A LOST ARAB HOLLYWOOD:
FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY
CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN CINEMA

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By

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CULTURE & POLITICS HONORS THESIS
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Foreword

This project is dedicated to Mona, Mebry and Soha.
Three Egyptian women whose stories will follow me wherever I go.

As a child, I never watched Arabic films. Growing up in London to an Egyptian family meant I desperately craved to learn pop-culture references that were foreign to my ancestors. It didn’t feel ‘in’ to be different and as a teenager I struggled to reconcile two seemingly incompatible facets of my identity. Like many of the film characters in this study, I felt stuck at a crossroads between embracing modernity and respecting tradition. I unknowingly opted to be a non-critical consumer of European and American mass media at the expense of learning from the rich narratives emanating from my own region. My British secondary school’s curriculum was heavily Eurocentric and rarely explored the history of my people further than as tertiary figures of the past. That is not to say I rejected my cultural heritage upfront. Women in my family went to great lengths to share our intricate family history and values. My childhood was as much shaped by dinner-table conversations at my Nona’s apartment in Cairo and long summers at the Egyptian coast, as it was by my life in Europe. It was not until coming to Georgetown, however, when I fully appreciated the power of indigenous cultural storytelling. Through discovering Arabic music, film and literature both inside and outside the classroom, I began to interact with my Egyptian culture in a context outside of my family. This intellectual quest helped me realize not necessarily who I needed to be but rather what I could become.

Egypt became more than my blood.

I want to thank my faculty adviser Safoura Nourbakhsh of Georgetown’s Women and Gender studies programme for helping me conceive and carry out this project. Throughout the year, her academic support and mentorship has helped me crystallize my ideas and grounded them into research. I am eternally grateful for her patience and salient advice as I navigated the unwieldy task of sharpening my argument. I also want to thank SFS Culture & Politics Dean Anthony L. Pirrotti. His academic guidance and support throughout our research journey has helped us seniors finish our projects during unchartered times.
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Introduction

In *Power, Politics and Culture*, the pioneering post-colonial scholar Edward Said wrote, “What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the authority which has become repressive because it doesn’t permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented.” Said’s remarks are at the beating heart of this scholarly endeavour. A deeply turbulent history laden with foreign influence, conflict and geopolitical tension coupled with cultural hegemonic practices stifled Egyptians from representing themselves in mass media. Due to European exploration in the region, the Arab world, including Egypt, has been an object of fascination for “Western” eyes for centuries. What began with 18th century French artists and novelists like Jean-Léon Gérôme in Greater Syria and Gustave Flaubert in Egypt producing paintings, travel accounts and poetry to convey their encounters with a native “Oriental” population, culminated with the roots of a national film industry initially built by foreigners. This colonial artwork often evoked notions of exoticism, sexual fantasies, female subjugation and Arab masculinity. Scenes depicting veiled female belly dancers curtained behind sultans and male merchants in urban bazaars became a staple in this discourse. Egyptian women experience a lack of depth in these artistic and literary representations, as they are depicted as victims of cruel male dominance and possess limited agency.

Built in around 1906, the first movie theatres and production companies in Cairo and Alexandria were owned by European immigrants and aired films that perpetuated these Orientalist tropes. Egyptian cinema became a booming and profitable industry, despite its roots as a foreign

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3 Dina A. Mahmoud, Swapna Koshy *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras* (Farringdon, Oxfordshire: Redshank Books, an imprint of Libri Publishing, 2019), Introduction.
import. From the 1920s onwards, Egypt began to carve out a national cinema with its own distinct turbulent trajectory. Would indigenous cultural modes of production deviate from the largely flat and simplified representation of Arab women? The portrayal of Arab women in indigenous film merits study because of the persistent and crying lack of accurate representation in its Western counterpart. Jack Shaheen, a specialist in racial and ethnic stereotyping, reviewed over 1,100 Hollywood films dating back to 1896 for the racial stereotyping and “otherizing” of Arab and Muslims in his anthology Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. Shaheen groups specific negative and biased tropes together to form different clusters and ranks how poorly (or positively) Hollywood has represented Arabs in their plots. He concludes that women overwhelmingly serve as oppressed wives, violent terrorists or illiterate and uneducated individuals who were poor. Do Arab women fit this same narrative in native Egyptian cinema?

This thesis will explore how Egyptian women are represented during the modern pre-revolutionary era of Egyptian Cinema. The film industry’s pre-revolutionary wave is defined as the 21st century period before Egypt’s 2011 uprising. Using two significant national films as cases for this analysis, I incorporate a gendered lens to critically examine the filmic depiction of women. While Egypt’s cinematic history can be divided into five periods dating back to 1920, the industry reached its peak fame between 1940 and 1960. Dubbed as the industry’s Golden Age, this period saw Egypt’s highest production levels to date and cemented its status as a dominant regional leader and cultural powerhouse. Compared to the smaller production capabilities of neighbouring countries, Egypt’s film industry—commonly referred to as the “Hollywood on the Nile”—was an anomaly in its size, scale and commercial success. Attributable to Egypt’s soft Arabic dialect, a marketable advantage over harsher regional dialects for film releases, and to its large population, production boomed to between

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60 and 100 films per year. While North African cinema in countries like Morocco and Tunisia advanced cinéma d’auteur, a 1950s French movement that emphasized the filmmaker’s role in developing art, and though Lebanon and Kuwait began to develop national cinemas, nothing could rival Egypt’s mid-century filmic success. Yet, there still remains a lot to be studied during Arab Hollywood’s less-successful moments. Since the 1980s, many film scholars have concluded that Egypt no longer dominates the pan-Arab film industry. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s decision to nationalize the lucrative industry proved disastrous as filmmakers fled to make movies abroad and production levels subsequently collapsed. The film periods that followed became known as modern neo-realist and pre-revolutionary cinema—this trend will constitute the focus of my research. Thus, my thesis will add to existing scholarship on Egyptian film, gender and representation by looking beyond the classical and popular age of cinema. Instead my project will analyse modern 21st century films prior to the Arab Spring, on which there is far less research because of the perceived decline in the industry.

It is difficult to overestimate the power filmic representations possess. As a vehicle for more than just creative expression, on-screen portrayals of women can capture, commemorate and challenge our social understandings of gender dynamics. While journalist Dina Mahmoud characterizes film as “the final print of history,” veteran film scholar Ella Shohat argues that film’s status as a public mass mode of consumption enables it to incite social change.  

For nearly 100 years, Egyptian filmmakers have populated cinemas and TVs across the nation with images of political uprisings, romantic musicals, family feuds, and regional wars. These films not only used history as the basis for their plots but also increasingly employed social taboos in their narratives to promote silenced issues and explore the depth of Egyptian society. In this vain, this thesis will combine women’s studies and cultural

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5 Mahmoud, Koshy, *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras*, 3.

6 Ibid.

studies theory situated in historical context to evaluate how Egyptian women fared in this powerful mode of production. After broadly surveying women’s representation on the screen throughout the span of the national film industry, I will analyse female representation in the pre-revolutionary films, *Cairo 678* by Mohamed Diab (2010) and *Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story* by Yousry Nasrallah (2009). The two films were selected based on the following criteria. First, the main protagonist is a female. Second, both films were produced in the same era, allowing for more consistent comparison. Third, national and international reception has been well documented. Finally, both were critically acclaimed and popular.

I will combine foundational feminist theories on oppression, class, privilege and power with anthropological and historical research on gender in Egypt to build out an analytical lens that will reveal the portrayal of women in these films. For *Cairo 678*, Fatima Mareah Peoples and Nadeen El-Ashmawy’s scholarship on sexual harassment in Cairo will be essential to unpack Diab’s representation of gender violence inflicted in the public sphere. Marilyn Frye’s classic essay “Oppression” and Carole Hanisch’s arguments on patriarchy and the politicization of women’s private sphere will serve as the framework for my interpretation of Nasrallah’s social critique in *Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story*. Throughout my monographic analysis, scholarship on Islamic dress, Arab masculinity, traditional gender roles and women’s supposed madness and hysteria will be incorporated to further enrich my understanding of both films and their intricacies.

By using this theoretical framework, this study finds that even though the politics of gender is the primary focus of both films, both directors also use an intersectional approach in depicting their female characters. By showcasing varying degrees of oppressive barriers, ranging from unwanted groping to domestic abuse, depending on the character’s gender, socio-economic status and privilege, these films create a deeply layered and nuanced portrait of social issues in pre-revolutionary Cairo. Moreover, both films highlight women’s agency and resistance, however limited their access to power
may be, in their fight for justice against patriarchal and cultural norms. Simply put, the women on the screen challenge the status quo. Diab and Nasrallah’s films offer marked differences in storyline approach. *Cairo 678* focuses on the sole issue of sexual harassment against women, including its underlying causes and larger social implications, while Nasrallah’s melodrama takes a macroscopic approach in attacking Egypt’s pervasive gender inequality from various vantage points. Nevertheless, both films are significant in the scope and depth of the social issues they explore as they relate to gender and other systems of social inequality by shedding light on some of Egyptian women’s biggest concerns.

My study is divided into three sections. The first chapter documents how the Egyptian film industry evolved from a foreign investment into a regional powerhouse. Through incorporating historical context, I give an overview of the main cinematic genres and obstacles the industry faced. In this chapter, I also situate my research in the bank of existing scholarship on the representation of women in Egyptian film. In the second chapter, I use the lens of women experiencing gender violence in the public domain to analyse *Cairo 678*. I argue that Diab’s intersectional portrait of a single issue, calls into question the norms of Cairene society. The third chapter focuses on Nasrallah’s interpretation of *1001 Arabian Nights*, a traditional story that feminist studies scholars have since re-examined as a work of female empowerment and agency. With limited access to power, Scheherazade in the classic tale, uses storytelling as a tool to successfully lure her captor away from ending her life. In Nasrallah’s modern-take, various women attempt to disrupt Egypt’s overwhelming patriarchal status quo by seizing a national media broadcast as a platform to convey their oppression. In my conclusion, I discuss the implication of these films as a pair of pre-revolutionary works, which offer a stark difference in female representation from earlier national cinematic gems.
The Egyptian Film Industry Explained

صناعة السينما المصرية

To date, Egypt has produced 3,000 films since the mid 1920s by approximately 400 different directors. This mass production of films often matched Hollywood standards according to Arab film studies scholar Viola Shafik, who chronicled the impact of nearly a century of national cinema in her book *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. While Egyptian literature, poetry, music, soap operas and press clippings also reflect local cultural and political shifts, I argue that film possesses a lasting effect in capturing a society in transition. Egyptian film is perhaps the most powerful tool in shaping and revealing its culture because film is more accessible in this context than any other artistic medium due to its widespread distribution and its ability to cut through Egypt’s low literacy rate. In their book *Film as The Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinema’s Glorious Eras*, Dina Mahmoud and Swapna Koshy credit film with the ability “to immortalize events by making a historical record for posterity.” Film as a medium transcends other art forms because of its power to converse with the audience and transport them to another point in time: filmmakers are shaped by the socio-political realm they work in, making film a precious source of information that figures into a country’s knowledge production. Due to political instability, social changes and historical circumstances, rather than a gradual growth in production levels, the output of Egyptian films ebbed and flowed, mirroring the nation’s rocky contemporary history.

