Nov-2014

Sexuality, Religion and Nationalism: A Contrapuntal Reading of the History of Female Activism and Political Change in Egypt

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By Jihan Zakarriya[1]

Abstract

Focusing on the Thomson Reuters Foundation Women Survey in 2013 that found Egypt to be 'the worst Arab state for women' (Boros 1), this paper aims at tracing the interaction between sexuality, religion, and politics, in controlling and marginalizing the public roles of Egyptian women throughout the 20th Century, which has reached its climax in post-Mubarak Egypt. I argue that, despite sexual and social abuses, the first decade of the 21th Century has witnessed the emergence of a promising potential of political feminist activism and power in Egypt.

Key Words: Egyptian Feminism, Sexuality, Religion, Politics

Introduction: Gendering of the Concept of Nationalism

As a matter of fact, the word activism is a key word in the formation of the feminist consciousness in Egypt. This is mainly due to the fact that the Egyptian feminist movement is 'compatible with nationalist activities so that Egyptian feminism and Egyptian nationalism reinforce each other' (Mernissi 3). In the 1919 Revolution against the British occupation, Nadine Abdalla explains, the feminist participation was both 'vocal and powerful,' as women rallied under the 'Egypt for the Egyptians' slogan' (5). Led by Hoda Shaarawi, Egyptian women organized the largest women's anti-British demonstration at the time. In defiance of British orders to disperse, women remained still for three hours in the hot sun. However, after independence, women's rights and demands were overlooked and marginalized in relation to the pressing causes of the nation.

In the following analysis, I give a contrapuntal reading of the historical relationship between Egyptian feminism and Egyptian nationalism. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said defines contrapuntalism as a 'comparative' reading 'fully sensitive to the reality of historical experience' (Said 19-20). Stemming from his belief that 'politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought' (1994 16), Said relates the political interests and cultural beliefs of any nation with its colonial experience and international relations. Utilizing Said's contrapuntal theory, this paper traces the interplay between politics, religion and sexuality in modern Egypt, with a specific emphasis on the post-Mubarak era. I argue that successive patriarchal political systems in Egypt sustain and practice gender-based violence and sexual prejudices against women as a means of fostering their political gains and the socio-economic hierarchy.

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Before examining the sexual politics of feminism in Egypt, this paper displays Edward Said's views of the process of politicisation, gendering, and sexualization of the concepts of culture and nationalism. In his analysis of the close relationship between Western colonialism and Eastern nationalism, Said identifies in both discourses, the 'assimilation of culture to the authority and exterior framework of the State' and consequently cultural identity and norms come to defend 'such things as assurance, confidence, the majority sense, the entire matrix of meanings we associate with 'home,' belonging and community' (Said, 1993 xxiii). As the 'highest' expression of belonging, 'nationalism' has not only to accommodates the fact that culture has always 'involved hierarchies; it has separated the elite from the popular, the best from the less than best, the female from the male and so forth,' but also to promote that 'the dialectic of self-fortification and self-confirmation by which culture achieves its hegemony over society and the State is based on a constantly practiced differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself' (Said, 1983 12).The Other and the native are always seen as opposites. Accordingly, nationalism stands for an 'aggressive' value of 'separating, essentializing, dominating, and reactive tendencies', and entails 'a simmering hostility' and 'the absolute opposition' to the 'other' (Said, 1983 33).

Moreover, sex and gender play pivotal role in the struggle between the colonial and the nationalist discourses. In *Orientalism* (1979), Said investigates the role of gender and sex in allocating the Other a permanent inferior position. Since the mission of the developed West was to 'civilize' and help the 'primitive' Orient, the two sides experience 'a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony' (8). One way of inferiorizing and subjugating the Orient or the Other is the recurrent and dominant Western process of sexualizing and feminising it. Said believes that sex, particularly 'feminine penetrability,' has been used as a means of stereotyping the colonized's manners as 'so low, barbaric, and antithetical as to merit reconquest,' and the attitudes of Oriental men towards women as always 'under-humanized, backward, barbaric' (Said, 1979 172). Said emphasizes the fact that in representing the Orient, Western Orientalists and writers gave a very negative and submissive image of Oriental women who are victimized by Oriental men, by convention and by Islam and who, at the same time, are a source of lust and seduction. Thus, not only is the Other stereotyped as uncontrollable and primitive but also the female is established as inferior and appropriated. The colonized body, both male and female, becomes vulnerable to all sorts of control and submission. Within colonial and patriarchal orders, sexuality serves as force subverting and disrupting power relations, unsettling the oppressor and the oppressed paradigms.

