

November 2006

"A Sea Captain in Her Own Right": Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi

Rula B. Quawas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quawas, Rula B. (2006). "A Sea Captain in Her Own Right": Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 219-235.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/17>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

“A Sea Captain in Her Own Right”¹: Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi

By Rula B. Quawas²

To think, to argue, to decide, to write
To talk, undoubtedly--perhaps to fight.
(Elizabeth Inchbald 1809: Prologue)

Abstract

Huda Shaarawi was one of the first Egyptian women who argued for women's liberation, starting with education which would lead to full participation in the social and cultural reform and result in social usefulness and in legal and civic equality. A socialist feminist, Shaarawi promoted a successful program for social change not only from within the existing social and political order but also from within the framework of Islam and its value system. She came to be a speaking subject of feminist politics and a feminist living text for the women of her own generation. She was, and still is, a leader of feminist thought who stands as firmly as men do upon the ground of individual freedom and legal justice.

Keywords: Huda Shaarawi; Egyptian Women; Arab Feminism

Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) is a curious phenomenon among Arab women feminists in the twentieth century. Her lively and insightful contributions to Arab feminism, although forgotten or ignored in the last decade of much twentieth-century discourse, are central to the development of a uniquely Arabic literary voice. By all accounts, Shaarawi deserves to be placed in a more appropriate position in the history of twentieth-century Egyptian culture, early feminism, and women's writing.³ A dauntless advocate of the rights and claims of women in Egypt and of social and cultural reform, Shaarawi, whose world was severely gendered, with a sharp demarcation between the public and private spheres, was one of the first Egyptian women to vindicate the rights of women and to achieve notoriety principally for her championship of women's rights.

Shaarawi argued for women's liberation, starting with education which would lead to full participation in the social and cultural reform and result in social usefulness and in legal and civic equality. Whether writing about education, the social and political equality of the sexes, moral standards, marriage, polygamy, divorce, woman's suffrage, or politics itself, she was always arguing and exerting a substantial effort to be independent and original in an Arab world that demonized feminine independence and would not tolerate deviations from the commonplace. A remarkable Arab woman herself in a revolutionary, tumultuous time, steeped in the nineteenth-century spirit of innovation, Shaarawi took up and lived out in her lifetime not only the liberal call for women's educational and moral equality in Egyptian as well as Middle Eastern circles, but also virtually all of the other related, violently contested questions of the 1920s--questions dealing with the reality of Arab women's severely restricted sphere of activity and pertaining to the principles of political authority, imperialism, liberty, class, marriage, childrearing, polygamy, divorce, prostitution, to mention only a few.

One fruitful way of approaching Shaarawi's feminist thought is through the two intermeshing elements of Egyptian feminism: the cultural-intellectual and the social reform. Shaarawi, who could be identified with libertarian or uplifting heterodoxies, spoke as an intellectual or cultural leader and broke through social constraints while the vast majority of women conformed to a restrictive, patriarchal mandate. Shaarawi ripped away the veil of oppression which concealed social injustices from the eyes of many and called for a cultural reform capable of transforming the individual, the family, and the market place. While recognizing the importance of critical thinking and self-development, she also clearly stressed the collective side of life, a broader cultural transformation. She moved beyond a view of women's rights as ends in themselves and saw them finally as a means to effect a broader cultural transformation and a larger social reform. She held that women should and must enter the public sphere and have the vote because their moral perspective was needed to clean up the corrupt (masculine) world of politics.

Only on the basis of educational and cultural reform, Shaarawi believed, could the rights of women and the moral equality of the sexes be guaranteed. She wrote as a "visionary feminist thinker," and a "moralist" or a "reformist," as an authority on the education of girls and women, and as a political analyst and projector, and as a "memoirist." The multiplicity or medley of her rhetorical voices should not be read as her failure of intellectual control but as her noble effort to sustain a female critique of phallogentric discursive forms and practices. Shaarawi is indeed a socialist-feminist who believed in the possibility of change and of progress, in education as the lever for change, and in democracy; most of all, she believed in individual liberty and in the interconnectedness of public and private spheres. She is a serious theorist whose perceptions lead insight to the tradition of liberalism and to women's issues today.

Everyone familiar with Shaarawi understands that she is a woman who wrote at a time in which neither democracy nor a public feminist movement existed. Initially, she approached theorizing feminism without benefit of the invention of that very term that manifests group or political consciousness by women on the basis of their gender; that is, before any women's rights movement as such yet existed and before the term "feminist" was invented in Egypt. Thinking especially about her writings, we witness a woman who worked and thought foremost as a close, critical, and often highly resistant reader of the cultural and social texts of Egyptian society in the first half of the twentieth century. She was very much an engaged critic, a contextual critic, a cultural critic whose feminist critique was under girded by cultural analysis, a reexamination of the interweave between women and Arab society, a reassessment of prevailing hegemonic, masculinized values and of women's position in society. Her social thought and cultural criticism interplay and explicate one another, and they are energized by her emergent feminist ideology's catalyzing force.

Shaarawi was a representative of the feelings of Egyptian women of her class: their restlessness, their ambitions, and their frustrations. Raised in the harem, she came to rebel against the gender-based restrictions of her society and to question women's place in her nation, choosing to take an active role in effecting changes that would benefit not just women of her own socioeconomic class and intellectual background, but all Egyptian and Arab women. She struggled to cast the spotlight on women, to represent women's hopes of a society free of misogyny and sexual injustice, and to resolve some of

the issues of women's place in the social and political community. If the role of the domestically centered woman can be called the Angel in the House (the British term for such a woman, coined by Coventry Patmore in 1854), the new role of Shaarawi can be referred to as "the Angel out of the House," performed by a woman who ministered to the needs and aspirations of Egyptian women at large through philanthropy and social service. Shaarawi actively supported women's education and suffrage and dared to examine and discuss the concepts or institutions of polygamy, divorce, and marriage which were not often broached at the time and which are intrinsically no less relevant to the well-being of individuals and political communities than are the structures of executive power or the competition for economic power.