This chapter will explore how Egypt’s film industry grappled with socialist policies, regional wars, military coups and popular revolutions and serves to situate the pre-revolutionary works of Mohamed Diab and Yousry Nasrallah into the broader fabric of national cinema. An overview of the

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8 Mahmoud, Koshy, *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras*, 6.
10 Mahmoud, Koshy *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras*, 1.
11 Ibid.
Egyptian film industry and how women’s representation evolved within it, is necessary to contextualize our monography of female representations in Cairo 678 and Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story. I argue that Egyptian women on the screen evolved from limited secondary characters such as sexualized spies, seductive dancers or submissive wives into empowered individuals with complex storylines.

**Financing Film: Building a “Hollywood on The Nile”**

Though the Arab World has had a difficult experience with foreign exploration and interference, the art of film was one of the few positive legacies European colonials and expats left behind. In Egypt, the first picture houses and movie theatres were owned by foreigners or immigrants. In 1906, Cairo’s first cinema, French Pathé, was created by French residents. Similarly, Egypt’s initial production houses were conceived by non-native investors. These film companies dismantled the monopoly of the French Lumière brothers, among history’s first filmmakers, who had patented early cinematographic techniques, by acquiring the pair’s Egyptian franchise. In the early 20th century, cities like Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan melting pots that boasted a mosaic of ethnicities such as Arab, Sudanese, Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Italian and French. Yet with only European-owned production houses, the initial output of Egyptian films was by no means a national product and hardly representative of the local population. These films mirrored European cinematic trends and pulled local Arabic-speaking audiences by using the latest technological advances like audio and subtitling to include Egyptians in this novel medium. Actresses in these silent pictures were rarely Egyptian and did not figure heavily into the plot.

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12 Mahmoud, Koshy, *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras*, 5.
16 Mahmoud, Koshy, *Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras*, 7.
Egyptian financial powerhouses like Bank Misr—Egypt’s national bank—capitalized on the increasing market of local movie-goers during film’s transition from silence to sound by financing the national industry. In 1935, Studio Misr was created by Talaat Harb, a nationalist entrepreneur and the Bank’s founder. With its large production output, the studio served as Egypt’s premiere film house, on par with Hollywood’s major studios. As well as hiring European expert filmmakers and licensing the latest technologies, the studio also funded scholarships for young Egyptian men and women to study cinematography in Europe in order to cultivate national talent both on and off screen.17 The studio built its initial success on musical-style films, providing an avenue for local singers to popularize their songs. During the 1930s and 1940s, iconic Egyptian male and female musicians like Abdel Halim Hafez and Umm Kulthum regularly appeared on screens across Egypt and eventually around the Arab world, affording them international exposure.18 Such films gave Egyptian women their first major chance at on-screen representation since many scenes incorporated female dancers to complement these musical numbers. Therefore, Arabic musicals transmitted a feminine imagery of the ideal woman through the frequent use of the belly dancer as a character device. Egyptian dancers such as Samia Gamal became cultural icons in the Arab world as they influenced people’s conception of a modern heroine. This new feminine image restored dance as a symbol of power across regional media. These popular musicals carved a dent in Arabic cinema and foreshadowed a new era for the industry, in which Egypt’s dialect was the dominant and most recognized form of Arabic in Middle Eastern film.19

18 Mahmoud, Koshy, Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras, 8.
19 Feminism Inshallah dir. Ferial Ben Mahmoud (France Televisions, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BugoLyO3ZeA
The Golden Age

Though musicals were attracting a larger audience, it was not until the post-war period, between the 1940s and 1960s, that Egyptian cinema matured into what Tunisian Director Ferial Ben Mahmoud described as “the political and cultural beacon of the Arab world.” In these decades production levels rose to over 50 films annually; doubling the total output in a matter of years. Commonly referred to as the “Golden Age” of Egyptian cinema, this production boom allowed for Egyptian films to not only experiment with new art forms but also to function as a political tool. Through its flourishing film industry, Egypt influenced neighbouring countries’ content consumption, and later their ideas and social conversations, thus asserting itself as the cultural capital of the region.

Guy Debord’s focus on the role of images in our society helps explain the significance of Egypt's newfound soft power through filmic representation. Debord examines the central importance of the image by positing that, “All that was once directly lived has become a mere representation.” In his work, The Society of the Spectacle, Debord argues that images have replaced genuine human interaction with the “spectacle,” which has contributed to a type of social relationship between people that is mediated by images. This argument stretches one’s understanding of representation as not a solely human and state-sponsored phenomenon but also as one that takes place in mediums such as TV, film and other mass media channels.

During the peak of Egyptian cinema, filmmakers explored subjects ranging from rural politics, infidelity and divorce, to political revolutions and socio-economic divisions. Egyptian stars such as Omar Sharif and Faten Hamama became household names and prolific directors like Salah Abu Seif

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20 Feminism Inshallah dir. Ferial Ben Mahmoud (France Televisions, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Buqo1yO3ZeA
21 Mahmoud, Koshy, Film as the Final Print of History: The Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Eras, 9.
23 Ibid.
24 Sameh Fathy and Sarah El Enany, Classic Egyptian Movies 101 Must-See Films (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018)
and Youssef Chahine experimented with contemporary innovative modes of storytelling while remaining relevant to their audiences by mainly exploring pervasive social issues. Naguib Mahfouz, widely known for winning the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, was also a prominent screenwriter who collaborated with Egyptian directors to write scripts. Like much of his literature, Mahfouz’s screenplays both reflected and shaped society by “holding a mirror up to Egyptian society.” Indeed, he used the screen as a vehicle to thrust silenced topics in the public debate.

With the exception of certain Golden Age films, however, the image of Egyptian women suffered as a victim of a patriarchal construct. Dina Mahmoud and Swapna Koshy argue that female representation in this era was limited to women posited as submissive individuals, who carried the pain of their families and acted obediently to those who surrounded them. The constant use of the same tropes amplified the flat representation of women on the screen. Women were either confined to the private sphere by being fragile, loyal and dutiful companions to their husbands or they bore the symbol of national values as “mothers of the nation,” since family and national honour were at the crux of the traditional conception of the ideal Egyptian woman. Women, who sacrificed for their husbands were depicted as strong and heroic as they, “ceased to be a threat in the male consciousness.” These depictions uncritically embraced Egypt’s patriarchal culture in order to preserve male dominance and not disrupt Arab masculinity.

Egypt’s Hollywood on the Nile quickly evolved into a political tool because of the international issues it increasingly addressed. Recognizing that, “The nerve centre of cinema was in Egypt,” President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the industry in 1966, enabling the government to politicize films with pan-Arab propaganda and nation-building messaging.  

25 Mahmoud, Koshy Film as the Final Print of History: the Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Era, 9.
26 Mahmoud, Koshy Film as the Final Print of History: the Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Era, 29 - 30.
Chahine is an example of Nasser’s Arab unification hopes projected on screen as the film centres on women’s contributions in the Algerian liberation struggle against French colonialism. The film was intended to garner sympathies across the Arab world during the wave of decolonizing revolutions in the 1960s by showing protest footage, political rallies and speeches from regional leaders. Chahine’s choice to craft the film from a female perspective was intentional as it complemented Nasser’s pseudo-reforms on women’s rights, bolstering his reputation as a modernizing and progressive leader. Nasser improved women’s political rights by granting women’s suffrage in 1956 and integrating them in the workforce, however he made no attempts to reform the oppressive family law or remedy gender inequalities in the private sphere, such as divorce and spousal abuse.

The female lens also distinguished Chahine’s film from other cinematic works that depicted the conflict. Chahine serves as a crucial example of the homegrown talent Studio Misr was able to cultivate to propel Egyptian cinema into a success story. Beginning as a director’s assistant, Chahine quickly established himself as a vital figure in the industry, who specialized in political films, because he used mature editing techniques at a fraction of the average cost to produce “unique cinematic artistry.” Ben Mahmoud, who directed the documentary Feminist Inshallah to explore the history of Arab feminism across the region, noted that women were frequently Westernized in national cinema by being portrayed as “bare-bodied, seductive and femme fatale,” to reflect Nasser’s competition against the West.

While production houses like Studio Misr benefitted from Nasser’s nationalization of the film industry, affording their work easy distribution across the Arab world, the decision triggered criticism from many filmmakers because of the censorship and lack of creative innovation that accompanied the policy. Depictions of women on the screen did not improve within this context. In her analysis of

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31 Feminism Inshallah dir. Ferial Ben Mahmoud, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuqOLxO3ZeA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuqOLxO3ZeA)
410 films with 460 female characters produced between 1962 and 1972, Mona El Hadidi argued that Egyptian cinema publicized a distorted image of women: “The portrayal of women continued to be that of sex objects…depraved in their behaviour and in their thinking.” Hadidi’s 1977 study found socio-economic gaps in filmic female representations, with rural and/or employed women suffering from limited screen time. Women were merely represented as sexual objects, lacking the complexity that social human beings possess such as life’s competing social roles and problems. Nahid Ramzi conducted an in-depth comparison between the images of men and women in these films, finding that women were negatively reproduced as incapable of making successful decisions in their family life. These choices highlight Golden Age directors’ indifference towards promoting a balanced image of Egyptian women in society.

**Film in Crisis**

The nationalization of film contributed to an exodus of foreign filmmakers. The decision quickly became financially unsustainable and delivered a major blow to output in the subsequent decades. The flood of imported foreign films coupled with heavily taxed cinema tickets shrunk movie attendances nationally; state film productions lost millions of Egyptian pounds. The policy effectively ceased by 1972, though the damage had already been done. From the 1980s, Egyptian cinema plunged into a rapid decline. The advent of television meant local audiences were no longer supporting national box offices and local cinemas in the same way. As a result, studio production shrank to 10 films per year. Egyptian filmmakers attempted to stay relevant by confronting social taboos and historical

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34 Dr. Nahid Ramzi, “The Image of Woman in Egyptian Mass Media,” *Al-Ra’aida Journal*, January 1970, pp. 4-6, [https://doi.org/10.32380/alri.v6i0.1612](https://doi.org/10.32380/alri.v6i0.1612)

35 Mahmoud, Koshy, *Film as the Final Print of History: the Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Era*, 10.
events that were previously censored such as political films dealing with Israel. In these films, women began to have an elevated role as they embodied the patriotic heroine against the enemy of Israel. In her book *Filming the Modern Middle East*, film scholar Lina Khatib argues that 1990s Egyptian cinema produced films centred on the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to commemorate Egypt’s alignment with the collective Arab cause and Palestinian suffering while simultaneously vilifying Israel on the screen. Mahmoud and Koshy’s research suggests that Egyptian women were, “shown as triumphantly conquering Israel” in these pictures but still confined to traditional gender roles like the sexually provocative seductress. Khatib documents multiple Egyptian films such as *Road to Eliat*, *48 Hours in Israel* and *Mission to Tel Aviv* where women are sexualized in covert operations, using their bodies and physical attractiveness to manipulate enemies and meet their characters’ goals.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s liberal economic policies, which encouraged private investments into the media industry, rapidly revolutionized the content consumption of Egyptians. Studios previously used for feature films now produced 30-day television series specials for the month of Ramadan—this continues to be a highly profitable media output as these shows are exported to a large portion of the Arabic-speaking and Muslim world. The relaxed investment policies also enabled oil-rich Gulf countries to influence the industry by financing films for television and later satellite channel distribution. The more conservative norms of the Gulf, where movie theatres were once prohibited, negatively impacted the waning Egyptian film industry as Gulf producers operated under stricter censorship requirements regarding issues of sex, politics and religion. As the number of

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38 Mahmoud, *Film as the Final Print of History: the Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Era*, 30.

