



**Sonallah Ibrahim and Miriam Naoum's Zaat: deploying the domestic in representations of Egyptian politics**

**LSE Research Online URL for this paper:** <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102705/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Salem, Sara ORCID: 0000-0002-7872-5613 (2020) Sonallah Ibrahim and Miriam Naoum's Zaat: deploying the domestic in representations of Egyptian politics. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 16 (1). 19 - 40. ISSN 1552-5864

<https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-8016477>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in LSE Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the LSE Research Online record for the item.

Sonallah Ibrahim and Miriam Naoum's *Zaat*:

Deploying the Domestic in Representations of Egyptian Politics

### *Abstract*

This article explores the television adaptation of Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Zaat*, arguing that *Zaat* provides us with an interesting representation of the various ways in which national projects in Egypt are gendered that adds to feminist debates around nationalism, capitalism and gender. In particular, the focus on the intimate in *Zaat* reveals the ways in which political projects are represented in the domestic sphere through the lens of women's work. I explore two themes: the increasing financial pressure and the effects this has on constructions of masculinity and femininity; and the steady decay of infrastructure and social services and the ways in which this renders middle-class life an impossibility. I argue that by focusing on the intimate, Ibrahim's novel and the TV adaptation both reveal the various forms of work women perform as well as makes use of women's work to critique or celebrate different national projects.

### *Introduction*

When *Zaat* was released, it quickly became one of the most popular *mosalsalat*, or television shows, of the 2013 Ramadan season. Starring Nelly Karim, written by Mariam Naoum and directed by Kamla Abu Zikri and Khairy Bishara, it was a star-studded affair that aimed to bring to life Sonallah Ibrahim's famous novel, *Zaat* (1992). The presence of Abu Zikri is particularly notable, as she has recently become associated with *mosalsalat* that have feminist undertones; she is also the director of *Sign al-Nissa* (2014), a show that detailed the everyday lives of female prisoners in a Cairo prison. *Zaat's* popularity can be explained in various ways, among them its ability to bring to life events and issues most Egyptians have confronted over the past several decades, as well as its construction of *Zaat's* family as apolitical and as merely trying to get by without any trouble. This article delves into the show, which I read alongside the original novel, in order to explore how they represent the shifts between various Egyptian national projects through a gendered lens. I argue that the show is an interesting attempt to represent various political projects in Egypt by deploying the domestic. The show and novel weave together a narrative of modern Egyptian history through the intimate details of a family, thereby making use of the domestic sphere as a trope through which to make broader political claims about the problems facing Egypt. This focus on the intimate allows us to both understand the different forms of work that women are engaged

in, and the ways in which political projects have effects on women's work beyond the formal labour market; as well as to sense the problems Egypt faces at different historical moments through this reading of the domestic and intimate. I further argue that the show provides numerous insights into the particular ways in which these national projects have been gendered; in other words, the gendered effects different political and economic projects have had on Egyptian society.

*Zaat* is an example of the rich material available from the wide range of television shows in Egypt and the broader Middle East, and in particular I highlight the ways in which shows deploy various tropes to make political claims. Television has long been a popular means through which identity in the Middle East has been constructed, negotiated and contested.<sup>1</sup> This is accentuated during the holy month of Ramadan, during which Muslims around the world fast from sunrise to sundown. One of the highlights of Ramadan in Egypt is the wide array of shows that air over the thirty days. Each year between thirty and fifty shows are produced, to be broadcast on the many satellite and national channels.<sup>2</sup> The hour before *iftar*—when the fast is broken—as well as several hours after *iftar* tend to be prime time, during which families and friends gather to watch these highly anticipated shows.

Ramadan shows are particularly interesting because they are widely seen as having pedagogical value. The most popular *mosalsalat* each year tend to have strong moral, political, and social messages, and are often intervening in public debates by covering issues that are seen as timely. Lila Abu Lughod has labelled this “social criticism,” arguing that because of this they should be understood as exercising some independence from state control (1993, 494). This characteristic also makes them an interesting site of research because of their tendency to represent and intervene in timely social issues. As I show in this article, shows often touch on contentious issues such as nationalism, sexuality, religion, poverty and politics, not simply to highlight that they exist but to make moralistic points about how Egyptians should navigate and relate to such problems. These interventions are often made from a particular positionality: scholars have noted the “middle class bias” that pervades most *mosalsalat*, where middle-class norms around morality, politics and nationalism tend to dominate (Abu Lughod 2008, 83). This is part of a “larger modernist discourse dominant in state culture for much of the twentieth century: the educated cultured individual represents the good, the law, culture, national responsibility and pride in the greatness of the nation's heritage,” (Abu Lughod 2008, 60).

Given the intersection between *Zaat's* gendered representations and feminist debates around nationalism, capitalism and gender in the Egyptian context, this article productively reads these alongside one another. I am especially struck by how *Zaat* brings to life the complex multi-layered process of nation-building, and its particular iteration after neoliberal reforms were

implemented. I argue that a reading of *Zaat* that pays attention to the representation of the political through the gendered effects of neoliberalism can be placed alongside feminist critiques of the move away from state welfare under Nasserism in the context of Egypt. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, there was an active feminist debate around anticolonialism and the possible trajectories Egypt's first postcolonial state could take. Much of this debate focused on the gendered nature of work, and the ways in which public social services could be crafted to meet the extensive work women were faced with at multiple sites. This article discusses this particular feminist debate, arguing that *Zaat* in many ways brings to life the problems Egyptian feminists discussed in the decades preceding Egypt's neoliberal transformation. The way in which the show represents gender and the economy works to create a narrative around neoliberalism that dovetails with the prediction made by numerous Egyptian feminists that women's work—unless supported by a social welfare state—would become increasingly untenable. Moreover, I argue that the choice to centre the show on the intimate, daily lives of a family allows the show to expand what is imagined by women's work, and see that political and economic nation-building has very direct effects on the work women do inside the home as well as outside of it.

