Egyptian Film and Feminism: Egypt’s View of Women Through Cinema

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Egyptian cinema originated as early as 1896, when Lumiere technicians adventured into Egypt to film international productions, with domestic filmmaking following over two decades later. During Egypt’s myriad of influential political developments, Egyptian national cinema continued to adapt and transform since the 1920’s. Moreover, the influence and perception of women in Egyptian cinema and society has paralleled this development. Generally, women within traditional Egyptian communities are not granted the same privileges as men, with legal restrictions and social inhibitions regarding of marriage, divorce, dress code, etc. From the beginning of Egyptian cinema to today’s contemporary films, motion pictures have significantly influenced both the positive and negative perception of women as revolutionary leaders, national icons, and feminine counterparts.

Lumiere technicians began producing 60-second films in Egypt 14 years after Britain colonized Egypt in 1882. By 1908, ten exhibition theaters arose throughout Egypt, featuring only foreign productions. Although imports had been viewed in Egypt for over a quarter of a century, domestic films were not officially produced until 1918 (Rahman 13). “Among the pioneers of Egyptian cinema were women, whose efforts and productions enriched cinema” (Farrugia 58). Women’s contributions in Egyptian cinema were largely made possible as a result of the First World War and the simultaneous feminist movement.
Professional opportunities for women increased drastically during World War I, when Egyptian men were drafted to the service and deployed out of the country, allowing women to occupy vacant job positions domestically. After the war, women continued to make large strides toward equality by marching alongside men during the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, in which Egyptians protested against Britain’s colonial control, until Egypt nominally received independence in 1922. Also, a coinciding pursuit for women’s liberation, mostly through the upper and middle classes’ feminist movement, lasted throughout the 1920’s (Bizawe, 2 & Farrugia 95). In Egyptian culture, the term “hitta” signifies a community where women are expected to follow traditional roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. “In the hitta everybody knows all the women, and their actions are always monitored,” including “inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody and the dress code, which discriminate against women” (Farrugia 77-85).

A turning point in the feminist movement transpired in 1923, when Safiya Zaghlul defied Egyptian dress code customs, exposing her face by lifting her veil as her husband, Saad Zaghlul, a political leader, returned from exile. Four years later, Aziza Amir, an Egyptian actress, director, and producer, unveiled her face to the entire country by acting on-screen in Egypt’s first feature film, Leila (Wadad Orfi, 1927) (Farrugia 95-98).
Dr. Marisa Farrugia from University of Leeds credits *Leila* for the increase in female lead roles in Arab films thereafter. Assy Dagher, another female forerunner in Egyptian cinema, for instance, debuted in *Leila* as an extra, later forming the Arab Film Company. The first production from her small studio, in 1929, was *Desert Maiden (Ghadat al-Sahra)*, which featured her as the main character. Directed by Widad Orfi, the film was produced by Dagher. A central theme of *Desert Maiden* was the prevalent issue of women’s marital and sexual objectification (Farrugia 103-104).

In the early decades of the 1900’s, Egyptian women often utilized the entertainment business as a channel to challenge social norms, despite the promiscuity and ignominy associated with public display. After World War I, for example, women emerged in the urban music industry. Bahija Hafez, one of the most educated female film pioneers, earned a college degree in the field of music in 1930, but eventually gravitated toward cinema as an actress, director, and producer (Farrugia 107-108). Viola Shafik writes, “Egyptian film industry was highly dependent on the exploitation of already existing theatre and music stars” (*Popular Egyptian Cinema* 210). Amir, a former theatrical actress, would likely not have achieved her acclaimed film career if not for the significant developments in Egyptian theatre, considering early Egyptian film was perceived as a continuation or reproduction of theatrical performances. Originally, women
were forbidden to participate in early Egyptian theatre, casting young men to play female roles. At the turn of the 20th century, however, “entertaining and artistic careers flourished for women,” largely due to the newly opened theatrical companies of Njibal-Rihani and Yusuf Wahbi, which provided more opportunities for talented actresses, like Amir, Dagher, and Hazez (Farrugia 97).

At the front of Egyptian cinema’s industrialization, Aziza Amir, Assya Dagher, Bahija Hafez, Fatma Rouchdi, and Mary Queeny gained popularity as female icons. These women offered various contributions to the developing industry, and each acquired their own unique personas. Notably, however, these incredibly diverse filmmakers possessed one distinguishable similarity – a lack of close relationships to men. Without fathers, brothers, or husbands, these female leaders were not subject to the direct control of a related male figure that may “impose restrictions on them, keep them from working, or steal the money they earned” (Bizawe). In fact, many of these women independently founded their own production studios in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s, including Amir’s “Isis Film,” Dagher’s “Arab Film Company” (later called “Lotus Film”), and Hazez’s “Fanar Film Company” (Farrugia 98-113). In 1936, Talaat Harb, an Egyptian economist, founded Studio Misr, the first “Hollywood-sized” studio in Egypt, allowing production numbers to rise exponentially (Darwish). By the late 1940’s, Egyptian film production grew to unprecedented annual numbers, yielding over
100 films in 1947 (Rahman 13). This would mark the beginning of the “Golden age” of Egyptian cinema, continuing through the 1950’s, and ultimately dwindling in the late 1960’s.