In the light of this analysis, Said indicates that woman's 'internal exile' is a sign that, similar to men, 'she too is dispossessed and her identity undercut' (*After the Last Sky* 88). According to Said, then, the inferior position of women is not simply a result of backward cultural attitudes towards women but is an inevitable part of racial oppression and patriarchal discrimination. This is typical of what had happened in Egypt during the first half of the 20th Century. Since the majority of Egyptian people oppose the West in favour of a return to original authentic forms of Arab and Muslim experience, they see the West as a single, monolithic enemy, plotting against Egyptian people and their culture. Consequently, categories of binary oppositions like us and them, tradition and liberalism, religion and secularism and other clichés are used. To defend their culture and identity, Egyptian people protected their women by secluding them. At the beginning of the 20th Century, Egyptian men assign women stereotypical, secondary roles of housewives and rears of younger generation. Women were not allowed to work or to even appear in public without her male guardian. All women wear the Hijab to cover

their body and hair. A woman's honor and pure sexuality were of high importance to the society (Mernissi 7).

Accordingly, with the rise of the Egyptian liberal feminist movement in 1910 led by Hoda Shaarawi, Islamist feminism was launched and led by Malek Hifni Nasif (Mernissi 34). Feminism was seen as a western movement conspiring on Islam in Egypt. Since then, the competition between liberal or Islamist feminists continues to dominate the Egyptian cultural scene. They exchange positions of power and influence in the Egyptian street. In the following analysis, I reflect on the attempts of the State to politicize the two dominant Egyptian feminist trends; the secular and the Islamist. I trace the development of female gendered agency in Egypt; economic, cultural and political, and its relation to the imperial culture and oppressive socio-cultural formations. I explore how Egyptian feminist movements develop their strategies from a dominant preoccupation with cultural and economic rights for women in the 20th Century to an active and persistent political discourse in the 21th Century.

Twentieth Century Egyptian Feminism: A Debate between Democracy and Patriarchy

The struggle of Egyptian feminists for emancipation and equality in the 20th Century can be summarized as a struggle between democracy and patriarchy. Living in a colonized, conservative and hierarchal society, Egyptian feminists in the first half of the 20th Century has to address their problems within a complex political atmosphere full of polarizations, stereotyping and political rivalry. Openly adopting secular and westernized feminist ideas which led her to cast off her veil and to resent social and cultural restrictions on women in Egypt such as confining women to the house and forcing them to wear the hijab over their hair and faces, feminist leader, Hoda Shaarawi, not only challenged deep-rooted religious and cultural traditions, but also disturbed the hierarchal political system at her time. Shaarawi called for changes in the personal status laws, advocated restrictions on marriage age, polygyny, and divorce, and called for the reform of laws governing child custody and inheritance. In 1923, Shaarawi, along with Nabawiyya Musa and Ceza Nabarwi founded and headed the Egyptian Feminist Union (Moghadam 8). In the same year, they all participated in an international Feminist Conference, where Shaarawi attacked the Egyptian authorities as responsible for the social problems of women and poor classes. As a result, in 1924, the new Egyptian Constitution had agreed to raise the age of marriage for girls to 16. Yet, women's right to divorce and the abolition of polygamy were ignored along with the question of women's economic-political rights.

In *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967*, Samira Aghacy argues that 'patriarchal masculinity is a form of 'male power' that is circumscribed in institutions and social mores. This power naturalizes hierarchy and domination over women and subordinate men, taking a variety of forms as it intersects with various family, class, religious and political systems' (Aghacy 9). Aghacy's view of patriarchy is a perfect fit for the political situation in Egypt. By improving certain aspects of women's rights and positions in Egyptian society such as access to education, the regime gained the satisfaction of the majority of the upper and middle classes. Yet, the regime planned to crack down feminist thought. In order to fight the secular feminist trend, conservative ruling party, the Wafd party, supported by Islamists and prominent male intellectuals, writers and politicians led an opposition campaign against liberal feminists. Talat Harb, an influential nationalist and the founder of the National Bank of Egypt, was very harsh and argued that 'the emancipation of women was just another plot to weaken the Egyptian

nation and disseminate immorality and decadence in its society' (Hatem 9). A similar criticism was expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood Group (1928) and Islamist feminists who saw feminism as synonymous with 'colonialism and Western immorality' (Karam 21). Instead, Islamist feminists, Karam continues, argued that what the Egyptian society needs is 'a recognition and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition between them' (21).

