

Four Women of Egypt: Memory, Geopolitics and the Egyptian Women's Movement  
during the Nasser and Sadat Eras

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*This article addresses the Egyptian women's movement of the 1950s-1970s through a recent film entitled The Four Women of Egypt, which focuses on the lives of four prominent Egyptian women active in the movement during that period. Using the concept of political memory, the article traces some of the major debates within the women's movement throughout this era. By focusing on the ways in which these women conceptualize the geopolitical, I show that the twin concepts of imperialism and capitalism were central to the ways in which they understood gender. The result was a complex understanding of how gender intersected with Egypt's position within a broader global system of imperial capitalism. Following the transition in the 1970s to an open-market economy, the women's movement shifted away critiques of imperialism and capitalism. This shift can only be understood in terms of geopolitics - the rise of neoliberalism in Egypt. New neoliberal policies had dramatic effects on the women's movement, showing why both the rise and fall of the movement must be contextualized geopolitically and transnationally.*

The 1950s saw Egypt gain independence from Britain and establish its first independent government, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers. Memories of this period can often be nostalgic, as a time during which there was a strong women's movement <1> that was active and that managed to achieve crucial gains. In this paper I raise several questions about the Nasser years and the women's movement, and argue that in order to understand the ways in which it has been remembered, we need to look at the geopolitical situation on the one hand, the women's movement on the other, and the ways in which these constituted one another. What was the role of geopolitics in the Egyptian women's movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and how did this build on feminist activism of the previous era? How did this particular geopolitical context impact

the ways in which feminists negotiated difference and what does this reveal about sites of contestation? Finally, how did the shift to an open-market economy in the 1970s affect feminist organizing and in turn construct the 1950s as a time of intense activity and advancement?

Numerous scholars have pointed to the importance of regional and international factors in the development of the Egyptian women's movement (Hatem 1992, 1994; Baron 2005; al-Ali 2000; Badran 1999, 1998). I argue that in the case of the Nasser era, many feminists focused on geopolitics via the concepts of imperialism and capitalism, and that this stemmed from the 1952 revolution and the focus on Egyptian independence. This particular era also saw rich debates around Marxism and socialism, and this too impacted the ways in which Egyptian feminists debated issues of gender as it provided a structural lens through which to understand inequality. Gender liberation was understood through the lens of independence—in the broadest sense of the word. There was an explicit critique of “Western feminism” that saw gender as the main axis of oppression that united women universally, and a clear articulation of nationalism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism as the main problems facing women of the Global South. This in turn allowed Egyptian feminists to engage in transnational activism with other Arab and Third World women, a process that had already begun during the 1920s and 1930s when Egyptian feminist alliances with Western women began to break down because of disagreements over the imperial question. Similarly, the decline of the movement that was dominant in the 1950s and 1960s should also be contextualized within geopolitical changes, including Egypt's transition to an open-market economy, the demise of state feminism and what Islah Jad has termed the “NGO-ization” of the Arab women's movement (2004), all of which played a role in shifting the focus of feminist organizing away from imperialism and capitalism.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which some of these issues were articulated, I use a documentary called *The Four Women of Egypt*, directed by Tahani Rached. <2> This documentary charts the political trajectories of four women who were active in the Egyptian women's movement during the transition from Nasser to Sadat, and thus is a useful lens through which to analyse this

shift in geopolitical terms. The narratives of these women suggest that the geopolitical changes that accompanied this shift can explain the decline in a focus on imperialism and capitalism within the women's movement. Alongside this documentary, I use sources on Egypt's feminists in order to present a sketch of the women's movement before the 1950s, as this provides important context for understanding the women's movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the experiences of the women in the film.

*Remembering the Egyptian Women's Movement: The Nasser Years*

The 1940s-1960s were a period of immense political, social and economic change across Africa and the Middle East, largely due to the rising momentum of nationalist anti-colonial movements. Much has been written about the involvement of women in these movements, usually highlighting their active involvement during the movement and then their rapid side-lining following independence. This narrative has appeared in Egyptian feminist historiography in writings on how women's demands during the 1919 revolution were side-lined by Egyptian male modernists (Baron 2005; Badran 1998). While this narrative is certainly an important part of the story, it is also useful to look at how Egyptian women themselves articulated their involvement in the nationalist anti-colonial struggle, as well as their responses to the Nasser regime and its aftermath. Engaging with this is one way of putting together the various snapshots we have of Egyptian women's history, and allows us to fill the gaps in the historiography of Egyptian leftist women (Hammad 2016, 119).