Shaarawi's corpus, which always revisits and rethinks the same questions pertaining to social and cultural improvement, shows her forever exercised over how female life gets inscribed in Arab-Egyptian society and how Egyptian society molds the rules and roles of women's lives. She published articles, essays, and letters in *L'Egyptienne*, which was published under the editorship of Saiza Nabarawi, who had attended the Rome conference with Shaarawi and had joined her in taking off the veil. Interestingly enough, twelve years later, an Arabic version, *al-Misriyya* (*The Egyptian Woman*) was published and became a rich reservoir for Shaarawi's writings. Shaarawi's journal articles in *L'Egyptienne* and *al-Misriyya*,⁴ which mark, in a sense, her intellectual apprenticeship and bear witness to her advancing awareness of women's secondary status, offer a case study of how a female journalist managed to create a resonant voice as a critic of society and gender, or at best a "rights" theorist. In her articles and speeches, she displayed a lively critical intelligence and, in accordance with her revisionist ideology, a determination to exercise her own independent judgment. Shaarawi had proved that she could argue her well-formulated insights about social inequities and injustices toward women with a vigorous self-confidence, and to opponents of her ideas she burst forth as a force to reckon with. Her strength was to say clearly and ringingly what other women or erstwhile radicals had almost failed to say and which constantly needs resaying: the egalitarianly feminist rights of women.

One can see that Shaarawi's value is as much in memoir writing as in public authorship. Her memoirs,⁵ which are a form of women's self-inscription, document her apprenticeship in the feminist movement and her family life. Shaarawi seems to live through her memoirs, expressing within them her numerous roles: child, daughter, companion, friend, sister, social critic, feminist, cultural reformer, wife, rationalist, and romantic. She grapples with the complexities of woman's lot as she does in her journal articles and speeches and reveals her transformation from a vital yearning child to a woman of strength and fortitude. The memoirs are a remarkable autobiographical document that reveals the hindsight of commentary and shows the steady progress toward a full articulateness of the author's feminist thought. They become Shaarawi's mirror and her mouthpiece, ventriloquizing her words and self-reflexive point of view.

The memoirs embody a variety of discourses in a form accessible to a diverse reading public, "novelizing" the cultural and social changes of the author's time. In them, Shaarawi uses the confessional, first-person mode and creates a self-validating text addressed to the reader as an equal. She develops a feminist social critique from her own experience and then generalizes from her own experience to a public statement of feminism. Seen in this light, her memoirs are an act of rebellion against the constitution

of society, for in writing them Shaarawi relieves the pain of imprisonment which the constitution of society seems to have entailed on her kind. As Margot Badran (1986) perceptively puts it, they are Shaarawi's "final feminist act," or a "final unveiling," (1) or perhaps one can say that they are a writing revolutionary consciousness that is a refuge from the consciousness of oppression. No matter what they are, they are revelatory of Shaarawi's life within a domestic private world that is not outside the public political one. In her memoirs may be found a chronicle of an epoch.

An intellectual Prometheus, Shaarawi is in a sense one of the first cultural and social critics who subsequently came to be a speaking subject of feminist politics and a feminist living text for the women of her own generation. She self-consciously exemplifies the mature woman speaker and writer with sufficient courage to think for herself and not to view life through the medium of men. Her self-confident assertions and decided views, her subjective candor, her down-to-earth commonsense, even her rough humor and ready wit function to differentiate her critical voice from the public discourse she criticizes and mark her as a strong-minded, rational educator and feminist, attuned to all the ways women have not been represented in life. Her speeches and her writings propose a model of what we would now call "equality" or "liberal-socialist" feminism.

Shaarawi's feminism is potentially although not explicitly revolutionary because she wanted to change, rather than replace, the old authoritative order into a system based on equity and independence. Grounded on the affirmation of universal human rights and an enhancement of female intellectual and social status, endorsed by enlightened literati of both sexes, such as Rifaah al-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Bahithat al-Badia (the pen-name of Malak Hifni Nasif), and Murqus Fahmi,⁶ Shaarawi argued that females are in all the most important aspects the same as males, possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and the same human rights. Understandably, Shaarawi cannot be seen as a lone voice crying in the wilderness for justice and equality. We need to know, however, that even though Shaarawi belongs to a tradition of feminist theorizing and even though some models of resistance provided her with their philosophical assumption of sexual equality and even potential sameness, she seems somehow exceptionally avant-garde. Without doubt, her arguments which proceed by incremental repetition, recurring to certain topics, themes, and images, have deep and lasting implications in the social, intellectual, and political arenas. They are also unprecedented in the systematic character of their analysis of female subjection and in the vision and precision of their critique of earlier prescriptions for women's education.

Through her public lectures and writings, her political speeches and actions, and her personal relationships with the Egyptian leaders and rulers, Shaarawi propounded her arguments for women's rights and promoted a successful program for social change not only from within the existing social and political order but also from within the framework of Islam and its value system. By helping to reform, rather than subvert, the existing social order, she called for a change in manners or cultural mores which aimed at transforming the education and behavior of women in particular and the attitudes of men in general. In permeating her path-breaking writings and speeches with the idea that women are oppressed by men, she moved women from silent objects to speaking subjects and accorded them, including herself, a group identity, a political position from which they could start organizing themselves and making a difference. Her reform efforts were

aimed at the non-existent or flawed education of women of all classes and at the daily practices of men who were motivated by their own desire to bind women ever tighter to the body, forsaking the mind. Of course, her efforts to change the social construction of gender in her day anticipates the contention of Simone de Beauvoir and a generation of social-construction theorists that one is not born, but becomes a woman, that women are not born but made. Above all, Shaarawi sought to create a new Egyptian national identity, a new cultural or social identity that provides the only corrective to the invisibility of women as living, breathing, contributing, participating members of the social and political community and that is based on a shared value-system grounded on the Islamic virtues of egalitarianism, honesty, personal virtue, the fulfillment of social duty, sobriety, and hard work.