Despite being liberal and advanced thinkers, Ahmed Lutfi el-Sayed, Ahmed Shawqi and other Egyptian writers opposed feminism as well. El-Sayed, an anti-colonial activist, the first director of Cairo University and the father of Egyptian liberalism, declared that unlike 'European women [who] had satisfied their demands for individual rights and begun now to compete with men in politics, [Egyptian women], God bless them, do not put up such demands, which would disturb the public peace. They only demand education and instruction' (Hatem 11). Shawqi opposed women's work and university education describing women as 'Canar[ies] that should not leave [their] cages or homes' (Hatem 11). As a result of such an aggressive campaign, women's departments in the Egyptian universities were closed between 1912 to 1919. In this way, since their early calls for women's rights, Egyptian feminists realize that any attempt to change Egyptian women's position in society 'was often legitimised by the needs of society, not by their rights as human individuals' (Ashar 4). Thus, early feminist movements in Egypt, like the majority of Third World Feminist movements, had been stereotyped by the conservative Wafd party as alien to Islamic and Arab culture:

> Third World women activists have been made invisible through a male-dominated discipline of political theory as well as earlier phase of feminism which had serious misconceptions about femininity, motherhood and the family. Western feminisms negated Third World women's choices of paths of political activism which used the local prevalent ideologies and were often located within religious or maternal discourses. (Ashar 11)

After the revolution of 1952, liberal feminist ideas flourished. Since women's support strengthened his political discourse, particularly in his open fight against Islamists, President Gamal Abdel Nasser encouraged what Mervat Hatem has called 'state feminism' in order to alter the image of women in Egypt. According to Hatem, state feminism was 'a selection of policies' that included women's access to 'politics through suffrage and candidacy in the 1956 constitution, women's free access to higher education in 1957, and their integration and increase into the work force by 31.1% between 1961 and 1969. Westernized patterns of life and dress prevailed and women started to appear in public (33-4). Nevertheless, while the voting power given to women strengthens their struggles for better living conditions, they became the 'ballot fodder for political parties, whether Islamists or secular' (Botman 87). Despite Nasser's support of women's causes, his aim was more to control his citizens rather than establish a democratic and free system. This is reflected in the fact that Nasser's policies make women depend on state support. Women have liberty in respects to work and education, but they are still controlled by patriarchal marital laws and strict male guardians. Above all, Egyptian women are marginalized in relation to the process of decision-making and political representation. In addressing Egyptian women, President Nasser was adamant to warn them of what he calls as 'the hypocrite and sexist attitudes of Muslim Brotherhood toward women'. Nasser continues that:

In the year 1953, I met the head of the Muslim Brotherhood and he sat with me and made his requests. The first thing he asked for was to make wearing a hijab mandatory in Egypt and demand that every woman walking in the street wear a tarha (scarf). I told him my opinion is that every person in his own house decides for himself the rules. He replied: 'No, as the leader, you are responsible' […] He said that 'Women must not work'. I said: 'if women want to work, we have to protect and support them. Women may become prostitutes out of need and poverty. Work is a protection to [women's] honour. Preventing women from work is against her interests. Freedom for women is work. Women should work side by side with men. (1958)

In the above quotation, Nasser establishes the Muslim Brotherhood as a 'fascist' group that oppresses women. Unlike Islamists, he trusts women's sexual freedom and defends their responsibility through supporting their public participation and rights with men. Women's economic situations improved a lot under Nasser. A textile factory in Chubra el-Kheima, on the outskirts of Cairo, is an evidence of change of working conditions of Egyptian women: Out of 20,000 workers there in 1975, there were 1,150 women: 400 engaged in the manufacturing of silk, 400 in the manufacture of wool, and 350 in cotton spinning (Botman 88). Compared with other factories, this one had many special features advantageous to workers, and especially to women: housing; transportation to and from work, daycare centers, consumer cooperatives, a clinic, a sporting club, and literacy classes. However, Nasser not only replaces the familial male guardianship over women with the state guardianship, but also establishes the political duality of the civil versus the religious state, setting them as contradictory entities. Consequently, some conservative sectors of the population sympathized with Muslim brotherhood as a religious group oppressed by a secular president, who 'forces women to move outside the traditional roles prescribed to them by their religion' (Ahmed 8).