Following Lila Abu Lughod's suggestion that Ramadan *mosalsalat* retain some independence from state control because of their pedagogical value, I want to draw attention to the ways in which the show I focus on in this paper—*Zaat*—makes a very clear pedagogical intervention that distinguishes between the Nasserist political project and the neoliberal reforms that marked its end, and that it does so through a gendered analysis of work. I begin by discussing Sonallah Ibrahim and the novel *Zaat*, before reading the show alongside feminist debates of the mid-twentieth century. I then look at two particular ways the show makes this pedagogical intervention: the steady rise in economic pressure from the 1970s onwards on the one hand, and the steady decline in infrastructure and public services on the other. These themes that cut through the show work to construct the Nasserist era as one in which middle-class families, like *Zaat*'s, could live well and during which the intimate lives of families remained untouched by the political. Juxtaposed to this is everything that came after Nasser, where we see an invasion of the political into the intimate, and in particular the disastrous effects this shift of national project has for gendered social relations. The representation of the political—or politics—as pervading the intimate in negative ways—works as a critique of neoliberalism in Egypt; one that feminists had already made throughout the twentieth century. This neoliberal critique, however, happens primarily within the realm of the intimate, with its focus on gender, and this makes *Zaat* a particularly interesting show for feminist scholars.<sup>3</sup>

## *Zaat*

The first time I watched *Zaat*, I was struck by how much historical detail it brought to life. The attention to detail and the investment in recreating scenes that look exactly like they are out of a different time period is one of the show's most impressive features. Partly this is done by using real footage of political events at the start of and during each episode. From Gamal Abdel Nasser's speech nationalizing the Suez Canal to the funerals of Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez; from the 1967 defeat to the 1970s student protests and the 2011 revolution; and from the 1992 Luxor attacks to the 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York, the show covers an expansive range of events that are revisited through actual footage. The attention to fashion, interior design and everyday objects also produce scenes that take you back to different eras. Indeed, it is precisely through the changes in these everyday objects and designs that we can trace some of the broader political, economic and social changes in Egyptian society.<sup>4</sup>

The show is based on a novel by Sonallah Ibrahim, one of Egypt's most prominent novelists and a self-defined communist intellectual. His leftist views have meant that his work often includes clear and concise critical views on economic, social and political change in Egypt. Ibrahim has been at the centre of political commentary in Egypt from a literary perspective, despite the fact that in recent years he has come under fire for his initial support of the military take-over in 2013. He has witnessed the transitions from colonial rule to the Nasser years, from Sadat to Mubarak, and from 2011 to the current military-dominated regime. This sweeping view of history translates into his work, and provides a series of interesting snapshots into different eras.<sup>5</sup>

*Zaat* was published by Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, a leftist Nasserist publishing house, and was received with great celebration by Cairo's intellectual scene. The novel was published in English a decade after its Arabic publication, and became extremely popular in its translated version as well. Samia Mehrez writes: "This is not a novel that critiques a regime of the past. Rather, it is one that hits hard at the present, in all its manifestations—social, economic, cultural, ideological, religious, political," (Mehrez 1994, 129). The novel is structured around a series of newspaper clippings that detail numerous problems and issues the country was facing, alongside claims by successive governments that everything is fine and that progress is being made. As Mehrez has pointed out, using these newspaper clippings works as a form of testimony, as a way of ensuring that a collective memory of the state of the country was put in place and serialised through literature (Mehrez 1994, 129). In the original Arabic version, the publisher notes that these clippings are there to create the atmosphere of Egypt, so that the characters can be properly contextualised. This literary approach was unique at the time, as the two storylines ran parallel to

one another: the fictional and the archival. Indeed, these newspaper clippings provide just the context needed for the multiple social, economic and political problems Zaat and everyone else in the novel faces. The clippings focus extensively on the spread of corruption, the rise of Islamic banking and Islamic conservatism, the rise of Gulf capital, and the deteriorating state of Egypt's infrastructure. In one chapter, almost all of the clippings draw on news related to the foreign aid Egypt receives. Put together, the clippings provide views from the government and opposition papers in order to show the types of debates happening around certain issues.

When asked why he wrote this novel, Ibrahim said that he saw the novel as a sort of testimony:

Like everyone else, I was thinking about what was happening in the country and I wanted to give my own testimony. I was hoping I could write a modern myth, with a character that would overcome all the existing deteriorating circumstances. But when I started writing, the situation changed. The character was transformed into a completely crushed one (Abdel Shafy 2017).

This vivid description brings to mind the situation of Egypt in the early 1990s, a situation in which most Egyptians did indeed find themselves crushed. Mehrez points out that, when used alone, the word *Dhāt* means “self” or “being” in Arabic, a tactic Ibrahim used to displace the focus from an individual onto the collective. This is not a story about an individual Egyptian woman named Zaat, but a story—or a series of stories—about Egypt and Egyptians.

Through the transformations Zaat undergoes, a whole society is exposed—its institutions, mores, contradictions, failures, and mediocrity. Yet throughout the narrative and despite the obstacles she encounters, Zaat does try to resist, but her resistance collapses in the face of the general tide of her social reality. As we read Zaat's individual history, which gradually loses any individual features because of its familiarity, we discover that it is conditioned and shaped by a collective history that unfolds through [the] newspaper clippings (Mehrez 1994, 131).

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of Zaat herself, played by Nelly Karim, is her timid and indecisive nature. She is surrounded by many strong female characters, from her mother to best friend—who later becomes her sister in law—to her friends and colleagues, and later, her youngest daughter. The show seems to suggest that this tepidness and lack of clarity around what she *wants*

allows her to get drawn into unfortunate situations, including her marriage to a comical Abdel-Meguid and her decision to quit university.

This is even more pronounced in the novel, where Zaat remains an often-hesitant character throughout; while the show adopts this version at the start, we begin to see a transformation in Zaat from about halfway through. She becomes stronger, more autonomous, and more assertive, even while moments of hesitation remain. This aspect of her character allows her to recede into the background, thereby allowing viewers to put themselves in her place; in other words, her unremarkable nature allows the storyline to focus on what *happens* to her, rather than how she reacts. Ultimately, it appears that Ibrahim wants us to focus precisely on this: on what has been *happening to* Egyptians over the past half-century. His pedagogical intervention is not only to locate the start of this series of misfortunes in the 1970s—after Nasser—but also to pass harsh judgements on Egyptians who couldn't seem to bring themselves to react or respond to any of it.

*Gender, nation, class:*

*Placing Zaat alongside feminist debates*

In both the novel and the show, we see representations of the domestic and the intimate being deployed to make claims about Egyptian politics. These claims, in particular around the role of neoliberalism in exacerbating the domestic burden women faced, often spoke to similar claims made in feminist debates that were pervasive throughout the twentieth century around the themes of nationalism, gender and class. As Margot Badran notes, the term “nationalist” was used by feminists who generated a feminist concept of nationalism that took into account the problems facing Egypt at that moment in time (1988, 16). Part and parcel of this was a strong focus on capitalism, particularly from the 1940s onwards. This followed on from an earlier feminist movement made up of women such as Huda Sha‘rawi, Nabawiyya Musa, Malak Hifni Nasif, and Saiza Nabarawi, many of whom are known for focusing on women’s right to work and be educated, the issue of seclusion and veiling, and the question of marriage and divorce. Indeed, these were the issues that collectively became known as the “woman question,” (Baron 2005, 31). There were important differences, however, among women within this generation. Leila Ahmed has argued that what became the dominant voice of feminism was one that favoured Westernisation and secularisation, a primarily upper-middle class version represented by feminists such as Sha‘arawi (1992, 175). The nationalism they propagated, therefore, was closely tied to a particular understanding of how Egypt needed to modernise in order to become fully independent and had close connections to Egyptian modernists who, feeling the European gaze toward the

Orient, felt the need to portray Egypt positively. The alternative to this were feminists who tried to articulate female subjectivity within a more “Egyptian” discourse such as Hifni Nassef, who formulated her ideas about feminism in and through the lens of Egyptian culture (ibid). For both strands of feminists, however, women’s rights were part of a broader question of nationalism; what differed was the futures these feminists envisioned for the nation.