39 Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*, 98.


conservative stakeholders in Egypt’s media began to rise, the veil became a prominent symbol in Egyptian film. Khatib notes that a plethora of films dealing with the rise of political Islam and religious fundamentalism, depict the ideal wife as veiled, submissive and silent.\textsuperscript{42} Under this fundamental worldview women are repressed and resigned to their lower status in this patriarchal hierarchy.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, the Gulf’s influence and rise of TV contributed to movie-theatre closures and reduced nationally-produced films. By 1994, Egyptian cinema was considered to be in a state of crisis, “The annual production of films had fallen to single digits, a far cry from the annual output of fifty narrative features in 1944.”\textsuperscript{44}

**Revolutionary Film: Women Reimagined**

In response to this film crisis, directors explored social issues with a renewed interest. Described as part of Egypt’s neo-realist film wave, veteran directors like Youssef Chahine and more nascent talents like Yousry Nasrallah and later on Mohamed Diab, used their films to explore domains state-controlled TV and Gulf-funded productions could not touch. Film releases in this period reflected a heavily scrutinized Egyptian society focusing on political corruption, drug abuse and sexual harassment. The days of musicals, Arab-unification and melodramas had evaporated. The realist lens attracted audiences again and by 2010, production output had reached healthier former levels. Compared to the 1990s, when production numbers had fallen to approximately 20 films annually, in the millennial decade, the cinema industry regained popularity with its strategic emphasis on socio-political taboos.\textsuperscript{45} As these films were critiquing society, their storylines increasingly afforded Egyptian women the space for fuller representation. Films such as Mohamed Diab’s *Cairo 678* and Yousry Nasrallah’s *Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story* exclusively focused on women’s issues, spotlighting social ills

\textsuperscript{42} Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*, 64.
\textsuperscript{43} Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*, 64.
\textsuperscript{45} Mahmoud, Koshy *Film as the Final Print of History: the Portrayal of Women in Egyptian Cinemas Glorious Era*, 13.
that would become the basis for Egypt’s 2011 revolution, which toppled Hosni Mubarak’s 29-year presidency.

This cinematic wave did not confine female representation to conventional gender norms but rather highlighted the burdens they carried. In these works, Egyptian women are empowered to recognize their repression and to question the patriarchal structure they are entrapped in. These films served as a precursor for Egypt’s Arab Spring and perhaps unintentionally fostered future national conversations. Egypt had slowly begun to regain its status as the Arab world’s Hollywood on the Nile. Though the energy emanating from The Arab Spring gave women more filmic representation because of the revival of social issues and popular demands for greater freedoms, the political instability accompanying the revolution once again rocked the film industry. Nation-wide curfews severely reduced cinema audiences, and film production slowed to a near halt. Movies took a back-seat as the nation faced a rough transition from Mubarak’s exit to the eventual overthrowal of Mohamed Morsi in 2013.46

It was not until 2016 that Egyptian cinema found its footing again. Now veteran, independent and emerging filmmakers are focused on depicting revolutionary and political themes such as disparate views on the Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Mohamed Diab’s The Clash and social-class urban relations in Hala Khalil’s Nawara—which notably had a female working-class protagonist. Since the 2011 Egyptian uprising formed part of the larger network of popular protests in the region, the international community has taken an increasing look at the artistic work and media from the Arab World. In other words: Egypt’s uprising put its national cinema on the international map. Both Hala Khalil and Mohamed Diab’s post-revolutionary works were critically acclaimed by prestigious international film festivals and awards like France’s Cannes Film Festival. The national reception of

such films, however, is less warm. In an interview for CNN, Khalil lamented the unbridled power Egyptian studios have in national distribution. These production houses prefer, “popcorn films rather than films that have serious storylines that discuss social and political issues,” according to Khalil.⁴⁷ In order to bypass ever-harsher censorship rules under the current political regime led by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, filmmakers are forced to use creative angles to convey controversial storylines. Egyptian film executive Sherif Mandour was more positive about the prospects for Egyptian cinema because production levels broke the national record in 2017 and more governmental funds have been allotted to the film industry since then. Mandour remained hopeful of Egypt becoming the region’s cultural capital for film once again because of the historic relationship the country has enjoyed with this art medium: “Cinema was a huge part of our soft power over history. It is not the same now and the competition is increasing, but Egypt has a space because we have the only language that is understood in all 22 Arab countries.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

Egypt’s contemporary history cannot be appreciated without the movies that captured it. Over the span of 100 years, the Egyptian film industry evolved from a successful national enterprise that positioned itself as the Arab world’s premiere producer into a politicized entity and medium that became engulfed in revolutionary rhetoric and social critiques. The medium’s capacity to both reflect and shape cultural narratives means that the evolving representation of women is an important metric of modern Egyptian society. Although initial emphasis on belly dancers in popular film musicals reduced women to a cultural emblem of femininity, it afforded them access into the public acting space. In the following decades, women were secondary characters, which fell into several tropes such as the patriotic heroine, the submissive wife or the bearer of national honour. Most of these tropes

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⁴⁸ Ibid.
aligned with conventional gender roles that an overtly conservative Egypt prescribed to. Several studies found that prior to the 21st century, women on the screen were skewed to negative portrayals. As will be revealed in the subsequent chapters, the pre-revolutionary wave of films finally began to chip away at this trend by questioning the status quo women were confined to.
In his 2010 film *Cairo 678*, Mohamed Diab takes a multi-narrative approach to spotlight an ugly urban reality facing many women in Egypt’s public space: sexual harassment. Inspired by true events, the stories of three women intersect in the infamously congested Cairo traffic. While Fayza, Nelly and Seba represent distinct social strata, they share the common experience of street sexual harassment. Fayza, a conservative and humble woman, faces daily unwanted groping on public transportation, leaving her in a state of constant psychological distress as she frequently interacts in Cairo’s public space. After reaching her limit, she seizes the matter into her own hands by pricking men who try to violate her, prompting a police investigation conducted by Detective Essam. Seba, who is a wealthy jewellery designer, suffers from a mob-assault during a mass football celebration she attends with her husband. Rejected by her husband and silenced by her mother, she eventually miscarries a baby and uses her experience to conduct self-defence workshops open to the public. Nelly, a young and middle-class professional, who feels unsafe in her discriminatory workspace, is assaulted on the street directly across from her house by a van-driver. In broad daylight, the man grabs her by the chest and continues driving. The incident triggers a lawsuit. When combined, these three narratives explore sexual harassment from different social, political and gendered perspectives.49

Diab not only portrays a pervasive and disturbing form of violent discrimination against Egyptian women, he also highlights the relationship between class and gender in a woman’s experience with sexual harassment. The film emphasizes that one cannot discuss gender in Egyptian society without exploring class structure. Although I will use gender as a lens to unpack the representation of Egyptian women’s interaction and treatment in the public space, gender cannot account for

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everything. Third-wave feminist scholarship argues that if we exclusively use gender to analyse the representation and status of women, it becomes a tool of oppression—a social system of barriers that work institutionally and interpersonally to disempower people because of their gender, race, class and other social criteria.\textsuperscript{50}

The three protagonists experience harassment from different socio-economic vantage points, resulting in a nuanced depiction of the phenomenon; the film illuminates that the intersection between class and gender is essential to this portrait of harassment in Cairo’s pre-revolutionary public space. Thus, our analysis carries an intersectional dimension as more than one factor is involved. Since people’s identities are complex and do not fit easily into distinct social categories, the concept of intersectionality can be used to showcase the interlocking systems of oppression that shape people’s experiences and access to power.\textsuperscript{51} Using this definition, the audience learns that Fayza, Seba and Nelly all face varying degrees of oppressive barriers in their socio-cultural spheres. Street harassment is the principal, but not sole, tool of oppression these women encounter, with Cairo’s class hierarchy shaping how harassment transpires for each character. Yet, I argue that within this intersectional representation of harassment, irrespective of their socio-economic status, Egyptian women defy barriers in the public domain and push the limits they are confined to by their gender and class. Though each character’s oppression is different and met with varying resistance, the three women are united in their attempts to seize agency, relative to their means, in order to combat injustice.

**Existing Research on Cairo’s Sexual Harassment Problem**

The frequency of sexual harassment in Cairo’s public space has led to a plethora of studies on the subject. This form of verbal or physical attack has been labelled as “street harassment,” by


anthropologist Fatima Mareah Peoples. Sexual harassment can be viewed as a social phenomenon because of Cairo’s internal reputation of multitudes of men in the streets promoting a culture of, “machismo.”\(^{52}\) Though written in a post-revolutionary context, gender and development scholar Nadeen El-Ashmawy’s study on the widespread nature of sexual harassment in Egypt is still useful for our pre-revolutionary analysis and echoes Mareah Peoples’ assertion that sexual harassment has grown into an “epidemic.”\(^{53}\) Mareah Peoples defines street sexual harassment as a highly symbolic form of violence, which transcends a woman’s class, religion or ethnic background. This public form of harassment can take shape in three distinct ways: gestures, verbal remarks and physical harassment.\(^{54}\) El-Ashmawy extends Mareah Peoples’ definition of sexual harassment by arguing that Egypt’s growing class struggle is critical to understanding gender violence in this local context. While sexual harassment is not solely experienced by middle and upper-class women inflicted by lower-class men, her study finds that Egypt’s teetering economic situation, which has left many impoverished men unmarried and unemployed, has elevated sexual harassment as a tool of class antagonism. In short, a woman’s class shapes her experience with sexual harassment.\(^{55}\)

Gender violence has been weaponized by Egyptian men to reaffirm their sense of masculinity and serves as a relic of an existing hegemonic culture pertaining to class and gender power asymmetries. Mareah Peoples attributes the street sexual harassment phenomenon to rising male unemployment and a shift in traditional family structures, which has allowed women to increasingly enter the formerly male-dominated public space.\(^{56}\) Both these trends threaten conventional notions of masculinity in a patriarchal Egypt, thus encouraging men to try and re-assert their dominance over the


public space by harassing women. Mareah Peoples uses Gamal Abdel Nasser’s pseudo-modernizing efforts regarding women in the workforce and Anwar Sadat’s liberalizing economic reforms for her analysis. This enables her to chart how sexual harassment escalated from a limited to a rampant issue over several decades. Her study incorporates a 2008 survey conducted by The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, in which 1,010 men and women respectively identify the underlying causes for the scourge of harassment in Cairene society in the run up to Egypt’s 2011 uprisings. ECWR’s study reveals that 83 percent of Egyptian women were exposed to sexual harassment on a daily basis.57 Though El-Ashmawy and Mareah Peoples’ definitions and scopes of harassment differ, they find common ground in the growing pervasive nature of this form of gender violence, which takes place exclusively in the public realm. Given its widespread nature, sexual harassment in Egypt has become a near-universal experience for women. Both studies stress that rising male unemployment coupled with struggles to reconcile a dominant patriarchal culture with a co-gendered public space are critical elements for a nuanced portrait of harassment in Cairo.58

**Cairo’s Gender Violence**

Diab’s filmic representation of sexual harassment aligns nicely with the aforementioned anthropological definitions of the phenomenon. As Mareah Peoples notes, the scope of harassment is wide and cannot be reduced to any singular experience or definition.59 To reflect this diversity, Diab purposefully portrays a variety of public sexual harassment incidents, using multiple characters from different walks of life and social settings. In *Cairo 678*, public transport plays a crucial role in depicting sexual harassment in the urban public space. For Fayza, this entails daily unwanted touching, groping and physical gestures on a cramped bus to and from work. Thus, whenever it is financially feasible, Fayza opts to take taxis to avoid close contact with male harassers. The film’s opening scene, however,

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highlights that even taxis are not safe spaces for women, emphasizing the pervasive nature of harassment. The scene depicts Fayza in a taxi with the radio blasting out a mainstream Arabic song with lyrics that are deprecating towards women, “Women are all mad, it doesn’t matter whether they’re a peasant or an elite lady.” Fayza is visibly uncomfortable during her taxi ride as the driver hums along to the tune—a reminder that female harassment thrives even in subtle and seemingly benign mediums such as music. In fact, the background music used in scenes where women are physically assaulted are often popular Egyptian songs by regional pop icons like Tamer Hosny, featuring lyrics offensive to women. 