The feminist movement that Huda Shaarawi initiated and then led for twenty-four years (1923-1947) was mainly an urban movement that carried undercurrents of Islamic insights and religious impulses, liberal and reformist, of women who were resolved to obliterate the restrictive and prescriptive harem system and, in principle, to all forms of unjust segregation, and who sought to bring Egyptian men and women together in all walks of life, to diminish women's insecurities and their dependency upon men, and to work toward the full potential and development of women. The objects of the feminist reform were inherited laws, social structures, customs, and stilted attitudes, but clearly the most important is pedagogy which was one of the basic concerns of Huda Shaarawi, who saw education not only as the answer to a complexity of social and psychological ills, but also as a process to be pursued rather than a product to be acquired (*al-Misriyya* May 1937: 309). Shaarawi always cherished education as a basic principle and a necessary means of improving and transforming the social order and treated it as the solution to or panacea for women's mental and physical lack of development and as a *sine qua non* for independence, equality, and the virtuous life (*al-Misriyya* May 1937: 310). She not only criticized women's lack of education or illiteracy but retorted that this kind of illiteracy and discrimination against her sex had rendered members of her sex useless characters, living forever under the bondage of ignorance (*al-Misriyya* May 1937: 311). Making female education not only equal, but indistinguishable from male education, could thus enable the improvement and the emancipation of the whole sex.⁷

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, budding women, unlike their male counterpart, had no access to a range of public spaces and to solid education. Women were traditionally educated at home and inculcated in domestic virtues appropriate to their separate sphere, the harem, or the feminine niche, which was considered their shelter from the harsh realities of the world outside. Domesticity dominated Egyptian thinking about women whose voices were to parallel the attributes of the Western cult of domesticity itself: to be passive, submissive, domestic, and self-denying.⁸ Obviously, formal education and serious study were discouraged and various aspects of homemaking, including cooking, cleaning, decorating, and childrearing, were deemed the most important area of study. Of course, not all women succumbed to cultural pressure and retreated to the safe and familiar territory of domestic life. Despite her acute awareness that girls were prohibited from acquiring a solid education, owing to their gender, Shaarawi was determined to educate and cultivate herself. After receiving some occasional, yet inadequate schooling in the harem, the sort which filled up, in a tolerably agreeable way, some of the many hours she had to pass at home, she became

autodidact. Imbued with the spirit of rebellion, she departed from the True Womanhood model and indulged her lively curiosity and active mind by reading voraciously and eclectically. She started buying books from the itinerant peddlers who came to the house and taking books, unbeknownst to others, from her late father's bookcase (*Harem Years*: 41).

Beyond schooling and access to print, Shaarawi was also given cultured society. During the seven years she remained separated from her husband, she found female mentors and had a "time for new experience and for growing into adulthood" (*Harem Years*: 62). She formed an intense friendship with Mme Richards, Adila Nabarawi, Atiyah Saqqaf, and most importantly Mrs. Rushdi (Eugenie Le Brun), who helped to introduce her to the social life of the upper class female world of the 1890s and to provide her with much intellectual stimulation. Shaarawi wrote, "She (Eugenie) often came to me for support to help her endure her life at home" (*Harem Years*: 63). Such friendships, through shared intellectual interests, had become the light in Shaarawi's life. Meanwhile, Shaarawi also benefited from openness to other cultural influences and from increased contact with European and American women.⁹ She traveled in Europe and the USA and attended women's conferences in which she expressed her intellectual capacity and raised the issue of women's liberation publicly, and became a vibrant member and then a vice-president of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship.

Instead of emphasizing the differences between Arab and Western women, Shaarawi often took Western women as her model, ultimately affirming that women should collectively espouse a feminist ideology and perpetuate female networks of alliance and communion. Her connectedness with other feminists made her better able to unfold her faculties, to discover her own truth as an individual, and to further her own possibilities. It is in the context of this idea of cooperative and collaborative bonding that Shaarawi described in her journal articles her relationship and interaction with American feminists who raised serious questions that are still with us today and which touch upon the woman's moral, social, and political life. In her speech in Washington in 1925 (*L'Egyptienne* Oct. 1925), she acknowledged the vast contributions American women had made to the advancement of the international women's rights movement. Also, in the lecture she gave in Egypt on American and Arab feminism, she specifically supported the sincere efforts and quest of Cary Chapman Catt (1859-1947), the American suffragist and advocate for the education of women in politics. She also hailed Alice Paul (1885-1977) as a courageous fighter for women's equality. By gaining an understanding of the intellectual traditions of first-wave noted feminists from other parts of the world and by responding to the tide of revolutionary fervor that was sweeping the Western world, Shaarawi argued that women were entitled to the same basic human rights as men and should therefore stand on their own. Indeed, Shaarawi, like many feminists in the West, denounced the notion that women belong in the domestic sphere, enumerated the various grievances of women in the public sphere, and articulated demands for their equitable education and for their respectful treatment as rational, dignified subjects.

Shaarawi went even further in her search for self-development and self-determination. She learned French and Turkish and reveled in accounts of exotic climes and manners, such as the sublime scenery in Turkey and France where her response to and communion with nature show a self-reflexive interest in the creative mind.

Shaarawi, as President of the Egyptian Feminist Union, traveled quite extensively for a woman: to Rome (1923), Washington (1925), Paris (1926), Berlin (1929), Marseilles (1933), Istanbul (1935), Copenhagen (1939), and Interlaken (1946). As a traveler, she was a cosmopolitan, and rather than assuming her own nation's superiority in culture, she commented on and compared the societies visited in an impartial spirit which we would call now sociological.

