not fall neatly into equal historical categories they can be identified in the films, demonstrating the coexistence of the three distinct phases of female consciousness. The presence of each phase is necessary for the emergence and development of the succeeding one.

Despite the nationalistic stance of Hudā Sha'rāwī and others at the beginning of the twentieth century and their articulation of the need for women's participation in Egypt's struggle for independence, the female role was subordinated to that of the male. The inherent contradiction in the quest for liberation was the desire to liberate the male from foreign domination while continuing to subject the female to the domination of the patriarchal system. In the phase of the 'feminine' discourse women were mainly portrayed in melodrama or romance with modes of the dominant tradition prevailing. Films from the early period of Egyptian cinema history for example represent this 'feminine' phase. Aḥmad Jalāl's collaborations with Assia during the 1930s and the films starring Laylā Murād during the 1940s imitated the prevailing modes of dominant tradition of the period. In melodrama, in particular, women suffered, mostly in silence. Female characters were usually subdued and sensitive and pure at heart, their future left to fate. Traditional values of purity and honour were prevalent and reflected in the passive and fatalistic nature of heroines who were silenced by the dominant patriarchal discourse. A highly restricted society was presented in which the traditional rules of society were given preference over individual desires. Gender and identity were perceived within the confines of the patriarchal order and their narrative representation was structured to serve the preservation of the prevalent hierarchy. In the construction of a national identity, the dominant discourse has focused upon the patriarchal domination of the family, favouring the construction of male identity over female identity.

The realist inclination in cinema of the 1950s and early 1960s portrayed issues of national liberation combined with questions of female development. But the patriarchal discourse remains dominant and the narrative representation implies its preservation. For Laylā in *The Open Door* personal freedom was inseparable from political freedom. The political upheaval of the country does not only form the setting but also plays an integral part in the narrative of the film. The freedom of men versus the confinement of women is paralleled with the liberation of Egypt and the confinement by the British. Simultaneously the narrative incorporates the individual's personal journey to freedom and her interaction and conflict with a patriarchal society. Laylā is unable to articulate her aspirations to contribute in the emancipation of her homeland and as a result the static discourse dominates and the protagonist's desires are suppressed. This is confirmed in the allocation of space in the film. While Laylā is confined to the limited domain of the house (where her father dominates) and partial autonomy of university (where Ramzī dominates) her brother is fighting in the Canal Zone. Only at the end of the film is Laylā able to break free of the static discourse. Her personal liberation is realised in her decision to go to Port Said but the supremacy of the patriarchal code remains intact because autonomy is offered through Ḥusayn.

The discourse that Amīna articulates in *I Am Free* is also a result of the basic dramatic conflict of freedom and confinement. Her departure from the protective, yet stifling space of the patriarchal household allows her continued denunciation of the patriarchal discourse and enunciation of her internal desires. Although the correlation between her personal liberation and the freedom of the country is clear, her personal liberation is also inextricably linked to her devotion to Abbās. For Laylā and Amīna the path to maturity is an ongoing battle between the confinement of family and expectations of society, and their personal

internal desires and growing awareness of the political situation of the country. Both films fed into the modernist discourse of gender equality which had arisen with 'Abd al-Nāṣir. However, heterosexual romance denotes the end of their journeys and rather than being liberated for the sake of themselves they are liberated for a larger issue: the nation. For both protagonists, the ability to articulate their desires is still bound to conventions of patriarchy.

The second phase is that of the 'feminist' narrative discourse, of protest against the values of the patriarchal discourse and its implicit system. The emergence of the woman's voice, a reflection of reality, expressed a desire for profound changes in attitude and behaviour. Once women had participated in the national liberation of their country they felt that they had earned the right to personal liberation. This coincided with the spread of education, progressive urbanization and the acceleration of social mobility. The patriarchal pressure and resistance to change, fuelled by cultural nationalism in opposition to the West distinguishes the formation of the Egyptian patriarchal system. Simultaneously, Jihān al-Sādāt's campaign to reform the personal status law was a challenge to overcome discrimination in women's private lives. The personal status law and its effect on women's lives are articulated in the narrative of *I Want a Solution*. Personal status codes were not just traditions, but were laws allowing men almost total control over the lives of women. Although the presentation of the woman's world is mediated through Durriyya she is not in control of it. Neither in the narrative events nor in the way the camera treats her. It is Durriyya's story but the feminist vantage point is continually blocked by the patriarchal discourse. She desires equal access to the symbolic order but at no point in the film does she have the autonomy to demand it. Durriyya's status is defined by her relationship to the men in her life. She is a daughter, a wife, and a mother, but at no point is she an

independent woman. In living her life through men she has obliterated her own existence. Her punishment is to remain as an object, never becoming the subject.

Sayyida in *The Woman and the Law* demands equal access to the symbolic order but once again, it is not granted. She and her daughter, Nādiya, seek the safety and security of conventional marriage but both women are let down by the patriarch who should unquestionably be the protector of the family. Each marriage brings with it disaster and Sayyida and Nādiya must become reliant on themselves, as women. Because the threat to her daughter has come from within the family itself and the only other male in the film, Aḥmad, is incompetent, Sayyida has no choice but to place herself in the traditionally masculine role of defender of the family. She moves from the private realm of the family to the public realm of avenger but she, like Durriyya is denied a voice by the dominant patriarchal discourse, symbolised in the articulation of the law. Both mother and daughter are failed by the legal system. Maternal revenge is not considered a part of feminine identity. The film suggests a feminist critique of a patriarchal legal system and a society that is unable to legitimate the movement from the feminine private realm (of motherhood) to the masculine public realm (of revenge and violence). The domination of men over women and the inequality of the law are depicted by the husbands evading the law and/or escaping their obligations because the law itself is deficient and indulgent towards men. The primary issue at stake is male identity and the witnesses have the power and ability to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

As well as finding themselves in opposition to the law and the bureaucracy surrounding it, women also had to fight against traditional beliefs and customs. In depicting the inequality of the law, the resulting effect on women's lives and the need for change Sa'īd Marzūq and

Nādiya Hamza offer their own critique of the law precisely because they cannot give their female characters the voice to do so themselves.