After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk, becoming the President of Egypt, gaining complete independence from Britain in 1956. Nasser’s interest in the film industry led to the recognition of cinema as a national industry and, in turn, a device to express Egypt’s nationalist ideology (Rahman 13). Golden age films are often propagandistic. For example, nationalists sought to represent Egypt as a family, symbolically promoting a homogeneous, supportive, and intimate community (Geer). As a result, Egypt was habitually portrayed as a woman by Egyptian media. Benjamin Geer, from the University of Basel, researches, publishes, and speaks primarily on topics regarding social theory and Middle Eastern studies. At the French Institute’s symposium on Middle Eastern cinema in 2008, Geer spoke of the hierarchical “nationalist family,” which metaphorically characterized the elite as parents and the lower citizens as children. In a traditional Egyptian family, the mother is highly honored. Representationally, the country of Egypt was to be appreciated as a mother. In another sense, the Egyptian male (mostly Arab-Muslim) audience also maintained a romantic relationship with Egypt, the
woman. Egypt, as both a wife and a mother, was worth controlling, obeying, and, most importantly, defending (Geer).

While film production boomed in the 1950’s, more “movie star” personas emerged, as male viewers developed emotional (often romantic) connections with celebrity actresses such as Faten Hamama. *The Nightingale’s Prayer (Doaa al-Karawan)*, starring Hamama, was a film based on a realistic novel by Taha Hussein. In the motion picture, Hamama plays a peasant girl named Amna who experiences major transformations from a peasant girl to a “proper lady” (Geer).

Even today, Egyptian films reach greater audience numbers than novels as a result of Egypt’s high illiteracy rates. Due to more citizens digesting cinematic content, mainstream films remain more conservative than written material. *The Nightingale's Prayer*, for example, places less emphasis on academic achievement, and more importance on prosperity, displayed through traditional gestures and wardrobe, attracting male viewers (Geer). This portrayal of women in 1950’s popular cinema coincides with the statements of Rasha Alam from the American University in Cairo, who states, “Egyptian movies have tended to place women in an uncompetitive level educationally” (Alam).

Directors, like Salah Abu Seif, Youssef Chahine, and Salah Abouseif, established a national ideology in the 1950’s through realist films (Joseph 72). The established realist style intended to preserve an authentic environment and
positively portray lower-class individuals. Traditional women remained valued, and independent women were generally criticized. For example, *Youth of a Woman (Shabab emraa)*, a dramatic comedy directed by Salah Abouseif in 1956 starred Tahiyya Crioca, a former belly dancer. The movie centers on a young man, Istimam, struggling to receive an education as a result of two female love interests, Salwa and Shafa’at. Both women resemble opposing classes, ages, and morality. Shafa’at, the antagonist, is older, part of the working-class, and in a position of power. Shafa’at is characterized as “independent and sexually provocative,” partly demonstrated by her dress, wearing high heels, gold bracelets, and black “kohl” (eyeliner). In contrast, Salwa is young, upper class, and modest (Joseph 78). “It is only appropriate, therefore, that [Istimam] desires to marry Salwa, who, unlike Shafa’at, is ‘proper’” (Joseph 80). Also, Shafa’at and Istimam’s sexual relationship is noteworthy, as it only reflects negatively on Shafa’at, not Istimam. In fact, the same “virgin-whore dichotomy,” as Viola Shafik calls it, has been used to justify the killing of women after having premarital sex, dishonoring traditional principles (*Popular Egyptian Cinema* 196).