This period seems to represent a moment that is often returned to; a moment that is often remembered, especially for the intensity of women's activism. Women active during this time were able to articulate their cause and connect it to other causes in ways that contextualized gender oppression within other structures such as colonialism and capitalism. Memories of this period are also important to interrogate in light of the disappointments that came after the moment of euphoria. In other words, any nostalgia that may be related to the specific moment in time—

1952—is related to seeing it as a moment when everything seemed possible; a moment women were as much a part of as men. <3> The eventual culmination of this moment in the 1974 decision to open Egypt’s economy to foreign capital and the major societal changes that followed surely play a role in constructing the memories of feminists surrounding the 1950s. <4>

By the 1940s, the generation of feminists who made up Egypt’s first women’s movement had already begun to focus on questions of nationalism and independence. This generation, made up of pioneering women such as Huda Sha’rawi, Nabawiya Moussa, Malak Hifni Nassef and Ceza Nabrawi, had first focused mainly on issues such as education, work, seclusion, veiling, and issues of marriage and divorce— these were the issues that collectively became known as the ‘woman question,’ (Baron 2005, 31). This choice of issues revealed a clear class bias, and created a paternalistic and detached dynamic between these feminists and the majority of Egyptian women (Badran 1996, 4). However, geopolitical changes in the form of a deepening British occupation led many feminists to focus on the question of Egyptian independence. Egypt was at that time occupied by the British, and an expanding capitalist system was becoming an undeniable reality. As Margot Badran has written:

In the second half of the nineteenth century Egypt experienced growing encroachment by the West in its economic life. British colonial rule interrupted the process of economic and social development begun under the direction of the previously autonomous Egyptian state. The political economy was redirected to serve British needs (1996, 11).

It was during this period that feminists began to articulate gender equality as part and parcel of independence. This shift led to confrontations between Egyptian and Western feminists over the question of imperialism, a question not all Western feminists were comfortable confronting (Badran 1996, 13). The issue of Palestine, in particular, led to major disagreements that eventually

culminated in Egyptian feminists turning towards Arab feminism as a new space within which to build feminist solidarity. Power dynamics between British women inside Egypt and Egyptian women also contributed to the disintegration of ties between Egyptian and Western feminists, as Egyptian feminists realized that they had to contend with both patriarchal and colonial systems of power (Badran 1996, 39).

During the Nasser era, nationalism was a key theme and numerous feminists spoke of their experiences in the anti-colonial struggle (see: Zayyat 1960). This experience of nationalism was related to the experience of decolonization, and the turn towards Marxism by many Egyptian feminists can be contextualized within this larger milieu. The period of decolonization brought questions of imperialism and structures of domination to the fore; because of this, Marxism as a body of theory that focused on the global development of capitalism proved useful. It allowed feminists the analytical tools, including a means of analyzing class conflict, to analyze Egypt's position vis-à-vis a rapidly changing world, and also provided a way of analyzing what many of them saw as the main problem facing Egypt: social inequality. Indeed this was a major feature tying nationalism, feminism and Marxism together: the identification of social inequality as the major problem facing the nation, with theories of class conflict as key to understanding how to address this. A key characteristic of this period, also connected to nationalism, was the proliferation of organizations and conferences that connected feminists across the postcolonial world, conferences at which global inequality was a central theme. The Bandung Conference is the most well-known, but organizations such as the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization were also key.

Discussions in the literature around gender during this period tend to focus on the emergence of state feminism as part and parcel of the new regime's political program. Mervat Hatem has defined state feminism as "government efforts to remove the structural basis of gender inequality by making reproduction a public—not a private—concern and by employing increasing numbers of women in the state sector," (1992, 232). While it is certainly true that there were clear benefits for the state in establishing such a dynamic with the women's movement, it is also

important to interrogate why many women were drawn to the new regime that emerged in 1952. Indeed, as we will see, the four women in the film were not a part of the state feminist project and yet they were supportive of many of the demands of the 1952 revolution and the regime that emerged from it. This suggests that the discourse of state feminism had complex and contradictory effects, and that many women in the women's movement were tied to it in complex ways. Indeed the key paradox of feminism under this regime was that it simultaneously gave women access to spaces in society they had long fought for—including work and education—while also closing down political space and extending control over independent organizations. Interestingly, however, as I will show, the four women did not refer to state feminism in their discussions of gender during the Nasser era. I suggest that this shows a different understanding of gender and how it is constituted for many feminists of this era. This seems connected to the focus on structural critique, specifically social inequality, in particular through the lens of Marxism. Indeed many of the women who were active during this period did not refer to themselves as feminists, nor were they referred to as feminists. But they did often refer to Marxism to frame their ideas. What seems to distinguish this era is not only the rapidly changing geopolitical terrain, but also the ways in which Marxist theory was consciously integrated into many of the struggles around the world, whether loosely through the work of people like Frantz Fanon, or more strictly through the work of people such as the Egyptian Marxists who were active during the 1950s and 1960s. This was a reflection of the usefulness of Marxist tools in analysing the massive structural changes taking place during independence. Because of these rich Marxist debates, particularly in countries that had been colonized, many nationalist movements turned to Marxism, thus bringing together nationalism and Marxist critique. Marxism provided the tools to understand the subjugation of colonized countries, and thus was particularly useful considering the role of nationalism in targeting that subjugation.