In an interview after the film’s release, Diab noted his intention was to illustrate how the patronization of women penetrated many facets of Egyptian life, often in unnoticed ways. Furthermore, Essam, a police officer leading an investigation into a series of related bus stabbings, discovers that many Egyptian men carry limes or lemons in their pockets to gauge whether the female target will resist physical harassment: “You put a lemon in your pocket and go squeeze yourself against a woman on the bus, if she doesn’t speak you go for the grab. If she gives you a dirty look, you apologize and say you forgot about a lemon in your pocket.” The fact that it only took Essam finding a lemon in one of the stabbing-victim’s jean pockets to reach this judgement illustrates both the widespread state of public physical harassment and the normalized rhetoric that accompanies it in Egyptian discourse.

In Diab’s reconstruction of pre-revolutionary Egyptian society, sexual harassment does not solely take place on public transport. The workplace serves as another ground where men attempt to demarcate their masculinity as women increasingly enter the public sphere. Nelly works at a call centre

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60 **Cairo 678**, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:02:04.
62 Ibid.
63 **Cairo 678**, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:48:35.
where she consistently receives sexual verbal advances by men on the other end of the line. While Nelly attempts to remove herself from these situations by abruptly hanging up or talking back at the customer, her boss is unhappy with her refusal to accept the unwanted flirtation; he prefers for her to, “play along and act diplomatic.” In an environment where he can easily assert his male dominance, Nelly’s boss prioritizes client satisfaction over his employee’s self-worth. He threatens Nelly could lose her job as he compares her to all the other girls in the office, who do not complain about this sort of behaviour, highlighting the monolithic standard women are held to by their male counterparts. Yet, Nelly refuses to be silenced and in a later scene suggests she will be, “chopping off your [a caller’s] penis,” if he objectifies her over the phone again, alarming her boss and the whole office. The lack of support from Nelly’s female co-workers is important to note when analysing Nelly’s workspace harassment. Their silence shows the normalization of verbal harassment against women, making it harder to confront publicly. Even in a workplace defined by the rule of law and objectivity, Essam’s remarks to his colleagues in the police force, depict a bias against women and a lack of respect for those who speak out such as Nelly and Fayza. He openly admits to “not caring about sexual harassment,” as he interviews wounded victims inflicted by Fayza’s pen knife, calls women’s rights activists “old hags,” and accuses all three women of “tending to their stupidities.”

While gestures and verbal remarks in the public space enrich the depiction of harassment, Diab’s film hones in on physical harassment; a form of harassment that all three characters experience to different degrees. In ECWR’s 2008 survey, 13.4 percent of Egyptian men admitted to having participated in physical harassment, making this the least prevalent form of street harassment in Cairo—assuming these men were speaking candidly in their interviews. Out of the three women,

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64 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:23:20.
65 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:24:45.
67 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:48:35, 1:10:34.
Seba’s harassment is the most public and graphic. Seba experiences what Mareah Peoples describes as, “mob-related” harassment, which tend to explode at random on the streets of Cairo in overly-congested areas or events.\(^6\)^\(^8\) Seba’s assault takes place when she and her husband are in a crowded celebration after the Egyptian national football team wins a match. The nature of her harassment is overtly public, with thousands around her while she is assaulted by over 10 men. Her husband is left powerless to stop the incident, defying the notion of safety in numbers that a non-local audience may be accustomed to believe. This violation of Seba’s body is communal: she is betrayed not only by her attackers but her society at large, which openly tolerates the behaviour. Meanwhile, Nelly’s physical harassment occurs after she is dropped off by her fiancée on a street right outside her house, when a van driver grabs her by the breasts. He continues to drive while dragging her.\(^6\)^\(^9\) Diab depicts both of these physical assaults as extremely invasive, traumatizing and isolated incidents. Contrastingly, Fayza’s physical harassment is systemic because her socio-economic background obliges more exposure to congested spaces on public transportation, “Every day I take the bus. Every day shit happens to me. Every single day! You expect me to be sane?”\(^7\)^\(^0\) Fayza’s character aligns with ECWR’s findings that over 80 percent of Cairene women admit to experiencing sexual harassment on a daily basis.\(^7\)^\(^1\)

**Why Harassers Harass**

As a subtext to his film, Diab alludes to the sexual suppression and fragility of Arab masculinity that leads men to violate women in public. The film shows that for Egyptians, irrespective of class, manhood is predicated on the ability to get married and be financially stable. Nelly’s fiancée, Omar, notes this when Nelly complains about having to drop her lawsuit for the sake of appeasing his parents. He tells her that while he hates working at the Arab Bank and would prefer to be a full-time comedian,

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\(^6\)^\(^9\) Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:25:58.

\(^7\)^\(^0\) Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:39:56.

he keeps his bank job in order to marry her. Nelly’s parents, coming from a respectable middle-class family, are not willing to allow their daughter to marry a man without a stable job. This scene highlights the implications that the fixed construction of Arab masculinity has on young Egyptian couples.

Moreover, Mareah Peoples’ in-depth interviews for her anthropological study conclude that a man’s viability to become a husband and head of a family is largely dependent on his financial status: “To be a man is to be successful at getting a wife and to take care of her and the family. Even if I am 35-years-old, if I don’t have these things in place, I am still not a man,” according to a 42-year-old Egyptian Taxi driver. El-Ashmawy argues that this construction of manhood has left many middle-aged Egyptian men as virgins who are unemployed with no future prospects. These men try and garner female attention in the public domain since they have close to no interaction with women in their domestic space due to Egypt’s overtly conservative culture. During his investigation, Essam interviews a second male victim who is unemployed, prompting him to ask why the harasser rode public transportation in the first place. “I don’t have enough money to get married,” the harasser argues, leading him to take rides on the bus for pleasure as he is stuck at home with idle time. This justification echoes Mareah Peoples’ conclusion that the lacklustre economic environment for Egypt’s youth bulge has exacerbated the phenomenon: “It appears that in patriarchal societies, when male desire for economic success is denied or cannot be realized, the result is an overt expression of male-to-female street harassment in public places.”

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72 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:32:46.
75 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:05:41.
Even in married life, an Egyptian’s manhood can be threatened. The shift in Egypt’s traditional family structure, from one that confined women to the domestic sphere to one that allowed their entry in the workplace, has stretched previously fixed domestic gender dynamics.\(^7\) The character of Fayza embodies this flux in conservative households, as she enters the public sphere to help support her husband and pay for her children’s school tuition while still expecting her husband to be, “the man of the house.”\(^7\) Diab uses Fayza to illustrate that despite her desire to exert more agency in her daily life, she still grapples with shards of Egypt’s traditional patriarchal norms. For example, when Fayza’s pay is docked and she is late in paying the school tuition, she exclaims that it is her husband’s duty to deal with the school administration and pending fees because he is the man and she will not be taken seriously.\(^9\) Here, Fayza appeals to traditional notions of Arab masculinity, arguing that it is her husband’s job to provide financial security and handle the household’s external affairs.\(^8\) Yet Fayza subsequently refuses to have sex with her husband, despite his multiple efforts to seduce her—a clear break from the traditional gender roles ascribed to an Egyptian husband and wife.\(^8\) Later on in the film, the audience learns that Fayza’s husband is in fact a harasser: a comment by Diab that not all harassers are single but rather insecure over their masculinity or economic situation.

Diab’s inclusion of the prevalence of pornography further cements Egypt’s status as a sexually suppressed society, which in turn contributes to a culture that tolerates public harassment. Sexual suppression is intrinsic to Egypt’s widespread sexual harassment because traditional cultural discourse forbids open discussion of this topic.\(^8\) The film shows that both single and married men are guilty of consuming pornography. Essam finds pornography hidden on a harasser’s sister’s wedding tape when

\(^8\) Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:37:02.
\(^9\) Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:37:02.
\(^80\) Judith E. Tucker, *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 50
\(^81\) Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:13:43.
conducting his investigation and Fayza’s husband attempts to watch a sexually explicit video when Fayza is putting their children to sleep because she will not have sex with him. While pornography is represented in the film as exclusive to the private space, Diab employs it as a tool to reinforce our understanding of how it informs men’s behaviour in the public space and, as such, their treatment of women.

This societal suppression fosters a culture that silences harassment survivors. All three female protagonists face obstacles when attempting to speak openly about their harassment, irrespective of their class. Fayza struggles to tell her husband why she is traumatized from riding the bus and is initially hesitant to open up to Seba in her harassment-prevention workshop. Though Seba wants to seek her husband Sherif’s support, she is unable to vocally or emotionally grieve her assault with him, as he is too engrossed in his own inability to protect his wife. Sherif feels impotent as if he was also an assault victim that night: his masculinity is threatened and he cannot bring himself to face his wife at home, nearly blaming her for her own assault, “Every time I see you, I think about what they did to you. I need time.”

His attitude isolates Seba, who faces pressure from her own family, who forbid her from openly discussing her harassment for fear of bringing shame to them, “Your father’s position cannot allow for such a scandal.” While Nelly shows the boldest attempt of going public by filing a lawsuit against her harasser and being interviewed on TV, she faces familial pressure to drop her case because of concern that she will inadvertently end her engagement. Both Nelly and Seba’s struggles represent the burden of family honour commonly faced by Egypt’s urban elite. As El-Ashmawy argues, victims are silenced in order to prevent a family’s public reputation from being tarnished, since the suppression

83 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:04:00, 00:36:02.
84 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:19:13.
85 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:17:09.
86 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:20:10.
87 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:30:53.
of sexuality in public discourse is an expectation for both men and women. This promotes a status quo, where women should privately handle their affairs, involving as few people as possible, and sexual harassment becomes increasingly rampant yet seldom talked-about.

**Power and Privilege: Cairo’s Class Divide**

Class is not just tied to one’s income. As Donna Langston argues in her pioneering essay “Tired of playing Monopoly,” class manifests itself in a variety of ways and is composed of ideas such as how you dress, which schools you attend and where you eat. As a result, “class is culture.” Thus, it is no coincidence that for this intersectional filmic representation of women, three distinct female characters with varying values and social upbringings are chosen as protagonists for *Cairo 678*. Nelly and Seba both enjoy privileges and access to power that Fayza is denied. In feminist studies, privilege is defined as the cultural benefits and power granted to people because of social and institutional inequalities. A person’s privilege is bolstered by social hierarchies in race, gender, sexual orientation or other social criteria. Privilege is not a comment on the lack of hardships or sufferings of a person but rather a virtually invisible advantage that pre-dates someone’s birth. Nelly and Seba represent Egypt’s middle and upper classes respectively, which affords them a sense of self-expression that Fayza lacks.

