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# Faces of Feminism in Early Twentieth Century Egypt

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FACES OF FEMINISM IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY EGYPT

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Sandra N. Mokalled  
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Accepted by:  
Dr. Amit Bein, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

In the first half of the twentieth century, during Egypt's "liberal age," middle- and upper- class Egyptian women carved a place for themselves in the public sphere. For the first time, women publically demanded social and political rights that had been withheld in Egypt's traditionally patriarchal society. Female figures emerged as leaders of the Egyptian women's movement, and the media followed the actions of these leaders and attempted to glimpse parts of their private affairs. As pioneering feminists, they were the first generation of women to be publically scrutinized by the media. Although the feminist movement during this period was typically associated with a few upper-class women, feminist activism had a variety of manifestations, or "faces." This thesis explores the lives of three of these faces of feminism: Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik, and Umm Kulthum. By using their personal memoirs and writings, newspaper articles, and a number of secondary sources, it attempts to reconstruct their individual lives and to discern the ways in which each woman handled constant public attention, particularly the degree to which they allowed the media access into their private lives. Although they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and had varying feminist visions and strategies, regular public scrutiny impacted the line between their public endeavors and private affairs. The separation between public and private varied for each feminist: while Shaarawi and Shafik maintained a fluid boundary between public and private, allowing for the exposure of certain aspects of their private lives, Umm Kulthum attempted to harden the line between her public career and private life. Ultimately, each woman's life presents a prism through which to discern the opportunities open for women during

Egypt's liberal age, as well as the challenges they faced. Shaarawi, Shafik, and Umm Kulthum represent different experiences within the women's movement, and all three women contributed to the transformation of women's roles in Egyptian society.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Steve and Rim, who have supported me not only through my graduate studies, but through my entire life. My parents provided the foundation, in every sense of the term, to my education and livelihood. Also, my sister Stefani has been instrumental during every step of the process, sitting with me for countless hours while we completed our graduate work and contemplated the future, sharing many laughs along the way. Finally, this work is for my vivacious family in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East.

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Next, I want to thank my committee members. Dr. James Burns not only served on my committee, but I was also lucky enough to be able to serve as his Teaching Assistant for two semesters. His energetic teaching style created a constantly positive environment, and I looked forward to attending each and every lecture. Dr. Mashal Saif provided a wonderful and necessary insight into the field of feminism. She pushed me to think outside of my comfort zone in order to grapple with complex notions in the Middle Eastern feminist experience, and ultimately helped me to write a balanced work.

Finally, I want to thank my graduate coordinator, Dr. Paul Anderson. From our first day as graduate students until the final submission of our theses, Dr. Anderson is there to support us through every step. His office door is always open, and his dedication to students and the graduate program is truly inspiring. I am greatly indebted to the support of all those who have helped me through my two years in the graduate program. Clemson's Department of History has provided a wonderful academic, intellectual, and social experience that I will always treasure.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first half of the twentieth century was a critical period of social change in Egypt, particularly the years between 1919 and 1952, known as the “liberal age.” More than before, middle- and upper- class women were visible in the public sphere, participating in activities such as journalism, education, philanthropy, and the fight for their political rights. Women claimed public space in Egypt, and individual women in Cairo rose to prominence as leaders of the movement for social change, with the ultimate goal of improving the lives of women. Leading female figures increasingly acquired national attention, which inevitably impacted their daily lives, both public and private. As they navigated through professional and personal endeavors, the public followed their actions through the Egyptian and international press. Moreover, a number of women wrote memoirs that reflected upon their individual lives. Thus, there is a rich record about the public personas of leading women, creating an opportunity for historians to study the daily lives of pioneering feminists. By examining their public activities and the revealed—or hidden—private affairs of these women, it is possible to not only identify their feminist consciousness, but also discern the way in which each woman took command of increasing public exposure. This thesis explores the lives of three Egyptian feminists in the early twentieth century: Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947), the president and face of the first Egyptian feminist organization, the Egyptian Feminist Union, Doria Shafik (1908-1975), the middle-class feminist activist whose rebellious nature made headlines across Egypt, and Umm Kulthum (1904-1975), a singer from the Egyptian countryside who ascended to stardom in Egypt and the Arab world.

The development of social transformation is influenced by periods of political and economic change. In Egypt, the nineteenth century witnessed a number of important political, economic, and social changes that laid the foundations for the emergence of the women's movement in the twentieth century. This process began in 1805, when Muhammad Ali (r. 1805-1848), an Ottoman commander, established himself as the khedive of Egypt and Sudan after the withdrawal of Napoleon's French troops. To protect the newly autonomous Egypt, Muhammad Ali implemented a program of modernization, which included industrialization, reform of the health and education system, and the introduction of the printing press into Egypt. Under Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-1879), the Egyptian transportation and communication system became more elaborate, including the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Egypt was now increasingly exposed to the West, as global transportation of people and ideas was linked through the Suez Canal.<sup>1</sup>

These new modernization efforts impacted the lives of Egyptian women in various ways across the nineteenth century. The implementation of transportation networks linking Cairo, Alexandria, and Minya (a city in Upper Egypt) allowed women to travel around more freely, as trams were created with separate compartments for female passengers, to maintain the traditional separation of the sexes. Elite women were more exposed to unrelated males, such as photographers who were hired to take family pictures.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most important change in the lives of women involved education. In the mid-1800s, the expansion of state education resulted in the opening of a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 8.

primary, secondary, and professional schools. For example, the School for Hakimas (female doctors) in Cairo trained women in the medical field, which produced female physicians who could care for women's medical needs.<sup>3</sup> Although nineteenth century elite Egyptian women still adhered to the traditional separation of sexes and the wearing of headscarves and the face veil, the changes occurring within Egypt granted them increased physical and intellectual freedom before British occupation.

In the wake of the Urabi revolt of Egyptian military officers in 1881, British ships arrived at the port of Alexandria in June 1882, purportedly in order to “safeguard” the khedive and foreign economic interests throughout Egypt, principally the Suez Canal. On this pretext, British colonial occupation in Egypt began. The British were most concerned about the strategic value of Egypt—a necessary passageway on the road to India through the Suez Canal. Moreover, the repayment of Egyptian government debt was also a pressing matter, as Europeans had heavily invested in Egypt through bonds. The British also feared the safety of Europeans living in Egypt. Politically, occupation translated into a *de facto* protectorate: Egypt was still an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire until World War I, with the Khedive as its viceroy, while the British served as advisers. Egyptian elites of Turco-Circassian background made up two representative bodies, the Legislative Council and the General Assembly. In reality, the British attained ultimate power, as legislation was required to be approved by British ministers before any action could be taken.

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<sup>3</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 137.

Economically, British occupation did not bring major changes to Egypt. Egypt continued the production of cotton for consumption by European factories. Beyond its strategic interest in defending the Suez Canal, the new British administration was primarily concerned with keeping their new colonial possession a supplier of raw materials for British textile factories. Under British colonial rule, Egypt became fully integrated into the capitalist world economy, though it remained on the periphery. Financially, the increase of European capitalism benefitted some classes, such as the Egyptian upper classes and the new class of educated civil servants, who were increasingly employed as administrators and servants of the British colonial state, while worsening the economic condition of other classes, such as the lower classes and the religious ulama class. Lower class rural workers flocked to cities, as their small tracts of land were taken by the state and dedicated to growing cotton, the cash crop Egypt became dependent on for export, and in the hope of finding new economic opportunities in the urban centers. Likewise, the judicial and legal place of the ulama in religious courts increasingly became less important, as British legal reforms took matters out of sharia courts.<sup>4</sup>

The justification of British colonization of Egypt did not mirror the actual reason for occupation—the protection of British finances and the Suez Canal. Despite the distinctive political character of the occupation, historians have recognized that the British justification for its colonization paralleled the arguments used throughout the British Empire. The “backwardness” of societies, whether politically, socially or both,

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 144-147.

was just reasoning for British intervention. These “other” societies, which, according to Edward Said, were part of the vision of the “East” as constructed by patronizing Western perceptions, were in need of British guidance to help overcome their tyrannical rulers and improve (or replace) their ways of life.<sup>5</sup> In Egypt, the justification for British occupation also involved a gendered argument: the oppression of Muslim women and their domestic lifestyle of seclusion. This aspect of Egyptian society rendered the Egyptian ruling class incapable of self-rule, as the ruling khedives secluded their wives, daughters, and concubines in the backwards place of the harem. The seclusion of women and the practice of polygamy were incompatible with a modern, Victorian lifestyle, which the British considered to be the supreme culture of the world. As a result, the colonization of Egypt was justified in terms of the benevolent British bringing superior rule and culture to a backwards society. Historian Leila Ahmed makes this point in her book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, and goes further by arguing that British justification for colonization was an attack on Islam, through the position and lifestyle of Muslim women.<sup>6</sup> Lisa Pollard also stresses the British argument for occupation, particularly emphasizing the domestic lifestyle of the khedive and ruling classes, who practiced polygamy and secluded their women in the harem.<sup>7</sup>

The colonial discourse that attacked Egypt and Islam as backwards through the position of women sparked fierce reactions from Egyptian intellectuals. The most explosive work to emerge was Qassim Amin’s *Tahrir al Mar’a* (Liberation of Women) in

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

1899, which called for major cultural and social transformations within Egypt. He argued for compulsory primary school education for women, a change in laws regarding divorce and polygamy, and the abolition of the veil. Amin represents Islamic modernists, who desired to improve women's position within the family unit, citing new religious interpretation as justification for improvement. Others, however, argued for a more conservative change. For example, Islamists advocated a return to "true Islam," arguing that the rights of women should be grounded in Islam, since Islam gave women certain rights, such as inheritance and property-holding rights.<sup>8</sup> Women also joined the debate about reform. With the rise of the women's press, women were able to present a wide range of views concerning questions of culture, identity, and change.<sup>9</sup> These views represented the continuation of a process of change already underway in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the debate on the liberation of women was part of a larger issue regarding the direction of progress and modernity in Egypt—which was not a binary argument of modernizer versus conservative, but rather a debate that included a broad spectrum of opinions.

