Nationalism & Feminism in Egypt:

Popular Culture, Feminism & Arab Women Writers
Historical Background Egypt

- Egypt lies on southeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea
- From ancient times, it has been a wealthy state, capable of sustaining great civilizations due to its trading connections and fertile Nile valley
The Plight of the Nation, 1970s

Nawal el-Saadawi:

“My arms opened wide to embrace the night, and my voice started to hum a song I vaguely remembered having heard before:

I hope for nothing
I want for nothing
I fear nothing
I am free”
1970s Arab Women Writers

• Writing techniques evolved during this period and women writers explored different ways of giving voice to their angst about socio-political issues with more use of *symbolism and images* to describe the nation.

• *I’tidal Uthman’s* short story collection begins this new writing style; she evokes the *mythical age and intersects it with present day*.

• Blending *literature and history* became another feature of Egyptian women writers.

• Their characters revealed *a loss of hope*; and dream of a unified, independent Egypt.
1970s Arab Women Writers

- Writer Latifa Zayyat’s novel *the Open Door* was full of optimism.
- In later novels, she expresses the angst of the late 1960s—early 1970s political period.
- She stopped publishing her work and lost all hope in the social and political changes.
- She returned to writing after she was imprisoned in 1981 for her political activism and for forming the Committee for the Defense of National Culture, which was against the normalization of cultural relations with Israel.
- She wrote her memoir in jail and short stories.
1970s Arab Women Writers contd.

- Nawal El-Saadawi *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 1958 — trauma due to discrimination, struggles with gender, femininity, tradition, and men—due to the tragic things she sees at her clinic. *Anger, and frank boldness are transformed into positive energy and hope in changing society for the better.*

- *Women at Point Zero*, 1975 — fearlessly goes to her execution, with lost hope for justice. Her story parallels the disappointment of Egyptian women and their loss of hope of nationalist ideals.

- She too was sent to jail by 1981 and wrote *Memoirs of a Woman Prisoner* on toilet paper.
Woman at Point Zero, 1975

- Novel is told from the perspective of a psychiatrist and M.D. and is based on Saadawi's encounter with a female prisoner, Firdaus, who killed her pimp;
- Firdaus agreed to share her life story before her execution;
- Firdaus had been abused by her parents, her husband, and those in power, religious and secular;
- She believes that her execution isn’t for murder but so she doesn’t reveal the truth about corruption;
- She is happy to go to a new place away from lies.
The Plight of the Nation, 1970s

Firdaus: The Prostitute

“I wasn’t destined to achieve what I had hoped for. For no matter how hard I tried, or what sacrifices I made, like some dreamer sold to a cause, I still remained a poor insignificant employee. My virtue, like the virtue of all those who are poor, could never be considered a quality, or an asset, but rather looked upon as a kind of stupidity, or simplemindedness, to be despised even more than depravity or vice.”

- Unrealized dreams, goals, of women’s equality and for the nation’s ideals
- The death of morals, those who have money and power corrupt the culture win out, the poor are “stupid” for being moral
“Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honor as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another.”

— Nawal El-Saadawi, Woman at Point Zero
How Did Egypt Get Here?

• Nasser, the president who gave the people hope for an independent Egypt suddenly died, by heart attack
• And with him, their hopes for women’s rights and equality were diminished

The Egyptian, Arab state today is trying to get back the dream of Nasser, of independence from Israel and the West; and that wealth and power is more equally distributed and women have rights, are not abused, genitally mutilated, forced into marriages or being veiled

Jamal Abbul Naser, President 1956-1970
Independent Egypt

- After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 that ended British occupation came the rebuilding of Egypt under Nasser

Propaganda 1956
This piece of propaganda shows a man with the Egyptian Eagle on his arm turning over the page to a bright future that hails “justice,” “democracy,” “elections,” and the “military”
Twentieth Century Egypt

- First half of twentieth century, Egypt was under control of Great Britain even though nominally ruled by a series of weak Egyptian kings.