What is interesting for this article, however, is the increasing prominence of socialist and Marxist themes during the 1940s and 1950s, that led some feminists to articulate their analysis through the lens of anti-capitalism. Some examples include Inji Efflatoun, who, as a delegate of the League of Women Students and Graduates of Egypt, the communist women’s organization, to the World Congress of Women held in Paris in 1945, gave a speech which she later described as “a very powerful speech in which I linked the oppression of women in Egypt to the British occupation and imperialism. I not only denounced the British, but the King and the politicians as well. It was a very political speech in which I called for national liberation and the liberation of women,” (Ahmed 1992, 196). Other feminists active as communists included Latifa al-Zayyat and Soraya Adham. This emphasis on anti-colonialism can also be seen in the focus on women’s work, whether at home or beyond, as I show further on.

These debates, emerging around the time of the Nasserist project, placed before feminists a difficult situation. 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. Nasser’s anti-imperialism and the discourse of “Arab socialism” proved relatable to many Egyptians for whom social justice and economic independence were central concerns. This does not mean that they saw him as solely responsible for all the gains that were made during this period, most notably in areas of education and employment; as prominent Egyptian feminist Wedad Mitri noted, the women’s movement in Egypt has always demanded the right of 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. But of course, it didn’t just happen. It resulted from the struggle of generations and generations of women,” (Salem 2017). This complicates the position of feminists within the historical moment. As Laura Bier writes, “women were neither unwitting dupes of the regime puppet-like propagandists of Arab Socialism nor renegades working within the system in order to fundamentally challenge its legitimacy,” (2011, 56).

What is especially interesting, however, is the way in which feminists articulated demands around work, gender and the state. Women joining the workforce was one of the major pillars of Nasser’s state feminist project, and new labour laws guaranteeing employment to those who had



the correct qualifications were passed. In response, feminist demands for equal pay, maternity leave and day-care centres were articulated (Taha in Eslava et al. 2017, 9). The 1959 Labour Code gave women fifty days of paid maternity leave and required employers to provide day-care facilities in workplaces (ibid, 10). New laws also provided women with equal access to higher education and fixed the workday for women to nine hours. However, the provision of these rights through state legislation came at a cost: “Through legislation, the state was able to intervene in women’s networks of communal support by legalizing social life that inhabited the public and private spheres, instead of allowing women to be the architects of their own working conditions,” (ibid).

Nevertheless, I am interested here in how feminist demands around women’s *labour*—inside and outside the home—were articulated and had an effect on the state’s feminist project. In particular, I want to note the understanding feminists had of the role of the state in easing or intensifying the gendered work burden, and thus the ways in which feminists lived their lives. It is clear that the demands made by feminists around day-care, equal pay and maternity leave—articulated through the lens of a nationalist project—allowed feminists to negotiate with the Nasserist state project partly because of its own commitment to social welfare, economic development and “Arab socialism”—as tenuous as this claim ended up being.

This is in distinction to the *infitab* era, which brought about a significant change to Egypt’s economic trajectory. As Egypt implemented neoliberal reforms, we see some of the gendered concerns about the free market materialise. Nasserism’s state-centric approach to gender equality, which was very much built on the public sector and women’s labour within it, was abandoned. On the other hand, the shift to the private sector opened up opportunities for some women, but this was a small minority. Moreover, even for those middle-class women for whom opportunities were now available, these often came at the price of an increased work load given the continuing presence of work in the home. This is precisely what we see happen in Sonallah Ibrahim’s *Zaat*. As Mervat Hatem writes:

The inflation and migration that were products of the open-door system served to push urban and rural working-class women into the labor force. The feminization of the urban and rural work force began in the mid-1970s. It manifested itself first in the industrial companies of the public sector. While most male workers were interested in the better paying jobs of the private sector and/or of the Gulf economies, in order to deal with spiralling prices, women workers preferred employment in the public sector because it offered such benefits as subsidized transportation, child care, and maternity leave (1992, 238).

This feminisation of the labour force is an important dimension of *infitab*’s gendered effects, and we see it clearly represented in *Zaat* when her husband moves to Kuwait to work as she struggles to survive on her public sector job and is forced to expand into private sector activities. What the

show also highlights, however—and this is its main strength, I argue—is what happens in the home as a result of this. In other words, what are the intimate politics of *infatab*, and how does this expand what we imagine to constitute women’s work? The show can thus be read as a representation of some of the debates Egyptian feminists had around women’s work *inside and outside* the home, and thus of how a spotlight on the intimate can also reveal the gendered nature of political projects. This is not to suggest that Ibrahim was alluding to these feminist debates, but rather that it is interesting to read the show alongside them as an instance of how popular culture tells political stories that are highly gendered.

I want to turn to my reading of *Zaat* now, in order to flesh out the ways in which this historical juncture produced gendered effects on women and work. We see how *infatab* had very particular ramifications for women, especially because of the withdrawal of social services and the individualisation of the economic burden. The novel and show not only show the multiple “shifts” Zaat has to complete each day to support her family, but also the embodied nature of this extra work, and the toll it takes on her. In some ways, then, the novel and the show deploy Zaat almost as a vindication of the concerns Egyptian leftist feminists had about *infatab*, serving to mark a clear break between Nasserism and what came after.

*‘I’m 23 but I feel like I’m 50’:*

*Egypt’s growing economic crisis*

Zaat’s marriage to Abdel-Meguid—which she largely agreed to because all of her friends were married and she had had several unhappy experiences with men—is a fascinating portrayal of the ways in which a relationship changes over time. Their marriage is the theme that cuts across the entire show, and one that does not lend itself to a clear-cut conclusion about gendered dynamics within marriages. At the beginning of the marriage, it seems clear that Abdel-Meguid is in charge, and that Zaat seems to be doing all of the housework and childcare, on top of working at a TV station during the day. She is always exhausted and struggling, and there never seems to be enough money. Notably, Abdel-Meguid was visibly upset both times she gave birth to daughters, in juxtaposition to his reaction to the birth of their son Amgad and his attachment to him throughout the show. Abdel-Meguid is strongly supported throughout by Zaat’s mother, who is very domineering and who consistently goes against Zaat’s wishes. It is her mother who is against her studying at university; who says she should not work after getting married; and who strongly supports her marriage to Abdel-Meguid. Zaat’s father, on the other hand, who dies soon after the marriage, did not like Abdel-Meguid and insisted that Zaat be the one to make the decision. Her

father also pushed her to study at university and to work. Interestingly, he is represented as the Nasserist figure in the show, symbolising a new way of thinking about gender through the expanding public sector.