Intellectual activities, however, soon took on a decidedly anti-British tone. With the continued British discrimination towards Egyptians, as well as uneven political development, anti-colonial sentiments were increasing by the turn of the century. At the start of the twentieth century, three nationalist parties formed with plans for Egyptian independence. Women involved themselves in this political culture by creating political

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<sup>8</sup> Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

associations that supported men's parties.<sup>10</sup> Egyptian nationalism and national consciousness became the most important consideration over gender, class, and religion. After the economic and political hardships of World War I, which resulted in placing Egypt under a British protectorate, nationalist sentiment intensified. The desire for independence reached a climax with the 1919 Revolution. Led by the elites, Egyptians rose up in demonstrations to demand independence, which marked the debut of middle- and upper- class women in the public sphere. After several failed negotiations, Egypt was eventually granted quasi-independence in 1922.

The Constitution of 1923 established a liberal constitutional monarchy in Egypt. According to Albert Hourani, the "liberal age" in the Middle East was the time in which Arab intellectual thinkers were inspired by the liberal ideologies of Western Europe. In practice, this meant experimenting with secular politics and modern culture, while still attempting to preserve Islamic culture. In Egypt specifically, liberalism translated to a pluralistic government and the re-thinking of society through the secular principle of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Liberalism continued in Egypt until the 1952 coup d'état by low-level military officers, the Free Officers, which immediately ended the monarchy and negotiated the removal of British presence. Despite the implementation of democratic processes and institutions, the liberal age of Egypt was a period of political turmoil and uncertainty. Competition among the ruling class and persistent colonial interventions resulted in constant power struggles between the Parliament, the Palace, and the British,

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmed, 170-173.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

who all held a measure of power stipulated by the constitution. This rendered the government ineffective and incapable of attaining the ultimate national goal of independence, even after it was formally granted in 1936, as well as relieving social and economic problems. As a result, groups outside of mainstream politics began trickling into the political system and gained popularity among the Egyptian population. Political and ideological ferment intensified in the 1930s and 1940s, due to the worsening economic conditions of the Great Depression, followed by increased industrialization and self-sufficiency brought on by mobilization during World War II.<sup>12</sup> These new groups were established by the effendiyya class, the new urban, educated middle class, who were native Egyptians and represented Egyptian authenticity, unlike the elites of largely Turkish origins. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt, and the Young Men's Muslim Association gained widespread support from the population by using ideology that appealed to the masses, such as Islam, socialism, and Communism. Women also joined a number of these emerging groups, and they established their own organizations, such as the Egyptian Feminist Union, with the dual goal of gaining political rights for women and gaining Egyptian independence. Together, these organizations supported various forms of Arab nationalism, a concept that many Egyptians could identify with due to its all-encompassing nature: the Arab character of Egypt, including culture, language, and religion, formed the basis of identification.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Selma Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution, 1919-1952* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Thus, the movement for social change in the lives of women emerged in a time of great change. Egypt's status in the world changed from an autonomous Ottoman territory, to a British colonial possession, to a semi-independent nation-state in only a few decades. This tumultuous period inspired optimism for a brighter future in Egypt, yet also struck fear during a time of uncertainties in the political and economic environment. Women were able to take advantage of this period of constant changes to push forward an agenda that would improve the lives of women in a traditionally patriarchal society in areas such as education, healthcare, marriage, and politics. There was a serious debate on the role of women in Egypt, which reflected the larger debate on social progress in Egypt. Moreover, the debate cannot be reduced to arguments advocating an affiliation with Western culture and secularization, versus the maintenance of indigenous, Islamic culture. Characterizing the debate as two binary and competing strands reduces the complexity of social change in Egypt. Women either articulated ideology or demonstrated behavior that encompassed a range of opinions about the direction of change in Egypt. This included combinations of Western and Eastern culture.

In order to clarify the importance of the everyday lives of pioneering female activists in Egypt, it is important to explain the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchal customs reflect a society in which men, the dominant group, are considered superior and therefore hold power in all the important institutions of society. In these societies, women are a subordinate group and are considered inferior.<sup>14</sup> This does not imply that women are powerless and deprived of all rights. In Egypt, women could rise up to become powerful

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<sup>14</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 139.

women who asserted control over the domestic affairs of the household and their sons. Furthermore, Islamic law, *sharia*, guaranteed women access to property and inheritance rights. During the nineteenth century, upper class women were mostly secluded in the harem and could only emerge in public with the permission of a male relative, and fully veiled. They were also denied access to public education and at most were educated in their homes by foreign tutors. Lower class women were much less secluded, because they were required to work in order to supplement their family's income. They were, however, devalued labor whose output was not rewarded fairly.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, with the rapid changes occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Egyptian women publically sought emancipation from the restrictions imposed by their patriarchal society. Women dramatically emerged in the public sphere during the 1919 Revolution, marking the beginning of the organized and highly vocal feminist movement in Egypt. Middle- and upper- class women no longer lived their lives in seclusion. Instead, they publically fought against patriarchal customs that subordinated women—first by resisting seclusion, followed by the articulation of and struggle for an agenda that would improve the status of women. The work of pioneering feminists was truly groundbreaking, as they took control of their lives in an effort to remove the label of inferiority placed on them by patriarchy.

As in the case of patriarchy, there are many different definitions of feminism. Scholars of women's history and gender history ascribe a variety of criteria to discern

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<sup>15</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective" in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 34.

feminist actions. In this work, I largely follow the definition of historian Margot Badran in her discussion of feminism in Islam. Badran defines Egyptian feminism within the context of Egyptian women's experience: "An awareness of constraints placed upon women because of their gender and attempts to remove these constraints and evolve a more equitable gender system involving new roles for women and improved relations between men and women."<sup>16</sup> Thus, feminism in Egypt involved not only awareness and attempts at emancipation, but also the development of a new equal relationship between men and women. Badran further makes the distinction between what she labels invisible and explicit feminism in the Egyptian feminist experience. Invisible feminism encompasses conscious activism or the articulation of ideology outside of the public sphere. Invisible feminism takes place in the private sphere, largely within homes. Before the 1919 Revolution, invisible feminism was the only type of feminism that could occur in Egypt, although it also continued after 1919. Explicit feminism involved actions or the articulation of feminist ideology publically and often within an organized institution.<sup>17</sup> After the 1919 Revolution, feminism as an explicit movement emerged. The creation of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923 institutionalized the feminist movement. On the other hand, some women did not self-identify as feminists, but their actions demonstrate a desire for female empowerment. Although they did not identify themselves as feminists, in this work, I consider these women feminists because of their deeds—they are feminists in practice. In the context of rapid political changes, women articulated their

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<sup>16</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2009), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*.

feminist consciousness and agenda for improving the social, political, and economic opportunities granted to women, which would lead to a new, more equal relationship between men and women.

Studies on the women's movement in Egypt have explored the Egyptian feminist experience, and Badran's *Feminist Islam, and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* and her more recent *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, represent some of the most influential studies on Egyptian feminism. One of the major points of debate is the origin of the feminist movement in Egypt, which some historians, such as Leila Ahmed, attribute to the colonization of Egypt. In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Ahmed argues that the feminist movement began with the British attack on the "backwardness" of Egyptian women. To the British, the veil became the symbol of political and social backwardness, and Egyptian intellectuals responded with ideas to improve the status of women, thus sparking the feminist movement.<sup>18</sup> However, Badran does not consider the origins of the feminist movement in Egypt to be exclusively linked to British colonialism. Badran attacks those who "imprison" the narrative of Egyptian feminism "in a frame story of Western colonialism."<sup>19</sup> Rather, she argues that the advancement of women was a gradual process that began with the transformations of Egyptian society throughout the nineteenth century, which allowed a change in attitudes towards patriarchal customs and the development of a feminist consciousness.

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<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, 151.

<sup>19</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* 24.

Moreover, historians have refuted the assertion that Egyptian feminists were Western agents of colonialism, simply adopting Western ways to emulate their European colonizers. Badran argues, “Egyptian feminism was not a subtext of colonialism or ‘Western discourse,’ but an independent discourse that simultaneously engaged indigenous patriarchy and patriarchal domination.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, rising gender consciousness attacked both traditional and Western culture. The West was not considered alien and bad, while the East and tradition as authentic and good. Unlike Ahmed, Badran writes that this polarization is inaccurate in describing the attitudes of Egyptian women, as “Such a reduction obscures the complexity of cultures and forecloses the notion of hybridity” and “perpetuates the polarization and politics of difference that colonialism constructed.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, in exploring the lives of pioneering Egyptian feminists, their actions and ideology encompass both traditional and Western culture.

Historians also agree on the importance of nationalism in the rise of the feminist movement. The nationalist struggle of 1919-1922 created an opportunity for women to escape the domestic sphere and engage in public activity. In the wake of the 1919 Revolution, middle- and upper- class women sought liberation for their nation and for themselves, both politically and socially. Beth Baron, Lisa Pollard, and Hanan Kholoussy use symbolism of the family, home, and marriage to explain the reforms occurring in the lives of women. Baron argues that both nineteenth-century transformations and colonial discourse led to the rise of reforms, while Pollard and Kholoussy argue that reform

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<sup>20</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

involved the entire family in order to refute colonial discourse and prove readiness for independence.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, interpretations of the origins of the women's movement for reform in Egypt have become focused on women's symbolic maternal and domestic roles within the male-produced familial rhetoric of Egyptian nationalism.

A survey of the literature of feminism in Egypt also reveals the presence of a number of biographies on feminist women. While Sania Sharawi Lanfranchi tells the story of her relative Huda Shaarawi, Cynthia Nelson explores the life and accomplishments of Doria Shafik. Both historians utilize the memoirs written by these women, as well as oral interviews with family members in order to dissect the lives of these two leading feminists. The work of Shaarawi and Shafik shaped the trajectory of the women's movement in Egypt, and Lanfranchi and Nelson have provided great contributions to the literature of Egyptian feminism.