Certainly, Shaarawi had female models to identify with and feminine fellowship, but she also had, literally, to invent herself. In Le Brun's first salon in Cairo, she was introduced to a wider social milieu which helped her develop her own style within the general social framework.¹⁰ She started to contemplate her own abilities, to understand for herself her cultural and social milieu, to exercise her intellect and argue for a higher valuation of women's character, and to rally women in sisterly solidarity. She sparked awareness in women and called on them to mobilize for their own rights and to step out of the harem which narrows women's horizon, constricts their affections, and curtails their sense of public responsibility. She also turned to men who, if they would but forego female subservience would, she assured them, acquire better wives and wiser mothers, in a word, better citizens.

It is not easy to exaggerate the immense bravery Shaarawi displayed on behalf of the Arab-Egyptian women. During the national struggle against British rule, she took it upon herself to play a nationalist role and led the first Egyptian women's nationalist organization, the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (*Harem Years*: 112-131). As the head of the Wafdist women, she proclaimed her commitment to the national cause and said, "Let it never be said that there was a woman in Egypt who failed, for personal reasons, to perform her duty to the nation" (*Harem Years*: 126). During the 1919 revolution, many women marched in the streets because they believed that the revolution was as much women's as men's. Sir Valentine Chirol (1920) related that "in every turbulent manifestation women were well to the front" (167). Shaarawi anchored her feminist discourse within the nationalist discourse, pairing her own liberation and advancement with those of the nation. She also embraced and harangued the women marchers and insisted that, as in early Islamic times, women could fight and rule with men. The 1919 revolution, coupled with the atrocities of imperialism, inevitably energized Shaarawi's thinking and helped her to reformulate and synthesize what had been unsystematically evolving intellectual growth during years of private observation. As Margot Badran (1986) contends, the Egyptian revolution made it possible for women to expand their scope of feminism from the harem to a public feminist movement; that is, from a prescribed limited sphere to public activism (20). Truly, for many women, oppression is associated both with the power of the colonizer and with the domineering power of men over women.

In 1923, Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), which focused its objectives on education and social welfare to provide equality between the sexes. Her first contention, that women be fully educated, is based on her belief that women, not only exceptionally intelligent ones, could be, and ought to be, educated. Her objective was elegantly simple and logically indisputable, and her feminist discourse was a reasoned, yet passionate, defense of female intellectual equality and drove a nail in the coffin of the ideology of patriarchal supremacy and protection. Shaarawi argued for the virtues and duties as well as the rights of women. For want of a proper education, she

believed, women had been reduced to a condition of misery and deficiency. For Shaarawi, woman was seen as an artifact of patriarchal culture, a creature that was so enslaved by convention that even her moral responses were vitiated into shallow compliances (*L'Egyptienne* April 1932: 220). Women should not be left immured in ignorance and folly, and they should not be regarded as creatures of pleasure or beings in need of protection. In Shaarawi's time, like in ours, a man's responsibility to practice protection was explicitly part of the Arab-Egyptian patriarchal ideology. In her liberatory voice, Shaarawi warned against the dire consequences if women's duties continued to be prescribed and circumscribed by their familial role and if women were to be excluded from equal rights. She stated if women were to remain slaves groping in the dark, they would degrade not only themselves but their men as well (*L'Egyptienne* April 1932: 220). The education of women and their enjoyment of full rights as equal citizens would ensure the progress of civilization, while their denial, she insisted would imperil the future (*al-Misriyya* Sept. 1940: 388-395). So it is in the interest of enlightened men to promote and advance the cause of women. Here, Shaarawi anticipates twentieth-century existential feminism in her awareness that a purely traditional gender role based on her reproductive capacity condemns women to a life of immanence rooted in the physical. Only through exercising her intellect can a woman exist as a moral being.

Female education was critically important to Shaarawi both as a liberal reformer and as a feminist theorist and proponent of women's rights. As a pragmatist in education, she stressed the need for females to think, to be critical and intellectually engaged, to learn from experience and to be fair-minded, compassionate, and well-balanced between work and play. Her feminist theory aimed at creating autonomous women who could act as helpmates by choice, not playmates by chance. It was in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance Conference in Rome in 1923 that she made the first public announcement of the EFU views on female education. Shaarawi's tone was urgent and exhortatory and her fervent plea was not for herself but for her sex. Speaking of the importance of achieving equal education for women in Egypt, Shaarawi said that if the Egyptian woman prevailed in education, she would be able to claim other advantages more precious still, such as political suffrage.¹¹

Since women's neglected education is the grand source of their oppression, Shaarawi came to venerate education as the royal road to social improvement. Her line of argument is clear. She saw education and learning as a, if not the, key locus for promoting a better social tone and for establishing more progressive social institutions. She maintained that women would never be able to achieve or demonstrate the ability to be independent, reasoning, autonomous human beings as long as they were educated for nothing. If women should enter the polity, Shaarawi recognized, they need improved education, equal legal status, and political rights. Without better education, an improved cultural standing, and political entitlement, women would never be successful wives and mothers. Only well-instructed women make good rational wives and mothers and virtuous moral subjects (*L'Egyptienne* May 1928: 132).

It is not difficult to unpack Shaarawi's use of "virtue" for she does not make it independent of Islamic beliefs. In her view, the degraded situation of women and their intellectual inferiority affront Islam which advocates equality between the sexes and calls out rights to women that family and society prevented them from enjoying. Shaarawi carefully separated social customs from religious injunctions in order to help discard the

stilted traditions that curtailed the functioning of women and arrested their growth. In calling for gender justice and in her brilliant deconstruction of the misogyny masquerading as Islam that so blatantly “inferiorized” women and denied them their human rights which are after all Islamic rights, Shaarawi repeatedly cited names of talented women in the Islamic past in the effort to demonstrate that not only did Islam not oppose education for women but that Islamic civilization provided a rich gallery of learned and pious women. Attention was drawn to the accomplishments of Aisha, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was well-known for her knowledge of religion. There was also Hafsa, another wife of the Prophet, who was proficient in reading and writing. Shaarawi anchored her feminist discourse firmly within the discourse of Islam and responded to the abject conditions of Egyptian women in a progressive Islamic voice by employing the language of the Quran to articulate a new feminism in an Islamic voice.