Lacking legal power, women have recourse only to 'feminine power' to have any kind of control in a patriarchal society. The 'feminist' phase of protest can be seen more clearly in *The Iron Woman* and *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwī*. Writers, filmmakers, and producers were expanding the range of roles and the range of action for female protagonists. These roles for women have developed into characters who have taken on conventionally masculine traits whilst simultaneously keeping their feminine attributes. Some 'feminist' narratives have revealed a tendency to invert the prevalent patriarchal order without a clear understanding of the dangers involved. As Hafez states: 'the inversion of an unjust order retains the inherent contradictions of its original system, albeit in a reverse form. They are recuperating the ideology of the system which they set out to repudiate.'<sup>6</sup>

Mājida, 'the iron woman', begins a journey of self-discovery in which she is forced to interact with society and challenge the limitations that society imposes on women. 'Abd al-Laṭīf Zakī uses this journey to challenge the socially constructed framework of feminine identity. By manipulating her social appearance from flirtatious to modest Mājida is able to control much of the narrative. She transgresses the traditional Egyptian conventions of female behaviour but her move from stasis to activity comes at a price. Unrepentant for her action, Mājida is incarcerated at the end of the film.

*The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwī* investigates the discourse of sexuality and the power associated with it, in the image of the protagonist. Sāmīyā is a sexually experienced woman who makes up for the legal and social advantages given to men by her strength and pragmatism. She is able to function as romantic interest, sexual object

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<sup>6</sup> Hafez, op. cit., 166

and active protagonist within the narrative using her sexuality consciously as a means of attaining influence over men and their dealings. She creates a *femme fatale* image and displays an awareness of the desiring male gaze. She displays qualities of capability but her overt interest in her sexuality perceives her as morally questionable. Although Sāmīyā survives to the end of the narrative and is successful in her schemes, her triumph is one of escapist fantasy rather than reality. Despite the reference to historical events the escapist element of the fabula negates any aspirations to serious drama.

The third phase of narrative discourse is the 'female' phase of self-discovery, expressed in a rich variety of characters in *Cheap Flesh*, *Four Women of Egypt* and *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā*. In these films the female protagonists are making their own destiny rather than their lives being circumscribed by the whims of their husbands and fathers or by the chains of tradition. In *Cheap Flesh* Tawhīda moves into public spaces and, therefore, violates spatial rules. Any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power but Tawhīda is strong in her challenge of the existing social order. Not only does she 'trespass' into the public sphere, she contests her lowly status within it and triumphs over patriarchy.

Despite their different backgrounds, religious beliefs and opinions, the protagonists of *Four Women of Egypt* speak a common language: nationalism. Strong ties were forged between the women during difficult moments in their personal lives and in the history of the nation but it is not only nationalism that has kept the women together. The lifetime bond of friendship between these women derives in part from a willingness to consider and accept a different other without perceiving it as a challenge to oneself. It is the shared experience of ruptures in their national history and the resulting struggles that unite the four women.

Unlike Sāmīyā who has no commitment to family, friends or ideology, the lives of Amīna, Ṣāfināz, Widād and Shāhinda are intertwined. The personal stories of the four women are bound within the greater story of Egypt's history. We have come full circle from *I Am Free* and *The Open Door* with the real heroines of the 1950s who agree that the feminist objectives subsumed within the nationalist movement represented a strike against the chains of colonialism as much as they did a strike against perceptions of Arab/Islamic patriarchy. There is a clear deconstruction of male power as the women develop their own power base. The film sets up the possibility of sexual difference in spectator-text relations by privileging a feminine voice through relations of looking, narrative discourse, subjectivity and autobiography and openness as against closure.

*Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* supports women's sense of self-worth, personal development and autonomy in its portrayal of female friendship. Simultaneously it questions woman's traditional social roles under patriarchy. While it is a sensitive portrayal of female friendship celebrating the accomplishment of two women who transcend the traditional role of the female victim, *Lace* offers two women positioned in competition for the same man. The relationship between Hind and Kāmīlyā is presented as a source of strength that helps them to cope with the problems they face in the larger society. This potentially subversive world of female bonding offers a threat to patriarchy. The relationship between Maryam and Saḥar, by contrast, is presented with an aggressive, destructive element. Both women desire a good marriage, a reflection of the prominent desire of the majority of women a century ago, and in so doing the film shows their struggle to survive in a male order which seeks to contain them and which has locked them into a destructive and competitive bond. Competition for the patriarch is only terminated when Saḥar is informed of her infertility, a reflection of the

past when barren women lost their claims to status and prestige. The friendship at the centre of *Lace*, although not obvious initially, facilitates a process of transformation in which Saḥar and Maryam gain independence through each other. While critiquing patriarchal marriage, the film also condemns women's attempts to find self-definition entirely within the confines of conventional domesticity. Both films offer narrative resolution that constitutes female affirmation. They challenge male dominance and the endings challenge existing social norms by implying that romantic love does not provide the answer for its female characters and that an answer to their problems may not even be possible in a patriarchal society. The female discourse represents the notion that women can escape from conventional society and that they can successfully escape the confines of a repressive social structure.