Similar to recent biographies, I explore the lives of three leading women engaged in feminist activity in the early twentieth century. Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik, and Umm Kulthum were prominent in the media because of their participation in a combination of journalism, political culture, philanthropic activities, and/or cultural activities. Each woman represents a different social class, resulting in varying social, political, and feminist experiences. Despite varying feminist ideologies and strategies for activism, Shaarawi and Shafik were leaders of the institutionalized feminist movement in Egypt. Contrastingly, Umm Kulthum was a feminist in practice, not a self identified

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<sup>22</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005); Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

feminist, but her practical form of feminism reached a broad audience. I ask how occupying the role of a pioneering feminist, constantly in the public eye, impacted the careers and private lives of these three women. In order to explore this question, both the challenges presented and opportunities opened by their feminist activities must be examined. Although their careers were not limited only to the liberal age in Egypt, focus will be placed on this period, 1919 to 1952, when women took advantage of liberal freedoms available, such as relative free speech and free press.

As the oldest of the three women, the life of Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) is the first to be examined. Born in the late 1800s to a wealthy Egyptian father and Circassian mother, Shaarawi's elite upbringing brought her into contact with ideas circulating among intellectuals about the advancement of women. Although she could not display her feminist actions publicly before 1919, Shaarawi's career as a feminist began before the 1919 Revolution, as she demonstrated her feminist consciousness in her home and through intellectual gatherings of women. Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, marking the beginning of an institutionalized feminist movement in Egypt. During her time as President of the EFU, the organization demanded political rights for women, a change in the personal status law, equal secondary and university education for women, and increased employment opportunities. Although the movement was dominated by the upper class, Shaarawi became the face of the feminist movement. She represented Egyptian women while making contacts with feminist women and organizations in both the West and throughout the Middle East. Shaarawi's life sheds light on the way in which a first tier, pioneering feminist handled public scrutiny and

navigated through the uncharted territory of explicit, organized feminism in a politically and socially changing Egypt.

Doria Shafik (1908-1975) emerged as an admirer of Shaarawi, as Shaarawi played an integral role in granting Shafik a scholarship that allowed her to earn a doctorate from the Sorbonne. Born in the early 1900s, Shafik came from a middle-class Egyptian family. Unlike Shaarawi, because of her later birth and middle class background, Shafik did not experience life in the harem, where women lived physically secluded from unrelated men. She harbored strong connections to the West, and years in Paris resulted in strong skills in the French language and inspired her to dress in Western-style clothing. Shafik hoped to make the feminist movement a mass movement that included all social classes, as the EFU represented only the elite and alienated lower classes. She founded three journals and her own feminist organization in 1948, the Bint al-Nil (“Daughter of the Nile”) Union. Shafik represented the dynamic feminism of the middle class, who hoped to spread the campaign for political rights, as well as to relieve the social problems of poor urban and rural women. The highly confrontational style of Shafik resulted in a large degree of publicity, which occurred during the tumultuous political situation of Egypt during and after World War II.

Umm Kulthum (1904-1975) represents a very different form of feminism—she was a feminist in practice, without identifying herself as a feminist. Shaarawi and Shafik were activists who articulated a feminist agenda. Umm Kulthum, however, was a role model while not being a part of a feminist organization, nor did she articulate a feminist ideology. Umm Kulthum was from a low-class family in the Egyptian Delta. Upon

discovering her incredible singing voice, she and her family moved to Cairo in the 1920s, where Umm Kulthum established herself in the entertainment industry. She became Egypt's greatest star. I argue that Umm Kulthum clearly demonstrates feminist actions during her career. Using shrewd business skills, Umm Kulthum took control of her own career and carved a place for herself in the entertainment industry. Umm Kulthum raised the level of respect given to female singers, as she behaved autonomously and exhibited dignified demeanor throughout her career. Not only the cultural symbol of Egypt, but also a feminist, Umm Kulthum's constant exposure in the public limelight impacted her personality—but she never lost sight of her humble origins and moral standards. As a result of widespread fame and continued connection with the Egyptian countryside, Umm Kulthum was a role model for many females were not exposed to the upper- and middle-class activism of Shaarawi and Shafik.

Although Shaarawi, Shafik, and Umm Kulthum will each have their own distinct chapters, the careers of these three women overlapped in the first half of the twentieth century. They established themselves as feminists during the same period of political, social, and economic changes in Egypt. Aside from being Egyptian Muslim women, these three unique women share an important characteristic: they all operated from Cairo, the largest urban center in Egypt. While engaged in feminist activity, all three women resided and worked from Cairo, which supports the conclusion that the Egyptian feminist movement is an urban phenomenon. Thus, the development of Cairo as a major urban center merits brief explanation.

The fifty years between 1847 and 1897 were critical to laying the foundations for the physical expansion of the city, which occurred in the first two decades of the twentieth century. During the rule of Ismail Pasha, when Egypt was still an autonomous entity within the Ottoman Empire, urban planners developed canals (most notably the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869), laid railroad lines, and extended telegraph lines.<sup>23</sup> After the British colonized Egypt in 1882, Cairo was widened to include the rugged terrain north of the city, the desert of the elevated plateau to the east, the border of the Nile to the west, and two islands in the center of the Nile. These areas were made accessible through transportation lines, irrigation projects, and draining systems, the foundations of which were established by Ismail's planners.<sup>24</sup> Cairo became both physically larger, as well as a more efficient city. Moreover, canals and irrigation projects allowed for agricultural reorganization that created an agricultural surplus, allowing the population of Cairo to grow.

As a result of these improvements, Cairo witnessed incredible population growth. An "urbanization revolution" occurred throughout Egypt at the start of the twentieth century: a complete reversal of the demographic balance between city and countryside ensued, as there was a mass movement of population off the land and into the cities.<sup>25</sup> Cairo attracted most of the newly urbanizing population. Cairo offered employment opportunities, which many people in the rural areas were hoping to find due to the oversaturation of rural areas. Additionally, improved health conditions in the city, due to

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<sup>23</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 113.

<sup>24</sup> Abu-Lughod, 132.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

sanitation laws requiring the disposal of waste and water drainage, and the opening of hospitals and clinics, led to decrease in disease epidemics. This created another pull factor for rural migrants. Between 1917 and 1927, “Cairo grew faster than ever before,” with its population exceeding one million inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> It was precisely during this decade that the feminist movement exploded as an institutionalized movement. Cairo was an asset to Shaarawi, Shafik, and Umm Kulthum, as the urban center granted them opportunities for exposure to the public. Cairo allowed for the actualization of feminist activities, and this is a central theme that is shared in the lives of all three feminists.

In reconstructing the lives of Shaarawi, Shafik, and Umm Kulthum, I answer a number of questions. Questions that will be explored include how each woman achieved her feminist goals, and whether socio-economic background impacted their strategies for feminist actions. While examining their lives, the political situation in Egypt will undoubtedly be an integral part of their stories. Thus, Egyptian political history will be intertwined through each chapter. In doing so, I can attempt to answer the question of how the political backdrop helped, hindered, or inspired the goals of each feminist. The goal of this thesis is to discern the impact of constant public attention on the careers and private lives of these pioneering feminists.

It is important to note the difficulty of gauging the impact that feminist actions had on these trailblazing women. Since these women were all embedded in society, there is an irresolvable dynamic between the individual and society. They are part and parcel of Egyptian society, making it difficult to discern whether each feminist was a leader in her

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 125.

actions, or rather played a passive role, responding to shifts in society at large. For example, Umm Kulthum's public support of Arab nationalism—displayed through songs that identified with Arab culture—could be attributed to her adept awareness of cultural changes. However, it is not certain whether she came up with the idea to create songs with Arab themes, or if she was influenced by society and others around her. What is certain is that she made the final decision on which songs she recorded and performed, and she was heavily involved in the process of lyrical and musical composition. Thus, I argue that she was an agent in producing songs that supported Arab nationalism, which demonstrates her feminist actions. Although it is difficult to grapple with the impact that society had on each feminist, I largely argue that each feminist seized agency through her life, taking on an active role rather than simply responding to changes in society.

Through the examination of the individual lives of Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik, and Umm Kulthum, I argue that although they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and had varying feminist visions and strategies, the autonomous lives of pioneering feminists were inevitably affected by public attention. Regular public scrutiny impacted the line between their public endeavors and private affairs—including personal relationships, family, and domestic space. The separation between public and private varied for each feminist: while Shaarawi and Shafik maintained a fluid boundary between public and private, allowing for the exposure of certain aspects of their private lives, Umm Kulthum attempted to harden the line between her public career and private life. Despite their differences, the public continued to be interested in all aspects of the lives of these feminists, both public and private. As the first generation of women in the public

sphere, these pioneering feminists experienced tension between public exposure and their private personal lives.

In order to present an argument that involves the boundary between public and private, it is important to briefly explain the notions of public and private in Egypt, as well as how they are used in this thesis. In Egypt, as in the Middle East in general, the public-private axis was profoundly impacted by European colonization. Egyptians adopted the European public-private dichotomy, meaning that public encompassed the masculine realm, while private encompassed the feminine realm. Colonial dichotomies such as public/private, modern/tradition, and East/West often framed Middle Eastern women's history, and Leila Ahmed's discourse of the veil is a major example of this dichotomous framework for Egyptian women's history.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, western liberalism, which Egypt experimented with during the first half of the twentieth century, embraced public-private in order to define citizenship and democratic statehood. Thus, notions of public-private became a potent argument against patriarchy, and Egyptian feminists used this argument to demand legislative change in private spheres (e.g. marriage, divorce, kids) as well as in public sphere (e.g. political rights).<sup>28</sup>

In practice, the public-private is dichotomy also linked with class. In Egypt, women's social class impacted access to public space: traditionally, upper class women were physically separated from unrelated men in the harem, while lower class women

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, "Public and Private in Middle Eastern Women's History." *Journal of Women's History* 15 no. 1 (2003).