<5> I return to this point in the conclusion.

The *Four Women of Egypt* is a film that follows the lives of four of Egypt's prominent women who were active in the women's movement during the Nasser years and subsequently.

Widad Mitri was a journalist and unionist; Safianaz Qassem a journalist and author; Amina Rachid a university professor; and Shahenda Maqlad an activist who has run for parliament several times. The film was directed by Tahani Rached and released in 1997. Methodologically I have approached this film as consisting of the oral histories of these four women. Produced in 1994—during the Mubarak years—it can in and of itself be seen as a nostalgic attempt to recount the Nasser years, years these four women clearly saw as central to the Egyptian women’s movement. “Oral history offered the delirious promise of brushing history against the grain, in Walter Benjamin’s famous phrase. Oral history promised a more democratic history. Oral history is potentially a technology for reproducing political memory, a technology accessible for the first time to the silenced, the inaudible, the disenfranchised,” (McClintock 1995, 310). It is the reproduction of political memory that I am interested in here, and this film provides a lens through which these four women do precisely that.

I use the film to try to answer the questions posed thus far: how was geopolitics defined and articulated and how did this provide the four women with a means of critiquing what they saw as the problems facing Egypt? What were the sites of difference and contestation between these women, and what do they tell us about the women’s movement during this period? Finally, how do they theorize gender and how is this tied to the geopolitical changes Egypt underwent during the transition from Nasser to Sadat? The next section of this paper presents a series of snapshots into the discussions and narratives present in the film in order to bring to the surface some of the dominant questions these four women negotiated. The final section ties together the themes highlighted and connects them to Egypt’s changing geopolitical context, and suggests that Marxist theory, with its assumption that class differences drives social conflict, provided a lens through which to analyse the problems facing Egypt as a new nation, among these the problem of social inequality.

*The Four Women of Egypt*

Amina Rachid, Safinaz Qassem, Widad Mitri, and Shahenda Maqlad all came from different ideological standpoints, a point that is made early on in the film. This does not seem to affect the common themes that they discuss throughout the film, nor the commonalities in the battles they faced throughout their lives. <6> In one instance, Qassem mentions that it is because of their good sense of humour that they all remained friends and managed to overcome ideological differences.

There are three themes that run through many of the discussions in the film. The first is the strong anti-colonial sentiment and activism of the four women, and the centrality of the Palestine question. The second is the constant negotiation over questions of class, and their own positionality within Egypt's class structures. The third is the consistent comparison between the Nasser and Sadat eras. The discussions and anecdotes surrounding these three themes show that they are connected to one another and, moreover, that they inform the ways in which these women understand gender and gender inequality.

The question of Palestine was one of the key issues of the Nasser period. It was understood that the British occupation of Egypt, the formation of the state of Israel, and the emergence of American imperialism were key components of women's activism. Organizations such as the "Women's Popular Resistance Committee" were formed, and prominent personalities such as Ceza Nabarawi and Widad Mitri were key members. Mitri speaks of this organization, noting that it was formed in 1951 in order to take part in acts of resistance against the British occupation. The focus on Palestine dates back to the 1940s, during which feminists such as Huda Sha'rawi were active in mobilizing around Palestinian liberation (Badran 1996, 223). This issue created significant tension between Egyptian and Western feminists, who often side-stepped the Palestine question and on the whole tended to ignore the imperial reality they were all enmeshed in (Ibid). This concern with Palestine continued into the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed in the film a shot shows an article written by Mitri in the 1960s that states: "While the construction of the [Aswan] Dam is a great victory of the will, our true victory will be to regain Palestine." Safinaz Qassem connects the issue of Palestine to

Nasser, pointing out that although he had promised to liberate Palestine, he had either lied about it or failed to do so.