A much broader range of and more forceful and complex female characters now engage our interest as cinematic subjects, and they are shown undertaking a wider range of activities in greater detail than ever before in narrative cinema. Tawhīda in *Cheap Flesh* and the protagonists of *Four Women of Egypt* and *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* have been granted a mature narrative voice that is truly their own.

### Gendering Representation

If we accept the fact that not all women are consciously feminists, and not everyone consciously feminist is a woman, then we must consider if the work of women artists should be situated within the pre-existent male discourse or should it be constituted as a separate province, an alternate heritage.<sup>7</sup> Taking the first path are those theorists who claim that women's art should be integrated within the male canon, since female authorship is not a significant organising principle. This

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<sup>7</sup> The following is a synopsis of a more detailed debate from Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), 5-9

position seeks to minimise the role of sexual difference, asserting that the art of women and of men are, fundamentally, the same. Minda Rae Amiran, for example, suggested that, 'the whole point of leaving the doll's house was to become a person among people.'<sup>8</sup> Choosing the other broad critical road are those who argue that women's artwork can be bracketed from patriarchal culture, who embrace the notion of sexual difference and stress the 'special' feature of women's creative production. Annis Pratt, for example, in her study of novels by women, found the works evincing a 'core of feminine self-expression.'<sup>9</sup> French feminist critics have recently offered a more radical rationale for configuring women's artwork as a separate field. They see shared properties as arising not simply from common social influences or lived experiences but from inherent psychological and biological factors. Hélène Cixous sees women's writing as evincing the mark of the feminine unconscious: 'Things are starting to be written . . . that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine.'<sup>10</sup>

While asserting the worth of various perspectives, it is also crucial to see their limitations. To deny sexual difference and integrate women's work into the established tradition may prevent its marginalisation, but it may ignore its noteworthy features – be they culturally, psychologically, or biologically determined. On the other hand, to emphasise sexual difference may highlight what is unique in women's art, but it can encourage essentialist thinking and the false impression that female artists operate outside of broader cultural history. Art historian Linda Nochlin rejects the notion of an essential feminine mode but sees women's art as unified by a shared subversion of the established

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<sup>8</sup> Minda Rae Amiran, 'What Women's Literature?' *College English*, 39 (1978), 653. Quoted in Fischer, *op. cit.*, 5

<sup>9</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archtypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981), x. Quoted in Fischer, *op. cit.*, 5

<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?' trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7 (1), (1981), 52

order. What critics as diverse as Nochlin and Kristeva are arguing is not only to view women's artwork diacritically (its meaning seen as difference from the male standard) but to regard it as aggressively establishing a counter-heritage. This perspective allows the theorist to note common features in women's artwork while still asserting its relation to the dominant mode. There is no need, then, suggests Lucy Fischer, 'to look for static, innate patterns in women's creations or for universal feminine style. Yet one need not abandon the idea of a female artistic tradition.'<sup>11</sup>

In much criticism, an equation is made between dominant and patriarchal culture, with a further implication that the practitioners of that mode are male. Not all works by men will replicate conventional structures; there are always some artists who gravitate toward the avant-garde. And the work of all male artists need not be patriarchal; being a man does not necessarily commit one to that position. But what literary and film criticism has revealed is the regrettable likelihood of that equation being sustained – the sheer magnitude of cases in which the established male canon has reflected masculine values. Fischer argues, 'that we envision women's art as engaged in an oppositional struggle with the patriarchal tradition . . . out of a wish simply to speak *at all*. For the canon/cannon has functioned aggressively to intimidate and silence women.'<sup>12</sup>

Claire Johnston has spoken of a 'counter-cinema' that creates new meanings by 'disrupting the fabric of male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film.'<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey has also urged that a feminist avant-garde cinema can 'only exist as a counterpoint' to the dominant tradition.<sup>14</sup> And Annette Kuhn has spoken of a feminist 'deconstructive'

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<sup>11</sup> Fischer, *op. cit.*, 7

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, *op. cit.*, 9

<sup>13</sup> Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', in Kaplan, E. Ann, ed., *Feminism and Film* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 29

<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *ibid.*, 36

cinema whose 'character at any moment is always shaped, in an inverse manner by dominant cinema.'<sup>15</sup> While certain theorists (like Laura Mulvey) have favoured experimental work as the ideal counter-cinema (since it opposes not only the content but the language of traditional film), other critics (like Annette Kuhn and E. Ann Kaplan) have suggested that conventional texts can make feminist statements as well.

The question of locating wherein the feminism of a particular work resides is also a difficult one. Can it be said to exist in the author's intentions? Within the 'content' of the text? Or within the reader's response to the work?

With the re-emergence of female film directors in the Egyptian film industry women are not only the object of the film but also have become the subject generating the discourse with the ability to challenge the symbolic order. Female involvement in the project, however, does not ensure a progressive text. For example, a female producer, director and screenwriter have created the protagonists in *Lace*. Many other members of the production team were also women, highlighting the recent influx of women into the production aspect of the film industry but this does not necessarily make for a more feminist piece of work.

The narrative of *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* is not resolved in the classic manner. It may be argued that such an open ending is in fact more 'credible' than any classic resolution which ties all the ends of the narrative together. Because of its increased verisimilitude and decreased emotional effect, *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* avoids the problems that *Lace* encounters in moving from the private realm of personal emotional attachment into the public sphere of social criticism. The naturalistic mode of representation allows it to move between personal experience and socio-political statement. Muḥammad Khān, therefore, dispels the

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<sup>15</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982), 161

belief that women themselves will produce the most liberated and liberating representations of women.

