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Mohamed Younis

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DAUGHTERS OF THE NILE: THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM IN EGYPT

Mohamed Younis*

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I. Introduction

Women's rights under Islamic family law continue to be the litmus test for analyzing the rights God afforded to women in Islamic theology. Recently, images of veiled faces and stories of female genital mutilation mandated by shariah law have become common knowledge in most American homes. The aftermath of the attacks on the eleventh of September 2001 have injected an infinite stream of hollow sound bytes on the most *obvious* changes in the Muslim world; images of regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Israeli war on Lebanon serve as the most recent examples. With a historic opportunity to bridge the understanding gap that has existed between Islam and the West for generations,¹ simplistic and superfluous analyses too often obsess our media, which many times solely focus on highlighting the *differences* between Islamic and western society.

* The author would like to thank Professor Louise Halper whose patience and guidance made this work possible. This is for my wife, Suzanne, my mother Olfat, and my grandmother Baheeja, you are the personification of this movement in my life. Many thanks to my brother Ahmed and father Samir, who taught me that the true measure of manhood is one's humanity.

¹ SABA MAHMOOD, *POLITICS OF PIETY* 1 (2005).

These sources leave the western media consumer with the false notion that, before 9/11, all was 'quiet on the eastern front' when it came to struggles for democracy, secularism, and women's rights in the Muslim world. In fact, the Muslim world is today witnessing its social, political and religious re-definition.

The social dialogue taking place in the Arab Republic of Egypt is one of the main stages where this phenomenon of re-definition is playing out. Lying at the geographic center of the Middle East and enjoying a long history of strong sociological, political, and military influence in the 'Arab World,' Egypt presents an important and interesting case study in examining the modern women's rights movement in the Muslim world.² Like many of its predominantly Muslim neighbor states,³ Egypt has excluded family law, particularly the law of marriage and divorce, from the numerous efforts to secularize domestic law. Today, family law remains the only area of law heavily influenced, if not totally transported from, classical sharia legal interpretations.⁴ However, this law and its application have not been completely stagnant. From time to time, Egypt's sharia courts have posited innovative interpretations to new (and sometimes old) circumstances facing the modern Egyptian citizen in marriage and divorce. Although drastic legislative changes in the law regarding divorce have been rare, the *Khul'*⁵ divorce law of 2000 was one such change that took place. Simply put, this law in effect grants women the right to unilaterally seek divorce without 'cause' so long as she is willing to forfeit her financial rights usually associated with Islamic divorce.⁶ This law, along with other phenomenon such as drastic changes in media consumption, has sparked a dynamic and vibrant social debate regarding the rights and role of women in Islamic jurisprudence and contemporary Egyptian life.

Of course, feminism as a concept *and* a movement are not new to the Egyptian psyche. In fact, in addition to scholarship and activism, it is well

² For purposes of this paper, I will use the terms 'feminist' and 'women's rights advocate' synonymously as they are treated as such within the Egyptian lexicon. I recognize that this may not be the case in other regions or countries.

³ The State of Israel to its Northeast is the sole exception.

⁴ See RODOLPHE J.A. DE SEIFE, *THE SHAR'IA: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LAW OF ISLAM* 1-4 (1994) (explaining the Shar'ia's place in Islamic jurisprudence and noting that most Islamic countries follow the Shar'ia in areas of domestic law).

⁵ See generally Lucy Carroll, *Qur'an 2 229 "A Charter Granted to the Wife": Judicial Khul' in Pakistan*, 3 *ISLAMIC LAW AND SOCIETY*, 91 (1996) (explaining that traditionally, a khul' is an extra-judicial form of divorce in which the wife seeks a divorce from her husband by obtaining his consent and paying back her dower).

⁶ The most common in Egypt is the [Mu'akharr] or "dowry" as referred to in the Common Law. This sum of money, previously agreed upon between the parties serves as financial security to the wife should divorce take place.

known throughout the region that Egypt is a country with comparatively permissive attitudes towards a more public role for women in all aspects of life. The Egyptian arts and entertainment industries, for example, have always included a plethora of actresses, (female) singers and artists of all types. Upon visiting any college campus throughout the country, particularly in the larger cities, the presence of female students, professors and administrators of the highest ranks cannot go unnoticed. However, as the Mubarak government executes political and social reform, a troubling phenomenon seems to be unfolding. In a post-9/11 Middle-East steeped in an atmosphere of severe identity paranoia and a strong desire to maintain or re-affirm Egyptian sovereignty in the face of Iraqi regime change, voices that are intolerant of an equal and meaningful role enjoyed by women in Egyptian society have acquired a body of followers that can hardly go unnoticed.

An unintended consequence of western pressure for political reform in Egypt has granted a long-awaited opportunity to the Islamist movement⁷

⁷ I use this term to refer to the Egyptian Islamist opposition movement whose disgruntled sentiments are most accurately expressed through the organization known as the Muslim Brotherhood (although there are many Islamists in Egypt who do not associate with that organization). See MAHMOOD, *supra* note 1, at 62–64 (2005) (defining "Muslim Brotherhood" as an Islamic reformist group founded in 1928 which advocates the abandonment of secularization and western lifestyles). The Brotherhood has recently enjoyed an unprecedented political victory by way of gaining eighty-eight seats (about one fifth) of the parliament seats in Egypt's 2005 general election. See *Initial Results Give Muslim Brotherhood 19%*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Dec. 8, 2005, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/12/08/africa/web.1208egypt.php> (last visited Feb. 22, 2007) (describing the unexpected composition of the Egyptian parliament). This political movement is openly defiant of the Mubarak government and often launches public attacks on the legitimacy of the heavily censored Al-Azhar scholars. The term "Islamist" has become widely used in Western literature to describe those movements which envision a broader political role for Islam in the modern state. See JOHN L. ESPOSITO, *WOMEN IN MUSLIM FAMILY LAW* 161 (2d ed. 2001) (explaining that modern Islamic movements endorse fundamental Islamic teachings yet question their applications in modern society). The Muslim Brotherhood is one such organization that does not promote any particular economic or social agenda other than a general philosophy of incorporating Islamic principles of governance. The recent presidential election of 2005 demonstrated this, where banners of the party hailing the motto "Islam is the Solution" presented the party's agenda as a general re-orientation of all aspects of Egyptian political and economic life with a particularly conservative and at times extremist outlook on Islam. See, e.g., http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/768/_eg9.htm (last visited Mar. 27, 2007) (depicting a member of the Muslim Brotherhood holding posters reading "Islam is the Solution"). A very recent example is the demonstration which took place at Al-Azhar University, the sight of Cairo's most controversial and aggressive political demonstrations, which included masked university students dressed in Hamas and Hezbollah uniforms performing battle game drills. This incident is truly unprecedented in Mubarak's Egypt and demonstrates to what degree the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, and the Islamist movement in general, have not only become more emboldened by their recent parliamentary victory but are increasingly producing a more extremist message to Egyptian youth and all others who are today politically and economically disenfranchised in today's Egypt. See Gamal Essam El-Din, *Unmasked Condemnation*, AL-AHRAM (Cairo), Dec. 21, 2006, available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/825/fr2.htm> (last viewed Feb. 22, 2007) (describing the 2005 Muslim Brotherhood demonstration at the Al-Azhar University campus).

within the country to voice its opinions and scathing criticisms of not only the Mubarak government, but of the entire modern Egyptian society. Finally, after years of marginalization and refusal of the government to recognize their power, Islamists have become the official political opposition to the Mubarak regime. Although other movements such as *Kifaya*⁸ voice their discontent with the state of affairs in the country, no other group has a larger following other than the ruling National Party of Mubarak. Such success has resulted in a wide-scale media campaign on the part of government controlled media outlets to attack the legitimacy of the movement as extremist and reactionary, not fit to be trusted with the affairs of the state. The mainstream Egyptian newspapers have focused greatly on the recent election of Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections in the "occupied Palestinian Territories" and the financial difficulties and chaos that have ensued. However, Egyptian Islamists have used other events, such as the perceived victory of Hezbollah (on the Arab street) in its conflict with Israel, to argue that Egypt's impotence in helping the Palestinians is due to its abandoning a fundamentalist Islamist social and political agenda. Couched in a rhetoric aimed at de-legitimizing all political or social influence lacking a degree of "Islamness," such Islamist voices as have often attacked the women's rights movement as a symbol of Western (particularly American) influence in the country. Writers such as Leila Ahmed have recognized that a sentiment of holding on to "original Islam" and "authentic indigenous" culture is often the response to perceived Western or colonial influence.⁹ I will argue that Western pressure placed on the Egyptian political establishment has, of late, resulted in realities on the ground that make it more difficult for local activists to fight for legal and social equality for Egyptian women.