During the 1960’s, President Nasser intervened directly not only in the political and economic realms, but also in the entertainment business, initiating state control over the film industry (Joseph 75). “The 1961 nationalization scheme reduced private investment to its bare minimum,” and resulted in state ownership...
of most major studios, including Misr, Al Ahram, Nahas, and Galal (Farrugia 58). As the film industry fell under governmental control, motion pictures were effectively utilized as vessels for nationalist agendas. Their representation of Egypt as a woman persisted, but ironically, women continued to be “sidelined” by the Egyptian government (Geer). Henry Barakat’s *The Open Door* (*Bab el maftuh El*) is a 1964 film based on a novel by Lutfiah Elzayaat, which features Faten Hamama as a girl named Laila. Laila is cynical of love, but finds it with Hussain, a man who admires her independence (Geer). Unlike Shafa’at’s “nonconformist” independence in *Shabab enraa*, Laila was devoted to her country, as a symbol of Egypt in and of itself. In the film, Hussain writes a letter to Laila, which says, “For you have become a symbol for all I love in my nation, when I think of Egypt, I think of you, when I long for Egypt, I long for you” (Barakat). Lutfiah Elzayaat, the author of the original novel, fought for a female Egyptian icon, emphasizing the need for a reformed social structure in Egypt. In the book, Laila ultimately runs away from her family and fights along men for her country. In the film, however, Laila elopes with Hussain, but does not stand alongside men as a soldier. Nonetheless, the central theme, of both the book and film, supports an allegiance to the national family over the biological family (Geer). Ironically, as Egypt was embodied as a woman in Egyptian cinema, males slowly came to
dominate the country’s industries, including film. By the late 1960’s, Egyptian cinema began declining, without signs of recovery (Thompson & Bordwell 607).

President Anwar Sadat replaced the late President Nasser in 1970 and reduced government influence in film production. During Sadat’s presidency, the National Film Organization reached seven million Egyptian pounds in debt and was forced to discontinue the production of feature films (Joseph 76). Although nationalization of cinema ended, technical facilities remained controlled by the Egyptian government, reducing film quality due to national restrictions (Rahman 13). An almost abandoned Egyptian film industry plummeted in competition with a U.S.-dominated world market. The government’s disregard for film, however, further fueled socio-political films. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, realism returned as directors, known as the generation of “New Realists,” such as Atef El-Tayeb, Said Marzouk, Mohamed Khan, Khairy Beshara, and Beshir El-Dik, sought to produce relevant films but lacked sufficient financial support (Arab Cinema 129).

Consequently, distinct lifelike qualities, especially on-location shooting and less optimistic subject matter inspired Egyptian cinema’s “New Realism.” Said Marzouk’s *I Want a Solution (Orid hallan)* (1975) and Atef E-Taib’s *A File in Vice (Milaff fi al-Adab)* (1986) serve as excellent examples of resourceful realist, social-issue films that managed to rise out of the debris of a crumbling Egyptian film industry. *I Want a Solution* centers on an affluent woman played by Faten
Hamam, who goes through a divorce from an abusive husband in a disordered, male-controlled court system (Joseph 82-90). *A File in Vice* addresses the challenges associated with women laborers in the lower middle class (Joseph 90-95). This film was particularly relevant since President Sadat “no longer promoted full employment, but rather propagated an agenda that encouraged women to refrain from work and retreat into the home” (Joseph 92).

“Throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s, production spiked and slumped unpredictably” with the film industry’s return to privatization (Thompson & Bordwell 607). Unfortunately, contemporary Egyptian cinema, by and large, has yet to recover from the detriment of the 1980’s and return to the substantial production numbers reached at its peak during the Golden age. Commercial realist films like *Cairo 678*, directed by Mohamed Diab in 2010, continue to expose social injustices in Egypt, shedding a much needed light on women’s issues. *Cairo 678* captures the ongoing conflict regarding women’s undervalued identities, and their consequential resilience against harassment. The film follows the stories of three separate female victims of sexual misconduct. Fayza, a woman with a modest wardrobe, pricks a sexual harasser with a pin from her scarf. Seba, wearing national colors, is abducted from an Egyptian soccer game, abused, and raped. This results in her husband’s resentment toward her which in turn leads to a tragic miscarriage. Nelly, a telemarketer, is sexually harassed over the phone, and
is “the first woman in her country’s history to file a sexual harassment suit” (Smith 8). Promoting gender equality, the male protagonists in the film, like Nelly’s fiancé and the policeman investigating Fayza, are sympathetic to the women. Similar to the Egyptian Revolution almost a century ago, men in Cairo 678’s audience once again march alongside women in a fight for liberation.

Since Egyptian cinema’s inception, motion pictures have constructed images of women as leaders, icons, and equals. From the first domestically produced motion picture in 1918, women have not only contributed, but also pioneered the film industry. As Egypt industrialized and nationalized the film industry, female “movie stars” represented the country of Egypt as a metaphorical mother and a symbolic sexual partner. In conjunction with the minimized status of women, however, film production decreased to an unprecedented low. After complete privatization, new realist films revised negative stereotypes and promoted women’s rights. Film and Feminism in Egypt demand further progress in the face of recent political uprisings, but it remains evident that hope for change rests in the eye of a camera lens.
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