The policy of 'state feminism' continued under Presidents Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak respectively, but with different outcomes. President Sadat's peace treaty with Israel after the 1973 victory changed political and consequently socio-economic priorities of the Egyptian political system. Presidents Sadat and Mubarak, unlike Gamal Abdel Nasser, head to the West to secure and strengthen their position in power and rule over Egypt. Sadat's 'Infitah or Open Door Economic Policy (ODEP)' (Alterman 16) is a direct expression of the new political alignment with the capitalist West, particularly the USA. The domination of the public sector over Egypt's economy was replaced by domestic, Arab and foreign investments in the private sector. Within the fierce competition of the free markets worldwide, and despite the fact that some sectors of the economy like tourism, infrastructure, trading and merchandising industries flourished, growing Egyptian textile and steel industries established by President Nasser started to collapse. The major attitudes underlying Sadat's socio-economic policies shifted from favouring the poor to favouring the rich. The result is an increasingly dualistic society in which growing class inequality, the mal-distribution of resources and the negligence of the state to people's sufferings become persistent problems in both urban and rural areas (Ajami 27).

Mubarak took the privatization of the Egyptian economy 'to its extremist measures' (Ajami 27). The poor class constitutes a major proportion of population in Egypt. According to the 2008 UNDP Annual Report, at least 20 percent of Egyptian citizens live below the poverty line, while 14.7 per cent of children do not go to school (Nagarajan 24). The ability of the poor to satisfy their basic needs such as food, clothing, education, health and transportation, Nagarajan

explains, has been in decline (24). At the same time, a small portion of the population compiled huge wealth. With the absence of state supervision, the Egyptian society suffered 'wild rents, land speculations, inflation, and corruption' (Hassan 8). Ignoring 'the limitations of the country's administrative system and the power of the military establishment', the economy fell into 'inefficiency, suffocating bureaucracy, and waste' (Ajami 27-8). In his article, 'Yeats and Decolonization', Edward Said perceives that the fatal mistake of many post-colonial and post-apartheid societies is that they 'replaced the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative force; instead of liberation after decolonization one simply gets the old colonial structures replicated in new terms' (74). By the late 1990s and first decade of the 21th Century, Mubarak has progressively and slowly, K.V. Nagarajan noticed, 'amended the constitution in order to give the appearance of liberalization, while ensuring that his rule could never be challenged through the political system' (Feuille 244-5). In this way, the socio-economic and political structure in Mubarak's Egypt was limited to a very small sector of the Egyptian population.

Sadat's and Mubarak's economic policies transformed the long-established social structure of the Egyptian society. The gap between the rich and the poor widens while middle classes suffer harsh economic conditions. Unemployment increased, particularly among young people, while prices of houses kept rising. The unwise political decisions of increasing taxes and retiring subsidies on basic foodstuffs led to strikes and riots. In 1977, massive spontaneous riots, the 'Bread Riots' (Sachs 1), involving hundreds of thousands of Egyptians roamed the street of the capital of Egypt, Cairo. In response, the government canceled its decisions. To either meet their families' needs or to save money to marry, Egyptian men started migrating to the Persian Gulf area. Between 1974 and 1985, more than three million Egyptians—construction workers, labourers, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, as well as young teachers and accountants—migrated. The 1990 Gulf War in particular forced about one million Egyptian migrants in Iraq. Yet, by 1992 the number of Egyptian migrants exceeded 2.2 million. In 2006, the number of Egyptian migrants abroad is about 3.9 million (Zohry 3).

Out of the rapid, dramatic loss of state protection and support, Egyptian men, who could not express their 'patriarchal power' by providing economically for the family,' Suha Sabbagh indicates, tried to assert lost authority through other means–physical violence, greater monitoring of women's behaviour and dress, confining them to the home, or responding negatively to women's demands for education and employment' (3). Other reasons and conditions, such as the prolonged absences of husbands, brothers, and fathers, who either migrate to other countries or inside Egypt for better work opportunities, 'undermine many of the 'classic' patriarchal household, with its head as the provider' (Hatem 51). Yet, though women are left with day-to-day responsibility for the household, women's autonomy and power does not increase as expected, mainly because patriarchal culture still surround women and judge and chastise them if they misbehave. Nasr Hamid Abu-Zeid agrees with Sabbagh, proposing that one of the reasons behind sexual and social control and violence and against women during Sadat's and Mubarak's regimes is the opportunistic interaction between patriarchy, sexism and social politics in the Arab world. Abu-Zeid specifies that:

> Following military defeat in 1967, Arabs increasingly felt a sense of shame. To compensate for his impotence, [the Arab man] resorted in (sic) escaping to the past, to his original identity, to the illusion of manhood. In politics, there was a

move against unity, and on the social level, sectarianism instead of nationalism began to blossom. Religion substituted nation, history and geography. (60)

Abu-Zeid continues that the widespread political corruption, repression and despotism in the post-1967 Arab world bred 'an environment charged with violence on all levels' (61). While Said discusses how oppression produces 'sectarianism and fundamentalism' (Unoccupied Territory 36), Zeid pinpoints 'how Arab man turns against women: does he further need a partner to compete with him or something to defend or die for and protect? Let women go to hell. Let them stay at home, serve their husbands, sweep the floors and raise the kids' (61). In addition to this, President Sadat placed an enormous strain on the Egyptian bureaucracy, the intelligentsia, and the middle class at large. He imprisoned writers who opposed his policy and encouraged the 'Islamization of Egyptian culture' (Kandi 1). To prove to the West that Egypt is a democratic country that respects human rights and values political opposition, President Sadat ratified a constitution in 1971, replacing the one-party system under Nasser, with a multi-party system. Then, claiming the image of the 'believer president', Sadat provided the Muslim Brotherhood the legitimacy to operate more openly (Feuille 12). In this way, Sadat gave Muslim Brotherhood the green light to fight progressive thoughts of Marxists, communists and liberals within universities, in mosques and in media. The Muslim Brotherhood published a monthly magazine, al-Dawa. As the state retreated from its enlightening and supporting social and cultural roles, which distinguished Nasser's regime, Islamists seized the change to dominate the Egyptian street. Although there has been an improved right to education and employment and relative freedom in relation to movement and choice, male control over women's personal lives and sexual behaviour is little changed. Suha Sabbagh affirms that:

Re-islamization of the legal structure in Egypt, a reaffirmation of the centrality and immutability of the *shari'a* have eroded the basis of legal reform. Thus, despite a great deal of attention [paid to the issue of legal status, most Arab women still live under laws which allow the ex-husband broad powers of divorce, give custody of children to the father once they reach a certain age, permit polygyny, and assign women half the inheritance share of men. (14)

Similar to the divided, unequal socio-economic distinction between the rich and the poor, Egyptian women were divided as upper class and lower classes, with different, if not contradictory, attitudes towards life. The first ladies, Jihan Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak, unlike Tahia Nasser, were famous and active public figures. Jihan helped change the world's image of Arab women during the 1970s, while undertaking volunteer work, and participating in non-governmental service to the less fortunate: she worked with the Wafa' wal Amal Rehabilitation Centre for the disabled and the SOS Orphans Village. Jihan's feminist activities broadly focused upon improving women's 'access to an autonomous existence either financially or socially' (De Witt 3). To enforce such an aim, Jihan targeted Personal Status Laws of 1979. In a similar way, Suzanne Mubarak's activities centered upon projects relating to human trafficking and family affairs. She led the Egyptian U.N. delegation in conferences relating to women and children, but with more fruitful results. She launched the "Reading for All" Festival in 1991. In 1985, she founded the Child Museum of Cairo in collaboration with the British Museum and played an important role in the foundation of The National Council for Women in 2000. In 2005, she opened the Hurghada branch of Mubarak's Public Library.

Yet, under Sadat and Mubarak, women's organizations 'have been closely linked with or part of the ruling political party structures. Their main role has been to mobilize women around the goals and tasks set by the party and the state' (Sabbagh 3). This is made explicable with the fact that although the first ladies, Jihan Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak had a strong public profile, it took until 1979 for the first Egyptian woman to be appointed as an ambassador and only in 1987, only four percent of the deputies in parliament were women. While women's organizations focus on the improvements in the fields of female health and education, they did not give due attention to urgent problems of women and children in rural and poor urban slums and districts, who remain without adequate health-care, lack of knowledge to treat simple illnesses, and are reluctant to invest time and money in the education of a female who may not 'use' that education outside the home.