I will conduct an examination of the different phases the women's rights movement in Egypt has undergone. Dividing the history of the

⁸ [Kifaya] means "enough". It refers to "enough of the status quo" which includes the Mubarak regime and the Army's control over the country since the AbdelNasser revolution. See '*Kifaya*' in Egypt, WASH. POST, Mar. 15, 2005, at A22, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35379-2005Mar14.html> (last visited Feb. 22, 2007) (bringing attention to the changing political landscape in Egypt). Although it played an influential part in Egypt's 2005 general election, lately the party has fragmented into at least three separate factions each claiming to be the original Kifaya movement. The movements' supporters gained much attention by way of their aggressive demonstrations which included large pictures of Mubarak crossed out in red with 'Kifaya' written over his mouth. Such bold acts of defiance have never before been permitted all throughout Mubarak's rule. The demonstrations still continue today but the movement has lost much of its political inertia on the street. See Maggie Michael, *Two Years after a Surge, the Number of Visible Supporters Wanes, and Demonstrations Appear to be Losing Steam: Is Egypt Losing Interest in Democracy?*, HOUS. CHRON., Dec. 22, 2006, at 27 (illustrating the decline in the pro-democratic movement).

⁹ LEILA AHMED, WOMEN AND GENDER IN ISLAM 237 (1992).

movement into three phases: the Colonial, Post-Colonial and Modern¹⁰, I will mostly focus on the modern voices advocating for the rights of the Egyptian woman, paying particular attention to how that movement has tread a new course not taken by its predecessor feminist activists and scholars of previous generations. I will also examine *why* the feminists of today's Egypt have chosen to re-define their cause. I will conclude with some personal reflections from my experience in Egypt during the summer of 2006.¹¹

II. The Colonial Era & the Rights of the Egyptian Woman

Egypt, like all North African countries, has a long and painful history of Colonial rule.¹² Although images of downtrodden and dominated brown faces may come to mind, unwavering and empowered voices of women (and men), demanding women's rights, have permeated Egypt's Colonial history. These advocates, motivated by a variety of interests and philosophies, gathered together around the voice of self-determination for all Egyptians. Malak Hifni Nasif was one such voice. Like many other women's rights activists of the time, she often used a widely recognized pseudonym, Bahithat Al Badiya (seeker in the desert), to address the public.¹³ Her father, a colleague of the monumental Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abdu, encouraged her education throughout her youth.¹⁴ Bahitha was a teacher, writer, and activist until her death at the age of thirty-two.¹⁵ She was a primary contributor to a column in a well known newspaper, *Al Jareeda*, called *Al Nisaa'iyyat* ("Feminist Pieces"), where she methodically exposed the hypocrisy and inhumanity of Egyptian society's entrenched patriarchal order.¹⁶

Like so many of her contemporary women's rights activists, Bahitha embraced Islam as central to her call for more humane treatment of women. Her father's experience studying with Muhammad Abdu at Al Azhar

¹⁰ I have categorized the movement in this way for logistical purposes of engaging the topic, however recognizing that the feminist movement in Egypt has always been one of pluralism and continuity, like any other social movement, it cannot actually be divided into discrete time frames.

¹¹ Many of the sources I have relied on are in Arabic. Throughout this document I have paraphrased the quotes presented from numerous works. Every effort has been made to accurately and effectively convey the thoughts of the quoted author. This paper has also been heavily influenced by my experience living in Egypt (mostly in Cairo and Alexandria) between the years 1991–94.

¹² See generally Albert Hourani, *A HISTORY OF THE ARAB PEOPLES* 282–84 (1992).

¹³ *OPENING THE GATES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF ARAB FEMINIST WRITING* 134 (Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke eds., 2d ed. 2004) [hereinafter BADRAN].

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

University perhaps influencing her, Bahitha consistently invoked the authority of Islam in expressing her frustration with Egyptian patriarchy. She often invoked her predecessors; women who were empowered by education yet maintained their religious legitimacy in the eyes of the community surrounding them.¹⁷ To address the argument that Islam was an obstacle to the empowerment or education of women, Bahitha states: "I can remain veiled and still benefit from the teacher. Are we better in Islam than Sayyida Nafisa and Sayyida Sakina—God's blessings be upon them—who use to gather with *Ulama* (religious scholars) and poets."¹⁸ By invoking the names of these relatives of the prophet Muhammad who, in addition to being highly educated, lived and have mosques established in their honor in Cairo, Bahitha undermines the religious justification for any attempt to imply that women should not be educated nor intellectually developed.

Bahitha approached the argument for women's rights by engaging the local psyche; relying on Quranic verses, her arguments were a deafening blow to the legitimacy of the most common justification in Egyptian society for female subjugation, i.e., the religiously sanctioned patriarchy. In her few preserved speeches, Bahitha seems to avoid quoting the Qur'an directly or positively in favor of women's rights.¹⁹ She focuses her Quranic commentary, however, on attacking the proponents of the patriarchy who extract from Quranic verses a rationale that furthers their agendas of female subjugation and marginalization. Perhaps this is because Bahitha views the initial and "authentic" position of Islam to be in favor of women's rights.²⁰ With this philosophy, she attempts to put those arguing for preserving patriarchy on the defensive, pushing them to search for support of their position.

Her *Lecture in the Club of the Umma Party* in 1909 is an example of this presumption.²¹ In her "ten points on legislation" Bahitha mentions action items necessary to ensure the rights of Egyptian women; she lists "[t]eaching girls the Qur'an and the correct Sunna" as the first and most important measure.²² Bahitha consistently argued that it was not religion or the Qur'an which stood in the way of women's rights but patriarchal voices which misrepresented Quranic verses in pursuit of their misogynistic agenda.²³

¹⁷ *Id.* at 234.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *See, e.g., id.* at 228–38 (reprinting her 1909 *Lecture in the Club of the Umma Party*).

²⁰ *See id.* at 134 (stating Bahitha's emphasis upon the Quran's admonition that polygamy is nearly impossible to practice equitably, justly, and righteously).

²¹ *Id.* at 237.

²² *Id.*

²³ *See id.* at 230 (decrying the position of men who assert women were created for domesticity, when the Quran has not stated such).

Bahitha's brother published most of her work after her death.²⁴ Particularly among some modern Egyptian feminists, her short stories and written speeches continue to be a widely celebrated chapter of Egyptian culture.²⁵ Bahitha is considered to be a founder of Egypt's feminist movement, although she never referred to her philosophy in those terms: she heavily influenced and paved the way for thinkers such as Huda Shaarawi, one of Egypt's first publicly self-declared feminists.²⁶

Egypt's cache of women's rights advocates was truly diverse. A contemporary of Bahitha, Aisha Ismat Al-Taimuria, was the daughter of a Pasha and a Circassian concubine.²⁷ A tri-lingual poet writing in "Arabic, Turkish and Persian," Aisha focused on relations between the genders in Egyptian society, some declaring her to have been the first to advocate for equality between men and women in Egypt.²⁸ An aristocrat at heart, Aisha's focus was on the importance of the education of Egyptian girls. "[A]cross its borders, I perceive that programmes of education are treasure chests, and I see that the paths of refinement hold, at their ends, the keys to every gem that lies hidden."²⁹ At times focusing her message on male ears, Aisha calls out to the eastern man with an abundance of blameworthiness:

O men of our homelands, O you who control our affairs, why have you left these females behind for no reason? . . . Since you have been miserly in extending to these females the true adornment of humanity, and since you have been content to pull them away and isolate them from its brilliant jewel . . . then why do you raise your hands in confusion, like one who has lost the meanings of things in the hour of need?³⁰

Nabawiya Musa was another outspoken advocate for the education of Egyptian women. Unlike Aisha, Musa was from the Egyptian middle class of rural Egypt.³¹ She was the only Egyptian woman who acquired the

²⁴ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 134.