- In 1954 the British signed an evacuation treaty, and Egyptian Prime Minister, and later President, Gamal Abdel Nasser assumes control and nationalizes the Suez Canal.

Nasser in Cairo after announcing nationalization of Suez Canal.
Suez Canal Conflict
President Gamal Abdel Nasser

- Nasser chose a socialist form of rule, nationalizes industry, represses radical Muslim groups, and sets up an extensive welfare program.

- Under Nasser, women were given the right to vote but little was done to end oppressive social customs within the domestic sphere.

Gamal Abdel Nasser
President 1956-1970
Women in Egypt were the first in the Arab world to be granted full political rights in 1956.
Media & Gender Equality 1960s

• Egypt in 1960s witnessed a significant and unprecedented conversation about gender equality.

• Magazines, films, songs, newspapers and state TV, debated the issue of gender equality.

• The 1968 movie “o” (Marriage the Modern Way) portrayed the generational gap between those who lived under the monarchy with a new generation that accepted women’s rights.

In a scene, popular Egyptian actress Soad Hosni says “Have you forgotten that we live in the era of equality?”
State and Gender

• Nasser’s state sponsored and encouraged gender discussions
• Nasser believed that women’s participation in the public would help build his socialist society
• Egypt emerged as an advocacy for gender issues—previously these were confined to “civil” society

Egyptian women watching a soccer match at the Heliopolis Athletic Field
There was a downside as well:

- At the start, Nasser banned independent feminist organizations and replaced them with regime-based organizations in 1952
- Nasser also did not materially change the *patriarchal cultural traditions* that kept women in inferior status and without certain rights

Huda Sha’rawi—the first woman to remove her veil in protest for women’s rights (in 1923) meeting with women from various Arab countries.

She also formed the Egyptian Feminist Union which defended the rights of Arab women. During Nasser’s rule (in 1956) changed its political function into being service oriented, for charity.
Feminism in Egypt

• In 1923 marriage age for women was raised to 16, but hardly enforced
• The main achievements were in education, but it was mostly wealthy and middle class girls that benefited

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Feminism under Nasser

• Under a program known as *state feminism*, Nasser encouraged women to become educated and work outside of the home

• Under Nasser, the 1956 constitution granted women the right to vote and equality in work and pay

A 1956 poster propagating the growth of women’s education in Egypt under Nasser
Education under Nasser

• Early 1960s, women students equaled men in some disciplines
• Women obtained post-graduate degrees from Egyptian and foreign universities
• Jobs were guaranteed in the government and free healthcare was granted to those who graduated from college and high school

Young woman working at the newly established state TV. An Egyptian state-owned TV set manufacturing plant, where out of 600 employees nearly half are women.
Feminism under Nasser

• In 1962, Nasser issued the *Charter of National Action*, which stated that women “should be freed from all social barriers”

• In the 1960s, women were appointed as ambassadors and other high-ranking government officials

The state granted women the right to vote and run for parliament in 1956. Here, Rawya Attiya, in military garb, canvassing the support that would make her Egypt’s first female parliamentarian (1957)
Two Faces of the Revolution

- The incompatibility between the two faces of the revolution (both giving and revoking liberties) is illustrated in the fate of a pioneer feminist in Egypt, Doria Shafik (1908 – 1975)
- Shafik holds a doctorate from the Sorbonne
- Politically active since 1940s
- Establish *Daughter of the Nile* magazine (1945) which became a political party in 1948
- Put under house arrest for opposing Nasser’s regime (1957)
- Hunger strike (1957) in protest of Nasser’s dissolution of civic organizations
- Banished from public life, isolated and shunned
- Committed suicide in 1975 at 67 years old
Egypt’s Umm Kulthum

*Umm Kulthum* who rose to the top by representing the nationalistic culture of the time, becoming the “voice of Egypt.”