Yet, the revisions of the personal status laws were the great achievement of the state feminist fight. In addition, while liberal feminist State organizations marginalize women's real causes and retreat from the activities related to the civil society, Islamist feminists, under support and leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, remain working with charity, religious education, political universities activities and other socio-economic activities to meet the growing dissatisfaction with the Government. By the end of the 1990s, 'many parts of Egypt *civil society* became synonymous with the Muslim Brotherhood' (Wickham 12). Despite the fact that Islamic feminists offered valuable socio-economic services to poor and lower classes in urban and rural Egypt, they propagate a strict and exclusive form of religious practices that not only depended on outward appearances such as wearing the veil and kept a traditional image of women as followers to men, but also supported harmful traditions like female genital mutilation (FGM) (Wassef 22). Moreover, with the increasing influence of Islamic feminists, they attacked and excluded secular feminists 'for championing foreign ideas and trying to 'Westernize' Egyptian society' (Zuhur 36).

Although the state controlled feminist organizations, independent liberal feminists such as Nawal Al Saadawi and secular feminist groups like The New Woman Foundation (1984) and the Committee for the Defence of Women and Family Rights (1985), came to counter religious fundamentalism (Sabbagh 35). Saadawi's book *Women and Sex* (1972) caused a strong backlash within Egyptian society as she demanded 'unified criteria for 'honour' for both women and men, and denounced social practices which used religion to justify women's oppression' (Krajeski 1). She talked openly about women's sexual abuses and violations like female genital mutilation or circumcision, early and forced marriages, polygamy and male absolute power in relation to issues of marriage and divorce as oppressive practices and not traditions. The New Woman Group was mainly concerned with figuring out a new feminist program which would start off from where the previous movements had stopped. The Committee for the Defence of Women and Family Rights supported the campaign for the amendment of the Personal Status Code. However, throughout the 20th Century, Sabbagh explains, the majority of liberal Egyptian feminists are seen as elites and 'remain vulnerable to the charge that the interjection of women's issues can be divisive and harmful to nationalist or revolutionary goals' (15).

Political Activism and Sexual Abuse in Egypt in the 21th Century: the Proletarization of the Concept of Secular Feminism
In her article 'Who Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano,' Sandra Gilbert argues that 'an axiom of the women's movement is that the personal *is* the political' (31).

Gilbert's arguments is perfectly applicable to feminist activism in early 21th-Century Egypt. The first decade of the 21th Century witnessed huge socio-economic and cultural changes and crises in Egypt. While the political process and policies were stagnant and unchanging, the deteriorating and challenging economic conditions were accelerating. These conditions led to the greatest number of strikes in the history of modern Egypt. Between 2004 and 2008, Nadine Abdalla asserts, more than 1.7 million workers and employees participated in contentious collective actions (1). Abdalla identifies two dominant trends of collective activism during the 2010s in Egypt. First, labor activism began to emerge in 2004 as a consequence of economic policies established by the government of Ahmed Nazif (2004–2011) and political activism started in the same year in objection to Gamal Mubarak's ambitions of running as the next President of Egypt. Nazif's government was called 'the government of businessmen' since the majority of its members were affluent businessmen and traders. Consequently, it promotes economic growth at the expense of social justice and resulted in vast social inequalities. With the weak role played by the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), Nadine Abdalla further explains, 'strikes and demonstrations had become the only influential tools for labour to exert pressure on employers in the private sector or the government in the public sector' (1). The ETUF was founded by Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1957 as the only official representative body for workers. It consists of 23 trade unions and has about 3.8 million members. In spite of its dominant position, ETUF has not met labour's expectations and demands over the past thirty years. Rather, it 'functioned as a mouthpiece for state or regime interests' (Abdella 5). The ETUF leaders not only had been hostile to labour strikes and tried to prevent strike actions, but also defended repressive and unjust practices of the state and corrupt businessmen.

Nevertheless, what is interesting about workers' strikes in 21th-Century Egypt is the fact that influential leaders and organizers of the strikes are women. For example, in the crucial strike of over 20,000 at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the city of Mahalla, December 2006, women walked out first, challenging the men to follow, and shouting, 'Here are the women! Where are the men?' (Duboc 28). The strikers' fight led to further work stoppages at the company and swept through the huge government-run textile industry. These public workers led the way in connecting the struggle against economic deprivation to opposing the government that is responsible. A famous female worker activist is Amal Al-Saad. In 2008, Al-Saad led workers' strike in the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving, the biggest textile factory in Egypt, in response to low wages and rising food costs. Strikes are illegal in Egypt and authorities had been given orders to break demonstrations forcefully in the past. After the end of the strike, Al-Saad was punished by the authority, transferred from her work as a producer to work in the daycare. Yet, she was at the forefront lines of the 2011 revolution (Duboc 29).