²⁵ See *id.* at 30 (noting the second half of the 20th century witnessed the increased publication of women's feminist voices in Arabic).

²⁶ Ironically, Bahitha's anonymous voice of women's rights advocacy went silent when she married a Bedouin Chief tribesman in 1911, only to discover later that she was his second wife. *Id.* at 134.

²⁷ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 125

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Aisha Ismat Al-Taimuriya, *Family Reform Comes Only through the Education of Girls*, cited in BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 129.

³⁰ *Id.* at 132.

³¹ See BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 257 ("Nabawiya Musa was born into a middle class Egyptian family in a village near Zigagig, Eastern Delta.").

secondary school certificate prior to Egypt's independence.³² Musa, a founding member of the Egyptian Feminist Union, was also the first international representative of the Egyptian feminist movement while attending the 1923 International Woman Suffrage Alliance Conference in Rome, Italy.³³ Perhaps her most defiant act of discontent with the patriarchal overtones of colonial Egypt was her choice not to marry and remain a single woman dedicated to her feminist advocacy.³⁴

In the early twentieth century, Egypt was a place where most men perceived the education of women as a threat to their long tradition of patriarchal dominance over Egyptian women. Men often attacked Musa and others for spreading corruption and vice among Egyptian girls because they promoted their education.³⁵ In an attempt to directly tackle such a notion, Musa dedicates a portion of her 1920 publication, *Women and Work*, to arguing that literacy empowers women to guard their morality and reputation.³⁶

A person who knows how to read and write is not considered educated except if he has taken it as a way to attain knowledge. Regrettably in Egypt we are ignorant of this and we automatically consider the woman who knows how to read and write to be an educated person. When she does something wrong we blame it on her education saying that education corrupted her morals.³⁷

As an educator and the first female inspector in the Ministry of Education,³⁸ Musa focuses her message on boys and girls alike.³⁹ She sees reading as a first step to the liberation of Egyptian minds, particularly those

³² In the year 1919, although Egypt's later revolution for independence in 1953 is more commonly referred to as the date of "independence."

³³ See BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 257 (Musa "was a founding member of the Egyptian Feminist Union and a delegate to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance Conference in Rome in 1923, the first international meeting Egyptian feminists attended.").

³⁴ See *id.* (Musa's "decision not to marry in a society and at a time when this was rare showed her courage and determination to live life on her own terms.").

³⁵ See *id.* (stating there is the "convention argument that literacy for women will lead to their moral downfall").

³⁶ See *id.* (stating that Musa "turns the conventional argument that literacy for women will lead to their moral downfall on its head [by] claiming that literacy would help women to guard their morality and reputation").

³⁷ Nabawiya Musa, *The Effect of Books and Novels on Morals*, in BADRAN *supra* note 13, at 259.

³⁸ See BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 257 (stating that Musa "became . . . the first Egyptian woman inspector in The Ministry of Education").

³⁹ See Musa, *supra* note 37, at 259–62 (referring to students generally, and not specifically to their sex).

of women.⁴⁰ The right of women to seek work outside the home also concerned Musa.⁴¹ Thus, Musa distinguishes the rural setting from urban Egypt of the 1900s:

In the villages women do not veil but there we do not see a man following a woman down the road to flirt. If he were to do this he would be killed instantly. Village men know women work outside their houses and that when they go out it is for work and not to flirt. But, men in the cities think that the woman has no work outside her house and if they see a woman in the street they think she has gone out to play Work for women is a way to combat corruption not to encourage it.⁴²

Nabawiya Musa, like many of her sister advocates, defied the constraints of a culture of male dominance in early twentieth century Egypt. Her mission was to legitimize the right of Egyptian women in achieving literacy, education, and work outside of the home. Employing a cunning and rhetorical approach to the debate, Musa left those unhappy with the feminist movement unable to attack her credibility and thus forced them to respect her contribution to the Egyptian educational system. She, like her colonial era contemporaries, was fearless in her outspoken defiance of a male-dominated society, a society that viewed feminism as a festering social ailment polluting the minds of "their" women.

Voices advocating for a deconstruction of male dominance and against the marginalization of the Egyptian woman permeate the colonial history of Egypt. Their focus, however, was on the importance of educating girls and the right of the Egyptian woman to be in the workplace.⁴³ In fact, it could be argued that this genre of Egyptian feminism focused on what some scholars refer to as "negative freedom."⁴⁴ Namely, the focus was on working for the removal of restraints on one's (women's) ability to act as one wants.⁴⁵ This generation also proved that every echelon of Egyptian society needed to

⁴⁰ See *id.* at 259 ("Knowing how to read and write is not knowledge, itself, but a door to knowledge . . .").

⁴¹ See Nabawiya Musa, *The Difference between Men and Women and Their Capacities for Work*, cited in BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 263–69 (arguing for allowing women to work outside the home).

⁴² *Id.* at 268–69.

⁴³ MAHMOOD, *supra* note 1, at 66 (stating that much of the mosque movement consisted of students and those employed in advanced professions).

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 11–12.

⁴⁵ *Id.* ("Negative freedom refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals."). In contrast, "positive freedom" is defined as the capacity for self-mastery and self-government. *Id.*

provide for women's rights activists, and that in collaboration, women from very different backgrounds and philosophies could effectively work together on a broad range of topics. However, a certain degree of realism seemed to guide their approach, as very few, if any, were demanding total equality between the genders.⁴⁶ They attacked aspects of Egyptian patriarchy that they felt were conquerable but did not (and probably could not) engage some of the even more controversial topics, such as female genital mutilation and freedom from sexual violence. In their era, these topics were *never* discussed publicly and rarely privately in any acceptable manner.⁴⁷ Sex and sexuality were simply improper topics of conversation at the time, and the despised women's rights movement must have known that to engage such topics would be a sure way of empowering those who argued that the movement was resulting in the degradation of Egyptian women's decency and chastity.

Although voices were heard, many hearts were not turned. The next generation of Egyptian feminists would soon realize that a faster rate of progress was possible and a more aggressive and less apologetic approach was in order. Although appreciative of colonial feminists laying down the groundwork, Egypt's post-colonial thinkers and activists began to intensify their rhetorical attacks on a system that had, for too long, denied women-folk their rightful place in Egyptian society.

III. The Secular Era: Turning our Backs on Religion

Unlike their colonial contemporaries, Egyptian feminists whose contribution took place near and shortly after Nasser's revolution⁴⁸ brought bolder and more objective arguments to the table. Heavily influenced by the revolution as well as the resulting close national relations with the former Soviet Union, the feminist movement moved outside the Islamic context. Unlike their contemporaries who were mostly writers, teachers, and poets,

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 36–39 (arguing not for outright total equality but rather for engaging in a continually progressing critique of the current order).

⁴⁷ FATIMA MERNISSI, *DREAMS OF TRESPASS: TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD* (1994). This work includes accounts of life in a Moroccan harem that present some proof that such topics were discussed among women. However, such discourse rarely became a topic of public (national) discussion placed in a context of advocacy for women's rights prior to the "Secular Era" in Egyptian feminism.

⁴⁸ In 1953, Gamal Abdel Nasser and a handful of his fellow soldiers conducted a bloodless coup resulting in Egyptian independence. The movement was called The Free Officer's Movement. Nasser's contempt for western domination on Egypt's strategic resources such as the Suez Canal ultimately led to an unofficial alliance with the former Soviet Union which resulted in a surge in socialist and communist influence on Egyptian thinkers and writers. The feminist movement was no exception to this phenomenon as two of the most famous women's rights activists, Fathiya Al Assal and Nawal Al Saadawi, were self-declared communists and socialists, respectively.

the new generation of feminists included doctors, engineers, and political candidates. These voices were willing to openly attack religion, not just Islam, as an institution that was responsible for the subjugation of women to male dominance. These feminists were the pioneers of sparking a social conversation about some of the most controversial elements of male patriarchy in Egypt: sexual violence and subordination.