Using Nelly’s middle-class context, Diab demonstrates the various outlets Egyptian privileged women have access to when reconciling with their assault. As a 22-year-old from a progressive family, Nelly enjoys a form of creative self-expression to spotlight her injustice: stand-up comedy. She also has the freedom to think independently and exercise her civil rights by demanding legal justice in a

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90 Saraswati, Shaw, and Rellihan. 2018. *Introduction to Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches*. 12.
social context where taking harassment to court is unprecedented. This access to power is a distinct marker of her class. Furthermore, Nelly is afforded the privilege of discussing her assault with her family and of forging a reality where she can bring her abuser to court. Nelly laments to her mother about the double-standards of being raised in a liberal family but also having to abide by class conventions when it comes to reporting her own sexual assault. In a heated exchange with her mother Nelly shouts, “You can’t redefine what’s right and wrong. You raised me on different principles. To hell with people, to hell with everyone!” Her position of privilege gives her access to power in Egypt’s socio-political system, which has the ability to silence many, since her demands are ultimately recognized in a court of law. She also has a relationship with her fiancé, Omar, that lends itself to frank and honest conversation about abuse that does not place her as a mere victim. Nevertheless, Nelly still feels the weight of class expectations, as Omar points out he is making sacrifices in his own professional development to appease her family so they can be financially stable in their early years of marriage. Diab uses the traditional Arab construction of masculinity as a device that both male and female characters grapple with when trying to disrupt their status quo. Nelly experiences what Marilyn Frye describes as the “double binds of oppression”—a situation when a woman faces two problematic choices as the only ones socially available to her. For Nelly, this transpires in either losing the man she loves by pursuing a public legal proceeding against her harasser, or in dropping a court case that would violate her own sense of justice, “I’m in a prison, I either drop the lawsuit or I lose Omar, I lose either way.”

As an upper-class woman, Seba is also afforded a similar sense of self-expression as that of Nelly. Her financial security gives her a sense of creative expression: she has the space to make art and

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91 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:56:03.
92 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:32:46.
94 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:25:40.
jewellery pieces for her shop in Cairo’s main bazaar, Khan el-Khalili. When no one in Seba’s family is willing to listen to her assault, art functions as an outlet for Seba to turn to. While Seba’s personal experience with harassment ultimately ends her marriage, her position of privilege in Cairo’s class hierarchy enables her to use her assault as a force for change. Seba holds harassment-prevention workshops, open to the public, that focus on self-defence and psychological training to equip women with tools that can build their empowerment. She publicizes these workshops on TV and is interviewed by journalists, who label her as a women’s rights advocate. Seba’s agency in the public sphere enables both Nelly and Fayza to engage in a discourse that is traditionally prohibited in their society. Fayza attends Seba’s workshops and seeks her help after she reacts violently to a harresser. Meanwhile, Nelly consults Seba’s advice over her predicament with Omar after she presses charges against her harasser. Thus, Diab not only portrays the media’s role as a public source to disseminate information but also as a mechanism that allows women from different social fabrics to interact with each other over their perspectives and shared experiences.

Fayza’s harassment is distinct because it is systemic. Fayza’s working-class status affords her limited privileges and minimal access to power. Essam puts this bluntly when he informs all three women of his findings and of Fayza’s possible arrest, “These two come from respectable and well-off families that will help them get out of this, but you [Fayza] will face prison.” While Seba and Nelly’s class affords them a public outlet for self-fulfilment—whether that be comedy routines, jewellery design or advocacy work—Fayza’s only available resource is her own body, since she cannot even open up to her husband about her assault. After Fayza endures continuous harassment by men on her bus and in the streets, she begins to use a small blade to knife attackers as a form of self-defence. As the only territory she can claim as her own, Fayza’s body becomes at once the victim and the response.

95 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:45:10 - 01:00:50.
96 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:10:34.
97 Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 00:33:50.
Fayza weaponizes her body as a tool to fight back against her harassment. This becomes Fayza’s coping mechanism and form of self-expression to defy the oppressive barriers she has persistently endured. Although Seba and Nelly’s assaults are graphic portrayals of physical harassment, their singular nature means the characters have more time to reconcile with the incident. Fayza’s harassment is disturbing because of its frequency and inevitability. Her class makes sexual harassment an inescapable and normalized event, as she spends most of her time in the public space, whether on buses, in the streets or at her work. Thus, sexual harassment does not affect all three women equally.

Diab uses Fayza to suggest that women from lower classes with less privilege suffer more frequent harassment while women of privilege encounter more isolated incidents of violence because of the way they lead their lives: they interact less in public spaces such as taking the bus and walking on streets as they have the financial ability to own cars.

Diab’s representation of how class and gender interact as it relates to street harassment in Cairo differs from El-Ashmawy’s conception of sexual harassment as a tool of class struggle. Since Egypt suffers from a wide socio-economic gap, El-Ashmawy uses existing statistics to support her argument that males target middle and upper-class women as a means to escape class subjugation. Women in “higher wealth quintiles” are more likely than women in “lower wealth quintiles” to experience sexual harassment, according to a 2010 survey of young people in Egypt. Yet I argue that Diab’s filmic representation is a more convincing and nuanced portrayal of the reality that women like Fayza face. Lower-class women bear the weight of socio-cultural institutions stacked against them, leaving them with limited access to power and agency. Moreover, Diab uses his film to challenge the status quo in Egyptian society, according to which class defines an individual’s experience. While class is significant in representing women’s treatment in the public space, Diab’s larger point is that

irrespective of their class, Nelly, Seba and Fayza all fight against their oppression relative to their privileges. This access to power ranges from public stand-up comedy routines mocking men to harassment-prevention workshops or holding a blade on a bus to fend off harassers.

**Class and Clothing: Fayza’s Veil**

When imagining the hectic, overpopulated urban scenes in Diab’s film, it is difficult to miss the multitude of veiled women strewn across cramped buses, civil service offices and street markets. The veil’s inclusion is not surprising to an Egyptian audience, considering how popular the veil has become in Egypt since the 20th century Islamic revival movement, in which religious practice infiltrated public life, social work and advocacy. As of 2007, 90 percent of Egyptian women cover at least their hair.99 Fayza’s appearance instantly sticks out next to Nelly and Seba because of her conservative and religious dress. How does Diab use the veil to comment on Fayza’s place in Egyptian society as a lower-class woman?

Dominant discourse in Western feminist studies surrounding the veil—*hijab* in Arabic—characterizes the veil as a symbol of oppression: stifling female empowerment and regional progress. Sadiyya Shaikh argues in *Transforming Feminisms* that there has been a long history of Third World women’s cultural norms being at the mercy of superior norms posited by Western scholars. Shaikh defines this discursive trend as cultural hierarchy, whereby Western cultural ideals are “imposed on women coming from very different religious and cultural traditions.”100 In this academic framing, women from the Arab world are oppressed before analysis even begins. Many discourses surrounding the veil are stubborn because of their fixation on forced veiling and coercion in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Shaikh argues that this coercive discourse should not be universal in our understanding of a Muslim woman’s motivation behind veiling. Fayza’s veil provides an opportunity

to evaluate symbolism and cultural hierarchy because of the scrutiny both indigenous and non-Arab scholars place on this facet of a Muslim Arab woman’s identity.\textsuperscript{101}

Historical discourse and feminist scholarship on the region has produced many different interpretations of the veil. Both Shaikh and Algerian gender scholar Marnia Lazreg concur that the veil signifies a range of identities and cannot be reduced to any one cause. The \textit{hijab} or \textit{niqab}—which includes face covering—has ties to the pre-Islamic Arabian custom of female seclusion and has since appeared and reappeared in different areas of the Middle East as part of social, political and/or cultural facets of a nation.\textsuperscript{102} For example, in the historical case of colonial Algeria, one sees two contrasting interpretations of the veil. In May 1958, the French mission forced a group of Berber women to unveil themselves in a public march in Algiers. In this instance, Lazreg argues French colonials portrayed the veil as a symbol of regress. This public display of unveiling served to bolster the French colonial political messaging at the time, which consisted of liberating Algerian women from what colonials deemed was an oppressive religious system. Meanwhile the FLN, Algeria’s liberation movement, used the veil to ignite national fervour and anti-colonial sentiment by asking women to don the veil in the \textit{Casbah} when aiding with guerrilla warfare tactics.\textsuperscript{103} In modern-day discussions of the veil, some Muslims view it as a religious requirement while others prefer to use it as a symbol of resistance against Western consumerism. Moreover, in today’s global society clothing norms are not monolithic and undoubtedly vary from region to region.

Two other meanings offered by Shaikh explain Fayza’s motivations for veiling, neither of which are attributable to her Muslim faith. We never see Fayza pray or invoke God at any point of the film—even when she faces hardships. Religion is less important to class when analysing Diab’s

intersectional representation of women. In one of the film’s most memorable scenes, Fayza accuses Nelly and Seba of being “guilty of wearing revealing clothing and uncovered hair.” Fayza believes that sexual harassment is rife in Cairo because “loose women” like them give men a false impression and empower violent behaviour, which inevitably falls on women like herself who ride the bus.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Nelly and Seba, she believes her conservative dress spares her from any blame in Cairo’s rampant sexual harassment. Fayza’s perspective falls under what Shaikh labels the feminist and anti-capitalist motivations for wearing the veil. This reasoning argues that veiling challenges the patriarchal prioritization of women’s physical and sexual attractiveness.¹⁰⁵ Fayza wears a veil, not primarily to symbolize her commitment to God, but rather to prevent her aesthetic appeal from being interpreted as an invitation for male attention. For women like Fayza, the veil is a synthesis of their modernity and tradition.

Similarly, from the onset of Diab’s piece, the audience is aware of Fayza’s work-life balance. She works at a civil-service bureau, which is a lengthy commute from her home in the 6 October neighbourhood.¹⁰⁶ For Fayza, her job is not a passion but rather a means to financially contribute to her household, while giving her flexible hours for childcare. Fayza’s veil is significant in this professional routine. As Shaikh argues, in certain Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, the veil neutralizes the public space, allowing for female presence in traditionally male-dominated fields. Thus, using Donna Langston’s understanding of class as culture, Fayza’s veil can be interpreted as a symbol of her membership to Egypt’s urban working class. Income is not the sole factor in analysing class; how you dress can be a just as important indicator. Without her veil, she may not be able to work in the civil service alongside men because of the implicit culture in these Cairo offices. An unveiled Muslim woman of her class is a bold and unusual sight in this cultural context. Undoubtedly the fact

¹⁰⁴ Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab, 01:25:40.
¹⁰⁶ Cairo 678, dir. Mohamed Diab.
that Egypt’s public space is sexualized and that women feel the need to erase what makes them female reinforces patriarchal assumptions. This reality, however, is not specific to Egypt or the Muslim world but rather symptomatic of a global patriarchal society. Thus, veiling should not be used as stand-alone evidence for the victimization of Muslim women or as the reason for their oppression.107

**Conclusion**

Though Fayza, Nelly and Seba are all victims of public violence inflicted by men, *Cairo 678* depicts women as agents, who seek to fight for justice relative to their privileges and access to power. Diab’s choice to interweave different socio-economic and gendered perspectives on the issue of sexual harassment gives the viewer a multi-faceted and intersectional portrait of how a society has normalized the public violation of women. By combining existing anthropological scholarship on sexual harassment in Cairo with feminist studies theories on oppression, privilege and class, I have shown that street harassment functions as a tool of oppression exacerbated in a sexually suppressed society with rife unemployment and insecurities over masculinity. The construction of Egyptian manhood, access to power and cultural clothing norms all intersect in Diab’s layered representation of women in a national climate on the verge of revolution.