In parallel lines with workers' activism, and in opposition to Mubarak's corrupt officials, economic inequality and Gamal Mubarak's potential inheritance of power, new political and social groups formed such as Kefaya (Enough, 2004) and April 6 Youth Movement (2008). Like workers' movements, female members of Kefaya and the April 6 Youth Movement are prominent and effective activists, who share the same fights, dangers and responsibilities with their male colleagues. Feminist activists at the time were not just a punch of highly educated or state-controlled women living in ivory towers and addressing people through media. On the contrary, Egyptian feminist activities in the decade pre-2011 revolution are a rainbow, including female workers, uneducated labourers, and employees, along with educated women like judges, feminist activists, journalists, media figures and common women. So the concept of feminist is proletarized in the positive sense of the word. It comes to reflect poor and oppressed women and

classes. Women like Mona Seif, Asmaa Mahfouz, Botheina Kamel, Nawarah Negm, Sally Zahran, Israa Abdel Fatah, Khaled Said's mother, Gamela Ismail, Reem Maged and others become famous public figures that call for Egyptian people's freedom and equality and not only women's.

The Mahalla labour strike in 2008 was a turning point in the relationship between the two forms of activism. Despite the fact that the main preoccupations of workers are economic and social reforms and fights against corruption while political activists ask for democracy, both groups see political reform and devolution of power as a precondition of any form of positive change in Egypt. Feminists and female activists realize what Third World feminists emphasize as 'the personal is always bound up with the political; domestic and sensual descriptions often have metaphoric importance' (Humm 160). Consequently, they work hard to raise political awareness of poor and common classes all over Egypt. Mubarak's regime reacted mostly to workers' protests with a mixture of indifference, toleration, and sometimes concessions and only resorted to violence to disperse protest actions. However, in the April 6 strike and due to the involvement and support of political activists in the strike, the regime used its security apparatus to pressure and forced the labor leaders to cancel their strike call; those leaders who did not submit to pressure were arrested, beaten, tortured and imprisoned (Human Rights Watch 15).

Additionally, the escalation of the strikes and feminist opposition against the regime brings the concealed sexist and prejudicial customs to the fore. Systematized process of sexual, physical and psychological threats, abuses and violations of female protesters, activists and strikers are openly and publically practised. On 25 May 2005, the day of the referendum, demonstrations organized by Kefaya in front of the Press Syndicate headquarters and Saad Zaghlul Shrine in Cairo were attacked by Mubarak supporters, plain-clothes policemen and thugs, whilst riot police looked on. Women were beaten and sexually molested by police (Human Rights Watch 15). Ironically enough, the same year, the Muslim Brotherhood nominated few numbers of its female members in parliamentary elections and ordered its women to participate in a demonstration to support their candidates, who were protected by the police forces. This is a sign of the complicity of Islamic feminists and Muslim Brotherhood's women with the regime that used their marches and demonstrations to propagate notions of freedom and respect of the opposition to the West, while suppressing liberal opposition and ignoring the rights of working classes.

From January 2011 to June 2013, Egyptian women workers, liberal and Islamist feminists, and political activists play pivotal role in political change in Egypt, first, in driving Mubarak from power, and second, in exposing patriarchal rules of the military council and Mohammed Morsi. During the 18-day uprising of 2011, hundreds of thousands of women took part in the demonstrations, especially up front, facing phalanxes of police or soldiers. Female members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic feminists stayed in Tahrir square, defying their old claims that women should work inside their homes taking care of their husbands and children. Many women activists and protesters were killed. Those who were arrested were tortured and sexually molested. Other protesters went through the humiliating process of virginity tests. Sameera Ibrahim, a 24 years old female activist, was the first Egyptian woman to sue the military council after being forced to undertake a virginity text. Also, the veiled Tahrir girl or the blue-bra girl reflected the sexist and oppressive mentality of the Egyptian police. As the Tahrir girl was dragged by her arms along the street, her abaya is ripped open, exposing her naked torso and blue bra. Despite all these violations, secular feminist writer Ahdaf Soueif has grasped an emancipated post-feminist attitude, explaining that 'here in Egypt today, we are

engaged in an experiment, which is benign, which is civil, which is modern, which is young, which is optimistic, which is inclusive, and which will be a wonderful model for the world. […]This movement does not see gender as an issue. Women are citizens, just like men are' (Soueif 1).