<sup>28</sup> Suad Joseph, "The Imagined Boundary in the Imagined Nation/State/Community: the Lebanese Case." *Feminist Review* 57 no. 1 (1998).

were not, as they participated in the economic sector to help their families financially.<sup>29</sup> However, beginning in the late nineteenth century, upper-class women sought a place in the public sphere, while still adhering to the traditional separation from males. Thus, the public-private axis was not binary, but rather represented a continuum, impacted by such variables as class, economic status, and education.<sup>30</sup> As a means of empowerment, particularly after the 1919 Revolution, Egyptian women carved their own public space, which brought benefits to their lives as well as encouraged overall social change. At times, women consciously linked their public and private realms as a means to improve their situation and further social change.<sup>31</sup> This linking of their public and private lives is what I argue Shaarawi and Shafik did during their careers. Umm Kulthum, by contrast, did not intertwine her public life with her private life, since she was not consciously advocating for social change, but rather had her own brand of practical feminism. Thus, while the public-private dichotomy is complex, in this work, public encompasses all activities outside of the home, while private refers to personal, domestic affairs.

This thesis seeks to tell the life story of three unique women during the first half of the twentieth century. The political, social, and economic developments that occurred during this period allowed them to make decisions that impacted their lives through both new opportunities and new penalties, and the careers of all three individual women provide a prism through which to discern these new openings and challenges. Ultimately,

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<sup>29</sup> Asma Asfuraddin, "The Hermeneutics of Gendered Space and Discourse," in *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies*, ed. Asma Asfuraddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the focus of this work is the interplay between the public and private lives of Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik, and Umm Kulthum.

## CHAPTER ONE

### HUDA SHAARAWI: THE GODMOTHER OF EGYPTIAN FEMINISM

As the leader of the first institutionalized feminist organization in Egypt, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), Huda Shaarawi became the face of the movement in its early years. An elite woman from an influential Turko-Circassian family, Shaarawi committed herself to improving the lives of women through her three magazines, philanthropic endeavors, and association with international feminists. She articulated a feminist ideology that advocated women's entry into the public sphere and equal educational, professional, and political rights. Shaarawi took advantage of her elite background and connections in Cairo to advance both a feminist and nationalist agenda. By grounding her arguments in Islam, Shaarawi and the EFU were successful in winning legislative reform in the 1920s for issues such as women's access to secondary and higher education, vocational training, and a minimum marriage age. As a pioneering feminist, Shaarawi represented upper-class Egyptian women, pushing to reform a society that limited women's careers and social opportunities because of patriarchal custom. Huda Shaarawi dedicated the second half of her life to fighting for the dual rights of women and Egypt. Thus, her efforts became part and parcel of her daily life, both public and private.

Shaarawi's public and private life became inextricably intertwined with her feminist and nationalist activism. Along with her responsibilities as the President of the EFU, she involved herself in the political affairs of Egypt, which endured continued hardships with Britain and within its own government. The tense political climate in

Egypt amplified Shaarawi's involvement in the nationalist struggle and the demand for full participation of women in the political sphere. Shaarawi's position as the recognized leader of the feminist movement and involvement in politics resulted in a busy daily life—one filled with international travels, writing, and meetings with notable figures. As a result, I argue that that Shaaraw intentionally blurred the line between her public and private life, particularly since her home, the very symbol of a private domestic space, functioned as a regular meeting place in Cairo for feminists and political figures. Thus, her public activism consumed her private life; there was little separation between the two spheres. As a rich widow from the age of 43, Shaarawi was the head of her household, allowing her to be the leader of both her private domestic space and the women's movement. The fluidity that Shaarawi allowed between public and private reinforced her dedication to fighting for women's rights and for Egypt's status as an independent nation and regional leader. Publically and privately, Shaarawi was on stage, poised to represent Egyptian women and the struggle for equality.

The 1919 Revolution marked the beginning of Shaarawi's career as a feminist in the public sphere. From 1919 until her death in 1947, Shaarawi worked relentlessly to achieve the goals set by the EFU and thereby spread her feminist ideology to the upper classes through her publications, international conferences, and charity events. It is useful to divide these almost three decades into shorter blocks, as each period represents a different strategy to implement social change, and a constantly changing political climate that influenced Shaarawi. The first period, 1919-1922, are the years of fierce Egyptian nationalist demonstrations and negotiations, when Shaarawi and other elite women

worked alongside men to demand independence. The ten years following the 1922 unilateral declaration of independence and the Constitution of 1923 represented a period of new beginnings for Egypt in general and for the feminists in particular. Egypt was adjusting to its new liberal constitution and continuing the demand for full independence, while the EFU was founded to institutionalize the feminist movement and seek legislative change for women. On both fronts, the focus was on Egypt: Egyptian women and Egyptian nationalism. Beginning in the mid-1930s until Shaarawi's death in 1947, for both the Egyptian government and women, increased communication with Arab nations, particularly with Palestine, reflected a more decisive shift towards Arab nationalism. During this final period, while still the leader of the EFU, Shaarawi made nationalism her priority. Before delving into her career as an explicit feminist, it is important to explore Shaarawi's life before the 1919 Revolution. From her early years, it is possible to discern her developing feminist ideology, as well as her invisible feminist actions during her years in the harem.

### The Making of a Feminist Leader

Through her memoir, which Shaarawi dictated to her secretary during the final years of her life, Shaarawi made available to the public a glimpse into her recollection of life as a young girl in the harem in the late nineteenth century. This allowed for the spread of her feminist ideology regarding topics such as education, marriage, and work opportunities. According to Badran and Cooke, "Personal memoirs can offer special insights into the workings of patriarchal institutions and ideology because they can show

how their imperatives are internalized and suppressed or how they cause conflict and inspire attempts to escape from their control.” This assertion reflects the importance of memoirs as a source of knowledge about the early feminist consciousness of Shaarawi.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, writing a memoir was a way in which Shaarawi erased the line between public and private, as she recorded the story of her youth for anyone to read. Shaarawi’s memoir reveals that her feminist consciousness began forming during her teenage years living in an upper-class harem. Her thoughts demonstrate that she was uncomfortable with the segregated and restricted way of life in the harem, and her actions reflect the invisible feminism against the patriarchal customs that often occurred in private spheres.

Shaarawi was born in Upper Egypt in 1879 to a wealthy Egyptian father, Sultan Pasha, and a Circassian mother, Iqbal. The family lived in a large mansion in what was then the newest part of Cairo, which was an area of streets and gardens between the Nile and the heart of the city. Shaarawi was educated in French and Turkish by tutors in her home. Although she memorized the Quran by age nine, she did not master Arabic grammar, as it was considered unnecessary to teach girls to read and write Arabic. Shaarawi was a curious young girl who loved to learn, and she snuck into her father’s large library where she would choose books to read for hours. Even at a young age, her high social status granted her opportunities that most other girls would not have, such as private tutors and access to a full library. However, her social status was a double-edged sword. She witnessed and was frustrated by the educational and social privileges granted

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<sup>32</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, “Huda Sharawi,” in *Opening the Gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 41.

to her brother, Umar.<sup>33</sup> He was allowed to go to school, learned to read and write Arabic, and was given ponies to ride—all opportunities Shaarawi did not have, only because she was a girl.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most revealing passages of Shaarawi's memoir is the transition from a free spirited girl to a young lady in the harem. She suddenly shifted from playing outside with all the boys, to being restricted to only the company of women, who were required to ask permission to leave the harem with a full head scarf and face veil. Shaarawi writes that this change at age 11 seemed very strange. This transition also marked the age when it was considered appropriate for young girls to have an arranged marriage. For young Shaarawi, this meant betrothal to her first cousin, Ali, forty years her senior. She watched as repairs were made to her house and expensive jewels bought for her, but she was unaware that these were preparations for her wedding. This ignorance points to her youth, as a thirteen-year-old bride. According to Islamic law, a woman must personally agree to marriage before a shaykh will perform the marriage ceremony. When she was told that she was to marry Ali, Shaarawi writes that in reality, she had no choice, as she was asked, "Do you wish to disgrace the name of your father and destroy your poor mother who is weeping in her sickbed and might not survive the shock of your refusal?"<sup>35</sup> She had to agree to the marriage, or she would bring shame to her father and her family by refusing.

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<sup>33</sup> Lanfranchi, Sania Sharawi, *Castling off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi, Egypt's First Feminist* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 11-14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 15.

Shaarawi was, however, very close to her brother. She turned to him for support, to discuss culture, knowledge, and her blossoming feminist consciousness. She would later turn to him when she needed help during the nationalist struggle.

<sup>35</sup> Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: the Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, trans. Margot Badran (New York: the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986), 54.

This reflects the workings of a patriarchal society. Even though religiously, women had a right to agree or disagree, social customs made religious law irrelevant. A woman had to accept the decision her family made, and Shaarawi was no exception to this custom. This is an example of Egyptian men deviating from Islamic law in order to maintain a misogynistic custom—which Shaarawi would later fight against as President of the EFU.

Shaarawi's initial reaction to news of her marriage was a broken spirit, and she “stood sobbing by the window for nearly three hours” after agreeing to the marriage. Her thoughts were devoted to ways in which she could “avoid the marriage.”<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates that even before she got married, Shaarawi was scheming for ways to avoid the fate that she did not choose for herself. Although the wedding festivities distracted young Shaarawi, who reveled in the attention she received as a bride, she quickly realized the temporary nature of the magical wedding. Shaarawi writes:

Bitter reality followed. I wept for my trees. I wept for my childhood and for my freedom. I saw in this barren garden a picture of life—the life I would live cut off from everything that had delighted me and consoled me in my melancholy childhood. I turned from the window with a heavy heart and avoided the garden for a long, long time, unable to bear these aching reveries.<sup>37</sup>

Shaarawi expresses disgust and anger towards her marriage. Even though she could not do anything to change her situation, Shaarawi still fostered thoughts of contempt and desire to break free from her life as the wife of Ali Shaarawi. Her husband would not allow her to visit family and friends, was displeased at her phone conversations, and disliked her piano playing. Melancholy led her to regularly “weep profusely”—until she

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 58.

discovered that her husband was secretly visiting his former slave and their children.<sup>38</sup> The news of his infidelity was a joyful event for Shaarawi, as she knew that her husband signed a contract promising never again to contact his slave. For Shaarawi, this meant a separation from her husband. She boldly states in her memoir, “I was determined not to return to him whatever happened.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike many women, Shaarawi had the opportunity to break free from her marriage, and she was not shy about expressing her delight about this separation.