Unquestionably, the leader of this new brand of Egyptian feminist could be no other than Nawal Al Saadawi. Although possibly the most controversial figure in the ranks of Egyptian feminists today, Saadawi's contributions to the Egyptian feminist movement cannot be denied or downplayed. Being the first to publicly confront issues such as prostitution, clitoridectomy, and incest, many elements of Egyptian society until today despise Saadawi for what is often described as her unapologetically offensive approach in discussing sex and topics concerning female genital mutilation. Her unyielding rhetoric and combativeness resulted in her imprisonment in 1981 under the brutal police state of the Sadat regime.⁴⁹ Discussing sexual abuse of children in the Egyptian home Saadawi states:

It is a well known fact that in our society young girls are often exposed to various degrees of rape. Even female children below the age of seven years are frequently the victims of an unexpected or unrecognized aggression from grown-up men and youths, who are often members of the family, such as the brother, uncle or even the father, or from a servant or porter in the building.⁵⁰

For anyone who has spent significant time in the Arabic-speaking Muslim world, it is not hard to imagine the reaction to such a statement being published. Saadawi is often attacked for exposing Egyptian society's private problems that many feel should not be dealt with in a public manner. Never wavering or apologetic, she has for over forty years consistently discussed such topics in media interviews and in her over twenty-five published books.⁵¹

In addition to publicizing the debate regarding sexual exploitation of the Egyptian woman, Saadawi also criticized religious teachings and thinkers. One bold aspect of Saadawi's approach is her attack of religious scholars and thinkers for their complicity in the subjugation of women. She

⁴⁹ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 203.

⁵⁰ NAWAL AL SAADAWI, *THE HIDDEN FACE OF EVE* 19 (1981) [hereinafter SAADAWI].

⁵¹ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 203.

is well-known for criticizing writers such as Abas Mahmoud El Akkad who, Saadawa claims, "[o]ften sung the praises of the patriarchal tribal system which emphasizes that women are the property of men."⁵² Akkad is by far the most respected thinker and philosopher of Egypt's colonial era and is a founder of Egypt's renowned 'Al Diwan' school for poetry. Quite simply, there is not a child educated in Egypt who is unfamiliar with his immense contribution to Egypt's literary and poetic achievements. It is therefore easy to imagine the hostile attitude many Egyptians have against her work—she not only attacked well-known figures such as Akkad, but is herself a woman who has broken many societal norms.⁵³

Saadawi continues her work both in Egypt and abroad. She still heads the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and is a frequent guest on Egyptian talk shows. The current debate ongoing in Egypt today (discussed below) includes the voice of Saadawi and her contemporaries. Interestingly, it seems that she is losing her audience for one very simple reason: Saadawi has always embraced the west and has admired western acceptance of what she perceives as gender equality.⁵⁴ Paranoia regarding western influence and dominance permeates the current political atmosphere in Egypt, and the Arab world in general, and as a result, has seriously harmed Saadawi's legitimacy. She is now often attacked for being a minion of the west, and America, in particular. These sentiments were strongly voiced in response to her nomination in the previous presidential election in Egypt, which she often states was a symbolic gesture of defiance.⁵⁵

Although none are as controversial or infamous as Saadawi, this era in Egyptian feminism introduced many new names into the arena of women's rights advocacy. Shirley Saad also strongly allied herself with the west. Saad was a Catholic Lebanese woman who was born and raised in Egypt and later lived in Lebanon, Abu Dhabi and San Diego, California.⁵⁶ As a creative writer, Saad focused her stories on the experience of women in

⁵² SAADAWI, *supra* note 50, at 123.

⁵³ Saadawi's marriage to a Coptic man, in contravention to Islamic teachings which prohibit the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man yet permitting the inverse, has also been another example of her defiance of what she believes to be patriarchal cultural practices which subjugate women to a secondary status in Egyptian life. Another example of such defiance is her continuous effort to publicize the fact that her daughter has chosen to take Saadawi as her family name and not that of Saadawi's husband as is traditionally done in Egypt. Married women in Egypt retain their maiden names and do not take the family name of the husband.

⁵⁴ See BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at xvii (explaining that some Arabs have attacked feminism as being Western—the cultural arm of imperialism, which undermines the religious foundations of the family and society).

⁵⁵ The last election took place in 2005 and resulted in the victory of the incumbent Hosni Mubarak.

⁵⁶ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 49.

Muslim society. In a letter to Miriam Cooke, an Islamic scholar on feminism, Saad states: "I have always fought for the right to do exactly as I pleased, even if it shocked the neighbors. It is a heady feeling to be in the United States where I can be my own boss and it is taken for granted."⁵⁷ In this manner, Saad represents the sentiments of her contemporary feminists in Egypt; they openly embrace western notions of gender and gender relations. Unlike her colonial feminist colleagues, there is little talk of the legitimacy of such a sentiment in the context of any religious teaching. Saad openly aligns herself with a western civilization that she believes Muslim women should be fighting for. Although she did not reside in Egypt towards the end of her life, Saad is a symbol of what most feminists in her era presented as the solution for the subjugation of the Egyptian woman; importing the *western* feminist movement, a position that (as discussed below) has become quite impotent and untenable within the domestic and regional political atmosphere.

Other voices offered both anti-religion and anti-western arguments for women's rights. Fathiya Al Assal is one such thinker whose popularity has increased over the years. Assal was a self-proclaimed communist in the 1960s but has since abandoned that position and has focused her work on the everyday stories and situations faced by Egyptian women.⁵⁸ Her autobiography *Hudn Al Umr* highlights both personal and public challenges that she overcame in her journey through advocacy for the rights of Egyptian and Arab women.⁵⁹ Assal's popularity today is largely due to her denunciation of communism, and her concerted effort over the years to infuse her message with local legitimacy by avoiding discussions about her communist history and focusing her writings on the everyday problems of Egypt's women.

Amina Said's approach most accurately embodies the resolve of the feminists of this era. This approach not only embraces the west, but goes on the offensive to launch its own attacks on religious conservatives. Said was not only a prolific writer, but the first full-time Egyptian female journalist in Egypt. In fact, her most well-known accomplishment was the founding of 'Hawwa' a magazine concerned with contemporary issues facing women.⁶⁰ Hawwa's targeting of male and female audiences alike was truly

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 50.

⁵⁸ FATHIYA AL ASSAL, *HUDN AL UMR [IN THE ARMS OF A LIFE TIME]* (2004).

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 357 (describing how the readership reacted to her editorials, and how the number of 'Hawa' readers increased between 1954 and 1981).

revolutionary. Today, Hawwa is the most accomplished and respected magazine in Egypt discussing the concerns of women. Unlike Saadawi, Said enjoys to this day a widespread respect and recognition for her contribution to the advancement of the Egyptian woman. No other feminist of her era more directly attacked the religious establishment of her day. In her widely publicized response to a printed interview of Shaikh Faraj Al-Sanhuri in *Al Ahram* newspaper which attacked the calls by some feminists for a re-examination of Egyptian family law, Said was careful not to attack Islam *per se*.

While lashing out at the religious establishment and their lack of responsible interpretation to ensure the rights of the modern Egyptian woman, Said states: "[w]e lack the ability to serve Islam through modernizing its teachings and laws that are inflicted on its people regardless of their contradiction of the spirit of Islam, a religion meant to be flexible enough to respond to the changing nature of styles of life and their demands."⁶¹ In this manner, Said attacked Islamic leaders, but not Islam itself. Perhaps that is why her contribution may be among the most respected in today's Egyptian feminist movement. Her approach empowers advocates to argue in a manner that does not de-legitimize their credibility and doesn't expose them to attacks by the traditionalist Islamists who argue that these thoughts are merely western imported philosophies meant to "de-islamize" Egyptian society. Like feminists of the contemporary period discussed below, Said was engaged in an Egyptian society—at the time of her public response to the sheikh (and throughout the 1970's)—immersed in a religious revivalism calling for the re-veiling of the Egyptian woman.⁶² Writers such as Saba Mahmood have thoroughly analyzed this revivalist phenomenon which continues to this day.⁶³

Although this generation of feminists, stepping away from religion and arguing for a more secular approach to gender relations in Egypt, contributed immensely to the advancement of Egyptian women, today's feminist movement avoids the implication of most of their names. In a post 9/11 Middle-East, the cultural/political atmosphere of Egypt has shifted to an ultra-traditionalist and rigid approach to understanding Islam and attacking all things deemed lacking "Islamness." I use this term because the attitude of many proponents of the Islamist agenda is not merely that Egyptian society should avoid practices that contradict Islamic teachings, in fact these voices

⁶¹ Amina Said, *Why, Reverend Sheikh?*, cited in BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 364.