Contextually, I would argue that films directed by women are not fundamentally separate to films directed by men in regard to the socio-political issues they choose to tackle and the female discourse of the characters which speak as the voice of opposition and rebellion undermining male dominated structures of classical cinema, narratives and narration. In fact it is not the gender of the director that is important but the artistic development of the genre of the film.

### Realism Versus Melodrama

Thomas Elsaesser's analysis of 1950s family melodrama, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', contains perhaps the most useful observations on melodrama as a genre.<sup>16</sup> The issues raised by Elsaesser, which are of particular use in defining the generic markers are: the utilisation of music, the strong presence of social pressures, the inability of characters to act freely, characterisation and the use of stereotypes, the privileging of the victim's point of view and frequent alterations between emotional extremes.

One of Elsaesser's central arguments is that the inability of melodrama's protagonists to act and express themselves is offset by the use of music, *mise-en-scène* and the camera in stating what the characters cannot. In its dictionary sense, melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects. Elsaesser emphasises the importance of music in the melodrama as a form of expression. *The Woman and the Law* features the major stylistic traits of melodrama. The music track plays a crucial role; it does not

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film* (London, BFI Publishing, 1987)

dominate the film, but it always leads it. The music in particular that is associated with Maḥmūd announces the proximity of danger. The jarring, discomfoting music that accompanies Maḥmūd's voyeurism evokes extreme anxiety in the audience.

Lighting, composition and decor become functional elements in the construction of meaning. These elements combined form a sense of claustrophobia which translates itself into a 'restless, and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and behaviour of the protagonists.'<sup>17</sup> The camerawork and lighting for example, in *The Woman and the Law*, are intended to evoke great unease in the audience as we are made aware of Maḥmūd's growing obsession with Nādiya and simultaneously with her entrapment in the family home. The culmination of the suppressed energy is Maḥmūd's violation of Nādiya. In comparison, the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Lace* results in increased conflict between Saḥar and Maryam. Set in homes or similar spaces, melodrama maps the repression of interiority and interior spaces.

The theme of overpowering social pressures, particularly those resulting from class issues, is central to the construction of melodrama. This strong sense of social pressure is inextricably connected to the way in which protagonists are unable to act in a way that could shape the narrative events, influence the emotional environment or change the stifling social atmosphere and so escape their tragic narratives. This inability to act is in part suggested by the setting of the home, which surrounds the heroine with the order of patriarchy, as Elsaesser suggests, 'the world is closed and the characters are acted upon.'<sup>18</sup> Durriyya's lack of voice is illustrated by her confinement in *I Want a Solution*. She moves directly from the patriarchal home of her father to that of her husband. When she does finally leave the restrictive patriarchal

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 55

environment she finds herself 'confined' once more, albeit in a safe house, with the threat of an order of obedience and by her own reluctance to challenge the society in which she is oppressed. In *The Open Door* Laylā is also unable to break free from patriarchal domination beyond occasional moments of respite. She is bound by the patriarchal dominance of her father and Ramzī and what is deemed appropriate behaviour by society. At the film's conclusion, however, she does escape her suffocating home life unlike Nādiya in *The Woman and the Law* who is confined to the patriarchal discourse to overpowering and ultimately tragic effect.

In her introduction to *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, Christine Gledhill notes that melodrama is traditionally related to the perceived simplistic representations of characters and their 'personifications of Good and Evil, Innocence and Villainy.'<sup>19</sup> While innocence is associated with powerlessness evil is associated with domination. The victim is invariably female; the source of oppression for the melodramatic victim is therefore either men with power, or the social pressures that work to maintain a condition of subordination. Modern melodrama draws on contemporary discourses for the apportioning of responsibility, guilt and innocence. In this respect *Cheap Flesh* identifies the persecution of innocence in the people trafficking undertaken by Mabrūk: the young women from the village whom he sells into marriage and the men he sends to work abroad. The struggle for clear moral identification is finally resolved by public recognition of where guilt and innocence really lie in Tawhīda's exposure of Mabrūk. In contrast, there is no resolution for Nādiya. Identification of good and evil is achieved through characterisation and the use of stereotypes but in this film good does not triumph over evil and Nādiya remains the persecuted innocent.

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<sup>19</sup> Gledhill, op. cit., 32

Melodrama's perceived conflict with realism is in part a result of the frequent alternations between emotional extremes. Elsaesser refers to this representing 'a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural, realistic, or in conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude.'<sup>20</sup> These changes of emotion result in 'dramatic discontinuity'. Emotions are allowed to rise, only to be suddenly inverted; characters form expectations of happiness, which are quickly shattered. Examples would be, Laylā's recognition of her feelings for 'Iṣām followed by Jamīla's revelation to Laylā that their servant is 'Iṣām's girlfriend; Mājida's euphoria at Ḥasan's return from Europe followed by his death on their wedding night; Sāmīya's discovery following her wedding to Ashraf that she is in fact his second wife; and Saḥar's revelation to Maryam that she and Ḥusām are husband and wife following her return to Cairo from Canada.

In contrast to melodrama realism attempts to reproduce the surface of reality with minimum distortion. It describes the visible appearances and experiences of reality that are accessible to everybody and thus form a common denominator of daily life occurrences. Realism focused on social reality which it saw as 'a human construct, the result of human intervention. This led to stress upon the determining action of people upon their environment rather than their passive moulding by it.'<sup>21</sup> A realist method, however, does not guarantee things as they really are. Conventional realism, therefore, is a fictional discourse on reality.