From the beginning of her marriage, Shaarawi’s feminist consciousness was taking shape. Not only was she forced to marry her much older first cousin, whom she always looked up to like a brother, but he also took away the little freedom she had in her two years living in the harem. Her shock and angry thoughts towards marriage, along with her constant weeping at her limited freedom and mistreatment, reflect a woman who is aware of the unfair life that she did not choose. Shaarawi’s happiness only returned when she separated from her husband. Thus, Shaarawi displayed invisible feminism during her early years as a wife. Shaarawi’s unhappy marriage experience as a young girl is highly likely to have influenced her actions as an outspoken feminist: through the efforts of the EFU, a minimum marriage age for girls (16 years old) was implemented into Egyptian law in 1923.

However, Shaarawi returned to her husband after a seven-year separation. She agreed to return to Ali Shaarawi because her brother Umar refused to marry until his sister was reunited with her husband. Moreover, Shaarawi knew the importance of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 61.

preserving the family estate with Ali Shaarawi, which would continue to bring their family great social and political power. Shaarawi stipulated that Ali would have to leave his first wife for good if he wanted her to return, which points to her stance against polygamy.<sup>40</sup> The almost decade long separation from her husband was instrumental in Shaarawi's life, and she described this period as, "a time for new experiences and for growing into adulthood."<sup>41</sup> After their marriage resumed, Shaarawi gave birth to a daughter in 1903, Basna, and son in 1906, Muhammad. Her children brought joy to Shaarawi's life, and she writes that, "Only my children were able to help me bear the bitterness of life."<sup>42</sup> Both children remained close to their mother, and Muhammad would eventually move his own wife and children into the Shaarawi home on 2 Qasr al-Nil Street. Despite the importance of the Shaarawi home as a meeting place for feminist and political figures, Muhammad and his children were separated from the professional role played by the mansion, as they lived on a different floor than the meeting spaces.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that even though Shaarawi occupied a professional role within her domestic space, her relationship with her children and grandchildren were kept private. Her family life was safely on the private side of the blurred public-private divide.

Another important event in Huda Shaarawi's life that contributed to shaping her feminist consciousness and eventual feminist ideology was her friendship with her

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 83.

Shaarawi continued fighting against polygamy, and the end of polygamy was one of the nine main principles of the EFU, published in November 1923.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>43</sup> Lanfranchi, 186.

The couple lived downstairs, while Shaarawi conducted the business of her magazines and meetings with important figures upstairs.

mentor, Eugénie Le Brun, at the turn of the twentieth century. Le Brun was married to the prominent Egyptian politician Hussein Rushdie Pasha. Le Brun occupied an interesting position because of her French background. She was aware of the greater freedom of movement and education afforded to women in Europe, as well as the increasing debate on women's rights occurring in the West. Yet she was also a Muslim convert in Egypt, married to an Egyptian man, which forced her to follow the traditions of Egyptian society. However, her dual position allowed her to initiate early activities for the advancement of women. For example, she opened a salon where women gathered to discuss and advocate the advancement of women. She also wrote a book explaining that the "backwardness" of Egyptian women's lives is a result of patriarchal social customs, not because of Islamic precedence.<sup>44</sup> Le Brun brought her young friend to these gatherings of women, where Shaarawi was exposed to the blossoming ideas of women's liberation.

In her memoir, Shaarawi describes this experience with Le Brun as the "intellectual awakening" of upper-class women, which was stimulated by salons and later lectures given by women. Shaarawi reflects that this process of discussing ideas about the advancement of women convinced her of the need for an association to bring women together, both intellectually and socially. As a result, with an endowment from a number of Egyptian princesses, Shaarawi helped create the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women in April 1914.<sup>45</sup> Through her friendship with Le Brun, Shaarawi's feminist

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<sup>44</sup> Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

consciousness increasingly developed, as she was exposed to an atmosphere dedicated to debates on women's social position and advancement.

Through her brother and husband, Shaarawi also had the opportunity to become involved in nationalist politics. Both men backed politicians who advocated independence from the British. Shaarawi inevitably came to discuss politics and the future of Egypt with Umar and Ali, and she believed in winning battles constitutionally. They sought Shaarawi's opinions on political matters, and they were supportive of Shaarawi's beliefs that women should play a role on the political scene of Egypt. Umar was especially supportive of his sister, and he supported Shaarawi intellectually, with her charity initiatives, and with her interest in politics.<sup>46</sup> Thus, from the turn of the twentieth century, Shaarawi was concerned with the plight of Egypt. She took advantage of the high position of her husband and brother in order to express her political opinions. Because of her high social class, Shaarawi was exposed to intellectual and political debates about nationalism and the future of Egypt. She would continue using her connections with elite men to involve herself in the political sphere, despite the lack of suffrage for women.

Along with her experiences in marriage, the years in which Shaarawi participated in intellectual debates were essential to the development of her feminist ideas. Although she does not explicitly describe in her memoir the topics that the women discussed as a group, Shaarawi does make clear that she began articulating the need for women's

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<sup>46</sup> Lanfranchi, 38.

Because of his constant love and support, Shaarawi was devastated with the sudden death of Umar in 1918, at only age 37. She felt her children were the only happiness she had left in her life.

advancement. Her activities in the years before the 1919 Revolution are the manifestation of invisible feminism, as defined by Badran, because her activism was private and not open to the public. Shaarawi reflects on the invisibility of their association, writing that women “dared not call [the association] a club, as our traditions would not allow it.” Because the harem system still prevailed, it was “not acceptable for women to have a place of their own outside private houses.”<sup>47</sup> However, it is clear that Shaarawi was attempting to loosen the patriarchal hold on women by gathering women for intellectual debates. Moreover, she was greatly influenced by her early invisible feminism, as she created a cultural center for upper-class women after the founding of the EFU that served a similar purpose of intellectual debates—but this time, it could be called a club and was located in the public sphere, pointing to the great gains women made in a few decades.<sup>48</sup>

### Emerging into the Public Sphere, 1919-1922

Before Shaarawi could create a cultural center in the public sphere for women, Egypt experienced a few years of national tension at the end of World War I. During the war, the British cut Egypt’s ties with the Ottoman Empire and made Egypt a protectorate. Therefore, Egypt became part of the war and was used as a staging ground for British military campaigns. Egyptians assisted the British war efforts and believed that after the war, Egypt would finally be granted independence.<sup>49</sup> However, at the end of the war, three Egyptian nationalist men, headed by Saad Zaghlul, were denied the opportunity to

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<sup>47</sup> Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>49</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 108.

present their demands for independence to the British government and on the world stage at the Paris Peace Conference. These leaders became known as al-Wafd al-Masri (The Egyptian Delegation) and spoke throughout the nation in order to gain support for their demand for independence. As a result, the highly suspicious British deported these leaders to Malta. Their deportation led to an eruption of demonstrations and strikes throughout Cairo and other cities and towns.

The mobilization of a women's network became important during this 1919 Revolution. From 1919-1922, women were involved in both highly visible nationalist agitation, which Badran calls nationalist militancy, and more invisible activism (such as in schools, where women were trained to take over jobs from foreign women).<sup>50</sup> Upper-class women held their own single-sex demonstrations in March 1919 in which they marched in protest to end British occupation. Shaarawi, along with 150-300 elite women left the harem and took to the streets of Cairo. Together, they marched as a solitary group, clad in black robes, black headscarves, and white veils covering their faces. The women carried flags and placards reading, "Down with occupation," and chanted slogans such as "long live freedom and independence."<sup>51</sup> When the women reached the home of Saad Zaghlul, they were surrounded by British troops and were kept waiting under the sun in the blazing heat for two hours. Shaarawi was determined not to leave, and she confronted British soldiers, who were carrying weapons leveled to the women. However, the British commander of Cairo city police, Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, ended the standoff

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<sup>50</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 74-77.

<sup>51</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 110.

by forcing the women to get into carriages and leave the scene.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, these elite women were no longer secluded and became highly visible and vocal during the nationalist struggle. Moreover, Cairo was the center of women's activities — which would continue to be the case with the feminist movement in Egypt and the founding of the EFU in Cairo.

Elite women even established the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC) in January of 1920 as an auxiliary branch to the male Wafd, and the organization elected Shaarawi the first president. The WWCC supported the Wafd by carrying out tasks such as keeping contact with deported Wafd members, speaking to British authorities, maintaining strikes and boycotts against British goods, and keeping Egyptian morale high. Even though there was danger involved in these women's activities, since the women were under close British surveillance and Egypt was under martial law, men and women viewed women's role as important to the nationalist struggle. Moreover, the nationalist movement brought husbands and wives of the upper class closer together. Shaarawi remembers the years between 1919 and 1922 to be the time of greatest collaboration with Ali. She writes, "My husband kept me informed on events so that I could fill the vacuum if he were imprisoned or exiled," which points to the important role that women played as a link between the British and nationalist men.<sup>53</sup>

For Shaarawi, the nationalist struggle was another time during which her public and private lives were intertwined. Shaarawi and her husband were both major figures in the nationalist movement, as they were each important leaders of nationalist men and

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<sup>52</sup> Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

women, respectively. When Ali had a falling out with Zaghlul, he returned early from Versailles, where the men were pleading the case for Egyptian independence to European leaders. This caused the Wafd to turn against Ali. Shaarawi also did not believe her husband's return was justified, and she placed more importance on Egyptian independence than on the happiness of Ali and their marriage. Shaarawi was able to continue to act as part of the Wafd, despite Ali's position, yet she also remained loyal to her husband. She managed to maneuver between her political and marital duties. This reflects her success in handling her responsibilities as a wife while taking on a new role as a political figure. Sadly, Ali died from heart failure not long after his return from Paris, in February 1922 at age 68. Shaarawi was devastated at the loss of her husband. But even as a widow in mourning, she continued serving as president of the WWCC and maintained her commitment to the nationalist struggle.<sup>54</sup> Shaarawi's actions show resilience during difficult personal and national times—for Shaarawi, these difficult times were intertwined.