⁶² BADRAN, *supra* note 13, at 358 (describing Said's view that the return of the veil would greatly hinder women's advancement).

⁶³ SABA MAHMOOD, *POLITICS OF PIETY* 15–16 (2005).

argue that the society should abandon anything not taken from Islamic teachings or history. They demand that all things Islamic wholly encompass Egyptian society, focusing most seriously on issues such as hijab and growing one's beard yet not presenting a coherent social program or agenda. Proponents stress appearance over substance, thus putting feminists on the defensive and frustrating their ability to engage the minds of young Egyptians, particularly young women.⁶⁴

IV. Egyptian Feminism Today: A Nuanced Revival

A. Alienating the West

Azza Haiykal, a literature professor, is one of the most prominent voices on women's rights and feminism in today's Egypt.⁶⁵ Her recent publication, '*Tahreer Al Ragul*'⁶⁶ (Men's Liberation) reads as a declaration of what are, in her opinion, the most problematic aspects of gender relations and gender identity in modern Egyptian society. Informed by the scholarship of non-Egyptian and western feminist movements yet totally dedicated to addressing the particular plight of women within the Egyptian context, Haiykal presents her concerns on the dangers of defining the social role of the Egyptian woman in an anti-Islamist reactionary manner heavily influenced by the western experience.⁶⁷ She posits that an honest social dialogue of the sexes is the only road to meaningful women's rights in Egypt.⁶⁸ Her approach for advocating the rights of the Egyptian woman is

⁶⁴ See generally, AZZA HAIYKAL, *TAHREER AL RAGUL [MEN'S LIBERATION]* (2006).

⁶⁵ Azza Ahmad Haiykal is a professor at Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt. She holds a doctorate in English Literature and has become quite a household name as she has lately frequented her appearances on satellite talk shows regarding feminism and women's rights in Egypt. She is a member of the Association of Egyptian Female Writers and the Committee on Literature and Rhetoric of the High Council for Cultural Affairs. She has also written four other books and numerous articles in Egypt's most prominent newspapers.

⁶⁶ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64.

⁶⁷ See HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 3 (presenting the argument that in order for women in the east to be liberated, it is men who must first liberate their minds from cultural dogmas that relegate women to a position of secondary importance by virtue of gender). Another source of indoctrination that men must be liberated from is that of extremists religious agendas that seek to deny women a major role in public life. At the same time, Haiykal cautions against those who blindly embrace the western model of the women's rights movement which she argues is not suited for the Egyptian feminist operating in an eastern culture and society. *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 11 (defining "dialogue of the sexes" as the way that the west approached women's rights through a mechanism or philosophy that sought to minimize any and all differences between men and women; regarding appearance or behavior in all aspect of society, she argues that what is in need in Egypt/Eastern culture is for Egyptian civil-society to more genuinely define the rights of women not

winning the 'hearts and minds' of patriarchs (and the system of patriarchy) by highlighting the locality, legitimacy, and humanity of the women's rights movement.

Although Haiykal harshly criticizes patriarchy within Egypt and eastern societies, generally she seems to equally criticize feminists for promoting the notion of importing western gender roles and standards into Egyptian society. This position is radically different from Haiykal's predecessor feminists of the 1960s, who embraced a more secular and western-influenced feminism highly critical of its opposition as backward in terms of cultural development and modernity. Haiykal begins her piece by addressing the importance of analyzing the '*Khitaab Al Nissa*'y (Female Conversation) or dialogue. In understanding the plight of the feminist movement in Egypt, Haiykal stresses that the onlooker must first analyze the social dialogue on gender roles and relations that is taking place domestically. In doing so, Haiykal categorizes the social conversation into five categories.⁶⁹

Haiykal sets out the 'Global Dialogue' as her first category in her analysis of the rhetoric regarding women's rights in Egypt. She states that "the global feminist conversation [rhetoric] presents a double trap [for women's rights advocates], between global standards and local realities relating to culture, historical tradition and religion."⁷⁰ She argues that the local perception that the global community, which serves as a proxy for the desires of western nations, sets the agenda of women's rights and delegitimizes the patriotism of the local struggle for women's rights. In this manner, a strong voice for an increased role for the Egyptian woman in public life is a voice for the agenda of western nations throughout the region; a voice to be mistrusted and marginalized.

Haiykal then presents the 'Official Dialogue,' or in other words, the effort of the government in increasing and protecting women's rights, as the next category of rhetoric surrounding the plight of the feminist movement in Egypt.⁷¹ Although the government promotes education, healthcare and leadership opportunities for women in the workplace, a heavy campaign

merely paying lip-service to certain political interests in Egypt whether they be of the west or of the Islamist political movement in the country).

⁶⁹ Haiykal actually sets out six categories: Global, Official, Employment/Workplace, Literary, Artistic, Folkloric/Cultural and Local; but I will discuss only five as I am compounding the last two categories under the 'Local' category. *Id.* at 11-15.

⁷⁰ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 11.

⁷¹ The Egyptian government has a long-standing policy and campaign for women's rights, particularly the education of girls in rural Egypt. This effort is headed by Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of Egypt, and is very heavily advertised throughout the country in Public Service Announcements in broadcast as well as on billboards in public transit stations.

effort on the part of the government has also hurt the image of the women's rights movement in Egypt. Haiykal argues that "the persistent nagging of media outlets promoting this campaign and its' leaders has helped to worsen relations between male and female in Egypt."⁷² She stresses that only a truthful and healthy dialogue between the genders can provide a favorable atmosphere for women's rights movements to win over the hearts and minds of Egyptian society.⁷³ The government's close association with such an effort leaves a bad taste in the collective mouth of Egyptian society. It leaves people with the feeling that women's rights are like all Egyptian government programs—heavy on rhetoric. Yet in the end, it is western aid appropriated for a certain societal change at the behest of foreign interests.⁷⁴

It is common knowledge that Egypt receives an enormous amount of U.S. aid, and political opponents of the ruling political party⁷⁵ use this as proof of the government's willingness to put foreign interests before local ones. The United States' recent actions in its project for democracy in Iraq have bolstered the notion that the west aims to change the very nature of Mid-Eastern society. The relationship between the current government of Egypt and the west has made it difficult for most Egyptians to support their government, yet not feel that their country's interests are being sacrificed for foreign ones. Any social movement's perceived association with the Egyptian government de-legitimizes that movement's actual support among the disenfranchised masses. This results in the Egyptian elite, an elite that Mubarak's twenty-five year government has always supported, fueling the alienation of the feminist movement. Furthermore, Haiykal argues that such a perception of government association leaves Egyptian patriachs feeling victimized.⁷⁶ She argues that it is the Egyptian *man* who is now:

⁷² HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 12.

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ In fact, beyond women's rights, throughout my work and interactions throughout the summer of 2006 with numerous NGO's in Egypt, it is a widely held feeling among human rights activists that Request for Proposals [RFP's] from western philanthropic organizations and institutes and the process by which they appropriate grants to fund such activities within Egypt have a strong influence on what causes are taken up by such organizations locally. It also creates a problem of maintaining legitimacy of the particular NGO working on an issue. Such organizations struggle in convincing public opinion that their work is in the local and national interest and is not merely a way for the 'west' to control Egyptian civil society. A current example is the humanitarian effort directed at aiding Darfur refugees living in Egypt. A perception by the Egyptian public that refugees from Darfur receive more aid and attention than impoverished Egyptian citizens not only exacerbates anti-American sentiment in the country but has a direct effect on the degree of discrimination and hate crimes that such refugees face within their country of refuge (Egypt).