Clearly, the contemporary alternatives arising for women in the 1980s were perceived to threaten the prevailing gender norms, yet simultaneously filmmakers saw that these choices represented valid possibilities for dynamic tensions in the narratives. As Lizbeth Malkmus points out, the titles of many films concerned with women of this period

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<sup>20</sup> Elsaesser, *op.cit.*, 52

<sup>21</sup> Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London, BFI Publishing, 1980), 66

imply the illegal, using such words as morals, licit, proof, law, and arrest.<sup>22</sup> Female protagonists were allowed to strike out in fury instead of consistently collapsing in grief or anxiety. The transition from female victim to female avenger, however, is not necessarily a healthy development. Passivity versus motivated vengeance is not the only means to measure an expansion of dramatic possibilities for female characters. The new generation of realist filmmakers used the cinema to explore the social dynamics of a changing society and this included a change in the screen presentation of women. A shift to more realist interpretations and a less emotional approach has meant a decline in melodrama. Directors have been engaging in less aggressive strategies for change and heroines no longer need to allow their frustrations to explode on screen. Finally Egyptian screen heroines have been given the chance to find a coherent voice rather than repeating the mistakes of the heroines of the past and thereby perpetuating their negative status in Egyptian society.

The most successful films are the ones which reach out to their audience to implicate them in the female quest for self-development. As such they set out not only to form the self-images of the characters but also the sense of identity of their female viewers as well. The pleasure for the female spectator of films of this kind lies in several possible identifications: with a central character who is not only a woman but who may be similar in some respects to the spectator herself; or with a narrative voice enunciated by a woman character; or with fictional events which evoke a degree of recognition; or with a resolution that constitutes a 'victory' for the central character. *Cheap Flesh* and *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* have been the most successful films in achieving this goal. The average physical appearance of the female

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<sup>22</sup> Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London and New Jersey, Zed Books Ltd., 1991), 106

protagonists and the fact that they are from the working class allows them to be seen as a representation of the common rather than the exceptional woman. The address of the films may thus position the spectator not only as a potential 'winner' herself, but also as a winner whose gender is instrumental in the victory: it may consequently offer the female spectator a degree of affirmation. The impact of female character expansion through cinematic images may be dulled for the viewer if the heroines are so unique or their adventures so unbelievable that parallels to real life may not be drawn.

Simply replacing stereotypes with positive images does not transform the system that produced them. Instead of providing idealised images for the female spectator the female characters, Tawhīda, Hind and Kāmīlyā in particular, are seen as actively engaged in a struggle to define their lives and their identities in a situation where the dominant discourse constantly undermines their efforts, or forces them into destructive positions through controlling what choices are available. The process of addressing mainstream film is not one of stasis but one of movement; not one of passivity but one of activity; not one of entrapment but one of growth.

'The fundamental project of feminist film analysis can be said to centre on making visible the invisible.'<sup>23</sup> This statement is true of the films which illustrate Showalter's 'feminist' phase of protest against the dominant tradition and a demand for autonomy. Each of the female protagonists in *I Want a Solution*, *The Woman and the Law*, *The File on Sāmīyā Sha'rāwī* and *The Iron Woman* attempt to reject the male symbolic order. They are successful, however, to varying degrees. Particularly in the films which exhibit codes and conventions of melodrama the female protagonist is punished for her demand for autonomy. In comparison, the female protagonists in the realist films are

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<sup>23</sup> Kuhn, op. cit., 73

much more successful in their search for identity which is achieved through self-discovery rather than protest. The biographical documentary serves as a critique of and antidote to past cinematic depictions of women's lives and women's space. Such films as *Four Women of Egypt* can lead to the restructuring of an entire historical memory. In challenging and changing our perception of women and their role within society, we can alter the preconceived ideas that govern women's lives today. Only through the added component of cultural development can a society fully develop.

Simply by making films with female protagonists about women's lives the directors have attempted to make 'visible the invisible'. It is clear, however, that the genre and artistic approach of the film are more important than the gender of its creator. Muḥammad Khān articulates clearly the importance of women in the final scene of *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā*. The film validates motherhood as one source of fulfilment but simultaneously eliminates the need for a father figure in the family construct. As soon as Hind and Kāmīlyā are no longer imprisoned and the women have breathing space and a chance to accomplish their dreams, two similar characters appear to fleece them of their money and hopes. As if the cycle of exploitation is an eternal one. Āḥlām, however, is an indication of their continuity in the future, and a symbol of the importance of women for the future. Mother and daughter will no longer suffer the same fate. In the words of Jihan al-Sādāt, claiming just as Qāsim Amīn had ninety years earlier: 'Women. In them lay the future of the world, for it was women everywhere who were the ones to pass down their values and principles to their children, who raised their sons to manhood, who set the example for their daughters to follow.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jehan Sadat, *A Woman of Egypt* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987), 326

## Filmography of Primary Texts

### *Cheap Flesh* (*Laḥm Rakhīṣ*) 1995

|                                |                                   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Director                       | Īnās al-Dughaydi                  |
| Producer                       | Arab Hollywood ‘Abd Alla al-Kātib |
| Story, screenplay and dialogue | Ṣalāḥ Fu’ād                       |
| Director of Photography        | Kamāl ‘Abd al-‘Azīz               |
| Editor                         | Salwa Bakīr                       |
| Assistant Director             | Usāma Farīd                       |
| Music                          | Muṣṭafa Nājī                      |
| <b>Cast</b>                    |                                   |
| Tawḥīda                        | Ilhām Shāhīn                      |
| Mabrūk                         | Kamāl al-Shīnnāwy                 |
| Hishām                         | Maḥmūd Qābīl                      |
| Najafa                         | Wafā’ Maki                        |
| Ikhlēṣ                         | Jihān Naṣr                        |