Because of their age difference, Shaarawi was only 43 at the time of her husband's death. Although the loss of her husband was a time of grieving for Shaarawi, it also signaled her liberation. No longer under the control of a male guardian, Shaarawi could travel and engage freely in feminist activism without having to ask the permission of her husband. Moreover, by this time, Basna and Muhammad were young adults, meaning that Shaarawi was not obligated to stay at home to take care of young children. This change in Shaarawi's family situation allowed her to commit to feminist activism, as

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 126.

she was in control of the family's fortune and mansion. As the head of the family, Shaarawi could increasingly blur the line between her public role and private affairs, positioning herself as the face of the Egyptian feminist movement.

On February 28, 1922, the British issued a unilateral declaration of independence. The decision was taken because the British knew that the 1919 Revolution could happen again. The Wafd, which became the leading political party, and the women's Wafd both objected to this declaration of independence, because it included four points that kept Egypt's sovereignty limited. Although Egypt was responsible for all its internal affairs, Britain still had full authority in foreign affairs, they were present as government advisers, kept a military presence in Egypt, and the Sudan would be administered by both Egypt and Britain.<sup>55</sup> The Constitution of 1923 created a two chamber Parliament, with a Senate and a Chamber of Deputies. The two chambers shared legislative authority with the King; bills passed by Parliament had to be signed by the King before becoming a law. If the King rejected a bill, the ministers could pass it with a two-thirds majority. The writers of the liberal constitution, Egyptian lawyers, were sympathetic to King Fuad and the British. Therefore, the intention was to constrain the mass political movement and limit the strength of the Wafd, who represented the new political elite. The result was an ineffective Egyptian government, with constant power struggles between British officials, the King, and the Wafd.<sup>56</sup>

Despite objections, in the wake of independence, Egyptian feminists were optimistic about the future. The Constitution of 1923 declared all citizens equal, with

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 79-84.

<sup>56</sup> Botman, 30.

equal civil and political rights. However, three weeks later, electoral law restricted political right only to males. This was a major disappointment for women who fought alongside men during the nationalist struggle, and, as historian Beth Baron writes, “In short, the nationalist movement may have eventually ended British occupation, but it did not make women full citizens of the states.”<sup>57</sup> This denial of women’s suffrage can be partly explained by the lack of “revolution” in the nationalist struggle. The 1919 Revolution was not really a social “revolution” in that it was led by the Egyptian elite, who had no intentions for socioeconomic transformations. During the revolution, rural uprisings were quickly suppressed, taking away the possibility of a revolution involving all social classes. British occupation had come to a partial end, thanks to the efforts of elite men and women, but the electoral law suggests that men were not prepared to give women a place on the political platform. The Revolution was, however, a push for Egyptian territorial nationalism. The leaders of the revolution framed Egypt’s existence as a historic nation with the right to full independence. They ignored the older focus on loyalty to Islam and the Ottoman Empire, as well as the alternative—the newer allegiance to an Arab nationalist movement. Instead, Egyptian nationalism triumphed. The Wafd pushed the idea that Egypt and the Nile Valley, which included the Sudan, was a distinct national entity, and that Egyptians were an ethnically and linguistically distinct race.<sup>58</sup> Thus, after the 1919 Revolution, unilateral independence, and the 1923 Constitution, the Egyptian government hesitated to make external political connections. Independent Egypt

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<sup>57</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 220.

<sup>58</sup> Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40-43.

was the centerpiece of discussion, both politically and socially. The political climate and the actions of Huda Shaarawi and the feminist movement reflect this Egypt-centered ideology, as the women embraced the idea of the political and cultural distinctiveness of Egypt.

The denial of suffrage to women was a blow to Shaarawi, who made the decision to leave the women's Wafd and turned her attention on confronting Egypt's socioeconomic problems. In March 1923, on the fourth anniversary of the women's demonstrations of 1919, Shaarawi and her fellow feminists founded the Egyptian Feminist Union. Through the EFU, Shaarawi could focus on improving the status and rights of women within an independent, highly visible organized feminist movement. A few months later, Shaarawi received permission from Prime Minister Yehia Ibrahim Pasha to send an Egyptian delegation to attend the Ninth Congress of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), an organization established in 1904 by Carrie Chapman Catt that worked to promote gender equality and human rights, in Rome. Shaarawi attended the conference, along with Nabawiyya Musa and Saiza Nabarawi. Their trip to Rome was crucial in a number of ways. In 1920, Shaarawi and her colleagues were stopped from attending the same conference, taking place in Geneva, by their husbands. But the delegation of 1923 was different because none of the three women in attendance were married—Shaarawi was a widow, and Musa and Nabarawi were both single. Thus, they only needed the permission of the Egyptian government.<sup>59</sup> At the congress, the women learned about the international women's movement and made contacts with international

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<sup>59</sup> Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 129.

feminists—relationships Shaarawi would continue cultivating throughout her career as the president of the EFU. More importantly, their experience in Rome influenced Shaarawi and Nabarawi to remove their face veils upon their return to Egypt. Before disembarking the ship at Alexandria with an unveiled face, Shaarawi contacted her son-in-law, Mahmud Sami, to make sure her act would not put her daughter's social life or marriage in jeopardy. She did not want to create a scandal for her daughter because of her own actions. Sami approved of Shaarawi's plan, saying that it was time for such a gesture in Egypt, particularly for Shaarawi, who had a flawless reputation, making unveiling a legitimate act.<sup>60</sup> Shaarawi's precaution once again points to the clear separation between her own public life and her children: she kept her relationship with her children private, and she did not want them to be impacted by her feminist actions. Shaarawi's children were one of the few parts of her life that she solidly kept away from the public.

### Egyptian Nationalism and Radical Liberal Feminism

After the dramatic removal of her veil, Shaarawi, through the EFU, continued what Margot Badran terms radical liberal feminism. The actions of Shaarawi and the EFU are considered radical and liberal because they were focused on dismantling the system of female segregation and seclusion, first through the dramatic act of unveiling, then with the ideology associated with such an act.<sup>61</sup> In November 1923, the feminist women published nine main principles of the EFU, which focused on social, political, legal, and moral equality. These included the right to higher education for girls, a change

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<sup>60</sup> Lanfranchi, 96-98.

<sup>61</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 124.

in marriage customs, prohibition of polygamy and divorce without the woman's consent, implementation of a minimum marriage age, and the promotion of public health and hygiene. In order to achieve their goals, the EFU built up finances from grants, member subscriptions, and individual contributions, thanks to systematic fundraising in Egyptian high society.<sup>62</sup>

Shaarawi's own feminist ideology reflected the principles of the EFU. Her ultimate goal was the reform of the authoritative and paternalistic order of Egyptian society to one based on gender equality and independence of women. In doing so, a new Egyptian national identity would be created: a social and cultural identity to include women as participants in the social and political community of the nation. This new Egyptian national identity would be based on a value system grounded in an Islamic framework. She sought the "destruction of the misogyny masquerading as Islam that so blatantly 'belittled' women and denied them their human rights which, after all, were Islamic rights," as she argued that women's roles were socially constructed and not keeping with Islam.<sup>63</sup> Shaarawi clearly separated religion from social custom, which was a way in which she sought to avoid being attacked as anti-Islamic. For example, on issues such as inheritance, she conceded that laws should not be changed, because rules about inheritance are clearly written in the Quran. But issues such as polygamy and veiling did not have clear rules (Quranic moorings) and therefore laws should be open to interpretation and reform. She believed that women should have control of their lives,

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<sup>62</sup> Lanfranchi, 104-105.

<sup>63</sup> Rula B. Quawas, "'A Sea Captain in her Own Right': Navigating the Feminist Thought of Shaarawi Shaarawi," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, no. 1 (2006): 227.

particularly educationally and vocationally. Education, she argued, was the basis of the transformation of society. Lack of education made women ignorant, which caused them to be seen only for their physical qualities. With education, women could attain their full rights and would be seen as moral, intellectual beings.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Shaarawi pushed her feminist agenda forward, with special attention to the education of women.

As president of the EFU, Shaarawi implemented a program of social activity in Cairo beginning in the 1920s. In the public health sector, the EFU opened a clinic and dispensary, Dar al-Islah, in the popular neighborhood of al-Baghalah, which offered free examinations for Egyptian women and children. The clinic also taught the poor basic principles of hygiene. The location of the facility was crucial. It was near the shrine of Sayyidah Zainab, a daughter of Prophet Muhammad, which attracted many women from surrounding neighborhoods. Despite some women's hesitance to be treated by male doctors, a large number of women were treated at Dar al-Islah.<sup>65</sup> Shaarawi formed a group of young members of the EFU, the Cadettes, who went door to door with baskets of soap, detergents, and medicine to distribute in the poor districts of Cairo. The Cadettes travelled in pairs, trained by doctors to give advice on health and hygiene.<sup>66</sup> Even in healthcare, the EFU did not simply distribute goods and services, but also focused on educating the poor on hygiene. In the education sector, the EFU demanded a state secondary school for girls that offered the same curriculum as the boys' school. In 1925, the Shubra Secondary School opened its doors for girls. By the late 1920s and early

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 222-226.

<sup>65</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 111-112.

<sup>66</sup> Lanfranchi, 109.

1930s, universities accepted female students, and the first women graduated in 1933. The EFU also opened a vocational school for girls at Qasr al-Aini Street.<sup>67</sup>

The EFU succeeded in pushing legislative changes for Egyptian women in the ten years following its founding in 1923. In following the principle of changing marriage customs, the EFU was successful in demanding a minimum marriage age. In 1923, the Ministry of Justice implemented a law for a minimum marriage age for girls (16 years) and boys (18 years). Although they sought to restrict polygamy and regulate divorce, the EFU's demands were not met. However, in 1929, agitation for extending mother's legal custody over children was successful. Moreover, labor laws were implemented to protect women from excessive hours of work.<sup>68</sup> A new headquarters for the organization at Qasr al-Aini Street in Cairo represented this success and strength of the EFU, and it reinforced the city of Cairo as the hub of feminism in Egypt. Known as Dar al-Mar'a ("the House of Woman"), the new building became powerful symbol of the feminist movement in Egypt. The two-day opening ceremony in April 1932 featured performances by Umm Kulthum and other Egyptian artists.<sup>69</sup>

Shaarawi was not only satisfied with social and legal activity. She knew that the media would be a powerful weapon to inform readers about both the endeavors of the EFU as well as the vision for the future of modern Egypt. In 1925, Shaarawi founded *L'Égyptienne* ("the Egyptian Woman"), a French language magazine. In order to avoid excessive administrative duties, Shaarawi delegated power to her associates, and Saiza

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<sup>67</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 143.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>69</sup> Lanfranchi, 193.