The generational element of the show also serves to produce gendered comparisons of marriage and relationships across time. On the one hand, the show suggests that each woman's personality plays a large role in her actions. There is a distinction between "strong" and "weak" personalities; ranging from women who are domineering like Zaat's mother, stubborn and willing to stand their ground, like Zaat's daughter Ibtihal; to those who are more likely to accept what happens to them, including Zaat's other daughter Doaa, and Zaat herself at certain points. On the other hand, the show clearly suggests that there are specific political and economic changes that affect the different generations of women. The beginning of mass education for women in the 1950s meant that there were debates around whether Zaat should attend university and what she should study, usually with her father encouraging her to study and her mother discouraging her and insisting she stay home and get married. By the time Zaat has children, education is not only a norm but a strong expectation for both her daughters and son; the debate that emerges here is rather *what* subjects they should study. While her daughter Doaa decides (initially) to study medicine—which is seen as very prestigious—her daughter Ibtihal's decision to study film was met with indignation by her family.

Zaat and Abdel-Meguid's marriage is largely represented through the lens of financial struggle. The show documents the varying effects their increasing inability to make ends meet—and live a middle-class life—has on both the masculinity and femininity embodied by both characters. Zaat and Abdel-Meguid are middle-class, although Zaat's family initially look down on him because he did not finish his university degree. Abdel-Meguid works in a national bank and Zaat works for a TV channel; however, this move to a two-income household became necessary precisely because they needed to earn more to support their growing family. Moreover, although Zaat starts working almost at the start of her marriage, she continues to do the housework and childcare, as well as to care for her parents.

In one episode, we hear Zaat say: "I'm 23 but I feel like I'm 50." This line brings to mind the theme of depletion, which feminists have theorised is an embodied response to overwhelming amounts of social reproductive work. It is here that the show is at its strongest: highlighting not only the exhaustion that results of an increasing workload outside of the home, but the increasing workload inside of the home as well. Indeed, the majority of Zaat's work, as represented in the show, seems to be focused within the confines of her apartment: from cleaning and cooking, to childcare, to the emotional labour of family disagreements. It is this that appears to be exhausting

her, highlighting the importance of what feminists refer to as the “social factory” in distinction to the “factory,” (Taha in Eslava et al. 2017). As Mai Taha notes, Egyptian feminists often pointed to the need to centre the social factory in any discussion of economic development; who, exactly, was maintaining the home, and what did this mean for the lives women were living?

Throughout the show we see that Zaat is constantly working, whether at home or at work, and barely has time to recover, let alone relax. She is in a constant state of movement and tiredness. At the beginning, we see Abdel-Meguid in very much the opposite position: although he goes to work, once he comes home, he spends his time relaxing. For Zaat, work outside and inside merge into one endless day. This intensifies in the 1970s with *infatab* where we see Zaat get involved in numerous small business schemes, from selling electric cooking pots to sewing lingerie. While these schemes initially promise vast returns on minimal investment, they always end badly with Zaat exhausted from all of the extra work she has to put in.

Throughout these scenes, the show explicitly shows how various economic changes intensify this situation, making a clear connection between changing national projects and the impacts they had on gendered work. With the end of Nasserism and as we move into the 1970s, the show begins to focus on the dramatic increase in prices. Food prices in particular are often mentioned, and soon we see the availability—or unavailability for most—of new imports such as video recorders. In a memorable scene, Abdel-Meguid has a tantrum after his children ask him why he won’t buy them a video recorder like the one their neighbours just bought. They are later to ask the same about imported Barbie dolls, and further on in the show Amgad begins to ask for things his friends have as well. Laptops and mobile phones come one decade later, and these too are demanded by their children, to which Zaat and Abdel-Meguid usually reply: “Why would we get you one when we don’t even have one?” The influx of new products and the pressure this creates on parents, as well as the increasing costs of private education and hospitals—given the deterioration of public services—add to the financial burden.

The theme of corruption is intricately woven in to further emphasise the shift between different economic projects. Indeed, it is Abdel-Meguid’s experiences with various business propositions that brings the reality of the ever-increasing presence of corruption to the centre of the show. It is usually Wagdy, his neighbour, that proposes various business schemes to Abdel-Meguid, even though it is never clear what these business schemes are or who runs them. Abdel-Meguid’s role is to run certain things through the bank he works in without raising suspicion. Abdel-Meguid’s consistent responses to these propositions is that he does not want to be involved in anything corrupt. In one of the earlier episodes, he says: “I don’t know how to steal,” The responses to his hesitation or refusal are often along the lines of “This is how it is now,” or

“Everyone is doing this.” Towards the end of the show, when Abdel-Meguid quits his job working for Essam—who is Wagdy’s boss—after finding out he is involved in corruption, Zaat asks him how they will afford their son’s school fees. His response is: “Should I go to hell because of private school fees?”

The show deftly touches on how corruption permeates social and intimate life. Rather than render corruption a “political” or “public” problem, it is represented as one that pervades the home and alters intimate family dynamics. The involvement of those around them in shady business deals constantly spills over into Zaat and Abdel-Meguid’s daily living arrangements. Take Wagdy, their neighbour, who constantly draws them into his business dealing; indeed it is his involvement in the construction of a building that collapsed during the earthquake that sets off a series of disastrous events, including his wife Samiha’s failed attempt to divorce him as well as Wagdy landing Abdel-Meguid in jail, which in turn leads to his daughter’s fiancée calling off their engagement. The chain of events emanating from a single instance of corruption is a powerful reminder of the ways in which corruption seeps through everyday intimacies and structures what is possible.

Facing increasing financial pressure, Abdel-Meguid eventually agrees to take a job in Kuwait, something he was against because he didn’t want to leave Egypt. This mirrors a broader societal transformation during the 1970s and 1980s, during which millions of Egyptians migrated to Gulf countries in order to earn enough money to send back home to their families. The moment of migration marks a particularly important turning point in their marriage, one that also sheds light on the ever-shifting gender dynamics within their household. Abdel-Meguid’s absence changes quite a few things at home: Zaat buys fast food instead of cooking; she uses the money he sends back to fix the apartment; she removes the red lightbulb in their bedroom symbolizing sex; and she starts spending more time with her friends. Although her mother soon moves in after discovering that she left the children at home to go to the hairdresser, thereby ending the short period of independence, it is clear that Zaat has some space to make her own decisions about the house, family and her time.