### *Dreams of Hind and Kāmīlyā* (*Āhlām Hind wa Kāmīlyā*) 1988

|                                |                   |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Director, story and screenplay | Muḥammad Khān     |
| Producer                       | Faṭḥy Yussry      |
| Dialogue                       | Muṣṭafa Jum‘a     |
| Director of Photography        | Moḥsin Naṣr       |
| Editor                         | Nādiya Shukry     |
| Assistant Director             | Majdy Aḥmad ‘Alī  |
| Music                          | ‘Ammār al-Shirī‘y |
| <b>Cast</b>                    |                   |
| Kāmīlyā                        | Najla’ Faṭḥī      |
| Hind                           | ‘Aīda Rīād        |
| ‘Id                            | Aḥmad Zaki        |
| Sayyid                         | Aḥmad Hijāzi      |
| Osman                          | Ḥasan al-Idl      |

*File on Sāmīyā Sha‘rāwi, The (Malaf Sāmīyā Sha‘rāwi) 1988*

|                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Director                | Nādir Jalāl          |
| Producer                | Muḥammad Rasmi       |
| Story                   | Wajīh Ābū Dhikri     |
| Screenplay and dialogue | Waḥīd Ḥāmid          |
| Director of Photography | Samīr Faraj          |
| Editor                  | Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Rāzzaq |
| Assistant Director      | Muḥammad Shihāta     |
| Music                   | Jamāl Sālama         |

**Cast**

|               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| Sāmīyā        | Nādiya al-Jindi  |
| Ashraf        | Fārūq al-Fīshāwi |
| Adham Bey     | Kamāl al-Shināwi |
| Ashraf’s boss | ‘Abdulla Ghaith  |
| Hilāl         | Aḥmad Budayr     |

*Four Women of Egypt (Arba‘ Nisā’ min Miṣr) 1997*

|                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Director and writer | Tahāni Rāshid                  |
| Producer            | Eric Michel                    |
| Producer in Egypt   | Elixir Production              |
| Cinematography      | Jacques Leduc, Serge Lafortune |
| Editor              | Fernand Bélanger, Zayna Maḥmūd |
| Music               | Jean Derome                    |

**With**

Ṣāfināz Kāzim  
Widād Mitri  
Shāhinda Maqlad  
Amīna Rashīd

*I am Free (Anā Hurra)* 1959

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Director            | Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf  |
| Producer            | Ramsīs Najīb  |
| Screenplay          | Najīb Maḥfūz, from the novel by<br>Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs |
| Dialogue            | al-Sayyid Budair  |
| Cinematography      | Maḥmūd Nasr   |
| Editor              | ‘Aṭiyya ‘Abdu   |
| Music               | Fu’ād al-Zāhirī   |
| Assistant Directors | Tulba Radwan, Aḥmad al-Sab‘awi                          |

**Cast**

|        |                         |
|--------|-------------------------|
| Amīna  | Lubnā ‘Abd al-‘Azīz     |
| Abbās  | Shukrī Sarḥān           |
| Uncle  | Ḥusayn Riyāḍ            |
| Aunt   | Zūzū Nabīl              |
| Aḥmad  | Kamal Yāsīn             |
| Vicki  | Laylā Karīm             |
| ‘Alī   | Ḥasan Yūsuf             |
| Father | Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Quddūs |

*Iron Woman, The (al-Mar’a al-Ḥadīdiyya)* 1987

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Director                       | ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Zakī   |
| Producer                       | Majdy ‘Abd al-Masīḥ  |
| Story, screenplay and dialogue | Muṣṭafa Muḥammad, from the<br>film <i>La Mariée était en Noir</i><br>(François Truffaut, 1967) |
| Director of Photography        | Muḥsin Naṣr  |
| Editor                         | Salwa Bakīr  |
| Music                          | Muḥammad Hilāl   |
| Assistant Director             | Maḥmūd Ḥusayn  |

**Cast**

|         |                  |
|---------|------------------|
| Mājida  | Najla’ Faṭḥī     |
| Ḥasan   | Fārūq al-Fīshāwy |
| Shukri  | Ṣalāḥ Qābīl      |
| Kamāl   | Ḥamza al-Shīmi   |
| Midḥat  | Yūsuf Sha‘bān    |
| Bayyūmi | Waḥīd Sayf       |

*I Want a Solution ('Urīd Hallā) 1975*

|                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Director and screenplay | Sa'īd Marzūq            |
| Producer                | Şalāḥ Zu-l-Faqqār Films |
| Story                   | Ḥusn Shāh               |
| Dialogue                | Sa'd al-Dīn Wahba       |
| Director of Photography | Muṣṭafā Imām            |
| Editor                  | Sa'īd al-Shaykh         |
| Music                   | Jamāl Salāma            |

**Cast**

|          |              |
|----------|--------------|
| Durriyya | Fātin Ḥamāma |
| Midḥat   | Rushdī Abāza |
| Sayyida  | Amīna Rizq   |
| Ra'ūf    | Sharif Luṭfi |
| Nādiya   | Suhayr Sāmi  |

*Lace (Dāntīlā) 1998*

|                         |                                 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Director and producer   | Īnās al-Dughaydi                |
| Story                   | Hāla Sarhān                     |
| Screenplay and dialogue | Muṣṭafa Maḥram, Rafīq al-Şabbān |
| Director of Photography | Māhir Rādi                      |
| Editor                  | Salwa Bakīr                     |
| Assistant Director      | Usāma Farīd                     |
| Music                   | Sāmi Naşīf                      |