Abdel Nasser represents an important figure to the women active during this period, and is present in many of their discussions. His anti-imperialism and the discourse of “Arab socialism” proved relatable to the majority of Egyptians for whom social justice and economic independence were central concerns. As Shahenda Maqlad notes, Nasser’s land reforms led to many changes in the countryside. She and her husband Salah Hussein led an uprising against feudal landlord family el Feqqi in the village of Kamshish in the Nile Delta. Her husband was assassinated by one of the landlords, in an event that was to galvanize peasants across the country in pushing for land reform. This land reform eventually became a reality under Nasser, although it failed to restructure relations between peasants and landlords.

In the film the women recount their memories of the 1952 revolution in detail, and the joy and excitement that characterized that moment. The film shows a clip of Nasser summarizing the goals of the revolution:

There are six goals. To put an end to colonialism, to put an end to feudalism, to put an end to exploitation of capitalism, to have a social justice (sic), to have a strong national army for the people, and to build up real democracy.

Mitri connects these goals to the women’s movement, by pointing out that the women’s movement in Egypt has always demanded the right for women to vote and be elected to office as part of any real grassroots democracy. “In 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser extended this right to us,” she notes. “But of course, it didn’t just happen. It resulted from the struggle of generations and generations of women.” Here we see a nuanced view that does not match either the discourse of state feminism or the historiography of the Egyptian women’s movement—both of which ascribed to the state

the power to give women rights. Mitri instead underlines the fact that this victory came from the women's movement itself.

Many feminists during this era had fierce debates about Nasser, <7> some of which focused on his authoritarian tendencies. Indeed Nasser shut down most independent political organizations, including the Egyptian Feminist Union, and notable feminists such as Doriya Shafik and Inji Aflaton were jailed for criticizing the new regime. In the film, however, the debates surrounding Nasser focused on whether he had truly made Egypt independent. In one scene Qassem speaks about one of the regime's most celebrated projects, the Aswan Dam:

To the people's demands there was always the response: 'After the Aswan Dam, wealth will flood the nation. After the Dam, there will be electricity everywhere. Always after the Dam. To the point we thought it would work marvels.

Despite her reservations, Qassem still makes it clear that she supported the revolution and that it represented a moment during which a different Egypt became possible, in which "our dreams would be fulfilled," pointing out that Nasser was a big part of the dreams of her generation. Describing his funeral, which they all attended, she said: "We sang the same song, felt the same pain, the pain of having lost him, and of what he made us suffer." Here it is useful to pause and analyse how Qassem understands the geopolitical via her analysis of Nasser. Out of the four women, she is the most ambivalent about Nasser; in Qassem we thus see the painful reality of decolonization, captured through a shift in time. The moment of independence in 1952 was one of euphoria and one of hope—it was assumed that Egypt could now be independent not simply politically, but more importantly, economically. Although Qassem blames Nasser for failing to achieve this, it may be more useful to see it as an expression of the structural contradictions of decolonization, where imperial capital had already made inroads despite the emergence of independence Arab and African states. <8> Indeed Maqlad does this by contextualizing the

Nasserist period: she admits that mistakes were made—and that her husband paid for them with his life—but also notes that it was a specific historical moment during which many things were not clear.

It is notable that none of the four women refer to state feminism, as opposed to the literature on the Egyptian women's movement, which mostly refer to Nasser through debates on state feminism. Instead the four women in this film refer to Nasser in a multiplicity of ways, all of which are connected to his economic and political successes and failures and not to his project vis-à-vis the 'woman question' or state feminism; this is because they saw gender as interlinked with the broader changes happening under Nasser and not as separate from them. This raises interesting questions about the ways in which gender was understood by feminists of that era, who tended to focus on structures and their intersections; this could be why Marxism in particular posed a useful paradigm, as will be discussed in the conclusion. The ways in which these structures were seen as intertwined is important in light of the emergence of intersectionality over the past two decades. In their conversations, the women rarely refer to patriarchy, imperialism or capitalism as separate problems with separate solutions.

The second prominent theme that arises throughout the film is that of class positionality. The 1920s and 1930s had seen a very paternalistic dynamic between Egyptian feminists—who tended to come from the upper class—and working class Egyptian women. This was largely a result of the colonial situation, where upper class Egyptian women had greater access to education and their social influence and organizational capacities were greater. However, their class position meant that they often articulated notions of emancipation that were inspired by European and English models and that were out of touch with the reality of the majority of Egyptian women.

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Rachid opens the film by speaking about her upper class family and her upbringing in a villa surrounded by working class Egyptians. She recalls a memory of a girl throwing stones at her because of her grandfather, Ismail Sidqi, Egyptian Prime Minister at the time, and the fact that he

had signed a treaty that, in her words, “appeared to tie Egypt to the British and find a way for their presence to continue in Egypt.” The little girl threw stones at her school, and she recalls: “For me it was a shock and I’ve never gotten over it.” Reflecting on this incident, she says that the shock came from being attacked by someone and realizing that the attacker was right:

The big house, the poor neighbors. So this political drama was for me a shock and an awakening. In our big house we spoke French, and Arabic only with the servants. The bitter truth of being the ruling class. Outside the gate, a traitor.