Nabarawi became the editor of the magazine.<sup>70</sup> As demonstrated by the name, the magazine focused on the social activities of women and the political events of Egypt. The authors and intended audience were elite women, as it was written in French, a language spoken only by the educated upper class. The activities of EFU and the articles of *L'Égyptienne* focused on Egypt; like Egyptian nationalist men, Shaarawi and her fellow feminists focused their attention on their own nation. Shaarawi wanted to “save the fabric of Egypt,” meaning to preserve Egypt from both the British and from itself. She pushed the preservation of distinctly Egyptian architecture, the construction of hospitals and schools, the development of industry and arts, and the publication of books and magazines. Shaarawi believed that these endeavors would foster the self-esteem of Egyptians.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the actions of Shaarawi and the EFU reflect the dominance of the ideology of Egyptian nationalism.

In order to increase the profile of the EFU and Egyptian women, Shaarawi constantly travelled to the West. She visited Europe at least once a year, and even made trips to the United States. In both continents, her public activities were enmeshed with her private affairs. She visited Europe every summer, not only to further her relationship with international feminists, but also to receive a spa treatment in France for the varicose veins in her legs.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the United States provided another platform to advocate for the rights of Egyptian women through the EFU. In 1925, Carrie Chapman Catt, a prominent American feminist, invited Shaarawi to visit the United States. Shaarawi arrived to the

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<sup>70</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 95.

<sup>71</sup> Lanfranchi, 151.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

U.S. in September, where she had a busy schedule of meetings and speeches. Her speeches, such as the one given at the National Women's Party Club on October 8, 1925, focused on Egyptian customs and goals of the EFU. She intended to demonstrate that Egypt was not trying to emulate the West, but had its own unique history, culture, and therefore future.<sup>73</sup> Shaarawi's internationalism was particularly important after she was elected as a member of the executive committee of the International Alliance of Women. Shaarawi received the nomination at the organization's Tenth Congress in 1926, which took place at Sorbonne. The election of Shaarawi was both a personal honor and an honor for Egypt, which had only joined the IAW three years earlier, at the Ninth Congress in Rome. On an international stage, Shaarawi represented Egyptian women, and she behaved with serious poise and an air of authority, while wearing her trademark dark chiffon dress and a black headscarf. She was a role model for non-European women in general, and Muslim women in particular. During the farewell dinner that Shaarawi hosted for the IAW, she stressed the Pharonic past of Egypt, demonstrating her belief in the uniqueness of Egypt, while also appealing to the Western fascination of Egypt's history.<sup>74</sup> Like her trips to Europe, Shaarawi's visit to the U.S. involved both professional activities and personal gatherings. Shaarawi's daughter Basna lived in the U.S. with her husband, who worked for the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, D.C. This again demonstrates the intertwining of her public activities and private affairs.

In Cairo, Shaarawi's own home also furthered her belief in the uniqueness of Egypt, and it became a symbol of "Egyptianness." With the death of her husband,

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 134-138.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 143-148.

Shaarawi stepped into the position of head of the Shaarawi household. After the founding of the EFU, Shaarawi's home at 2 Qasr al-Nil Street became an important meeting place for feminist activities. Her home was called Bayt al-Misria ("House of the Egyptian Woman"), and became the headquarters of the social movement it represented in Cairo. As an important symbol of the feminist movement, Shaarawi believed that her house needed to be remodeled in. In 1927, Bayt al-Misria underwent renovations to render it "oriental in its appearance, while reconciling Western and Eastern styles." Inside, two separate salons were built, one oriental in style, the other Western. The salons were side by side, separated by an intricate fountain. The two salons sought to demonstrate the harmony between East and West, and represented the entire house, which was also divided between oriental and Western style. In this way, Shaarawi could entertain guests, both Egyptian and Western, in an environment in which they felt comfortable, yet show them the splendors of the "other" style. Moreover, the two salons were a symbolic representation of Shaarawi's agenda, which reconciled East and West, and was open almost exclusively to elite and middle-class Egyptians. Every Tuesday, Shaarawi hosted elite guests at Bayt al-Misria. This included a wide variety of visitors, including Arab and Western feminists, politicians, artists, poets, foreign visitors, and members of the royal family.<sup>75</sup> Shaarawi was "on stage" in her domestic space, poised as the leader and face of the Egyptian feminist movement. Bayt al-Misria rendered Shaarawi incapable of having

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 164-168.

Guests included Margery Corbett-Ashby (British feminist) and her close friends from the IAW, American Charles Crane (who installed an elevator in Shaarawi's home as a gift), Egyptian poet Khalil Mutran, and King Fuad's brother, Prince Muhammad Ali Tawfique.

complete privacy in her home, further entangling her professional public life and private space.

Even while focusing on social issues, Shaarawi always had an eye on the political events unfolding in Egypt. For Shaarawi, “politics always made life more exciting, neutralizing the boredom of humdrum existence,” and she involved herself in the political sphere as much as possible.<sup>76</sup> She opposed the unilateral declaration of independence, and she called for a boycott of British goods. Even when she was attacked in a letter in *La Bourse Égyptienne*, as “unacquainted with Egypt” and “living in a dreamland,” because of her call for boycott, Shaarawi continued her campaign unshaken.<sup>77</sup> After a nationalist group assassinated Sir Lee Stack, British Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Army and Governor of Sudan, Shaarawi, along with many Egyptians, were unhappy with the ultimatum sent to Prime Minister Zaghlul, which called for a number of punishments.<sup>78</sup> Shaarawi published a message in the Egyptian press, asking for help from the League of Nations, “before the total destruction of our country which was for many centuries the cradle of the world’s civilization and still is the link between the East and the West.” Once again, Shaarawi appealed to the West by pointing the Egypt’s past, and she did so through the media.

Shaarawi’s journalistic endeavors involving politics were not limited to the Egyptian press. She used her own magazine, *L’Égyptienne*, as a platform to launch her nationalist political views. She used the magazine to appeal to the world against British

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>78</sup> Botman, 35.

Punishments included withdrawing the Egyptian Army from Sudan, payment of half a million pounds, and the prohibition of political demonstrations.

dominance over Egypt, as well as criticize the actions and frequent inefficiency of the Egyptian government. The decade after independence in 1922 witnessed a number of elections, followed by the dissolving of Parliament by the King or the British, who did not support the majority Wafd Parliament. When Ismail Sidqi became Prime Minister from 1930 until 1933, Shaarawi and the EFU took a stand against his regime, which dissolved Parliament, deferred elections, abolished the Constitution of 1923, and created a new constitution that increased the power of the King. Shaarawi and the EFU demonstrated against the 1931 elections, during one of the harshest rules of modern Egypt.<sup>79</sup> Despite their lack of political rights, the women demonstrated that they could involve themselves in the political sphere, as well as showed their courage to take a stand during a brutal regime that reacted with violence towards demonstrators.

Politicians themselves were not exempt from Shaarawi's criticism. Shaarawi used her family's social status to connect with high-ranking officials. She had a close relationship with Zaghlul, thanks to his previous friendship with Ali Shaarawi. When Zaghlul was urged to form a coalition government to counter the power of the King, Shaarawi went to Zaghlul's home to try to convince him to act. A coalition government was eventually formed, despite Zaghlul's opposition.<sup>80</sup> Shaarawi even had contact with King Fuad. Although she admired his nationalism, she criticized his misogynistic tendencies, such as using bayt al-ta'a (the "house of submission"), which was a man's legal right to confine his wife in the household until she agreed to obey his will. Shaarawi challenged the King's behavior, as she believed he was setting a bad example. As the

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<sup>79</sup> Botman, 38.

<sup>80</sup> Lanfranchi, 120-122.

King, he should be a role model for Egyptians, not behaving unacceptably.<sup>81</sup> Despite her criticisms of Egyptian men in the political sphere, Shaarawi believed in democracy and was optimistic about the future of Egypt. Her boldness and strong will are evident in her bold words towards political figures, such as the ones she spoke to Zaghlul: “I am not afraid, Saad. The only thing I know for sure is that I am working to serve my country. You cannot reach me. And should you send the Wafd’s ruffians to cast stones at my house, or even to kill me, do it—this is the least I could do for my country.”<sup>82</sup> Huda Shaarawi’s patriotism was unwavering, despite political setbacks for both Egypt and women.

Although there were disagreements and factions within the Egyptian government, all politicians agreed on one thing: the complete removal of British occupation. This included removal of the restrictions on the strength of the Egyptian Army, transfer of army command from the British to Egyptians, full Egyptian authority over Sudan, and Egyptian control over minorities in Egypt. After multiple failed negotiations in the 1920s, the British finally compromised in 1936, thanks to the growing international crisis. Along with Libya, the recent Italian invasion of Ethiopia established another Fascist-ruled nation. The British wanted to keep Egypt on their side in the international arena and solidify Egyptian anti-Mussolini sentiment. Thus, the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was signed on August 26, 1936. With the agreement, Egypt became formally independent and was soon thereafter accepted into the League of Nations. In reality, however, it was not a completely independent and sovereign nation. The terms of the treaty allowed Britain to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 122.

maintain significant military forces and facilities along the Suez Canal and the right to deploy in the rest of Egypt in emergency cases. Egypt reluctantly accepted the continuation of the joint administration of the Sudan by both nations, rather than its outright annexation to Egypt. The subsequent Montreux Convention of 1937 ended the system of capitulations, which exempted foreigners from the Egyptian judicial system. Foreigners in Egypt were now Egypt's responsibility, and the nation was allowed to create its own foreign policies and control its domestic affairs.<sup>83</sup>

During this time of important and rapid political changes, Shaarawi was going through a period of personal difficulties. Her son-in-law Mahmud died suddenly of kidney failure in July 1936, while Shaarawi was attending the Agricultural and Industrial Fair in Budapest. Mahmud's death was a major family tragedy, and it created a rift between Shaarawi and her daughter. Basna needed her mother by her side as support during her tragedy, and she felt betrayed that Shaarawi was outside of Egypt when Mahmud died. Shaarawi herself was facing continued deteriorating health, specifically consistent feelings of a heavy chest and limbs.<sup>84</sup> But her family and health problems did not deter Shaarawi from continuing her involvement in the EFU and in national politics. Even during private problems, Shaarawi was turned towards public issues, demonstrating her constant presence in the public sphere. For example, when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, Shaarawi joined many other Egyptian figures in appealing to the League of Nations to preserve Ethiopia's independence. In the same year, she led a large Egyptian

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<sup>83</sup> Botman, 38-40.