The time in Kuwait seems to have a very different effect on Abdel-Meguid, who comes back thinner, quieter, and overall a very different man, clearly having suffered. Moreover, the eruption of the Gulf War meant that he could not return, and because he had given up his previous job at a national bank, this meant that he was now unemployed. To top it all off, the money they had invested in an Islamic bank—on the advice of their neighbour Wagdy—had all been lost after the famous Islamic banking scandal of the 1990s during which many Egyptians lost their life’s

savings. The move to Kuwait as well as his return thus mark a turning point both in the show and in their marriage; after this we see Zaat's authority emerge more clearly.

This moment is critical because it intervenes in our understandings of both masculine and feminine shifts during *infatab*. The show not only demonstrates how Abdel-Meguid's move to Kuwait affects Zaat—allowing her more autonomy and financial security—but also how it affects Abdel-Meguid. He comes back a broken man, who now faces unemployment in Egypt as well as rising costs associated with private schools. This is the point during which their marriage shifts, and the show makes it clear that these shifts in their intimate dynamics are a direct cause of Abdel-Meguid's decision to migrate to Kuwait for financial reasons. Read alongside the increased economic pressures facing their family, as well as the deterioration of public services and the rise of private education and healthcare, the show appears to be making a clear intervention against *infatab* and Egypt's adoption of neoliberalism. Corruption is suddenly everywhere; without it, families can no longer get by. Food prices and bills steadily increase, and whoever can find work abroad, leaves Egypt. The 1970s-1990s are decades of strain and incessant work.

Throughout these episodes, we see Zaat constantly stressed, pulled too tightly in every direction. She continues working at the TV station, while raising three children, doing the domestic work (although they eventually hire a domestic worker), and taking care of Abdel-Meguid. She also takes on side projects to make ends meet, ranging from sewing clothes to selling pots. Abdel-Meguid, meanwhile, also emerges from these decades exhausted and over-worked. The shift from when Abdel-Meguid is working in Kuwait, and thus sending back remittances, to when he returns is stark. While he was working in Kuwait, we see a different Zaat, one that was relieved of much of her work burden inside and outside of the home. When he returns, however, the family are once again low on money, and we see the old Zaat come back: overworked, exhausted, and depleted. It is during moments like these that we see clearly how much of a difference financial stability makes to the work women have to do in the home. However, because the starting point of the show is the 1952 revolution, we are prevented from thinking that the way it is now is the way it has always been. Instead, we are prompted to see all of the work Zaat does as a direct consequence of a change in Egypt's political and economic state. On the one hand, we are left wondering where the state's previously-offered social services are. On the other, we ask what has happened to Egypt's economy that the family can only survive if Abdel-Meguid—against his will—travels abroad to work.

Indeed, throughout the show we are reminded of the first few episodes, set during the Nasser years and documenting Zaat's childhood. Instead of financial struggle and a decaying public infrastructure and social services, we see a family home insulated from broader political changes;

the only time politics enters the intimate is when something positive happens, such as the 1952 revolution or the nationalization of Suez. It is precisely here that we can identify Sonallah Ibrahim's pedagogical intervention: whereas politics does not seem to exert pressure on Zaat's childhood home, by the time we get to the Sadat era, politics is everywhere, seeping through every crack to completely overrun their marriage, children's lives, and futures. This is also where we can see resonances with some of the debates Egyptian feminists were having during the mid-twentieth century; debates around what a state should provide, and what it means for women if the state refuses to take on part of the social reproductive work women are usually tasked with.

### *Zaat's bathroom and Egypt's decaying infrastructure*

In several episodes scattered throughout the show, Zaat slowly walks to the bathroom, locks herself inside, sits down on the closed toilet seat, and proceeds to cry. As the show progresses, the bathroom emerges as a space that holds special meaning to Zaat in that it is where she escapes when she feels overwhelmed, usually because of problems in her marriage. The bathroom is significant more broadly in the show because of the fights she has with Abdel-Meguid about its decaying state and the desperate need to fix it, which she eventually manages to do with the money she has saved up from sewing clothes as a side job. The bathroom emerges as her space within the apartment, not only because she saved up the money to fix it, but because it is where she retreats whenever she feels overwhelmed. The bathroom and her retreats into it to release frustration that had built up represent the struggles Zaat experiences throughout her marriage, particularly at the beginning. Although her marriage visibly improves after Abdel-Meguid returns from Kuwait, there continue to be moments during which Zaat simply cannot handle the ever-mounting everyday realities that confront her and her family. It is here that economic struggle re-emerges quite clearly: the fights she has that lead her to the bathroom are more often than not about finances.

What is important to note about the bathroom is the steady decay that overtakes it. The bathroom is not only an escape from financial and marital difficulties, but also a physical manifestation of those difficulties. In one episode, there is a crisis in the family because the bathroom—already extremely run down—was leaking water into their neighbour's apartment. After a visit to a couple who had been her university friends and who were now evidently wealthy, Zaat comes away feeling even worse about her own apartment, and bathroom. In one episode, we see her in her friends' luxurious bathroom, clearly upset; later, we see her in her own bathroom, even more distraught. Zaat asks Abdel-Meguid how they will ever be able to invite the couple to their apartment, and indeed when the couple do visit, there is a scene in which her friend sees

Zaat's bathroom and is taken aback. The bathroom is fixed and rendered respectable only after Zaat dips into her savings which she accumulated through tiring sewing work she did at night.

The bathroom can be read as a material representation of Cairo at that moment in time. The spread of corruption and its spill over into all aspects of life; the increasing difficulties facing middle-class families; rising sectarian tensions; and rapidly changing international relations following the September 11 attacks of 2001 are all strongly portrayed in the latter half of the show. However, two particular themes emerge clearly: collapsing and decaying infrastructure on the one hand, and deteriorating public services on the other; both of these become central to the show from *infatab* onwards. From the 1980s, we begin to see numerous infrastructural collapses that the characters read through the inability (or reluctance) or the government to perform quality control checks. One instance is one episode during which Doaa gets sick and misses a school trip, only to find out later that day that the bus had been involved in an accident and that many of her schoolmates had died. This accident was read through the worsening conditions of roads. It also demonstrated the ability of infrastructure to touch individual lives in unexpected ways; ultimately, it was a stroke of luck that Doaa had not gone on the trip that day. Another instance is further on in the show when Amgad went on a school trip to Luxor and Aswan, and the train on which he was returning to Cairo derailed. He survived with a broken leg, and the episode focused on the responses of Essam—who owned the private school—and his attempts to implicate one of the supervisors in the accident rather than the school administration.