The interesting point is that Shaarawi entered into the debate of the pro-feminist Islamist discourse generated by Shaikh Muhammad Abdu, a distinguished teacher and scholar from Al Azhar, and his disciple Qasim Amin, a Muslim judge. Both of these men suggested the practice of independent inquiry in interpreting the Quran, the *Ijtihad*, including the reinterpretation of the status of women in Islam. Through *Ijtihad*, they demonstrated that Arab women’s roles which were mostly prescribed by the traditional Islam represented by the *Ulama* (the learned men), who were mostly socially conservative and politically anti-Western, were not in keeping with Islam. Although their ideas were not tolerated by many and drew criticism from religious conservatives, these two young men raised a feminist consciousness amongst people, especially women. Shaarawi herself benefited from their feminist ideas, followed in their path by contributing to the general debate on women’s rights, and started fighting for basic rights for women such as access to education and amendment to the marriage and divorce laws to secure women’s livelihoods.

As a public intellectual, Shaarawi proposed that the most effective way of providing female erudition would be a national network of state-sponsored schools where boys and girls of all backgrounds would be educated. She said that public schools for both sexes would best promote the spread of literacy, knowledge, and ultimately social and political equality. She not only demanded that women have access to all educational facilities in the country, but she also maintained that women should have the right to pursue the same professions as men--medicine, business, law--and even that they should be represented in parliament (*L’Egyptienne* May 1928: 133). At the very least, she thought that women should have control over their lives and should have the right to equal educational opportunities and to any vocation they desire, neither of which was permitted under the laws and traditions of Egypt (*L’Egyptienne* April 1929: 187). What Shaarawi was attempting to do was to disentangle the female body from the restrictive clothing of the political system of subjection and a culture of control. She removed layer after layer of social cloth that throughout history had so tightly bound and restricted women’s physical and psychic independence and claimed that except for physical strength, all distinctions between the sexes are socially constructed. In 1925, Shaarawi could look with some satisfaction over the establishment of the Shubrah Secondary School for Girls, which followed the same curriculum used in the boys’ schools. The progress of education among Egyptian girls soon became noticeable, and Shaarawi’s

plans and efforts to bolster female education and to offer equal opportunities to girls who might eventually pursue university studies were duly rewarded.

The feminist movement in Egypt presided over by Huda Shaarawi had made noticeable progress in expressing its educational and remedial goals. With the spiritual support of Shaarawi and, even at times, with her financial aid, women started to have more or even free access to establishments of higher education, to make strides as teachers, writers, journalists, artists, lawyers, nurses or doctors, and to enter the professions on a par with men. Also, as Shaarawi stepped up the campaign for women's rights and freedom, a great number of new schools and social service societies that catered mainly to the needs and aspirations of women were founded. Some of these included dispensaries for poor women and children, workshops for girls, day-care facilities for the children of poor working class mothers, a ceramics factory, and vocational schools for girls. By founding these centers, Shaarawi revealed the intentions of instructing students in usefulness, cultivating their taste, and sharpening their intellect. Finally at least, schooling became an attainable objective for girls, and women had the option to be lawyers, doctors, and pilots if they wished. Delighted by the burgeoning growth of independent, thinking women, the feminists could now take great pride in the achievements of their many university graduates who were setting a very good example for their fellow Egyptian women and who were reclaiming or creating a public space for themselves where they are no longer rendered as irrational weaklings.

In a speech at the American University in Cairo on November 15, 1935, Shaarawi celebrated the historical accomplishments, both political and cultural, of contemporary women, citing fifty-nine examples of accomplished female writers, journalists, and artists.¹² Certainly, these representative women endorsed the program of liberal feminism which Shaarawi had developed, fostered feminist, nationalist or intellectual interests, and emerged as inspiring heroines for aspiring professional women in their hard-fought battles for complete emancipation. Distinctively, they defined a wide repertoire of subject-positions, each one articulating a different model of female power. It was becoming clear that the daunting, difficult road to women's economic, social, and political emancipation was being paved slowly, yet determinedly.

The more Egyptian women became educated, the more they could boldly protect their own full-fledged rights to education and to be immune to discrimination or prejudice. Resisting a call to return to their proper place in the home, more women were entering the workforce, and more were in white collar and professional occupations, which were nevertheless still male strongholds. Interestingly enough, when Prince Umar Tusun voiced his opposition to women's joining the workforce and undertaking jobs outside the home, Shaarawi defended their work within the context of Islam:

Your Royal Highness, in your opinion half the nation is made up of people without capabilities and rights. However, Muslim law clearly acknowledges and advocates the equality of the sexes and does not ascribe one domain of work to one more than the other. . . . It is as if your highness has forgotten that our religion had given the woman the free range and right to dispose of her goods in any way she sees fit. She is able to sell and secure a mortgage and to bequeath and to testify. . . . The Great Lawgiver has high reverence for the woman, but man refuses to admit that and grant her respect owing to his self-centeredness. He

wishes to constrain woman and deny her any field of action (*L'Egyptienne* May 1935: 243-244).

Clearly, a woman's desire to work was acknowledged as an inherent right, not yielded as a concession.

A study of Shaarawi's writings indicates that she not only worked on better education for women, but she also worked diligently on the reform of family laws. Her contemporary society, she felt, lay in a state of degeneration, in sore need of improvement in connection with judicial laws and legal rights. She offered a plea for the removal of unjust laws and artificial restrictions imposed upon women and asked for a reform of marriage laws seen as particularly harsh on women. She formulated an agenda for the reform of laws regulating family relations from within the existing social and political order. The goals of the agenda included fixing a minimum marriage age, regulating divorce, restricting polygamy, and abolishing the forcible restitution of a wife to her husband, and extending the duration of the mother's custody over her own children in the case of separation from her husband (*L'Egyptienne* April 1926: 57-64). Shaarawi was strongly opposed to unjustified polygamy which, in her view, broke families up, chipped away at the dignity and integrity of women, and kept them in abject subservience forever. Observing her mother's plight as a second wife of an older man and having had first hand experience of being a second wife to her polygamous husband, Shaarawi lashed out at the practice of polygamy and demanded that a man be permitted to take a second wife only if his first wife were sterile or had an incurable ailment. While the Quran allows man to take four wives at a time, Shaarawi and other feminists in the EFU pleaded for the regulation of polygamy and accepted only two in their attempt to protect and strengthen family life and to improve the lot of wives who were often victimized despite clear Quranic recommendations.