During that time and because of the good relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the governing military council, Islamic feminists, female leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists showed their exclusive practices and launched an aggressive campaign against liberal female protesters and activists, blaming them for taking part in the political struggle and thus exposing themselves to dangers and sexual violations. The situation gets worse under the rule of Mohammed Morsi as *Human Rights Watch* has described sexual violence in Egypt as 'an epidemic.' Tahrir women face organized acts of sexual violence such as rape, sexual assaults and harassment. Joe Stork, deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch, continues that:

> The rampant sexual attacks during the Tahrir Square protests highlight the failure
> of the government and all political parties to face up to the violence that women in
> Egypt experience on a daily basis in public spaces. These are serious crimes that
> are holding women back from participating fully in public life. (Solovieva 1)

The report focuses on the cultural aspect of violence against Egyptian women, but does not consider the political aspect. While Islamic feminists ignore sexual abuses of women protesters, secular feminists, led by feminist Azza Kamel, in response to such sexual abuses, cooperated with a group of young political activists and founded the 'I Saw Harassment Initiative,' which relies upon hundreds of volunteers to stop and record sexual violence against women. Kamel states that 'this is organized violence. We don't know exactly who's organizing it, but there is a political aspect' (Wahab 3). In fact, the political aspect of sexual violence is strong. During the 2011 revolution, there were no signs of sexual attacks in Tahrir square. This phenomenon appeared during the rule of the military council and increased abruptly with President Morsi. The political side of violence against women is also enforced by Nazra and other Egyptian human rights groups. They reported 19 cases of gang rape, of which two cases involved a rape with a sharp rod. Similar to Azza Kamel, human rights activists emphasize that 'the rapes were organized, with the use of the same tactics nearly in every instance,' and 'seem to be designed to scare and shame women into avoiding demonstrations, thus preventing them from practicing their democratic right to participate in the transitional democratic process Egypt I undergoing' ('Targeting Women'1).

Nevertheless, Egyptian women's solidarity in the face of organized sexual terrorism is extraordinary. In February 2013, Egyptian women from all social backgrounds gathered in a one million march against increasing instances of sexual harassment of female protesters, raising the slogan 'Egyptian Women are a red line' ('Egypt: Keeping Women Out' 14). Egyptian women and girls who were sexually assaulted or raped appeared on TV program, with their husbands and fathers, telling their experience of sexual terrorism and violence as a badge of honour. They use their tragedy to fight for an end to violence against women. Thus, women challenge sexual taboos in Arab and Egyptian cultures. With the foundation of Tamarod, the grassroot movement that aimed to collect 15 million signatures by 30 June 2013, the one-year anniversary of President Morsi's inauguration, to force him to call early presidential elections, Egyptian women take essential role in campaigning for change and raising people's political awareness. In the

Egyptian constitutional referendum in January 2014, women constituted 55 percent of participants (El-Bey 3).

Conclusion

This paper traces the gradual development of feminist thought in Egypt in the 20th and early 21th Centuries. It argues that women's causes and emancipation have been part and parcel of the political struggle for democracy and freedom. Yet, I also argue that sexuality and sexism are central political problems in Egypt and that a reform of sexual practices should be incorporated into the process of political change to achieve real transformation of gender and social relations. Such a reform incites a transformation of the traditional power relations of domination and subordination which permeate familial, political and socio-economic relationships in Egypt.

Women activists and participants in political and social movements in Egypt continue to struggle as they (re)negotiate the way they present themselves at home and for the international community. They have to promote their free ideas in parallel lines to nationalist movements that are essentially patriarchal, reductive and also gender-centered. Within the nationalist struggle for independence and sovereignty, women and their causes are at the forefront agenda of struggle. However, improving certain aspects of their rights and situations in the Egyptian society such as access to education and improvement of health conditions, women's political and social rights are overlooked. Their voting rights have not translated into female access to ruling circles and they are asked to return to their home and take care of their families.

There has been a rivalry between Islamic and liberal feminist movements in Egypt, through which both movements enter into deals with the authority. This is the main reason that there is no linear and interrelated progress of feminist thought in Egypt. Both Islamic feminists and liberal feminists fail to address women's needs and rights as individuals and lock women's struggle within traditional stereotypes of women as mothers and wives. Nonetheless, the image of 21th-Century Egyptian feminists and activists is special in the sense that the majority of these Egyptian girls and women are wearing Hijab. Yet they all are liberals who call for a secular state. Also, they come from versatile social, cultural and economic background. Thus, they challenge and counter the stereotyped image of feminists as westernized, affluent women who are separated from the realities and sufferings of common people, or as Islamists who reject liberal ideas.

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