The social service system brought about in the 1950s also begins to decay. Zaat and Abdel-Meguid were educated in public schools and universities, while their own children had to attend private schools. Zaat decides to move her daughters from a public school to a private (Islamic) one after Abdel-Meguid moves to Kuwait and begins earning more money. By the time their son, Amgad, who is significantly younger, is to attend school, it is not merely a matter of paying for a private school, there is also the pressure that comes alongside this. Abdel-Meguid ends up migrating to Kuwait precisely in order to pay private school fees, and it becomes a major concern for the family until the end of the show. After several years Abdel-Meguid, returns to Egypt but is unable to find a job; Zaat has to take on extra work, showcasing the increasing burden on women to respond to economic crisis.

Amgad's private school is not an Islamic one but rather an international one—owned by Essam, Wagdy's boss. The class composition of the school is thus notably different. Throughout the second half of the show, we see tense emotional scenes between Amgad and his parents when he asks them why their house looks the way it does and why he doesn't have the same gadgets and allowance his friends do. In one scene he tells his parents he is ashamed to invite friends to their



home, particularly his best friend Khaled, who is Essam's son. This feeling of shame deeply upsets his parents, and his father in particular. Indeed, by the end of the show Zaat and Abdel-Meguid can no longer afford to pay his school—or university—fees, and it is his older sister Ibtihal who takes that on.

It is a drive for profit at all costs that defines the 1990s and 2000s in the show, and that is connected to figures like Essam, a successful businessman for whom Abdel-Meguid eventually ends up working, and Wagdy, the neighbour. In one scene, Essam tells Wagdy that if Gamal Mubarak were to become president, “things will open up for us even more,” referencing *infitah*. The push for Gamal Mubarak's presidency is one of the main factors behind the decision of Ibtihal and Saad, Zaat's daughter and nephew, to join a growing political movement against the government. Although her parents warn her not to get involved in politics—particularly as she is a woman—she ignores this and eventually ends up getting arrested and beaten by police in prison. Although Saad gets arrested as well, he is released because he has an American passport. The show ends without Ibtihal being released, although the assumption is that the revolution would bring her justice. In one scene, Zaat's mother tells Ibtihal not to get involved in politics because she will end up like Zaat's friends Safiyya and Aziz whose lives were ruined by constant government surveillance and harassment. A clear generational divide emerges, with Ibtihal, Saad and Amgad showing each other photographs and videos taken of police torture—including the infamous photographs of Khaled Said.

I want to bring these representations of decaying infrastructure and increased privatisation into conversation with the feminist debates I touched on earlier in the article. In particular, these representations serve to render clear how political and economic decisions—often imagined to be abstract and take place far away from the intimate space of the home—very much structure the contours of the intimate. The “social factory” cannot be separated from the “factory”; and the amount of work increases in both when political projects reduce state responsibility and open up more space for the market. In the last section, it was the withdrawal of state services that exhausted Zaat; in this section, it is the decaying infrastructure that both exhausts her and brings tragedy, as well as the increasing drive to privatise education and healthcare. Recall Mervat Hatem, who argued that the changes *infitah* brought about “benefitted a small group of bourgeois and upper-middle-class women. The overall effect of these changes was to introduce pronounced economic, social and ideological divisions among Egyptian women” (1992, 231). These divisions manifested themselves in the show when Zaat visited her wealthy friend's bathroom and saw how luxurious it was; when Zaat could no longer afford to pay her son's international school fees but did not

want him to attend a public school; and when Zaat's daughter averted death when she missed a school trip in which a train crashed because of poor maintenance.

Extreme profits and financial success for some on the one hand, juxtaposed with increasing financial struggle for many on the other, animate the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution. The deterioration of public services and infrastructure led to the proliferation of private services accessible to very few Egyptians (or perhaps the proliferation of these services led to the deterioration of public services). The burden of trying to access these private services—and to avoid the (often deadly) consequences of failing infrastructure, often fell to women as well as young members of families. As we see in the show, Amgad's private school fees were paid not by Abdel-Meguid—rendering him a failure in terms of the norms of masculinity—but by Zaat, who had to shoulder even more responsibility alongside her social reproductive work, her full-time job, and her side-projects. Towards the end of the show, even Zaat can no longer pay the fees, and it falls to her daughter Ibtihal. The dream of middle-class stability—let alone mobility—is thus shattered.

### *The social factory in a free market*

In this section, I want to highlight the ways in which *Zaat*, written by one of Egypt's most critical voices, makes use of the domestic and the intimate in order to put forward particular claims about Egypt's political trajectory, in particular its critique of Egypt's neoliberal trajectory, and the ways in which this constructs a certain level of nostalgia for the Nasserist era. I do this by engaging with some of the feminist debates from the Nasserist era, to highlight the tensions that coloured the relationship between Nasserism and feminism, particularly in relation to the “social factory” or women's work in the domestic sphere. I go on to argue, however, that we can see similarities between the representations of women's work in the novel and the show on the one hand, and critiques Egyptian feminists posited of the dangers of neoliberalism for women on the other. By focusing on the politics of representation, I show how both the novel and the show should be understood as efforts to fix social and political meanings in certain ways that may either support or resist particular political-ideological projects rather than as some sort of direct reflections of reality or history. In doing so, however, the novel and show engage in what Hoda Elsadda has alluded to as the use of the feminine to represent the nation (2012).

In one of the earlier episodes, *Zaat* is attracted to a fellow student at her university called Aziz. Aziz is extremely active politically, and in one scene he hands *Zaat* a book by Nawal El Saadawi entitled *Women and Sex*. When *Zaat* responds that she doesn't like political books, he looks

surprised and says: “But politics is in everything in your life.” This is one of the clearest messages of the show: that politics is intertwined with every single aspect of one’s life. The show makes clear interventions in our understandings of national political projects in Egypt, from Nasserism to the rise of Gamal Mubarak; representations that often serve to construct the Nasserist era as progressive. The show begins with Zaat’s birth on the day of the revolution in 1952 and ends with her marching in the January 25 revolution of 2011. Bracketed between these two revolutions, we see dramatic changes in her life as well as the lives of those around her. The novel and the show, however, clearly suggest that some national projects are worse than others, and embedded within this is a strong and convincing critique of Egypt’s neoliberal trajectory.

There is little doubt that Zaat—both novel and show—have a soft spot for the Nasserist era. Just as the novel constructed Nasserism as the golden age of modern Egyptian history, the show equally employs the politics of nostalgia to both valorise certain aspects of the Nasserist social contract as well as to critique aspects of the political projects that came after. Zaat herself is born on the day of the 1952 revolution, symbolising the literal birth of the new nation. Her years growing up in the 1950s and 1960s are portrayed nostalgically, with the focus of the show being on inter-personal relationships, family dramas, and the pains of growing up and falling in love. Politics is present, but it is almost in the background. It does not disrupt daily life or intervene in life choices. Life flows smoothly, and the only problems that arise are personal in nature. This comes to a sudden end following Egypt’s 1967 defeat to Israel. Suddenly, politics is front and centre; it is unavoidable.