We thus see the class tensions that frame the ways in which some of the women related to the nationalist movement. The self-reflexivity Rachid engaged in is to be central to her own development. Her declaration further in the film that she identified with socialism and Marxism from a young age can probably be connected to this realization, and to her general awareness of her own class positionality—and all of its cultural baggage—vis-à-vis the majority of Egyptians. It was precisely because Marxism offered the tools with which Amina could understand class—so central to her experiences growing up—that she identified with it.

The new generation in the women’s movement tried to demolish this paternalistic relationship that had existed between Egyptian women’s activists and the majority of Egyptian women. Maqlad in particular is illustrative. Known as the “mother of the farmers,” Maqlad was part of the Peasant’s Union, and she mentions that her struggles against the landlords in Kamshish, discussed earlier, are some of her most important memories. Indeed in the film she takes us to the village of Kamshish, where she is received warmly, and shows us the exact place where the demonstrations against the landlords took place. “In 1961, land was taken from the feudal lords. Everything changed. For the peasants and farmhands, who previously were only day laborers, it was incredible.” Maqlad paid a high price, however: the loss of her husband. Mitri later in the film says: “Shahenda showed that there is nothing an Egyptian woman cannot do.” Here we see the

intersections between class, gender and nation: they were not seen as separate, but as intertwined. Similarly, Rachid recounts that Shahenda losing her husband Salah and the events surrounding the loss pushed others towards a more radical revolution. Maqlad notes that the events of Kamshish were what really brought the four women together, and Mitri clarified: “Not just us. Everyone.” The centrality of land reform, of Nasser’s promises, and of the nationalist project cannot be overemphasized. It was not separate from the women’s movement, but part and parcel of it. An interesting point about the Kamshish event is the fact that Che Guevera visited the village with Nasser, as Maqlad points out in the film, bringing light to the transnational dimension of anti-imperialism that dominated in the 1950s.

What is important to note, however, is that the paternalistic relationship between feminists and working class women was somewhat lessened not only because of the articulations of feminists themselves, but because of the Nasserist project and the new material context it created. It was precisely the opening up of education to the masses, the guarantee of a public sector job, and the extension of the right to vote that leveled the playing field among women—to a certain extent—in ways that were unprecedented. It is this material context—a result of state feminism—that allowed for a shift in the ways in which feminists articulated their visions and related to one another.

The final theme is the transition to an open-market economy as Egypt’s geopolitical orbit shifted, showcasing how geopolitics not only resulted in different political economy inside Egypt, but also a different conceptualization for the women’s movement. In a telling scene where Qassem and Rachid are listening to a song playing on the gramophone, Qassem repeats the line of a song that goes: “That blows a soothing breeze on the foreign usurper,” and then says to Amina: “Look at us now.” This distinction between then and now is something that occurs throughout the film, and brings us back to the idea of memory. All four women spent time in jail during the Sadat years because of his crackdown on leftists, and the shift from Nasser to Sadat marked the end of Nasserism, both as ideology and material reality. The transition to an open-market economy, commonly referred to as *Infitah* (literally meaning ‘opening’), the emergence of a new bourgeoisie

dependent on real estate, rents, and financial speculation, and the 1967 defeat to Israel were all events that characterized this shift. Indeed Rachid refers to the “new rich”—a new class that largely made their money off real estate deals, a process she points out is not a form of “productive capitalism.” At the base of this shift were two major structural changes: a transition in the economic system, and a transition in Egypt’s geopolitical position. There was a move away from state welfare and state-led capitalist development to an individualization of the economic burden, the expansion of the private sector, and the liberalizing of the market. Indeed it was during this period that the groundwork for neoliberalism was put in place and peace with Israel in exchange for lucrative US aid to Egypt’s economy if it was to liberalize. This was to affect Egypt’s position globally: moving away from positive neutralism (Abou el Fadl 2015) and anti-imperialism, Egypt now turned towards the United States. The peace treaty that was signed with Israel—despite its extreme controversy among Arabs and Egyptians—marked this new geopolitical orientation.