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Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story: ‘The Personal Is Political’

While Cairo 678 has three female heroines who bond together and show a united front by the film’s conclusion, Yousry Nasrallah’s 2009 neo-realist drama anchors on one female character, who like her classical predecessor Scheherazade, entices her audiences with stories. A modern-take on the classic tale from *Alf Layla wa Layla* (1001 Arabian Nights), *Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story* revolves around Hebba, a popular and beautiful talk-show host for Sun TV. Even though Hebba’s talk show introduces us to other women and their narratives, Hebba’s story remains at the crux of the film.

Hebba is married to Karim; a journalist anxiously awaiting a promotion at a leading state-run newspaper. The newly-wed couple lives in a bubble of nouveau-riche luxury, far-removed from the tribulations Cairo incurs on the majority of its residents. Hebba’s frequent political criticisms through her coverage of hot-button social issues on her tell-all, night-time programme *From Dusk to Dawn*, makes the political establishment uncomfortable. Knowing they cannot openly pressure Hebba into pursuing less controversial topics on air, the powerful male elite class entices Karim with an Editor-in-Chief position on the condition that he persuades his wife to shift her attention to more superficial topics. This leads Hebba to seek out regular Cairene women to discuss their personal stories about love and life on her show. Yet, the strategy backfires when these women recount disturbing stories about their oppression and struggle against a pervasive patriarchal culture.

While the traditional story of Scheherazade involves the interchange between one young woman telling 1001 entertaining stories every night to her Sultan-captor in a bid to preserve her life, Hebba’s televised narratives unwittingly uncover the oppressions of her talk-show guests and eventually expose the narrator’s own struggles against the stifling gender inequalities of contemporary

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masculinist Egyptian culture. Through its use of intersectional narratives by women of distinct classes, religiosity and ideologies, Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story paints a portrait of the dark corners of Egyptian society, ranging from domestic violence and pre-marital sex to political corruption and clandestine abortions. As The New York Times’ film review puts it, “In the Arab World even love, it seems, is political.”

In his scathing social critique, Nasrallah questions the entire Egyptian socio-political system. Though both men and women stand to suffer in the same crooked system, as the film unfolds it becomes clear that irrespective of class and privilege, women are an oppressed group unlike any other. Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story challenges a heavily politicized and masculinized public/private space through spotlighting women enmeshed in a society that rewards male dominance. Though this female oppression stems from a culture inextricably tied to traditional gender roles, Nasrallah represents the subjugation of women in a myriad of ways. This includes women unintentionally aiding and reproducing their own oppression. Trapped in a transitional space, these women struggle to reconcile their own agency and the evolving role of the modern woman with a fixed set of traditional values that have allowed male entitlement to go unchecked. In the midst of this systematic female oppression, I argue that Nasrallah’s nuanced portrait of a diverse range of women does not serve to impart a single lesson on the audience but rather capture a culture on the brink of eruption as women seek to fight against the lot they are given by the status quo. Though women participate in their own oppression, they are still agents that strive to seize control in their lives, even if the social norms they are bound by do not support them. By applying a gendered analytical framework this chapter will explore how

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Nasrallah’s filmic representation of female oppression is rich and intersectional, fulfilling many social categories.

**Unpacking Patriarchy: ‘The Personal is Political’**

In Nasrallah’s recreation of pre-revolutionary Cairo, the audience becomes acutely aware of the omnipresent gender dynamics that populate various storylines. The popular women’s rights slogan, “the personal is political” will serve as a central framework for this analysis of how women unintentionally produce and confront their systemic oppression that hovers Egyptian society. This slogan, which can also be referred to as, “the private is political” suggests that the personal experiences of women can be explained through their gender inequality and political circumstance. In other words, an individual’s location in larger power structures and social institutions, namely rule-governed social arrangements that have endured time such as the nuclear family, underpin the female experience in the private space. The motto was popularized by American feminist Carole Hanisch in 1970, who published an essay under the same title; her essay focuses on the relationship between men’s power and women’s oppression. Hanisch uses examples to illustrate how social systems are responsible for many of the problems women faced. For example, if a woman was being abused by her male partner, then societal oppression of women is an important factor in understanding this abuse. While Hanisch coined the motto, the origins of her argument can be found in earlier American sociological thought. C. Wright Mills asserts that individual experiences are tied to their greater social and historical context in his 1959 book, *The Sociological Imagination*. Hanisch brought a gendered lens to this theory by arguing that women themselves were not to blame for their personal problems,

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112 Saraswati, Shaw, and Rellihan. 2018. Introduction to Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches, 3.
considering that they were operating under a structural power system, which elevated men: “Women’s personal problems were political problems.”115 In this same vein, social change rather than personal solutions was the only path forward to resolve problems that were labelled as personal at the time, such as associating a woman’s success with her beauty. Hanisch’s motto heavily influenced the second-wave of feminism, a period of feminist activity prominent during the 1960s and 1970s, by widening the scope of issues feminist activists could tackle.116 Issues that were once relegated to the private sphere transcended the dichotomy that kept male and female affairs separate, by allowing activists to question the systemic politicization of personal affairs, such as career development and parenting.

By incorporating this foundational feminist thought into our analysis of Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story, tales told by women from different walks of life on Hebba’s talk show serve a new purpose. Various female narratives complicate the notion that women are to blame for the state of their lives as these women shine a light on the gendered power asymmetries they are subject to. Their stories point to a pervasive phenomenon that is larger than any one plotline. French film scholar Valérie Orlando labels these stories, “feminist collective consciousness raising,” as the female characters share their private issues—which dominant discourse categorizes as personal problems—on a public media domain for not only millions of other women to resonate with but also to threaten the patriarchal institutions and state structure they are operating under.117 Recognizing this form of patriarchy, which can be defined as the cultural system in which men hold power and are central figures in the family, community, and larger society, is critical to understanding Egyptian women’s participation in their own oppression and fight against the status quo.118

116 Ibid.
118 Saraswati, Shaw, and Rellihan. 2018. Introduction to Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches, 3.
Hebba’s Silent Oppression

Hebba’s personal trajectory is essential to the plot’s pace and greater meaning. The centrality of Hebba’s character allows the film to be largely framed around her worldview, which becomes disrupted through her interaction with other women’s real-life stories. Their tales ultimately trigger a significant self-realization for Hebba, which her position of privilege initially prevents her from recognizing. The audience first meets Hebba in her subconscious, as the film opens with the protagonist in the middle of a nightmare. She is trapped. Breathlessly running from corridor to corridor in her apartment, Hebba shouts, “There are no doors!” By applying Marilyn Frye’s theory on oppression to this scene, the viewer learns an unknown truth behind Nasrallah’s heroine. The dream signifies Hebba’s inability to realize and thus confront her own oppression. Frye argues that even if one diligently studies each facet of an oppressive power structure with an open-mind, oppression can be difficult to spot. Frye likens this experience to that of a birdcage: if someone hone in on just one wire within the cage, they will be unable to appreciate why the bird remains trapped as it should be able to fly around the wire. Frye concludes that, “It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere.” Frye’s conception of oppression, confines people to lives that are shaped by external forces and barriers, which are interconnected to one another. This results in the person being stuck in a trap or placed in an unavoidable position.

Only through hearing other women’s stories, and thus taking a macroscopic approach to the female experience in Cairo, does Hebba become cognisant of the inequality she faces in her marriage. The audience may initially be surprised to find that Frye’s visualization of oppressed people being trapped...
“caged in” is apparent in Hebba’s domestic partnership with Karim. Superficially, the couple is in a prominent position of privilege and the face of Cairo’s globalized professionals, enjoying a generous double-income in an upscale modern apartment on the Nile.\textsuperscript{122} In her film review, Orlando argues that Hebba, who sports luxury labels, heavy make up and an obvious care for her aesthetic appeal, serves as the modern-day Scheherazade. Along with her husband, they symbolize the “seemingly secular, young go-getters of Egypt’s one percent.”\textsuperscript{123}

Yet as the film unfolds it becomes clear that Hebba suffers from Frye’s double binds of oppression.\textsuperscript{124} Her husband presents her with a problematic choice, as he wants her to swap out her shows deep-dive of political taboos, like illegal immigration, for fluff pieces that centre on what he perceives as non-threatening subjects like love and womanhood.\textsuperscript{125} Although Hebba tries to defend herself at the dinner table by questioning her journalist husband: “Would you let someone in your work tell you what to write and what not to write?” Karim quickly psychologically manipulates her by demeaning her qualms and appealing for her help, so he can reach his professional goals.\textsuperscript{126} In this instance and several others, Hebba ultimately submits to her husband’s authority, stemming from traditional Islamic marital duties outlined by historian Judith Tucker in her book \textit{Women, Family and Gender in Islamic Law}. Tucker’s legal analysis of early Islamic jurisprudence found that the twin doctrines of \textit{nagana} (maintenance) and \textit{nushuz} (disobedience) are the chief obligations for both partners within a Muslim marital union. The husband is expected to provide consistent financial support to his wife through his employment in the public realm; his failure to do so resulted in serious consequences such as termination of marriage.\textsuperscript{127} In exchange for this economic security, the wife had to be sexually

\textsuperscript{122} Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 2009.
\textsuperscript{125} Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:13:00.
\textsuperscript{126} Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:14:20.
available to her husband, “The husband’s central right in marriage was his right to her body: maintenance began when his wife was sexually available to him.”128 While these antiquated legal doctrines are not familiar to most modern-day Egyptians, they still serve as the bedrock of social institutions that have influenced the cultural norms and power structures that women operate in. Therefore, unknowingly Hebba participates in her own repression by remaining loyal to her husband, even when he asks her to violate her own principles.

Nasrallah uses the couple’s spatial movement in their apartment to symbolize these traditional gender dynamics. Applying Tucker’s conception of nagana and nushuz, the viewer sees that Hebba consistently sacrifices her own wants for those of her husband. After Karim and Hebba discuss his proposition at the dining table, Hebba sits on her husband’s lap while she continues to feed him.129 As the plot continues, this spatial configuration becomes a pattern. On four accounts, Hebba feeds her husband and is positioned lower than him—a comment to the audience that while Hebba may not be financially reliant on her husband, she still acts subservient to him in their domestic realm.130 She only engages in sexual acts after her husband initiates them—appealing to the traditional Islamic discourse that a wife’s body is an exclusive right to her husband, who she should not disobey. Karim knows his wife is accomplished in the professional sphere but within the confines of their apartment, he appeals to traditional notions of Arab masculinity to secure his place as head of the household.131 As a result, Hebba does everything in her power not to emasculate her husband, which her friend Hannan tells her bluntly would ruin not just her relationship but her life: “You have only been married for 7 months, if he dumps you, your reputation is ruined. Give in to him Hebba, your marriage isn’t a horse race and it matters more than your job.”132 While Hebba pushes back against Hannan, arguing

128 Tucker, Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law, 53.
129 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:15:00.
130 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah.
131 Tucker, Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law, 50 – 51.
132 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:15:30.
that her friend’s ideas are outdated, her actions suggest she takes the advice: the next day at work she informs her team of a major shift in the show’s focus, favouring women and romance.\footnote{Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:17:20.} Thus, in a social context where women bear the burden for marital disputes, women of privilege like Hebba are depicted as inadvertently reproducing their role as the submissive wife in an attempt to preserve their relationships and social standing.