**Cast**

|        |                |
|--------|----------------|
| Saḥar  | Yusrā          |
| Maryam | Ilhām Shāhīn   |
| Ḥusām  | Maḥmūd Ḥimaida |
| Wagdi  | Maḥmūd Qābīl   |

*Open Door, The (al-Bāb al-Maftūh)* 1963

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Director and producer   | Barakāt  |
| Screenplay              | Yūsuf Issa, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt from<br>the novel by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt |
| Dialogue                | Yūsuf Issa   |
| Director of Photography | Wahid Farid  |
| Editor                  | Fathi Qāsīm  |
| Assistant Director      | Ḥasan Ibrāhīm  |
| Music                   | Andrea Rider   |

**Cast**

|        |                   |
|--------|-------------------|
| Laylā  | Fātin Ḥamāma      |
| Ramzī  | Maḥmūd Mursī      |
| ‘Iṣām  | Ḥasan Yūsuf       |
| Ḥusayn | Ṣāliḥ Saḷīm       |
| Jamīla | Shūwīkār          |
| Aunt   | Mīmī Shakīb       |
| Maḥmūd | Maḥmūd al-Ḥaddīnī |
| ‘Adila | Shīrīn            |
| Father | Y‘aqūb Mikhā’īl   |
| Mother | Nāhid Samīr       |
| Sanā’  | Sihām Fathī       |

*Woman and the Law, The (al-Mar’a wa al-Qānūn)* 1988

|                                |                     |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Director                       | Nādiya Ḥamza        |
| Producer                       | Majdi ‘Abd al-Masīḥ |
| Story, screenplay and dialogue | Samīra Muḥsin       |
| Director of Photography        | Sharīf Iḥsān        |
| Editor                         | ‘Inayāt al-Sāyis    |
| Assistant Director             | Usāma Farīd         |
| Music                          | ‘Ammār al-Sharī’i   |

**Cast**

|         |                  |
|---------|------------------|
| Nādiya  | Shirihān         |
| Sayyida | Mājida al-Khaṭīb |
| Aḥmad   | Fārūq al-Fīshāwi |
| Maḥmūd  | Sami al-‘Idil    |

## Filmography of Secondary Texts

- Accusation, The* (*al-Ittihām*, Mario Volpi, 1934)
- Accused, The* (*al-Muttahama*, Barakāt, 1942)
- Alas, She's a Woman* (*Imra'a Lil-Asaf*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1988)
- Alien* (Ridley Scott, USA, 1979)
- Apple of My Eye* (*Nur al-'Uyūn*, Ḥusain Kamāl, 1991)
- Bamba Kashshar* (Ḥasan al-Imām, 1974)
- Bāṭiniyya, The* (*al-Bāṭiniyya*, Husām al-Dīn Muṣṭafa, 1980)
- Battle of Nādiya, The* (*Ma'rakat al-Naqib Nādiya*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1990)
- Beggars and Noblemen* (*Shahhādihūn wa Nubalā'*, Asmā' al-Bakrī, 1991)
- Beginning and the End, The* (*Bidāya wa Nihāya*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1960)
- Best of Times* (*Ahlā al-Awqāt*, Hāla Khalīl, 2004)
- Bewitching Eyes* (*'Uyūn Sāhira*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1934)
- Cairo 30* (*al-Qāhira 30*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1966)
- Call of the Curlew* (*Du'ā' al-Karawān*, Barakāt, 1959)
- Challenge, The* (*al-Taḥaddi*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1988)
- Days of Democracy* (*Ayām al-Dimuqrāṭiyya*, 'Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1998)
- Death on the Nile* (John Guillermin, GB, 1978)
- Desert Beauty, The* (*Ghādat al-Ṣaḥrā'*, Widād 'Urfi, 1929)
- Determination* (*al-'Azīma*, Kāmal Saḥīm, 1939)
- Diary of a Teenager* (*Mudhakkirāt Murāhiqa*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 2002)
- Disco Disco* (Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1994)
- Doctor, The* (*al-Duktūr*, Niyāzi Muṣṭafā, 1939)
- Doorkeeper Became the Building's Manager, The* (*Ṣāhib al-Idāra Bawāb al-'Imāra*, Nādiya Sālim, 1985)
- Earth, The* (*al-Ard*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1968)
- Excuse Me, Oh Law* (*'Afwā Ayyuhā al-Qānūn*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1985)
- Fātima* (Aḥmad Badrakhān, 1946)
- Flirtation of Girls, The* (*Ghazal al-Banāt*, Anwar Wagdi, 1949)
- For Lack of Sufficient Proof* (*Li 'Adam Kifāyat al-Ādilla*, Ashraf

Fahmi, 1987)

*Girls of the Night* (*Banāt al-Layl*, Ḥasan al-Imām, 1955)

*Girls Still Dream* (*Āhlām al-Banāt*, ‘Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1995)

*Hasan and Na‘īma* (*Ḥasan wa Na‘īma*, Barakāt, 1959)

*Hot Night, A* (*Layla Sākhina*, ‘Āṭif al-Ṭayyib, 1995)

*Horse of Mud* (*Hussan al-Ṭin*, ‘Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1971)

*Ismā‘īl Yāsīn in the Army* (*Ismā‘īl Yāsīn fi-l-Jaysh*, Faṭīn ‘Abd al-Wahab, 1955)

*Lady on the Train* (*Sayyidat al-Qiṭār*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1952)

*Land of Dreams* (*Arḍ al-Āhlām*, Dawūd ‘Abd al-Sayyid, 1993)

*Laylā* (Widad ‘Urfi and Istefane Rosti, 1927)