In an important scene in the film, some of the villagers from Kamshish point to the fact that Egypt was seeing the dismantling of the agrarian reform initiated under Nasser. Farm rents were deregulated, and many could not afford the new prices. One villager said: “Capitalism hasn’t solved a thing. Or socialism. Or Islam, as they want to apply it. But we’re facing a shambles, a loss of direction.” It was this new moment that created uncertainty about Egypt’s future, and I argue that this contributed greatly to the framing of the Nasser era as a nostalgic one. This loss of direction led to a discussion among the four women about religious fervour, and the ways in which religion was being used to deal with this uncertainty. Indeed the 1970s are often portrayed as the decade during which there was an “Islamic revival.”

It is surrounding this topic that we see one of the major disagreements between the women. In a scene towards the end of the film there is a heated discussion about Islam, where Qassem insists that Islam is a clearly defined religion, and criticizes Maqlad for her tendency to “use Qur’anic verses selectively.” Mitri, an Egyptian Christian (Copt), points out that when Safinaz and others say “Islam is the solution,” it brings up the question of what this means for Egyptian

Christians who are fulfilled by Christianity. It is this that leads to Mitri's position that the Egyptian state should be neither Muslim nor Christian. The religious revival of the 1970s can be explained partly by the 1967 defeat to Israel and the social chaos that followed, as well as Sadat's policy of strengthening Islamist forces in order to defeat the leftists. <10> Mitri's statement that the Egyptian state should be neither Muslim nor Christian brings up the contested notion of secularism. It may be tempting to see Mitri's point as support for a secular state as the most beneficial form of statehood for women. However, in light of her Marxist articulations in other parts of the film, it may be more useful to see her comments on religion in the state from the perspective of how anti-nationalist forces such as the British occupation had often used religion to crush moves towards independence. Many of Egypt's pioneering feminists of the 1920s and 1930s espoused what they called secular views, not as an attempt to banish religion to the private sphere, but rather to counter the British colonial policy of divide and rule. These feminists often recognized that colonialism was premised on separating and favoring certain groups over others, and thus consciously strove to interrupt this by speaking as *Egyptian* women rather than as Christian or Muslim women. Some scholars have suggested that the Nasser era was also marked by a strong secular anti-colonial project. Laura Bier, for example, has written that the Nasser era was marked by a clear division between secular and Islamist visions of feminism (2011, 43). While it is true that the memoirs of prominent feminists of the Nasser era, such as Latifa al Zayyat and Zeinab al Ghazali, suggest that there was a divide, this appeared to be more along the lines of a leftist-religious divide than a secular-religious one. Indeed it appears as though many of the feminists who identified as 'secular' were in effect staunch leftists.

Although many feminists during this period discussed the cultural effects of imperialism, their focus tended to be on the hard economic and political reality. Qassem, for example, says: "Our ideal was the Western woman. Anyone but ourselves." Here we see the effects of Western hegemony on gendered understandings in Egypt and the ways in which women felt pressured to adopt Western values in order to be considered modern. In a telling scene, Qassem says:

People [in the US] would ask me: ‘Why are you not dressed like them?’ I would ask them, ‘Like who?’ ‘Egyptians.’ ‘But I am dressed like them.’ They would tell me, ‘No, they’re veiled.’ At first I would challenge them: ‘No, we wear bikinis. No, we can be naughty too. We get into the same mischief as you. We’re civilized. Some of us drink alcohol and eat pork—not me. But some do, I swear. Some people go naked. We’re good people just like you.’

The non-modern—Islam—is deemed to be open to interrogation. The modern—the US—is beyond interrogation; it is the norm. This touches on the old debate about the Orient as a space of non-modernity that must always justify itself according to standards set by those who are modern.

Many feminists linked this to changes in Egypt’s position geopolitically. Rachid points out that the influx of petro-dollars after President Sadat liberalized the economy led Egypt to an even stronger position of dependency. Importantly, she notes that this dependency was not just on the West, but also on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries and their rising use of ‘Islam’ as a bulwark against Nasser’s pan-Arab socialism. This new economic orientation had tangible social effects, as Amina Rachid notes:

All of this has led to a new attitude about life, a ruthless individualism. [...] A strong sense of helplessness.

Qassem frames all of these changes within Western ideological hegemony: “The West is the dominant ideological and cultural power.” Amina responds by pointing out that she does not believe the West’s power is ideological or spiritual, but that it is “power politics, stating: “We know that if an Islamic force came to power and acted in the West’s interests, the West would embrace it.” Maqlad adds: “The multinationals and the big international financiers need to create an enemy.”

She thereby also locates the tension between the West and Egypt at the level of what Rachid calls power politics.