⁷⁵ Al Hizb Al Watany [The Nationalist Party].

⁷⁶ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 13.

alleging that he is the weaker creature which needs help and freedom after his compulsion to abide by certain laws such as 'Khul' and 'Nafaqa' which have changed him from a social lion to a humanitarian tiger who must plot and scheme so as not to fall into the 'traps' of [modern] marriage.⁷⁷

Ironically, this leaves the Egyptian movement for women's rights in a similar predicament as that of the U.S. racial desegregation movement post-*Brown v. Board of Education*,⁷⁸ where government action demanded certain rights and a notion of equality that many Americans felt did not comply with their cultural beliefs and social upbringing. Inherent in accepting desegregation was the notion that somehow, what individuals' parents taught them was wrong. Similarly, in today's Egypt, in order for a Western-funded, government-fueled effort at gender equality to prevail, the everyday Egyptian would be required to accept that somehow their culture, and particularly their faith, was wrong and must be abandoned for a more secular and Western worldview.⁷⁹

Haiykal's third category of reference is the 'Employment/ Work-related Dialogue.'⁸⁰ Through this dialogue, the Egyptian working woman has been presented as one who has cultured resentment for society as a whole.⁸¹ Haiykal argues that the rhetoric surrounding the Egyptian woman in the workforce has persuaded the masses that any woman given the opportunity to hold a powerful leadership role in the workplace will abandon her femininity and work to destroy a society which she believes has kept her and her 'sisters' under oppression.⁸² Such rhetoric neither aids in advocating for

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) (holding that the segregation of children in schools deprives them of equal educational opportunities). This decision established that "separate but equal" facilities are inherently unequal. This case was brought as a class action suit by African Americans in four states. *Id.* at 493. The plaintiffs argued that they should be permitted to attend non-segregated public schools. *Id.* at 486. The United States District Courts of the four states, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia and Delaware all decided against the plaintiffs and the Supreme Court granted certiorari. *Id.* For the first time, rather than taking a more legal approach, the justices looked at sociological aspects of the problem, finding that the segregated schools created a feeling of inferiority within the African American students. *Id.* at 494.

⁷⁹ An interesting contrast can be made with Ataturk and his movement for a more Western 'civilized' Turkey. The relationship between the U.S. and Egyptian governments creates a problem unique for Mubarak. Ataturk, although promoting Western cultural practices in Turkey, was viewed as a nationalist with local interests at heart, Mubarak's heavy dependency on US aid prevents him from making the same claim.

⁸⁰ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 13.

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² *Id.*

women's rights nor does justice to the reality of the Egyptian working woman in today's Egypt.

The 'Scholarly Dialogue' category is not very different or separate from the employment category. Global scholars on feminism often take the position that a total destruction of patriarchal society is the only insurance in the face of women's subjugation and oppression. These scholars cast away this patriarchal society, a culture composed of history and religion, as a symbol of liberation. At the same time, they attempt to prove that a woman can live independently and without the need for a man and family. Haiykal attacks such a position as creating a dialogue that is

erroneous and in opposition to the nature of woman in the local context, because a blind throwing of one-self into the arms of Western and global notions and definitions creates a cognitive dissonance between woman in the abstract and the [Western] feminist movement which is to a great degree distant from the feelings and opinions of most women [globally] . . . and is composed by a few scholars [whose thoughts are] encapsulated in the sky scrapers of modern Western culture demanding a total divestment of the constraints which societies place upon women.⁸³

In this way, Haiykal presents her case for women's rights as brave and honest in attacking patriarchy in Egypt, and yet critical of the motives and perceived ulterior interests of the global feminist movement, which may diverge from those of Egyptian women. Haiykal attempts to maintain her legitimacy by not mincing words when discussing an assumption of Western feminism that she feels is not applicable to Egyptian society.

The most interesting, and arguably influential, aspect of the rhetoric surrounding women's rights in modern day Egypt is what Haiykal calls the 'Dialogue of the Arts.'⁸⁴ Egypt is a country with an enormous and vibrant entertainment industry that has recently exploded with the introduction of satellite programming. A visitor to any modern Egyptian home will find it hard to ignore the overwhelming role that media, generally, and television in particular plays in the lives of Egyptians. A barrage of over 200 channels from around the world broadcast, daily and uncensored, into millions of Egypt's households. In fact, it is shocking for most first time visitors to Cairo to see the ocean of satellite dishes which seem to cover every part of

⁸³ *Id.* at 14.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

every rooftop throughout the city. The programming for most of these channels consists of music-television and film. Haiykal describes such programming as presenting "the [female] body as the primary element of communication" between a woman and all who surround her.⁸⁵ She argues that the West confuses 'sexual freedom/liberation' and artistic creativity.⁸⁶ Haiykal's generation of Egyptian feminists argue that instead of liberating women, this phenomenon has enslaved the Egyptian woman by instilling in the national psyche the notion of equating a woman's worth with her sexual desirability.⁸⁷ According to Haiykal, the entertainment industry serves as effective ammunition for those arguing for the removal of the Egyptian woman from contribution to the arts,⁸⁸ a position she posits was recently unrecognizable to the modern Egyptian cultural paradigm.

Haiykal's final category of the dialogue surrounding women and gender roles in modern Egyptian society is what she refers to as the 'Local Dialogue.'⁸⁹ She argues that this category is full of inconsistencies and empty rhetoric.⁹⁰ One of the main arguments in Haiykal's piece is that women's rights in Egypt suffer from the notion of a lack of freedom on the part of Egyptian men (patriarchs). In short, Haiykal argues that it is the inability of the elements of patriarchy within Egypt to confront social, economic and political corruption and marginalization that leads to the mistreatment of Egyptian women and a denial of their rights. In fact, Haiykal names the book '*Men's Liberation*' for the very purpose of making the point that the voices of patriarchy in Egypt have made women's rights the scapegoat in modern Egyptian society. While searching for her book throughout Cairo's most popular book stores, booksellers (mostly men), who had heard of the book as being 'an attack on the men of the Muslim world,' often looked at me in a suspicious and scornful manner. Those were the words of one bookseller who seemed extremely interested in why, as a young *male*, I would be looking for such a book.⁹¹ This interaction reinforces the

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 15.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ As I was speaking to this vendor in downtown Cairo, a political demonstration by the Communist Party of Egypt was passing by shouting extremely inflammatory anti-government/anti-Mubarak slogans. The vendor looked at me, and shouting over the crowd he said: 'May Allah protect our country . . . it seems everyone has gone nuts!!' Throughout the three separate television interviews on which I saw Professor Haiykal promoting her book, this sentiment was repeatedly voiced by the traditionalist elements arguing for a more 'Islamic' Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood's slogan in the recent presidential and later parliamentary elections was 'Islam is *the* solution,' making the argument that any pluralism within the domestic political scene in Egypt is a reflection of foreign interests and thus, an

paradigm that Haiykal presents in her book: a meaningful entitlement of women's rights in Egypt will only result if its advocates are able to win the local dialogue of the sexes.

Although Islam is often criticized for denying equality and dignity to women, many of today's most prominent Egyptian feminists advocate women's rights within the framework of Islamic theology.⁹² Writers often refer to the pre-Islamic period in Arabia as the proper context in which to view the position of Islamic philosophy on women's rights and role in society.⁹³ The widespread cultural practice of infanticide in pre-Islamic Arabia (often by way of live burial of a female newborn) is an often used case-study in this analysis.⁹⁴ Female infanticide was commonly practiced because female offspring were less economically and socially desirable to families in the Arabian Peninsula.⁹⁵ Haiykal presents Islam as a break from such ignorant and inhuman practices. She argues that "when Islam entered the Arabian Peninsula . . . the value of woman increased as [she] was deemed by God to be a free creation."⁹⁶ She goes on to state: "[I]n its essence Islam is the religion [Deen-way of life] of 'Humaneness' for all times and places, it was the concept of 'Human Rights' before such a term was [coined] by Western thinkers."⁹⁷ In this manner, the modern Egyptian feminist challenges the notion that women's rights are a foreign, and thus un-authentic, movement or agenda operating within Egypt. By taking this position, Haiykal shakes the ground of legitimacy beneath the feet of patriarchal voices. Such patriarchal voices are often presented as the 'authentic' Islamic voice, in contrast to the position of government-controlled Al Azhar University. Fundamentalist Islamist movements have recently attacked Al Azhar for its moderate support of an enlarged role for

Islamic government and Islamic ideals should be the only refuge for Egyptian society to solve the several problems it may face.