It is here that there is a shift in the tempo of the show. Suddenly, everything appears to be political. What we see from Sadat onwards is the slow and steady disintegration of Egypt, or at least of the Egypt Nasser had built. Politics seeps into their family’s everyday life. This is most prominently shown through their constant attempts to achieve social mobility, which by the end of the show transforms into their desperate attempts to hold on to their middle-class positionality. There is constant financial pressure; always bills to pay and appliances to buy. There is increasing decay; buildings are collapsing because they weren’t built properly; school buses are crashing; bathrooms are falling apart. There is the steady permeation of corruption into every pore; nothing can happen without corruption. 1967 marks the beginning of a downward spiral. Zaat and Abdel-Meguid, who live their entire lives trying to stay out of politics, find themselves embroiled within it at every turn.

Sonallah Ibrahim’s positionality as a leftist and communist may explain the show’s representation of the Nasserist era, one during which families were not confronted with the same problems that began to pile up after Sadat and Mubarak. Equally important to note is that *Zaat*

was released in the summer of 2013, two years after the revolution. 2013 was an in-between moment, between hope and despair. The revolutionary momentum, the ideals, the hope and optimism, had not been completely crushed yet. But the signs were bleak, and not many believed there was still much to hope for. *Zaat* can thus perhaps be read as putting forward an argument for a different Egypt, during which politics did not necessarily equate to misery. Scholars have made many valid critiques of the Nasserist project<sup>6</sup>; but what we see here is its positioning relative to the projects that came afterwards. Ibrahim does not seem to be weighing the Nasserist project's achievements on their own terms; he is rather positioning them in a trajectory with the projects that were to come after.

Nevertheless, here feminist work complicating the Nasserist project in relation to social reproduction can point us towards key tensions embedded within national feminism. Following the state's decision to "make reproduction a public concern" (Hatem 1992, 232), we see women become symbolic of the new anticolonial order, with the imagery of motherhood central to this. While the imagery of the mother served the national consciousness, it worked to erase her labour at home. Equality was said to exist in the political and economic sphere, with little mention of the work women continued to do in the domestic sphere. This worked to invisibilise this labour, even as the Nasserist project invested in social services that benefitted women. It is thus pertinent to remember the continuity we see in the work women do in the home and outside of it; while the burden may have been lessened by an investment in social services under Nasserism and intensified during *infītah*, it was never fully addressed or valued.

Returning to *Zaat*, what is perhaps unique, however, is the move to make these political claims by deploying and referencing the "social factory", or the expanse of women's work that holds the nation together. Where the show is strongest is in its portrayal of how political projects seep into and structure the everydayness of intimate spaces. We are able to register the effects of *infītah* largely through representations of Zaat's exhaustion and depletion, as well as through Abdel-Meguid's exhaustion upon returning from his job in Kuwait. It is here that the particular strengths of popular culture representations are visible: the novel and the show are able to transmit the everyday ordinariness of an increased work burden on Egypt's middle classes. These can be productively read alongside feminist debates around the responsibility of the state for social reproductive work, and the price women pay when the state withdraws from this responsibility.

This positioning of political projects along a trajectory through deploying the social factory can be read as an instance of what Hoda Elsadda discussed in her work on the modern Arabic novel, namely: the use of a female character to represent the nation (2012). When we begin to think of *Zaat* as a representation of Egypt, we begin to see some of the differences between the

novel and the show. In the novel, Zaat's character is often represented as hesitant and unsure. During her early years, she is portrayed as naïve and innocent. From her marriage onwards, this increasingly turns into an incapacity to take control of her life. Things simply happen to her; she doesn't always respond or resist in ways that can be read as forceful. Her life begins to appear as a series of unfortunate events, and readers are increasingly left feeling frustrated at her inability to take control of her surroundings. There are numerous scenes during which her silence or lack of a response to her mother, husband, colleagues, daughters, or neighbours leaves you wondering why it is that she is so subdued. If we read this as representing Egypt's increasing helplessness, we can begin to see Sonallah Ibrahim's apparent frustration with Egyptian society, which continues to silently accept everything that happens to it.

However, this changes somewhat in the show. In the show we see a very clear transition in Zaat, as I discussed previously. Not only does she gain a sense of autonomy, but she begins to challenge decisions others make on her behalf, as well as find creative solutions to the problems that continue to pile up. She becomes a strong and assertive character, especially in distinction to her husband and mother who—although initially domineering—recede as the show progresses. If we can read Zaat as representative of the nation in both the book and the show—and interviews with the director and screenwriter suggest that this is how they understand her—then they are both putting forward very different notions of how Egypt navigated the past fifty years. It is perhaps here that we can read the influence of the female script-writer and director who, rather than render Zaat a hesitant character throughout who is simply a stand-in for the nation, instead complicate the picture and render her a more complex and contradictory character.

While the show and novel differ in how they represent Zaat as a character, they are more similar in terms of how they deploy the social factory to tell a story about Egyptian politics. In both instances, we see Zaat become increasingly exhausted and over-worked, constantly completing an endless set of tasks and always worrying about financial demands. An exhausted Zaat is set against a backdrop of decaying infrastructure, under-funded social services, mass migration, and the hopes of entrepreneurship. It is the coming together of an increasingly exhausted Zaat and an increasingly decaying Cairo that we can see how the social factory is being used to tell a larger story about Egypt's perilous neoliberal trajectory, and what it means for families, for the nation—and, more importantly—for women like Zaat.

### *Conclusion*

Zaat remains one of the most popular Ramadan shows of the post-2011 period. Asked to comment on this popularity, the director, Kamla Abu Zikri, noted: “What makes the story so special is that Zaat and her husband aren’t. They are not heroes in any way. They’re not into politics, they’re not rich, they’re not exceptionally gifted or successful. They’re average Egyptians you see and meet every day; peaceful people who struggle to get on with their lives and want no trouble — the type that makes up the majority of this country’s population. And that is why everyone who watches the series will find something they can relate to,” (Zohdi 2014).