She was a singer between 1924-1973

Umm Kulthum, 1898-1975
Umm Kulthum’s Influence on Egypt: Icon of the Nationalist’s Dream

• Umm Kulthum, who became the greatest, most well known, Egyptian singer, was born into great poverty

• Her father taught her to sing verses from the Koran and dressed her as a boy so she could perform for weddings and other events in village life, thereby earning money for the family
Umm Kulthum’s Legacy

- Umm Kuthum’s songs appealed to all levels of society including the elite, shopkeepers and those at home who kept their radios on; it united Arab culture
- Umm Kulthum died in 1975 at approximately age 76; millions of Egyptians filled the Cairo streets to view her funeral procession
Umm Kulthum “Voice of Egypt”

• Her performances on Radio Cairo in the mid-1930s propelled her to fame; her audience grew to the millions
• She was an Egyptian patriot and national icon, and later a close friend of President Nasser
• Her songs dealt mostly with love and longing, and the desire for a beloved which is beyond attainment
• She came to embody the nation, expressing a longing for a strong and independent Egypt that did not need the West
Walla Zaman Ya Selahy

*It has been a long time oh my weapon!*
*I long for you in my struggle!*
*Speak and say I am awake,*
*Oh war it has been a long time.*

*O! glory our glory,*
*You who was built by us,*
*By toil and pain,*
*Never to go to waste.*

*Who shall protect Free Egypt?*
*We shall protect her with our weapons.*
*Land of the Revolution, who will sacrifice for her sake?*
*We will, with our souls.*

*The people advance like the light,*
*The people stand like mountains and seas,*
*Volcanoes of anger, volcanoes erupting,*
*Earthquakes digging the enemy into their graves...*
Death of Nasser 1970
President Anwar Sadat

- In 1970 Gamal Abdel Nasser, previous president, died
- The successor elected president was Muhammad Anwar al Sadat who turned away from connections with Russia—including socialism as a national philosophy
- Sadat turned to the United States instead and initiated a peace process with Israel
  His ideas of an open economy resulted in economic inequality at home, which negatively affected working women
Feminism under Sadat

• Increased Islamist influence; many men grew beards, and there was a return to veiling women
• There was a general withdrawal from principles of gender equality, however, Sadat refused to make the hijab compulsory
• Through the influence of his wife Jehan Sadat, the Personal Status Law was implemented in 1979, granting women legal rights in marriage, polygamy, divorce and child custody
Egyptian Islamic Revival

- Men grew beards and the *hijab became more popular* for women to wear.
- Sadat clashed with the religiously conservative Muslim Brotherhood because he opposed making the hijab compulsory and he supported some rights for women.
- Religious extremists assassinated Sadat for making peace with Israel.

President Anwar Sadat (right) and Mubarak are seen on the reviewing stand during a military parade on Oct. 6, 1981, just before Sadat was gunned down.
Camp David Accords of 1978

- U.S. President Jimmy Carter sponsored the historic *Camp David Accords* in 1978; in which Israel and Egypt made peace.
- The Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights remain highly contentious areas between Israel and Arab states.

Camp David Accords 1978
Sadat, Carter, and Begin
"Peace is much more precious than a piece of land... let there be no more wars."

Anwar Sadat
Egyptians vs. American View

- Many Egyptians were dissatisfied with Sadat’s rule due to his policy *infitah* or “open door” of private investment in Egypt
- This reform created wealthy upper class and small middle class with little results for the average Egyptian
- Sadat’s peace treaty with Israel also created animosity with other Arab nations
- Egypt was suspended from the Arab League

American newspaper of Sadat
Overthrow of Sadat

- Egyptian Islamic Jihad planned to overthrow the government
- When Sadat learned of the plot, he ordered arrests of not only religious extremists but any he thought might oppose him
- This included Coptic Christians, university students and activists, including novelist Nawal El Saadawi
- In October, 1981 an Islamic extremist cell which had eluded capture by Sadat’s purge of opponents—assassinated Sadat