⁹² This phenomenon is not unique to Egypt. In fact, Iran presents an interesting case study of such a phenomenon. See generally Ziba Mir-Hossieni, *Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, Veiling and Emerging Feminist Voices*, in *WOMEN AND POLITICS IN THE THIRD WORLD* (Haleh Afshar ed., 1996). For an example of an American Muslim voice presenting similar arguments, see generally ASMA BARLAS, *BELIEVING WOMEN IN ISLAM* (2002).

⁹³ The period prior to the beginning of Muhammad's revelations is referred to in Islamic history as the *Jahiliyya* period [Period of Ignorance]. In ancient Arabia, as in most of the world, women were treated as the property of men; practices such as infanticide of female offspring were widespread throughout Arabia at the time of Muhammad. See MAHER HATHOUT ET AL., *IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE: THE JURISPRUDENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISLAM* (2006).

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ *Id.*

⁹⁶ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 18.

⁹⁷ *Id.*

Egyptian women in public life, drawing particular condemnation for advocating education of girls. Such a position is seen as compromising the traditional view on the role of women in an Islamic society. Interestingly, arguing for a more traditional role for women in Egyptian society forces figures such as Yusuf Al Qaradawi⁹⁸ to engage the great debate in the Muslim world today: the proper distinction between the roles of sharia versus fiqh.⁹⁹

Azza Haiykal is another voice in the Muslim world admonishing Islamic scholars derelict in their duty to re-open the door of *ijtihad*¹⁰⁰ and present modern Muslim society with contemporary interpretations of religious texts as they apply to women's rights issues. In fact, I found it common to hear arguments like Haiykal's—such positions were scornful of religious leaders who advocate for a circumscribed definition of a woman's rights. These scholars argue that these concerns are prioritized by contemporary religious leaders.¹⁰¹ Instead of engaging the real issues such as the compatibility of democracy and Islam, proper governance in a representative Islamic society, or freedom of expression and its limits under shariah, all camps—from secular social activists to the disenfranchised Islamist opposition movement—are attacking religious leaders in Egypt with accusations of complacency and intellectual laziness.¹⁰²

In contrast to the established religious leadership, and unlike preceding movements of the post-colonial era, the modern Egyptian feminist movement embraces the long history of extraordinary Muslim women in Egypt. Haiykal argues that women's public involvement in Egyptian life is not a new or foreign influenced phenomenon, citing the example of Al Sayida Nafisa.¹⁰³ Famous for frequenting intellectual and scholarly debates

⁹⁸ Yusuf Al Qaradawi is a well-respected Sunni Scholar with his own television show on the Aljazeera News channel called *AlSharia Wal Hayaa* [Sharia and Life]. He is well-known for his fiery and controversial comments, often critical of the established Azhar positions on issues such as suicide bombings and the use of terrorism in Iraq and Israel. He is also well-known for his support of the destruction of the Buddhist statue in Afghanistan by the Taliban. Although Qaradawi has taken positions in support of women's rights to run as candidates in municipal elections, he is often at the forefront of attacking Egyptian feminists arguing for interpretations of religious texts that incorporate a larger recognition of the rights of women as proxies for Western control and influence in the Muslim world. His most famous work is YUSUF AL QARADAWI, *AL HALAAL WAL HARAAM FIL ISLAM* [THE LAWFUL AND THE PROHIBITED IN ISLAM] (1994).

⁹⁹ For an excellent exploration of the differences between Fiqh and Sharia, see Ziba Mir-Hossieni, *The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform*, in 1 HAWWA 1(2003).

¹⁰⁰ *Ijtihad* is the scholarly effort of synthesizing new religious edicts on topics Islamic jurisprudence has not previously addressed or new issues not present in the times of previous generations.

¹⁰¹ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 21.

¹⁰² *Id.*

¹⁰³ *Id.*

attended by the highest ranking scholars of Islam, such as Imam Al Shaf'ie,¹⁰⁴ Nafisa has a Mosque in Old Cairo named in her honor.¹⁰⁵ By way of citing the historical contributions of Nafisa and others, Haiykal demonstrates the comparatively negative modern orientation toward women's rights in Egypt.¹⁰⁶ She argues regressing Egyptian attitudes and traditions regarding the role of women in public life are symptomatic of the downfall of the Islamic civilization from its position of cultural, intellectual and political superiority in the eastern world.¹⁰⁷ In her description of what replaced such intellectual vibrancy, Haiykal states "the winds of darkness spread all around us with the hiding of woman's very image from public life justified by a call to religious righteousness which was in essence a call to political turmoil, social weakness and backwardness in intellect."¹⁰⁸

Haiykal underscores the importance of writers and activists of the late 19th and early 20th such as playwrights Tawfiq Al Hakeem and Taha Hussein¹⁰⁹ by her controversial decision to cite these earlier thinkers for their views on human rights rather than thinkers of the secularized post-colonial movements of the 1960's and 1970's. This message, although subtle to the Western reader, resonates powerfully with young Egyptian women who are under immense societal pressure to maintain their 'authentic' Egyptian culture. These colonial-era writers presented the recognition of women's rights as defiant of foreign occupation rather than yielding to it, and hence imperative in the struggle for independence from the British Empire. Egyptian feminists recognize they must revive this argument to counter accusations that they support the interests of Western powers within Egypt. This is the result of cultural and religious legitimacy becoming the defining factor of Islamic identity in the minds of many young Egyptians.

No other social practice highlights this defining thought process more than Islamist-influenced Egyptian teens and young women wearing the veil. It is far too simplistic to blithely ascribe the wearing of hijab (or niqab) to a decreased appreciation of women's rights or the feminist movement. Women in Egypt often choose to wear the veil as an expression of their support for women's rights within the context of Islamist cultural identity.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 19.

¹⁰⁵ Masjid AlSayida Nafeesa [AlSayida Nafisa Mosque].

¹⁰⁶ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 19.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ Hussein was a prominent playwright and a leader of the 'modernist' movement in Cairo. Hussein served as Minister of Education beginning 1950. His plays focused on the plight of Egypt's impoverished masses.

These women, although not necessarily otherwise politically active, openly support a more dominant Islamist role in Egyptian public life. In their view, Islam inherently entitles women to rights and responsibilities which cannot and should not be changed throughout time. They look to Sharia¹¹⁰ as a comprehensive source of all the rights God has granted to all women irrespective of ethnicity, color or social stature. These women see those not wearing hijab as the true victims of patriarchy: as women overly concerned with their appearance and beauty so that a male dominated world accepts them. Many women claim the veil commands respect, forcing men to view them as equally intelligent and driven citizens with much to offer their country and family. This group views Islam as the objective of their efforts, not a means to inherent rights, and support women's rights because their reading of the Qur'an requires it.

In contrast, Haiykal's notion of women's rights is more similar to secular Western notions of feminism in that she understands women's rights as human rights to which every individual is entitled. However, Haiykal's approach intelligently embraces Islam as much as possible, so long as it promotes the rights of women, in order to win over the Islamist audience. Realizing that the ongoing religious revival beginning in the 1970's and the recent surge in political exposure the Islamists have enjoyed heavily influenced young Egyptian women, thinkers such as Haiykal carefully choose their rhetoric so as to infiltrate and win support among the audiences of the 'Islamist women's rights activists.'