*Laylā* (Togo Mizrahi, 1942)

*Laylā Daughter of the Desert* (*Laylā Bint al-Ṣahrā’*, Bahīja Ḥāfīz, 1937)

*Laylā Daughter of the Poor* (*Laylā Bint al-Fuqarā’*, Anwar Wagdi, 1945)

*Laylā Daughter of the Rich* (*Laylā Bint al-Aghniyā’*, Anwar Wagdi, 1946)

*Laylā in the Shadow* (*Layla fi al-Zalām*, Togo Mizrahi, 1944)

*Laylā the Country Girl* (*Laylā Bint al-Rīf*, Togo Mizrahi, 1941)

*Laylā the Schoolgirl* (*Laylā Bint Madāris*, Togo Mizrahi, 1941)

*Long Live Love* (*Yaḥyā al-Ḥubb*, Muḥammad Karīm, 1938)

*Lost Love, The* (*al-Ḥubb al-Dā’i’*, Barakāt, 1970)

*Lost One, The* (*al-Dā’i’*, ‘Āṭif Sālam, 1986)

*Mortal Revenge* (*Sira’ fi-l-Wādi*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1954)

*Murderess, The* (*al-Qātila*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 1992)

*My Life, My Passion* (*Ya Dunya Ya Gharami*, Magdi Aḥmad ‘Alī, 1996)

*My Wife is a General Director* (*Mirāṭi Mudīr ‘Āmm*, Faṭīn ‘Abd al-Wahāb 1966)

*Nasser 56* (*al-Nāṣir 56*, Muḥammad Fāḍil, 1996)

*Necklace and the Bracelet, The* (*al-Ṭawq wa-Iswira*, Khairy Bishāra, 1987)

- Night of the Arrest of Fāṭima, The* (*Laylat al-Qabḍ ‘ala Fāṭima*, Barakāt, 1984)
- Night Talk* (*Kalam al-Layl*, Inās al-Dughaydi, 1999)
- On File for Morals* (*Malaf fi al-Ādāb*, ‘Aṭif al-Ṭayyib, 1986)
- Rebellious Girl* (*Fatā Mutamarrida*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1940)
- Resent of a Woman* (*Ḥiqd Imra’a*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1987)
- Ruby Cairo* (Graeme Clifford, USA, 1992)
- Sad Song of Tūḥa* (*Ughniyat Tūḥa al-Ḥazīna*, ‘Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1971)
- Saladin* (*al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*, Yūsuf Shāhīn, 1963)
- Sea of Illusions* (*Baḥr al-Awhām*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1984)
- Search for the Woman* (*Fattish ‘an al-Mar’a*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1939)
- Seas of Thirst* (*Bihār al-‘Atash*, ‘Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1981)
- Second Wife, The* (*al-Zawja al-Thāniyya*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1967)
- Sellers and Buyers* (*Illi-Bā’ wa ill Ishtarā*, ‘Aṭṭiyat al-Abnūdi, 1992)
- Servant, The* (*al-Khādima*, Ashraf Fahmi, 1984)
- Shajarat al-Durr* (Aḥmad Jalāl, 1935)
- Sin, The* (*al-Ḥarām*, Barakāt, 1965)
- Sleazy Women* (*Nisā’ Ṣa’ alīk*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1991)
- Solicitor Fāṭima* (*al-Astādha Fāṭima*, Faṭīn ‘Abd al-Wahāb, 1952)
- Sparkle of Your Eyes, The* (*Barīq ‘Aynayk*, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 1982)
- Sphinx* (Franklin J Schaffner, USA, 1980)
- Su‘ād the Gipsy* (*Su‘ād al-Ghajariyya*, Jacques Schutz, 1928)
- Substitute Wife, The* (*Zawja bil-Niyāba*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1936)
- Tears Without Sins* (*Damū bila Khaṭāyā*, Ḥasan Yūsuf, 1980)
- Thieves in KG2* (*Haramiyya fi KG2*, Sandrā Nash’at, 2002)
- Thieves in Thailand* (*Haramiyya fi Thailand*, Sandrā Nash’at, 2003)
- Tita Wung* (Amīna Muḥammad, 1937)
- Two Orphan Girls* (*al-Yatīmatān*, Ḥasan al-Imām, 1948)
- Vagabond, The* (*al-Shārid*, Barakāt, 1942)

- Victims, The* (*al-Daḥāyā*, Ibrahim Lama)
- When the Woman Loves* ('*Indamā Tuḥibb al-Mar'a*, Aḥmad Jalāl, 1933)
- Whom I Love* (*Mann Uḥibb*, Mājida al-Ṣabbāḥi, 1966)
- Why do you Make me Love You?* (*Laih Khalitni Aḥibbak?*, Sandra Nash'at, 2000)
- Wife Number 13* (*al-Zawja Raqam 13*, Faṭīn 'Abd al-Wahāb, 1962)
- Woman's Youth, A* (*Shabāb Imra'a*, Ṣalāḥ Ābū Sayf, 1956)
- Women, The* (*al-Nisā'*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1985)
- Women Against the Law* (*Nisā' Didd al-Qānūn*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1991)
- Women Behind Bars* (*Nisā' Khalf al-Quḍbān*, Nādiya Ḥamza, 1986)
- Women in Search of Freedom* (*al-Bāḥithāt 'an al-Ḥurriya*, Īnās al-Dughaydi, 2003)
- World on the Wing of a Dove, The* (*al-Dunyā 'ala Janāḥ Yamāma*, 'Āṭif al-Ṭayyib, 1988)
- Zaynab* (Muḥammad Karīm, 1930)

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