I think that it is useful to look at this two differing viewpoints as aspects of the same story. There is little doubt that the US exercises hegemony, and continues to do so. This hegemony, however, is not *either* ideological or political/economic: it is both at the same time, and *must* be both at the same time in order to subjugate massive areas of the globe. These views on US imperialism should also be contextualized within the decline of the Cold War and the rise of the US as a single superpower. This focus on US hegemony is also connected to the nostalgia for the Nasser era, an era commonly defined as socialist, pan-Arab/African, and anti-imperialist. Thus it is precisely geopolitics-understood-as-imperialism that dominates many of the discussions in the film.

*“We Were Defending Peasants and Palestine”:* *The Decline of Egyptian Resistance and Changing Geopolitical Circumstances*

*The Four Women of Egypt* was produced and released in the early 1990s, about halfway through Hosni Mubarak’s presidency. Although there are tensions surrounding the ways in which the four women see Nasser, there is also an element of nostalgia throughout the film that is interesting to probe. I suggest two interconnected reasons for why this nostalgia for the Nasser years is a feature of the narratives in the film: first, the geopolitical circumstances of the period of decolonization, and second the availability and popularity of tools that allowed for structural critiques of gender inequality.

The themes that emerge from the film can be explained by situating these women within the historical moment of decolonization. As Maqlad notes, “We were defending peasants and Palestine.” Following this period there was the liberalization of the economy, which led to dramatic economic, political and cultural effects, not least among them the penetration of vast amounts of

foreign capital. <11> The 1970s saw the groundwork for neoliberalism being put in place in Egypt. Because of the 1967 defeat, social forces that had been pushing for market liberalization managed to get the upper hand over forces that favoured continuing the project of state-led capitalist development Nasser had implemented. This was also the period that saw a dramatic decrease in feminist activism and writing that focused on questions of class and imperialism.

These geopolitical changes had a very particular effect on the women's movement. Some, such as Islah Jad, have written about the "NGO-ization" of the Arab women's movement (2004). With the decline of the Soviet Union and many nationalist regimes across the Arab world and the rise of neoliberalism, as well as the funnelling of aid to Egypt as it entered the US fold under Sadat, NGOs spread exponentially. Jad rightly notes that rather than see this as proof of democratization or a challenge to authoritarianism, we should raise questions about what NGOization means for the women's movement, arguing that through professionalism, a new set of elites decided which women's issues should be focused on, and this has led to the immensely popular "gender mainstreaming" approach that has been widely funded by multiple organizations and that has become common sense in terms of gender and development (ibid). Donors favored concepts such as good governance, democratization and human rights, and allocated funds accordingly. It is not a question of Western control through NGOs, but rather a question of how neoliberalism dictates development agendas. Subversion of these agendas will always take place within the broad contours set by neoliberal development institutions themselves. "The formation of women's NGOs with particular social aims marks a very different form and structure for Arab women's activism from those that predominated in earlier periods," (ibid). Although NGOs may attempt to subvert the conditions of donors, it is the logic of neoliberalism that is difficult to escape. This is why Marxist feminist groups such as Bint al-Ard and more recent feminist collectives such as Ikhtiyar have refused funding, arguing it would compromise their work (Hammad 2011, 224). Indeed it seems as though the framing of gender justice has moved from a socialist-inspired one to a human rights inspired one, the latter an approach popularized by the influence of international donor institutions

(Hammad 2013, 229). These institutions focus on achieving particular outcomes—advocacy, awareness, media outreach—through particular tools—workshops, conferences, reports—within a particular time frame—short term—and for a particular audience—the target group and the donors (Jad 2004). It is these differences that delineate the contemporary period from the period these four women discuss.

When Safinaz says to Amina: “We are two friends who agree on the goals, but differ as to the means,” she sums up the way in which difference was articulated among these four women: as a productive disagreement concerning *how* struggle, which was common, should be waged. Emphasis on the common struggle allowed the women to navigate ideological and material differences in ways that ensured such differences remained productive. As Amina says in two other scenes: “We share the same fundamental values: the love of our country;”; “All of us are for social justice and equality...a return to a certain morality. But between the secularity of some of us, and the religious perspective of others, I think there’s a difference.” Here tensions are negotiated among their worldviews while retaining their solidarity with one another.

This notion of a common struggle that further connects these women to the broader transnational women’s movements of the time. The private papers of Mitri, for example—housed at the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo—are full of notes she took at international conferences on women’s justice. Many of these conferences were pan-Arab and pan-African. An interesting example of these connections is a visit Angela Davis made to Egypt, where she met with Egyptian women active in the women’s movement (Davis 1990). Davis’ visit to Egypt in the 1970s is an interesting example of this solidarity and shows the affinities between Black feminist approaches and Egyptian feminism. The responses from the Egyptian feminists she met show a shared concern with anti-imperialism, even if the articulations were different.