Through this sophisticated and measured approach, the modern Egyptian feminist whose primary concern is human rights is able to operate within a social environment particularly hostile and skeptical of the intentions of the global feminist movement. In addition to invoking Islamic authority, Haiykal also includes a harsh critique of Western concepts of gender equality.¹¹¹ One particular focus of criticism is her perception of the exaggerated importance given to 'sexual liberation' of woman in the Western psyche.¹¹² Haiykal states: "woman is de-humanized throughout media outlets when she is undressed and transformed [in appearance and behavior] to please the sexual senses of man."¹¹³ She argues that the meaning of freedom [for women] is lost when a society focuses on sexual freedom and not the freedom to think as a free society.¹¹⁴ By attacking sexual promiscuity, Haiykal directly addresses a major, if not *the* major concern for Egyptian

¹¹⁰ Sharia encompasses the primary sources of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence: Quran and Sunna.

¹¹¹ HAIYKAL, *supra* note 64, at 37.

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

minds for whom sexual liberalism has come to symbolize the degree to which Western culture has infiltrated their country and culture.

Haiykal also directly attacks Western Egyptian feminist organizations for espousing Western feminist ideals and for being overly judgmental and categorical. For example, she criticizes feminist organizations (e.g., *Al Munazthamaat Al Nisa'iyya*) for maintaining that polygamy is in violation of women's rights.¹¹⁵ She argues that the response to such positions has been an increase in less legitimate and more secretive forms of marriage and extra-marital affairs which ultimately place women's rights in a more compromising situation than traditional polygamist marriages.¹¹⁶ Haiykal declares: "what is appropriate for Western societies does not necessarily suit ours since polygamy was originally intended to protect the widowed and orphaned."¹¹⁷ Such skepticism toward importing the solutions of another culture is not a flaw recognized by Haiykal alone. Leila Ahmed has often posited a similar argument. Ahmed states that "[a]dopting another culture as a general remedy for a heritage of misogyny within a particular culture is not only absurd, it is impossible."¹¹⁸ Although such a critique may be harsh to Western feminist ears, it is precisely what is in order if the ears and minds of young Egyptian women and men are to be influenced to recognize the rights entitled to the woman of modern Egyptian.

V. Conclusions and Personal Reflections

Today's Egypt is a frightening and turbulent place for intellectual Egyptians who find themselves marginalized due to a perceived lack of religious legitimacy. Many of these people are the natural allies of the feminist and other progressive political movements in Egypt. The government's efforts at aiding the feminist movement in recent years can be said to have backfired in the face of women's rights activists. Today, the central argument of anti-feminist Egyptians is that feminism and its proponents will not rest until they make Egypt a cultural colony of America and the West. In fact, many argue that that has already taken place. They point to United States officials' statements arguing for a 'new Middle-East'

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 38.

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ *Id.* While appearing on one of the numerous talk shows on Egyptian satellite broadcast, Haiykal directly quoted from the Qur'an to an Islamist Sheikh on the issue of polygamy. The Sheikh was explicitly arguing that a main purpose of permitting men to marry four wives and not grant women the same right was that it was more difficult for men to resist sexual promiscuity.

¹¹⁸ AHMED, *supra* note 9, at 128–29 (1992).

as proof that the feminists are in cahoots with Western powers of domination to change the very essence of Egyptian culture. As a result of America's pressure on the Mubarak government for political reform and increased civil liberties, the Islamist anti-womens' rights movement in Egypt has injected its representatives into the programming of every major media outlet within and outside the country. These voices quote weakly-supported hadith¹¹⁹ and selectively-quoted verses from the Qur'an to argue that what the feminists are demanding is simply not permissible if Egyptians are to remain true to their culture and religious heritage. The recent explosion in the number of women wearing *niqab* (veil covering the face),¹²⁰ the plethora of bumper stickers attempting to shame women into wearing hijab—illegally posted in nearly all modes of public transportation stations and cars—coupled with "a brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature,"¹²¹ have made for a hostile atmosphere for any political or social movement not heavily cloaked in the garb of Islamic legitimacy and purpose.

The latest generation of feminists has skillfully and cunningly adjusted their message to incorporate more Islamic authority in positing their arguments. They denounce Western domination and have delved into Egypt's colonial history to seek voices that presented women's rights in the context of Islam. Other voices of secularism, such as Saadawi,¹²² are still heard in the social discourse, but perhaps this new, more religious-oriented generation, signals an interesting phenomenon unfolding today: the fragmentation of the Egyptian feminist movement. Haiykal, representing the new generation, recently undertook a book promotion campaign that put her on the guest list of every major talk show in the middle east. Over my stay in Egypt in the summer of 2006, I watched her take part in four separate talk-show interviews accompanied by an Islamist non-Azhar-associated Sheikh, who was arguing for the decreased presence of Egyptian women in the work

¹¹⁹ See AHMED, *supra* note 9, at 46 (explaining that "[t]he hadith are short narratives about Muhammed, his Companions and contemporaries, collected into written form in the three or four centuries after Muhammad died"); see also MAHMOOD, *supra* note 1, at 3 (elaborating that the hadith is "the authoritative record of the Prophet's exemplary speech and actions").

¹²⁰ Any repeat visitor to Egypt throughout the past decade will likely attest to the stark increase in the use of *niqab* by Egyptian women. A phenomenon that represented a tiny minority in the late 1990s now represents a noticeable block of the population. In fact, writers such as MAHMOOD, *supra* note 1, have attempted to use the *niqab* as an indicator of class or degree of education, implying that the practice is often associated with the less educated, peasant class. Although true at the time of observation in the mid-1990s, today such a distinction cannot be accurately made as *niqab* has become much more widely worn by women from all classes of Egyptian society. Throughout my visit, *niqab* was equally prevalent in poor neighborhoods as well as the high-end restaurants and social clubs frequented by locals.

¹²¹ See MAHMOOD, *supra* note 1, at 3 (noting that this is an outcome of the religious revival movement, which began in the 1970s).

¹²² See generally *supra* Part II.

place. His main thesis was that many of the sexual morality problems¹²³ now prevalent in Egypt are due to the increased presence of women in the work place and public life. Such a position voices perfectly the Muslim Brotherhood's motto of 'Islam is *the* solution.'

In these interviews, Haiykal directly attacked the Quranic justification for such a position and consistently quoted hadiths and Quranic verses that completely destroyed the jurisprudential credibility of the Shaikh's thesis. As a Muslim Egyptian-American, I have never seen an Egyptian female thinker, with no association to any religious institution, so effectively and directly challenging a person of religious authority on a religious matter. In fact, in one of the interviews, her adversary became so flustered and frustrated that he began ranting accusations that all feminist women were merely jealous that God had never chosen a woman prophet or messenger in all three of [his] monotheistic theologies.¹²⁴

For those of us who wish to see the advancement of women's rights in Egypt, Haiykal and her new contemporaries are our best and most realistic hope. As a woman who chooses not to wear hijab, Haiykal faces criticism from men and women alike. In fact one of her most frequently repeated arguments is that it is the duty of every Muslim woman to teach her children, particularly the boys, the wrongfulness of male domination and patriarchy.¹²⁵ If we in the West truly desire a better and more dignified position for women in Egyptian society, it is our role as feminists to do whatever we can to bolster the local legitimacy of voices such as Professor Azza Haiykal's. If the West pursues its current course of political pressure on the Mubarak government, it will only supply the Islamists with the verbal and cultural ammunition they so very need to tear down the voices of reason and self-determination of the modern Egyptian woman.

Regardless of what course the West may choose, reflecting upon the history of Egyptian feminism, one thing is certain: the voice of the Egyptian feminist will go on and will not be silenced. Like in previous generations, it will face and overcome the obstacles placed before it because it is a genuinely local Egyptian movement. The movement is focused solely on

¹²³ There is a widespread sentiment in Egypt that un-Islamic sexual relations between youths are at an unprecedented rate. In my return to Egypt in recent years, I have witnessed a noticeable trend in a portion of the community that has developed a very Western and liberal approach to relations between the sexes before marriage. Today, boyfriends and girlfriends walk up and down the Cornice [Nile Boardwalk] hand-in-hand, sharing kisses and embraces. What is truly ironic is that the majority of the young women also seem to be a part of the explosion of hijab-wearing among the youth, creating what many call a stark inconsistency.

¹²⁴ This referred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

¹²⁵ See generally Haiykal, *supra* note 64.

promoting the interests of the Egyptian woman and it will not accept becoming a mere pawn of Western political influence.