Hebba and Karim’s clashes do not only relate to their professional goals. Though Hebba embodies the famous host and high-powered boss in her office, she still longs to fulfil the traditional domestic duties Egyptian women are expected to complete. This includes having a family. Still childless, Hebba tries to broach the idea of family-planning with Karim, “My career matters less than having a family. What is the purpose of this marriage if only the bed connects us?”\footnote{Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:23:05.} Karim quickly shoots down the idea because of his professional aspirations but Hebba’s comment serves to muddy the notion that she is completely absorbed by her work and unphased by tradition. Hebba is committed to both the progressive, modern dream and conventional obligation for Arab women to have children.\footnote{Kathryn M. Yount and Li Li, “Domestic Violence Against Married Women in Egypt,” Sex Roles 63, no. 5-6 (2010): pp. 332-347, \url{https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9793-3}} Upset at her husband’s reaction and his choice to leave her at their table to network with government officials across from them, Hebba abruptly leaves the restaurant. Later, the couple argues, and the viewer becomes aware that Karim’s masculinity is clearly threatened, “When you see me buttering up people of power must you make me feel like a woman?”\footnote{Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:25:36.} Karim’s anxiety over his wife’s behaviour transpires into an aggressive assertion of his male dominance—in his analogy women are powerless and humiliated individuals that he wants nothing to do with. Hebba quickly complies by submitting to him both spatially and emotionally as she fulfils his request of feeding him food while he caresses her. In these scenes, Nasrallah constructs a complex personal power-dynamic between

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133 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:17:20.
134 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:23:05.
135 Kathryn M. Yount and Li Li, “Domestic Violence Against Married Women in Egypt,” Sex Roles 63, no. 5-6 (2010): pp. 332-347, \url{https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9793-3}
136 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:25:36.
husband and wife, where Karim and Hebba’s marital duties of maintenance and obedience are in total flux.

_Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story_ uses multiple female narratives to demonstrate that Egypt's pervasive patriarchal culture still takes hold for women in their personal affairs, even for women like Hebba, who may seem empowered and privileged from the outset. Hebba’s attempts to seek frivolous storytelling are short-lived after her interaction with a shop-assistant challenges her to explore women in a different context. While Hebba is given the VIP treatment at a high-end store in the centre of Cairo, Salma, the shop girl, approaches her and says: “If you saw us, you’d talk about us differently. I’m divided in two.” Hebba then remarks, “How so? Show me.” This exchange triggers what Orlando argues is Hebba’s first encounter with “the masses.” Accompanying Salma on her bus-ride home, Hebba witnesses Salma transform appearances. The shop girl, who was dolled up in makeup and Western-style dress, is now veiled to hide her flashy clothing. Here, Nasrallah shows that the hijab, a customary marker of religiosity, has transformed from a private and spiritual symbol willingly worn by society's truly devout into another agent of conformity. The distance between the social and the religious, the personal and the public, has been completely destroyed. The special treatment Hebba enjoyed at the shop is juxtaposed with the severe judgement she receives from fellow women on the bus because of her uncovered hair. Her appearance is an embarrassing marker of her class, which represents an indignant and out-of-touch attitude to the harsh realities for the majority of Cairene residents. As they walk through Salma’s shantytown, full of “garbage and insects,” Hebba realizes that she is oblivious to the “real” women of her city. The incident inspires Hebba to use her show as an investigative platform for the plight of all women in Egypt.

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137_Scheherazade Tell Me A Story_, dir. Nassrallah, 0:18:00 - 0:19:10.  
139_Scheherazade Tell Me A Story_, dir. Nassrallah, 0:20:10.
The subsequent stories of Amany, Safaa and Nahed on Hebba’s talk show ultimately hold a mirror against Hebba’s own oppression and empower her to confront her abusive husband. With the aid of her interviews, she becomes more attuned to address Karim’s macho assertions by pointing to the hypocrisies their country bestows on women and the politicization of silenced narratives, “Nothing is not political in Egypt!” Hebba shouts at her husband after he blames her media segments for destroying the country’s reputation.\textsuperscript{140} Karim’s failure to secure his promotion manifests in the beating of his wife, who up until the final moments of the film had always submitted to his authority and thus unwittingly participated in her own oppression. In Karim’s eyes, his wife blatantly disobeyed him and assaulted his dominance, resulting in a violent act he deems justifiable. His violence, which leaves her hospitalized, is the final trigger to awaken Hebba’s conscious and to make her realize that she is caged. In the film’s final scene, Hebba liberates herself by seizing agency to tell her own tale outside the confines of their apartment. She gives a live admission of being oppressed to her broadcast audience—cementing a concrete step forward in determining her own role in Egyptian society. What began as Hebba’s silent repression engulfing her nightmares and feeling caged in her domestic space, evolves into her ability to share her narrative publicly: “I am tonight’s oppressed woman,” she tells her audience.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Cairo’s Mad Woman}

The first guest on \textit{Dusk to Dawn} is Amany, an educated, middle-class, secular and close-to-60-year-old virgin, who insists on marriage for love—something she has not found in any man. Hebba introduces her as, “a truly remarkable woman, whose quest to find the perfect man led her to be a patient in an asylum.”\textsuperscript{142} Despite her beauty and male interest, she is represented as the instable, hopeless romantic, who defends her self-worth by prioritizing love over lust. Hebba frames Amany’s

\textsuperscript{140} Scheherazade \textit{Tell Me A Story}, dir. Nassrallah. 02:04:00.
\textsuperscript{141} Scheherazade \textit{Tell Me A Story}, dir. Nassrallah, 02:05:00 - 02:06:00.
\textsuperscript{142} Scheherazade \textit{Tell Me A Story}, dir. Nassrallah, 00:30:40 - 00:32:40.
interview around the notion that her search for her love has landed her in a mental institute, “How can love encourage a woman to go to an asylum?” Nasrallah’s choice to commit Amany to a mental institution, problematizes how Egyptian society perceives women who are unmarried and have a mental condition. Like in many parts of the world, mental health does not feature prominently in Egypt’s dominant cultural discourse and is seen as taboo in Arab countries, with gender as an implication of these disorders. In Hebb’s questioning, Amany’s condition is subtly blamed on herself rather than her social context. In short, it is Amany’s problem that she is depressed, since she has opted for a single lifestyle with an irrational perception of love that has driven her to a psychiatric ward.

The notion that depression and mental instability is a “women’s problem” rather than a socio-political co-gendered phenomenon has been documented and debated by Jane Ussher in her book *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. 20th century dominant medical discourse thought, “women were more mad than men,” because of the skewed description of symptoms for a depressive episode, which included feeling sad, showing tears, dizzy spells, consistent fatigue, noticeable weight loss or weight gain. Ussher argues that scientific observers are not neutral in their conception of depression, which negates the complexity of women’s subjective experience of distress and isolates depression from its cultural and political context. By casting distress as a pathological condition, scientists have perpetuated the ongoing construction of women’s distress as madness to benefit pharmaceutical companies and legitimize psychiatric intervention. Amany’s response to her condition, however, mixes the personal with the political: “This country can drive anyone nuts.” Here, Amany challenges the notion that something is innately wrong with her, since larger social systems have fostered barriers

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143 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:32:40.
146 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:40:00.
for women to realize their potential, “Egypt didn’t used to be veiled. I’m not talking about the veil they stick on women. I mean the brain.”

Though, Amany still embodies elements of conservative social norms, telling Hebba, “How can I lose my virginity? You need a man in your life for that,” her interview highlights that she is relentless in challenging the status quo; she refuses to fulfil expected roles such as becoming a wife, if it is at the expense of her wants. For example, when she recounts a serious marriage proposal by a conservative politician, who serves as a dramatization of the traditional Egyptian man, Amany is steadfast in her conviction that women should not settle for less than they deserve. Amany was set up with Ahmed, a government official with inherited land, who laid out important terms for their potential marriage contract over dinner at a restaurant. These terms included that she wear the veil, partake in most household chores without help, quit her job and not leave the house without male supervision. His vision for their marriage heavily infringed on Amany’s liberties and his lack of self-awareness represents an extreme manifestation of Egypt’s contemporary patriarchal culture.

Ahmed’s approach invokes certain aspects of Shariah Law and mirrors Tucker’s legal findings that marriage is firstly a legal contract; mutual affection is not a fundamental element for the union, so long as the agreement falls in line with traditional gendered obligations. Rather than complying, Amany speaks her mind, concluding how absurd it would be for her to give him sex at the expense of her freedom, personal money and time. Amany’s public outrage at Ahmed’s suggestion, leads him to shout to the whole restaurant: “I’ve never seen anything like her. A madwoman! No wonder she’s an old spinster in an asylum! She’s Crazy! Totally crazy!”

Blinded by his male privilege, Ahmed blames

\[147\] Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:41:40.
\[148\] Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 00:40:40.
\[150\] Tucker, Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law, 40.
Amany for her mental illness and thus reaction, despite the fact that her reservations to his extreme proposition are valid. Nasrallah uses Ahmed’s response to magnify the societal habit of blaming women for their own problems. Through using the “personal is political” lens, however, one sees that Amany’s condition is not gendered but rather a symptom of structural inequalities and Egyptian society’s overt adherence to traditionalism.

**A Twisted Family Affair**

The second guest on the show, Safaa, narrates a story that engenders a different tone to that of Amany. She explains her and her two younger sisters’ attempts to get married, which go painfully wrong and result in murder. As a veiled member of Egypt’s urban working class, Safaa’s story complicates the status quo of conservative Egyptian women, by highlighting their fight against patriarchal norms. Safaa and her sisters inherit their father’s hardware shop in a Cairene marketplace: property their manipulative uncle tries to defraud them from. 

While Judith Tucker notes that lower class Arab women historically interacted more with men in the public space because their economic status forced them into labour roles, they still regularly faced gender discrimination from male relatives, who frequently attempted to manipulate inheritance laws to enrich themselves. Tucker maintains that under Islamic law all women, whether married or unmarried, have the right to own property, despite some male relatives trying to prove otherwise.

Through their firm understanding of the law, Safaa and her sisters exert their agency by quickly confronting their uncle over his scheme to con them. Their actions highlight that conservative women are not simply obedient and submissive individuals, who defer to male authority. Rather Safaa challenges her uncle’s crooked behaviour so she can secure the best future for her family.