It is precisely the fact that Zaat and her husband are so apolitical—that they expend so much energy trying to *avoid* politics—that makes the show so striking. Because despite this, every single day they live seems to be deeply imbricated in the political. The family do not engage in politics; and yet their lives are constantly affected by “the political.” Ultimately, this show—and the novel before it—aim to provide an intimate national history of Egypt, one that traces the dramatic shifts by looking at the everyday changes of one multi-generational family. Major moments, such as Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel, are told through small, silent moments. In the words of the director: “The general state of the country is always expressed through the characters. One of my favourite episodes is the one where President Anwar El-Sadat visits Jerusalem and Zaat’s father, a loyal devotee of the values and ideals of Nasser’s times, watches his Knesset speech on TV in agony. The man looks broken, and so was the whole country back then. Most people felt as if they were losing their pride and dignity with that move,” (Zohdi 2013). This telling of national history through the intimate, however, also draws our attention to what Egyptian feminists have long debated: the role of political projects in determining women’s work and the lives women are able to lead as a result of it.

The telling of the story of modern Egypt through both fact and fiction—by using archival footage alongside TV scenes—draws viewers into a historical portrayal of the nation that makes a clear critique of Egypt’s trajectory. I have argued that Sonallah Ibrahim places different political projects on a connected trajectory in order to make an important and incisive critique of the neoliberal project that came after. *Zaat* not only shows the ways in which Egypt’s neoliberal crisis pervades the everyday lives of Egyptian families, through increasing financial pressures and decaying infrastructure and social services, but also demonstrates the gendered effects this growing crisis has. Egypt’s spiralling situation has varying effects on masculinities and femininities, thus indicating the close connections between national projects and gender.

Returning to the complexity of Zaat in the show, Yasmine Zohdi writes: “Zaat is a normal woman; she is beautiful but the hardships of life show on her face, and her colourful dresses and short skirts are eventually replaced with loose, shapeless garments and a veil, making her look like

most women you encounter on the street—a far cry from the glamorous and immaculately dressed femmes fatales all over TV. She represents a very wide range of Egyptian females: oppressed, frustrated and often underestimated. As a child, she suffers the trauma of female genital mutilation (FGM); as a teenager, she has to argue with her parents to [sic] they allow her to go to college. As a woman she lives with a demanding husband who is often domineering and unappreciative, and as she grows older, she is socially pressured into covering her hair. She rarely has a say in how her life unfolds,” (Zohdi 2013). Zaat represents many Egyptians, but also is a character in and of herself. The show surpasses the novel in its attempt to portray the complexities inherent in Zaat’s life; she rarely had a say in how her life unfolds, yes, but she does find solutions to the accumulating problems facing her family. What we see is that it is Zaat who navigates the multiple crises, and who finds ways to maintain the family’s middle-class respectability. This, however, eventually takes its toll.

In the words of the director, “She starts out as a hopeful girl with dreams and aspirations, and she gradually becomes a deformed, exhausted, powerless and ineffective person who falls prey to consumerism and the brutality of the capital’s middle-class life.” This gradual and slow exhaustion is a more accurate representation of the experiences many Egyptian women go through, dealing with the political and economic changes that have overtaken Egypt during the past six decades. Such shows provide us with an understanding of gender in contemporary Egypt that is both novel and that provides a complex basis on which to analyse the connections between national projects and gender relations.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Nicola Pratt and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This research was made possible through an AHRC grant on the Politics of Popular Culture in Egypt. Grant number: AH/N004353/1

### *References*

Abdel Shafy, Haitham. 2017. “Interview with Sonallah Ibrahim: The Writer of Modern Arab Life.” *El Raseef*, 17 May 2017. <https://raseef22.com/en/culture/2017/05/17/interview-sonallah-ibrahim-writer-modern-arab-life/>

Abu-Lughod, L., 2008. *Dramas of nationhood: The politics of television in Egypt*. University of Chicago Press.

Abu-Lughod, L. (1993). Finding a place for Islam: Egyptian television serials and the national interest. *Public culture*, 5(3), 493-513.

Ahmed, L., 1992. *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Yale University Press.

Al-Ali, N., 1994. *Gender writing/Writing gender: the representation of women in a selection of modern Egyptian literature*. The American University in Cairo Press.

Badran, M., 1988. Dual liberation: Feminism and nationalism in Egypt, 1870s–1925. *Gender Issues*, 8(1), pp.15-34.

Baron, B., 2005. *Egypt as a woman: nationalism, gender, and politics*. University of California Press.

Bier, L., 2011. *Revolutionary womanhood: feminisms, modernity, and the state in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press.

El Satta, H., 2012. *Gender, nation, and the Arabic novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*. Edinburgh University Press.

Gordon, J., 1992. *Nasser's blessed movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July revolution*. Oxford University Press.

Hatem, M.F., 1992. Economic and political liberation in Egypt and the demise of state feminism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24(2), pp.231-251.

Ibrahim, S. and Calderbank, A., 2005. *Zaat*. American University in Cairo Press.

Matar, D., 2012. Rethinking the Arab State and culture: Preliminary thoughts. *Arab cultural studies: Mapping the field*, 123-136.

Mehrez, S., 1994. *Egyptian writers between history and fiction*. American University in Cairo Press



Sakr, N., 2013. Social media, television talk shows, and political change in Egypt. *Television & New Media*, 14(4), 322-337.

Sakr, N., 2007. *Arab television today*. IB Tauris.

Sakr, N., 2002. Seen and Starting to be Heard: Women and the Arab Media in a Decade of Change. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 69(3), 821-850.

Sakr, N., 2001. *Satellite realms: Transnational television, globalization and the Middle East*. IB Tauris.

Salamandra, C. (1998). Moustache hairs lost: Ramadan television serials and the construction of identity in Damascus, Syria. *Visual Anthropology*, 10(2-4), 226-246.

Salem, S., 2017. Four Women of Egypt: Memory, Geopolitics, and the Egyptian Women's Movement during the Nasser and Sadat Eras. *Hypatia*, 32(3), pp.593-608.

Taha, M. in Eslava, L., Fakhri, M., & Nesiah, V. (Eds.). (2017) *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*. Cambridge University Press, 337-354

Zohdi, Yasmine. 2013. "Egypt's modern history told through one woman's daily struggle." *Al Abram*, 4 August 2013. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/32/77977/Arts--Culture/Film/Egypt%E2%80%99s-modern-history-told-through-one-woman%E2%80%99s-da.aspx>

---

<sup>1</sup> Salamandra 1998; Sakr 2001, 2002, 2007; Abu Lughod 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Only two decades ago Egypt had only two national channels; the rapid proliferation of private media has had a dramatic effect on media production in Egypt, making it accessible to more people and over a longer period of time. Naomi Sakr argues that the decision by the government to license private Egyptian channels was because of pressure of business elites and to encourage investment (Sakr 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See: Al-Ali 1994.

<sup>4</sup> One example is the shift from letters to cassette tapes as a way of communicating with family and friends abroad.

<sup>5</sup> Sonallah Ibrahim is a prolific author; here I focus on the adaptation of one of his novels, *Zaat*.

<sup>6</sup> See: Gordon 1992.