Earlier in the paper I posed the question of what separated this moment—the moment of decolonization—from other moments. What allowed for the understanding of geopolitics through the notions of imperialism and capitalism, which in turn allowed women across the globe to identify

a common struggle? I want to suggest that these decades were also the height of the Marxist moment, both in academia and in social movements across the world. This refers not necessarily to Communist movements and parties, but more broadly to the rich theoretical debates and the complex applications of these debates within movements and resistance forces. It is no secret that the 1970s saw the decline of Marxism in terms of both theory and practice (or praxis). The neoliberal moment has played a key role in depoliticizing both the academy and social movements alike even if events such as the Arab uprisings of 2010/2011 demonstrated clearly the continuing relevance of class analysis, anti-capitalist politics, and social justice, despite attempts to represent the uprisings as simply about electoral politics or liberal democratic demands. <12>

Contexts such as Egypt are structured in specific ways that demonstrate that we cannot discuss gender relations without discussing their position within the global capitalist system. More orthodox versions of Marxist feminism assume that only by ending capitalism can the exploitation of women end (Engels, 2010). Contemporary Marxist feminist interventions have complicated this to show that patriarchy is not simply an effect of capitalism. However, the aim of dismantling capitalism remains, and it seems to me that this is an especially crucial point for contexts in the Global South. The women in the film articulate gender and gender equality as part and parcel of other structural inequalities. Sexism intersects with racism, nationalism, imperialism and capitalism, and it is here—in locating these intersections materially and ideologically—that Marxist theorizing has been particularly useful because of its analytical framework that centers inequality and power. Some women and organizations in Egypt have explicitly used Marxist theorizing to address social issues (Hammad 2013). Bint al-Ard is one example, and Hanan Hammad shows how they “analyze women issues as socio-cultural issues connected to the dynamic of gender as a social/sexual relation of domination in a patriarchal society and materialist conditions related to their roles in production and social reproduction and social class,” (Ibid, 224). These examples, however, remain few compared to previous decades and compared to the rhetoric of human rights that dominates Egyptian civil society. Perhaps the resurgence of Marxist theorizing will once again provide the

tools with which to redirect debates about gender towards structural inequalities and structural solutions.

### *Notes*

1. It is important to note that the term feminist remains a contested one. For this reason, I will use “women’s movement” as a descriptor instead. While this paper focuses on the Egyptian women’s movement as a whole at certain points, the main emphasis is on the four women featured in the film under study. For a broader overview of the Egyptian women’s movement across time, see: Al-Ali 2000.

2. The release title is in French: *Quatre femmes d’Égypte*.

3. Here it is important to note the gendered dynamics within such movements. Hanan Hammad, for example, has shown how the Communist movement in Egypt had very problematic gender dynamics and that indeed women have often been left out of the historiography of the left in Egypt (2016).

4. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize, at the same time, that nostalgia remains a hegemonic representation of the Nasser period that minimizes the exclusions that the regime produced.

5. See: Abdel-Malek, Anouar; and Ayubi, Nazih N.

6. It could be argued that all four women represented different shades of the same ideology—Nasserism—but this ignores both the fact that Nasserism as a force did not exist as early as the

1950s as well as the complexity with which some of the women, especially Safinaz Qassem and Amina Rachid, approach Nasser's decisions.

7. The debates surrounding Nasser and "Nasserism" have been seemingly endless, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to get into details of these debates. Instead in this paper I aim to show the ways in which these women—coming from different ideological dispositions—related to Nasser.

For an overview of some of these debates, see: Abou-El-Fadl, Reem, 2015; and Kandil, Hazem, 2012.

8. For a particularly acute discussion of this, see: Nkrumah, Kwame, 1965.

9. See the work on Qasim Amin as the best example of this: Amīn, Qāsim, 2000. Nawal el Saadawi has made a clear class critique by pointing to the ways in which history remembers the actions of upper class feminists, and ignores those of peasant women: "little has been said about the masses of poor women who rushed into the national struggle without counting the cost, and who lost their lives, whereas the lesser contributions of aristocratic women leaders have been noisily acclaimed and brought to the forefront," (Baron 2005, 122). Additionally, Beth Baron has argued that it was middle class Egyptian women that pushed for political rights, since they did not have the same access to power as upper class women who were wealthy and well-connected (Ibid, 187). These nuances show how complicated the picture of the Egyptian feminist movement becomes when we take intersections of identity into consideration.

10. See: Kandil 2012.

11. For a detailed discussion of the ways in which these changes impacted women and the labour market as well as the ways in which different classes of women were affected see: Hatem 1992, 1994.

12. See: Malak and Salem, 2015.

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