Shaarawi placed the family at the heart of political reform and attributed the misfortune in woman's lot to the obstacles being imposed by men. She demanded fixing a minimum marriage age, the interdiction of divorce without serious motives or reasons, the limitations of the right of the husband in his use of the institution known as *bait al-taa* (literally, the house of obedience or arrest), and the right of divorced women to keep their children for a longer period of time. Having earlier encountered the harsh criticism of some religious personalities who had accused her of attacking religion, Shaarawi took great care to justify the demands of the Feminist Union within an Islamic context. If the Union wanted divorces to be handled by religious courts, it was in accordance with the Quranic text which stipulates that the judge has to attempt reconciliation between spouses with the representatives of both. She denounced the use of the *bait al-taa* by certain husbands in order to extort money from their wives, even going to the point of sequestering them without any of the legal protection to which they were entitled and thus putting them in a worse situation than they would be in a government jail. Such a practice contradicted the Quranic saying: "Do not retain them forcibly by revenge, retain them with gentleness or leave them honorably." The divorced woman lost the guardianship of her children when boys reached the age of seven and girls the age of nine. Shaarawi claimed that the Sharia law stipulated that boys should stay with their mothers until they do not need female help and girls until adolescence. Therefore, she wanted the spirit of religious law applied, and injustices remedied.¹³

Even though the marital and family laws had been modestly reformed, Shaarawi gleaned a modicum of success and she could acknowledge some substantial feminist gains: the setting of a minimum marriage age in 1923, the extension of the period of the mother's custody over her children in 1929, and fundamental clarifications pertaining to the woman's right to request annulment. Shaarawi's care for the women of Egypt was matched by a deep anger at the attitudes binding them. She denounced the sexual double standard that demanded that only women remain pure, and thus she condemned prostitution because of its victimization of women. In many a case, she fought to eliminate prostitution, drugs, and alcoholism.¹⁴ She, moreover, assisted in the rehabilitation of poor and imprisoned women. In fact, such compassion and maternal care had been the tie which bound Shaarawi's close circle of women's friends and which animated her salon and the public lectures that she organized for women.

Also, in her concern with the plight of the poor and victimized women of Egypt, Shaarawi asked for political rights and suffrage for women. Elected to the board of the International Alliance for Woman Suffrage in 1926, Shaarawi became one of its Vice Presidents in 1935, when she organized a suffrage conference in Cairo and received Dame Margery Corbett Ashby, the President of the organization and other noted feminists. Nevertheless, suffrage for Egyptian women was still far away, and it was the opinion of Shaarawi that women should be incorporated into the law-making process for it is a right granted to them by Islamic Law, a lost right that must be restored to women. On behalf of women's political rights, Shaarawi engaged with the Islamic establishment, objecting to *fatawa* (legal pronouncements in Islam, done by law specialists on an issue) saying that women should not vote. She also fervently expressed her support of granting the vote to women every time a bill was put forward in parliament. In Cairo in 1944, she made a strong case for women's political rights at the Arab Feminist Conference hosted by the EFU:

The woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights, rights granted to her by the Sharia and dictated to her by the demands of the present.¹⁵

Unfortunately, none of the bills passed, due not only to the fact that the majority of deputies thought women should not be allowed to participate in political life, but also to the lack of unanimity concerning democratic representative government. The vote did not come to Egyptian women during the feminist movement led by Huda Shaarawi, and when it did come it was granted to them after the revolution of 1952 by the President of the Republic, Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956.

Shaarawi had the power to awaken women's aspirations and impart the unshakable conviction that they are attainable. By transgressing the norms of her society and mentioning the unmentionable, she shocked her audience into an awareness of repressive gender norms and influenced her contemporaries enormously. Her intention was twofold: to show that women need and have the same right to freedom for their inner and outer development as men, and to set forth, as a goal for women's aspirations, an ideal of womanhood fundamentally different from that imposed by the culture of the time. Ranging freely over history and religion, she tried to show that sexual equality was not some new and dangerous notion but an old and venerable human ideal. She explored

the significance of women in Islam and looked to history, to Joan of Arc, Cary Chapman Catt, Alice Paul, Qasim Amin, Madame de Stael, Catherine the Second, Queen of Russia, to name only a few (*L'Egyptienne* Jan. 1929: 190-201). She removed woman from the position of being defined solely in terms of her body and argued that women needed as wide a range of occupations as men, instead of the stifling circle of the harem to which they were consigned.

Throughout her life, Shaarawi addressed the cultural pressures that had demonized the productive power of women, excluding it from definitions of respectable society, stressed the legal, political, and economical issues of the EFU, and prepared the way for women to use their minds and talents in domains other than the home. Some successes were achieved in changing the cultural mind of the times, the power relation between men and women, and the social behavior and lifestyle of Egyptian women. Women were able to develop their potentialities and individualities both inside and outside the home and to move more freely within their own country. Educational and vocational opportunities were expanded and improved. Work became a reality for women and all kinds of occupations opened up for them.