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After kicking out their uncle, the girls lean on Said, their father’s former errand boy and shop assistant, to help run the business. Said is an integral character in understanding how class and gender interact in Egyptian society. Though Said is a member of an inferior socio-economic class to that of Safaa’s family, who are at least small-business owners, his male privilege affords him access to power that the sisters are denied. Safaa was deeply concerned for her sisters’ future prospects as wives. Safaa told Hebba she longed for them all to get married, “We needed a man whose shadow we could live behind, for protection, security and support. It’s what each of us dreamed of.”155 Here, Safaa invokes traditional Egyptian cultural discourse surrounding marriage; an event, which anthropologist Homa Hoodfar argues is the most important social event in an Egyptian’s life because it is through marriage that self-realization and adulthood are achieved. Hodfar’s ethnography, in which she surveyed the daily lives of thousands of Muslims in Cairo for her book, Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo, finds that Egyptians rarely live alone by choice because of the contextual cultural weight attached to marriage.156 Safaa’s staunch belief in their readiness to be married and find love, “Show me a woman who is ashamed to say she needs love?” results in the three sisters individually pursuing Said; a male figure they felt had exhibited unwavering family loyalty.157 His class restricts him from initiating sexual relations with the sisters—Nasrallah intentionally depicts the sisters advancing at Said first to highlight the oppressive nature of class boundaries and social mobility in Egypt’s social strata for both men and women. However, as the three sisters subsequently fall in love and secretly lose their virginity to him, it becomes evident that irrespective of his poor social standing, Said’s gender affords him power over these women.158 Said is able to manipulate the sisters in secret for years because the cultural significance of finding a husband in Egypt’s sexually suppressed nature

155 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 01:06:12.
156 Hoodfar, Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo, Chapter 2.
157 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 01:06:12 - 01:12:00.
158 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 01:21:00.
inhibits open conversations about sex. When Safaa comes to the distressing revelation that Said has deceived all three sisters, promising marriage to each of them, her rage and shock transforms into rabid violence. In one of the most symbolic and charged scenes of the film, Safaa burns Said alive by recreating what she tells him “Hell will feel like.” Safaa told Hebba she served a prison sentence for her actions and permanently damaged her sisterly relationships but believed the family shame and betrayal Said inflicted on them meant someone had to pay the price.

Nasrallah’s filmic representation of Safaa’s story is unsettling for viewers because it seems that no one and everyone is to blame for the outcome—Hebba sums this sentiment up by telling Safaa after she finishes her story, “You really puzzle me.” The weight of tradition and restrictive cultural norms for Egyptians foment marriage, rather than financial independence or self-fulfilment, as the ultimate goal in life, leading three sisters to unwittingly go after the same man. Meanwhile, Said’s limited personal wealth and social mobility prospects render it nearly impossible for him to afford marriage and thus, seek love from other women. Yet, his gender in a patriarchal culture still enables him to benefit from traditionalism. When all three sisters make themselves sexually available to him, Said has no incentive to refuse them in a social context that openly encourages male entitlement.

The Crossroads of Modernity and Tradition

Hebba’s final interview is with Nahed, a dentist from a well-respected family who is eventually blackmailed after she marries a well-placed minister and member of the wealthy political elite. Nasrallah crafts his film’s final female character as a nuanced woman with competing identities that she continually seeks to reconcile. Nahed directly stands at the crossroads of modernity and tradition, as she tries to form identities that are modern, without being too Westernized, and devout without

161 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 01:34:12.
being too submissive. She strives to be both the educated, professional woman and the conservative, Egyptian daughter, who seeks to replicate her family’s honour through a marital union that complements their status and mirrors their moral values. Beth Baron, a prolific scholar on Egypt and gender, argues this tension is anchored in 20th century Egyptian feminist literature in her book, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*. Arab women’s disapproval of the erosion of family values and explosion of individualism in Europe coupled with the eradication of domestic slavery, left a power vacuum at home and gave rise to different interpretations of how Egyptian women should conduct their lives. New roles for an Egyptian woman ranged from asserting herself as the household manager in the private sphere to striving for equality in the workforce. Despite her best efforts to stay true to her traditional values, Nahed is trapped by her husband, who wants to have sex with her before they have moved in to their new villa together—a stipulation in her marriage contract to ensure her husband’s obligation to provide for her economic well-being. Though she tries to assert herself, Nahed eventually gives in to her husband’s wishes. When she discovers she is pregnant, she is accused of being a liar by her mother and a cheater by her husband, who claims to be sterilized. The cultural burden falls on her to restore her family honour of accused infidelity. Though it is clear Nahed did not have sexual relations with any other man, her husband’s male privilege and political power allow him to blackmail her by using their divorce as a bargaining chip: he won’t grant a separation without a hefty price. Hoodfar’s study finds Egyptian divorce laws heavily favour men, leaving Nahed cornered.

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Nahed comes to the realization that this behaviour is part of a pattern: the minister makes a business out of preying on women from good families who seek marriage. Under these promises of marriage, the pair signs a marriage contract so that their public appearance is socially acceptable. He then corners these women into pre-marital sex, impregnates them, then blackmails their families, by claiming he could not possibly father these children. Nahed endures an abortion and seizes agency by refusing to participate in the scam; she tells Hebba she could not have a child that reminded her of him. She successfully attains her divorce. After Nahed was wronged, however, she fights against the injustice further, and through mixing politics with her personal story, she takes her protest to the streets outside of Egypt’s Parliamentary offices. Nahed holds a banner reading: “How do you choose ministers? Their integrity, or . . . ?” and is subsequently surrounded by police and taken to jail. Thus, as Orlando argues, the viewer again sees, “a woman’s individual story entwined in politics of the state’s patriarchal status quo.” Nahed publicly spotlights her discrimination by challenging social institutions, such as family laws and representative bodies, which allow for men’s abusive behaviour to go unchecked.

Conclusion

Nasrallah’s filmic representation of Egyptian women is complex, layered and intersectional. By using an analytical framework that employs the politicization of personal women’s issues to interpret Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story, it becomes clear that the oppression these female characters face is systemic. The range of narratives serves to amplify the pervasive nature of Egypt’s patriarchal culture, which gives rise to gender discrimination and abuse. After integrating a selection of

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170 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 01:55:00.
171 Scheherazade Tell Me A Story, dir. Nassrallah, 02:01:00
foundational feminist theories, interpretations of Islamic law and ethnographic studies on Cairo, I have shown that Nasrallah’s critique transcends any single narrative but rather problematizes a bigger network of norms and institutions, on which Egyptian society is predicated. While the film centres on Hebba’s journey to recognize her own oppression, a theme that connects every female character is a dual identity, as women try to reconcile their modern ambitions with traditional values. Moreover, in a nation ravaged by socio-economic inequalities and political corruption, Nasrallah provides a snapshot of women, who irrespective of their social standing or worldview, challenge the status quo.
Conclusion

Can film predict global events? It is difficult enough for filmmakers to record history after-the-fact, let alone craft precursory narratives to seismic events such as Egypt’s 2011 revolution. Yet perhaps inadvertently, these films succeeded in measuring the pulse of Cairene society by challenging stubborn patriarchal norms that this medium previously left unquestioned. Throughout the 100-year history of Egyptian cinema, the evolution of women’s portrayal on the screen has resulted in the increasing complexity of the female role. By surveying local cinematic trends, we see that women are no longer objectified and submissive background characters but social agents in their own right.

By combining female-driven narratives with social taboos, Mohamed Diab and Yousry Nasrallah paint intersectional portraits of women’s agency and resistance, however limited their access to power, in their collective fight for justice. These layered depictions may in part be due to the screenwriters’ decision to incorporate real stories in both plots. Nasrallah’s narrative on the three sisters, who are sexually manipulated and betrayed by their shop assistant, was inspired by a true story, according to Egyptian film critic Joseph Fahim. Nelly’s legal battle in Diab’s piece on sexual harassment was based on Noha Roushdy’s experience in 2008 as the first Egyptian woman to sue for sexual harassment. She eventually won her case, paving the way for a new law that criminalized sexual aggression. Diab said in an interview that it was after witnessing the male reaction to Roushdy’s public trial that he was inspired to address Egypt’s pervasive patriarchal culture:

“I'd heard about harassment, and as a man in Egypt, you cannot know about those things, because women didn't speak about it. I went to the trial, and one of the cameramen covering the trial was making fun of her. I was sitting next to him. And an attorney walked by who also made fun of her, saying, 'Oh, women, they just exaggerate.' I never try to see black and white, so even those people, I didn't see them as bad people. I just saw them as people, who were

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not well-informed, who needed to see the world through Noha’s eyes. So I decided to make a film about her story.”

Thus, the choice to use real-life stories anchored these pieces in the everyday socio-political and media context of a society on the edge of chaos. Their impact goes beyond plotlines, cinematic techniques or star-studded casts as the directors used their works as modes to expose the politicization of women’s oppression, gender violence, socio-economic deprivation and political corruption—all themes which coloured protestors’ demands in Tahrir Square months later. In the wake of the films’ releases, national and international film critics explicitly underlined their revolutionary spirit. *Scheherazade, Tell Me A Story* was labelled as a thoroughly needed “wake-up call to the sordid world our leaders, religious guides and fathers have created” and an example of “art’s great way of lifting society’s veils.”  

*Cairo 678*’s ability to never speak of national politics allowed its characters to, “become metaphors for a generation that feels like its voice, too, has been silenced,” according to LA Times film critic Steven Zeitchik.

While both films were major box-office successes at home and abroad—Diab’s piece became the most successful Egyptian film for international sales and Nasrallah managed to raise over two million dollars in national ticket sales alone—they were not without controversy. *Cairo 678* faced three separate lawsuits by politicians and pundits before it was released because of the negative subject matter—Egypt boycotted the UN film screening for all 22 Arab countries. Mona Zaki, the actress who played the protagonist role of Hebba in Nasrallah’s film, received death threats from conservative...

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175 Jonathan Curiel, “A Film from Egypt Dissects the Scourge of Sexual Harassment,” KQED, October 9, 2013, [https://www.kqed.org/arts/126860/a_film_from_egypt_dissects_the_scourge_of_sexual_harassment](https://www.kqed.org/arts/126860/a_film_from_egypt_dissects_the_scourge_of_sexual_harassment)


fans for her explicit scenes; a petition with over 10,000 signatures on Facebook condemned the star for “selling out and compromising her values for fame.”

While many may judge this public scrutiny as Egypt’s lack of commitment to remedy inequality and champion social progress, these criticisms also highlight the power national film still possesses—even if scholars concur that its glory days in the region are long gone. By using a theoretical framework that combines gender, historical and anthropological scholarship, this study has shown that even though gender dynamics are central to both storylines, the directors applied an intersectional approach to their depiction of female characters, resulting in deeply thought-provoking narratives for a local audience to digest. By showcasing varying degrees of oppressive barriers depending on a character’s wealth, privilege and gender, the films craft a nuanced portrait of social issues in pre-revolutionary Cairo. Both Diab and Nasrallah portray women as agents, who challenge their dominant discourse and attack a system that has entrapped them in a cycle of inequality—actions Egyptians subsequently realized on the global stage. While both Nasrallah and Diab may not have intentionally made movies to incite an uprising, their films possess a revolutionary energy by capturing social tensions and silenced people on the verge of rupture. For an interview with The New Yorker, Diab said:

“You know what, when I wrote the film, I saw the film so many times, but after the revolution I seriously looked at it from a totally different point of view. When I watch it now, I see it as predicting—maybe I’m exaggerating—the revolution in a way. The film is about breaking the silence.”

It seems that Egyptian women on their native screen have not only evolved from silenced objects to complex subjects who challenge discriminatory modes of authority; women also lead the fight with their male compatriots to conceive a better nation for all its people built on principles of freedom, equality and justice.

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