Extremists assassinate Anwar Sadat in Cairo, 1981

https://youtu.be/rhu-YgCyPz4
President Anwar Sadat

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- Sadat turned to the United States; he initiated a peace process with Israel and returned to multi-party political system.
Egyptian Islamic Revival

• An Islamic revival had begun under Nasser and continued under Sadat (from 1970s through the 1990s)
• Men grew beards and the *hijab* became more popular for women to wear
• Sadat clashed with the religiously conservative Muslim Brotherhood because opposed making the hijab compulsory and he supported some rights for women.
• Religious extremism grew and attacked Sadat for making peace with Israel
Feminism under Sadat

- Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) rejected the socialist state and turned to the capitalist West
- His ideas of an open economy resulted in economic inequality at home, which negatively affected working women
- The Islamists, who were kept weak under Nasser, gained strength under Sadat

President Anwar Sadat (right) and Mubarak are seen on the reviewing stand during a military parade on Oct. 6, 1981, just before Sadat was gunned down
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American newspaper of Sadat
Struggle of Feminism in Egypt

• A key struggle regarding women’s rights in Egypt is due to feminism being viewed as a *foreign imposition* by nations that colonized Egypt.

• Further, western feminism presented a line of thought that clashed with Egyptian nationalism’s need to not be associated with western culture.

• Any rights for women, it was thought, needed to be justified in an Islamic context.

Females in Egypt 1911
Egypt from 1981 to Present

• Succeeding Anwar Sadat as president was Hosni Mubarak.
• Over time, as his government became more corrupt, the Muslim Brotherhood became a stronger presence.
• In 1990s, veiling of women decreased and overt expressions of religiosity declined.
• In 2001, 72% of women were in school and in 2009, 64 seats were reserved for women in Parliament.
• Nonetheless, sexual harassment and assault, along with a male dominated patriarchal culture remained the status quo.

Hosni Mubarak
President 1981-2011
Feminism under Mubarak

Under Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) the Personal Status Law was amended in 1985 to erase many rights of women due to the increase of a shari’a-based legal system. The struggle to reinstate these rights and address matters of violence against women, abortion, reproductive rights, and clitoridectomy continues today.
3 Major Novels of 1960s

- *The Open Door* by Latifa al-Zayyat
- *Confessions of a Masculine Woman* by Su’ad Zuhayr
- *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* by Nawal El-Saadawi

These novels expressed the different forms of rebellion that women were experiencing.

They confronted the problems facing women—and end with the hopes of a better society.

The women in the novels experience difficulties and trauma but refuse to be limited by those difficulties.
The Six Day War 1967

- Three years before Sadat’s presidency “The Six Day War,” June 5-10, reshaped the Middle East
- War began because of border tensions between Israel and Egypt
- President Nasser also drew Syria and Jordan into the combat
- The Israelis came out the winner and seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria

Results of The Six Day War
1967: All Is Not Well

• There was anxiety about the direction of the new order and a revolution was called for freedom, liberation and social justice

• The Revolutionary Command Council began eliminating forums for political opposition—the party was turning into a dictatorship

• This was also the year Egypt loses The Six Day War with Israel and the hope of the 60s is destroyed
1960s Arab Women Writers

• 1960s was important for women writers and Egyptian novels
• Lots of romantic poetry that expressed a rebellion against social pressures and expressed a desire for change and freedom
• The romantic viewpoint supported the nationalist ideals; hope of being independent from the West and a better Egypt

Nawal El-Saadawi
Her Early Novels

- Two Women in One, 1971
- *The Thread and the Wall*, 1972
- Woman at Point Zero, 1973
- God Dies by the Nile 1976
- *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, 1977
- *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, 1993
- and *The Novel*, 2004
Nawal El Saadawi

- Nawal El Saadawi was born October 27, 1931
- She is an Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist, M.D. from Columbia Univ. NY
- She has written many books on the subject of women in Islam, paying particular attention to female genital mutilation in her society

Author Nawal El-Sadawi