Shaarawi had the power to encourage, provoke, and inspire the voices of others. Her public voices--as a feminist, a social critic, and a cultural reformer--became a shared vibrant legacy, enabling many women to defy conventions and assume similar and newly powerful roles for themselves. Women who followed Shaarawi in becoming feminists and social critics include Saiza Nabarawi, who benefited from Shaarawi's example as writer and speaker on women's issues. She challenged domestic definitions of womanhood and advocated the need to expand professional opportunities for women. Another woman who gradually constructed herself as Shaarawi's disciple and heir in a tradition of feminist and social criticism is Amina Said. Said, who read the public speeches on behalf of Shaarawi for the last seven years of the latter's life, saw in this woman a model for the liberal feminist who could speak and write in intellectual domains and argue for women's spiritual and intellectual equality. Still, Fatima Nimat Rashid and Duriyah Shafiq contributed more than any other women activists to the politicization of feminist issues. In 1944, Rashid founded the National Feminist Party in the hope that women would be granted the vote. As for Shafiq, she founded a magazine, *Majallat Bint al-Nil* (*The Daughter of the Nile*) after her return to Egypt from France and launched *La Femme Nouvelle*, a quarterly publication reminiscent of *L'Egyptienne*, focusing on arts, poetry, women's issues, and education.¹⁶

It is obvious that Shaarawi's contemporaries and successors drew on her example of a new, more powerful role for women and exceeded it, in becoming much more strident feminists in their political demands. They bravely produced their own feminist treatises, testifying to her influence. Their feminism took shape as advocacy of a new definition of dependent, submissive womanhood which included public action and responsibility. Not only did these women carry on Shaarawi's work, despite personal differences, they also challenged restrictions on women's lives and found ways of positioning women's discourse in male/public domains. They argued that women should enjoy full participation in political and social spheres and should be granted equal opportunities for education and intellectual development. Their demands encompassed suffrage for women, reform of laws of personal status, better education for women, suppression of gambling and prostitution, health and social measures, and equal pay for

equal work. In every phase of their endeavors, they drew on Shaarawi and her ideas for inspiration, each making her own very separate and individual contribution to the ongoing feminist discussion of the day.

Toward the end of her life, the state awarded Huda Shaarawi its highest decoration, the Nishan al-Kama, in celebration of the changes that the Egyptian society had experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. Marking the one-hundredth anniversary of her birth, Amina Said celebrated the achievements of Shaarawi and hailed her as the founder and foremother of Arab feminism. She said:

Huda Shaarawi is without any contention the leader of the Woman's Rights Movement in all Islamic countries. She spent at least fifty years of her life fighting to elevate womankind and to lift the veil of oppression shrouding the Arab woman. She was the first to take off the veil and to call for complete equity between the sexes in order to help usher the Arab people into a new world of democracy and productivity.¹⁷

Upon her death, Shaarawi was warmly remembered and enthusiastically praised for her multifaceted contributions and her innovative feminist thought. The poet Abbas al-Accad saw Shaarawi as a woman who embodied the virtues and passions of the revolutionary world of the first half of the twentieth century within her own being.¹⁸ Najeeb Hawawini is another poet who noted the enduring importance of Shaarawi's work which is still imbued with plenty of energy and zeal to stir up passions among new generations of readers.¹⁹ Without a doubt, Shaarawi's reverberating memory and huge achievements had endured the passage of time.

What Huda Shaarawi sought was not enlightenment for its own sake, but an intellectual torch that would lead all of humanity from the darkness of ignorance and servitude into freedom's dawn: a light of truth that would liberate the whole world by interpreting and then changing it. Through her words and her life, she reminds us of who we are, of where we have come from, and of how far we have yet to go. Many of her hopes have come true; we have even gone beyond what she thought was achievable. She would doubtless be thrilled to see women being part of the armed forces and of the legislative and executive branches of many modern nations. But we have yet to achieve true equality with men, as the continued attacks on the personal autonomy of women in the domestic and the legal arenas, and the low proportion of women among the top ranks of leadership in business, politics, medicine, and the law so clearly demonstrates. With Shaarawi's writings to inspire us, we can work toward such a goal. Many thousands have died and been forgotten in the fifty plus years that have passed since she was buried, and yet as we read her articles and her memoirs and listen to her arguments, we come to realize that she is still alive and active. Huda Shaarawi remains as vital and necessary a presence today as she was at the turn of the twentieth century. In her absence, she is a living presence. She was, and still is, a leader of feminist thought who stands as firmly as men do upon the ground of individual freedom and legal justice.

References

- Abdel Kader, Soha. 1987 *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society, 1899-1987*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.
- Ahmed, Leila. 1991 *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Al-Ali, Najda. 2000 *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Al-Sabki, Amal Kamel Bayoumi. 1986 *al-harka al-nisaiya fi Misr ma bayn al-thawretyen, 1919-1952 (The Egyptian Feminist Movement Between the Two Revolutions, 1919 and 1952)*. Cairo: al-hayaa al-misriyya al-amma lil-al-kuttab.
- Amin, Qasim. 1992 *The Liberation of Women: A Document in the History of Egyptian Feminism*. Samiha Sidhom Perterson, trans. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Arnett, Mary Flounders. 1965 *Qasim Amin and the Beginnings of the Feminist Movement in Egypt*. Ph.D. Thesis. Dropsie.
- Badran, Margot. 2005 *Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond*. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1 (1): 6-23.
- 1995 *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1977 *Huda Shaarawi and the Liberation of the Egyptian Woman*. Oxford D. Phil Thesis.
- Badran, Margot and Miriam Cooke, eds. 1990 *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. London: Virago Press.
- Chirol, Valentine. 1920 *The Egyptian Problem*. London: Macmillan.
- Cole, Juan Ricardo. 1981 *Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13 (4): 394-407.
- Cooke, Miriam. 2001 *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Hourani, Albert. 1962 *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ibrahim, Jurjit Atiyah. 1998 *Huda Shaarawi: al-zaman wa-al-riyada 2 Volumes (Huda Shaarawi: Age and Avant-Gardism) 2 Volumes*. Lebanon: dar atiya lil-al-nashr.
- Inchbald, Elizabeth. 1793 *Everyone Has His Fault*. 1809 Edition. New York: David Longworth.
- Idris, Hawwa. N.D. *Ana wa-al-sharq (Myself and the East)*. 2 Volumes in 1 Book. Microform. Princeton University Library.
- Khalifah, Ijlal. 1973 *al-haraka al-nisaiya al-haditha: qissat al-mara al-arabiya ala ard Misr (The Modern Feminist Movement: The Story of the Arab Woman in Egypt)*. Cairo: al-matbaa al-arabiya al-haditha.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2003 *The Emergence of Islamic Feminism*. In *Modernising Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Valentine Moghadam, ed. Pp 215-220. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.
- Nasif, Majd al-Din Hifni. 1962 *athar Bahithat al-Badiyya Malak Hifni Nasif, 1886-1918 (The Legacy of Bahithat al-Badiyya Malak Hifni Nasif, 1886-1918)*. Cairo: dar Misr lil-al-nashr.
- Nelson, Cynthia. 1986 *The Voices of Doria Shafik: Feminist Consciousness in Egypt, 1940-1960*. *Feminist Issues* 6 (2): 15-31.

- Raghib, Nabil. 1988 *Huda Shaarawi wa-sr al-tanwir* (Huda Shaarawi and the Enlightenment). Cairo: al-hayaa al-misriyya al-amma lil-al-kuttab.
- Salem, Latifa Muhammad. 1984 *al-mara al-misriyya wa al-taghyir al-ijtimai* (The Egyptian Woman and the Social Change). Cairo: al-hayaa al-misriyya al-amma lil-al-kuttab.
- Shaarawi, Huda. 1986 *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879-1924*. Margot Badran, trans. and ed. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.
- N.d. *dawr al-mara fi al-nahda al-sharkiyya* (The Role of Woman in the Arab Renaissance). Cairo: al-matbaa al-haditha.
- Tucker, Judith. 1985 *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that Huda Shaarawi was called a "sea captain" by King Faisal the First, King of Iraq. On her way to Europe in 1933, she met King Faisal who told her that the feminist movement will keep on thriving as long as she is the captain at the helm. For the full quotation, see Raghib 1988, p. 156. Shaarawi was also called the *raisa* (President) by Saad Zaghlul, a nationalist leader of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution. For the full quotation, see Shaarawi, *Harem Years* 1986, pp.123-124.

² Rula B. Quawas is an Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of Jordan, Amman. She has a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of North Texas. She has been teaching American women writers and American feminism since 1996, and she is a strong advocate of women's rights. She has written numerous articles on American and Arab women writers and has coauthored some textbooks that are currently being used at the University of Jordan. She is the Director of the Women's Studies Center at the University of Jordan and her aspiration in life is to help Arab women shed their shackles and assert themselves so that they could be whoever they are capable of becoming.

³ Some Arab writers have dealt with the achievements of Huda Shaarawi from a general historical sense. For a broad historical overview, see Salem 1984, al-Sabki 1986, and Khalifah 1973. On Huda's life and her multifarious achievements, see Badran 1977 and 1995 as well as Idris N.D.

⁴ Most of Shaarawi's journal contributions in *L'Egyptienne* have been translated into the Arabic Language by Jurjit Atiyah Ibrahim 1998, who has compiled these writings (lectures, speeches, and letters) along with those in *al-Misriyya* in the second volume of her book. Most of the quotations pertaining to Shaarawi's journal writings are from Ibrahim's second volume (unless otherwise indicated) and hereafter will be identified in the text by the journal's title and by their dates of publication, followed by the page number. All English translations from this edition are mine.

⁵ Shaarawi's memoirs, *Harem Years*, have been published in English by Margot Badran 1986. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and hereafter will be identified as *Harem Years* in the text, followed by the page number.

⁶ On Muhammad Abduh and Islamic Modernism, see Hourani 1962. On Qasim Amin, see Amin 1992 and Arnett 1965; on the life and writing of Malak Hifni Nasif, see Nasif 1962. For insightful reflections on secular and Islamic feminism/s in the Middle East, see Badran 2005, Cooke 2001, and Moghadam 2003.

⁷ It is a fact that Islam recognized the importance of education for every believer, man or woman, and that the Prophet Muhammad exhorted that education is a duty incumbent on every believer, since he said: "For all Muslims, education is compulsory."

⁸ For a description of women's lives in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Tucker 1985, Abdel Kader 1987, and Cole 1981. Also, see Ahmed 1991 and al-Ali 2000.

⁹ In her speech in Washington in 1925, Shaarawi acknowledged the vast contributions American women had made to the advancement of the international women's rights movement. See her speech in *L'Egyptienne* Oct. 1925, pp. 33-39. Also, see *L'Egyptienne*, Feb. 1926, pp. 43-51, for the lecture she gave in Egypt on American and Arab feminism.

¹⁰ In the 1890s, Eugenie began the first woman's salon in Cairo. Princess Nazli Fazil, the daughter of Prince Mustafa Fazil and niece of Khedive Ismail, had earlier begun a salon attended mainly by men.

¹¹ For Shaarawi's full speech, see Ibrahim 1998, vol.1., pp. 191-198.

¹² See Shaarawi's full lecture published as a book entitled *dawr al-mar'ah fi al-nahda al-sharqiyyah (The Role of Woman in the Arab Renaissance)*, n.d.

¹³ For Shaarawi's views on divorce, *bait al-taa*, and custody of children, see *L'Egyptienne*, Nov. 1926, pp. 90-94. Also, see her interview with regard to these issues and demands in *L'Egyptienne*, April 1927, pp. 105-109.

¹⁴ See Sharaawi's essay in *L'Egyptienne*, March 1927, pp. 102-104. Also, see her essay in *al-Misriyya*, Oct. 1937, pp. 336-342.

¹⁵ See Shaarawi's Pan-Arab feminism speech in Badran and Cooke 1990, p. 338.

¹⁶ To know more about Shafiq, see Nelson 1986.

¹⁷ See Raghib 1988, p. 46. Translation of the text is mine.

¹⁸ See Ibrahim 1998, vol. 1, p. 375. Translation of the text is mine.

¹⁹ See Ibrahim 1998, vol.1, p. 360. Translation of the text is mine.