<sup>84</sup> Lanfranchi, 220.

delegation to the IAW Congress in Istanbul, where the women, “armed with a spirit of love,” focused on preserving peace in a crisis-ridden world.

Before the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, Shaarawi wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of Egypt and British High Commissioner to denounce the hypocrisy and unjust policies of the two governments that failed to negotiate the independence of Egypt. After the 1936 treaty was signed, Shaarawi was upset that Egyptian negotiators accepted British terms. She believed that the solution to Egypt’s problems “lies with its women.” She wrote an appeal to Egyptian women in *L’Égyptienne* to “preserve our country, while there is still time.”<sup>85</sup> Shaarawi’s appeal in *L’Égyptienne* was written in French, which again demonstrates that Shaarawi’s agenda, both feminist and nationalist, was geared toward the upper classes. Although Shaarawi continued to fight for the rights of women and of Egypt, she began looking outside of Egypt, and brought the issues of women throughout the Middle East to the media’s attention.

#### Expanding Horizons: Arab Nationalism and the Defense of Palestine

Shaarawi’s new orientation, looking outside Egypt, was in line with nationalist sentiment in Egypt. While a pluralistic Egyptian nationalism was still an important ideology, a new type of nationalism was gaining popularity: pan-Arab nationalism. As economic and political difficulties arose with the Great Depression, constant conflicts within the ineffective Egyptian government, and World War II, there was a sense of disillusionment with the idea of only a territorial nationalism. Instead, many Egyptians

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 229.

increasingly supported a larger link to the Arab world, which looked to Egypt for “regional leadership.”<sup>86</sup> Egypt’s national identity became increasingly linked with other Arab peoples, all perceived to be parts of a larger Arab nation. The Egyptian nation was redefined by emphasizing not just unique Egyptian traits, but also its Arab character. Shared Arabic language and culture became the basis of pan-Arab nationalism. In Egypt, historical unity, the Arab character of the Nile, Islam, and Arab culture were emphasized to illuminate shared Arab characteristics. Arab nationalism had widespread appeal throughout Egypt, because identification with a larger language and culture was much more tangible than just Egyptian territory.<sup>87</sup> “Arabness” became the basis of identification and cooperation in Egypt and the Arab world, which intensified after the 1952 Revolution.

Within this context, Shaarawi’s endeavors in the late 1930s and 1940s were informed by pan-Arab sensibilities rather than particular Egyptian agendas. She began delegating responsibilities in the EFU to other members of the organization, and concentrated instead on publications and campaigns for the benefit of Arabs throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In that vein, she established in 1937 an Arabic language magazine in order to “demonstrate the solidarity of the Egyptian women’s movement with the Arab world.” Unlike *L’Égyptienne*, which was limited to the French-speaking middle and upper class, *Al-Misria* (“The Egyptian woman”) was specifically aimed at Arabic-speaking audiences. Thus, the publication of *Al-Misria* represented one of Shaarawi’s first attempts to gain a wider readership and spread her feminist and

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<sup>86</sup> Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 20.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-141.

nationalist agendas among lower-middle classes, instead of exclusively French-speaking upper classes. The magazine would inform Arabic speakers in Egypt and the Middle East about the activities of the EFU, as well as include articles about education, politics, and the arts. Shaarawi's activism reached a high point, as she amplified her strategy for using her magazines to publicize her thoughts on official corruption, government ineffectiveness, the neglect of women, and one of the most pressing issues in the Middle East: Palestine.<sup>88</sup>

The British brutal suppression of the revolt and the advances in the Zionist efforts to colonize the land encouraged Palestinian efforts to mobilize regional support for their cause. In an appeal made in 1938, Egypt was specifically called upon "to rise up...to come to its neighbor's rescue," since, "did it not suffer yesterday from what this poor country is enduring today?"<sup>89</sup> Many Egyptians viewed Palestine as a tragedy in the making and believed that Arab and Muslim solidarity and Egypt's long-term national interests necessitated their support for the Arabs of Palestine. Shaarawi was personally asked by Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi women's organizations to represent them in international forums and to organize a conference to discuss the plight of Palestinian women. She agreed, and Shaarawi organized the Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine, held in Cairo in 1938. As the organizer of the conference, Shaarawi supported an issue that was increasingly gaining popularity in the region, demonstrating a new effort to reach a broader audience. However, the conference was only open to the upper classes. Shaarawi called upon fellow feminists around the

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<sup>88</sup> Lanfranchi, 230-234.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 241.

Middle East to attend the Conference, in the city that represented the Egyptian feminist movement: “I urge all feminist organizations...to join us by sending delegates, as a gesture of solidarity, to this Conference...Together, we shall examine the Palestinian question and how it may be resolved.”<sup>90</sup> Although women organized the conference, Egyptian political figures and other men also attended, and the Egyptian government showed solidarity with the conference. This solidarity reflects the increasing emphasis on Arab nationalism. Shaarawi gave the opening address on October 15, and she also spoke at the third and final session, telling the audience that together, Arabs must resist Zionism and protect Palestine and the region from penetration by Zionism.<sup>91</sup> The Eastern Women’s Conference demonstrates elite Arab women’s nationalist actions—led by Huda Shaarawi, who continued to represent upper-class Egyptian and Arab women.

Shaarawi’s home continued to be a meeting place for prominent individuals, and with a new emphasis on Arab nationalism, she welcomed guests from throughout the Arab Middle East into her home. She invited, for example, Palestinian leaders to her home, who were on their way back home to Palestine after years of deportation. Her mansion on Qasr al-Nil Street now became known as Bayt al-Shark (“the Orient House”), dedicated to the affairs of the “Eastern peoples” in general and of the Arabs in particular.<sup>92</sup> As before, the use of her mansion to advance her political campaigns reinforced the blurred public-private life of Shaarawi, who welcomed regional leaders to her private space in the name of Arab solidarity.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>91</sup> Charlotte Weber, “Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women’s Congresses of 1930 and 1932,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies* 4, no. 1: (2008), 100.

<sup>92</sup> Lanfranchi, 244.

The crisis in Palestine dominated the activities of Shaarawi in the late 1930s and early 1940s, representing a shift in her priorities. Shaarawi's nationalist agenda was of higher importance than her feminist agenda during this time. She protested against the White Paper on Palestine in 1939 by writing to the British Colonial Secretary.<sup>93</sup> In her letter, she emphasized the bond between Arabs and Muslims throughout the world:

They form a single nation that will never agree to be enslaved or to undergo such suffering... Palestine has always been Arab, your Excellency... It will therefore remain Arab, despite Lord Balfour or any other person who might wish to make their own fantasies come true...<sup>94</sup>

Shaarawi explains that Arabs are linked by a common religion, language, and origin, and they will therefore fight together to keep Palestine a territory for Arabs. Even when she travelled to the IAW Congress in Copenhagen, Shaarawi's priority was to secure a resolution to condemn the displacement of Palestinian Arabs and deplore the immigration of European Jews.<sup>95</sup> However, the Jewish delegation from Palestine disagreed with Shaarawi's resolution, as did Margery Corbett-Ashby, the British President of the IAW, and the rest of the executive committee. As a result, Shaarawi threatened to resign as Honorary Vice President of the IAW and leave with the Egyptian delegation. She would throw away her position as a representative of international feminism for Arab nationalism and the support of Palestine. Although Corbett-Ashby convinced her to stay for the remainder of the congress, Shaarawi would "never cease to defend the women of

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<sup>93</sup> The White Paper on Palestine limited the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine to 75,000 for five years, until 1944.

<sup>94</sup> Lanfranchi, 244.

<sup>95</sup> Shaarawi's family was unhappy with Shaarawi traveling to Europe, as health was increasingly worsening. She was diagnosed with angina pectoris, constant pain of the chest.

Palestine.”<sup>96</sup> Her actions against the White Papers and in Copenhagen demonstrate Shaarawi’s solidarity with Palestine and support of Arab nationalism. Although she used her elite methods—writing to the British Colonial Secretary, threatening to resign her position at the IAW—to support Palestine, Shaarawi’s populist agenda around the issue of Palestine demonstrates again Shaarawi’s efforts to reach broader audiences.

Although the start of World War II distracted Shaarawi from the plight of the Arabs in Palestine, she continued monitoring the political activities within Egypt. She was appalled at the actions of the British, who were involving themselves in the internal affairs of Egypt—an important stationing and supply ground for Allied forces. The British implemented martial law and censored Egyptian media in hoping to deter Axis propaganda. The European power was worried that their war effort would be undermined by the Egyptian refusal to declare war against the Axis powers.<sup>97</sup> Thus, they forced the dismissal of Prime Minister Ali Mahir in 1942, who was believed to foster fascist sympathies, and forced King Farouk, who ascended the throne in 1936 after the death of his father, to appoint Wafdist politician Mustafa al-Nahhas. Moreover, the British gave King Farouk an ultimatum: either accept their terms, or abdicate the throne.<sup>98</sup> The actions of the British were an insult to Egyptian independence, as well as the breaking of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty.<sup>99</sup> As was typical of Shaarawi, she objected to British actions through writing. She sent a telegram of protest to Prime Minister Winston

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 249-252.

<sup>97</sup> Egypt would eventually declare war in February 1945—a formality necessary for Egypt to qualify as a participant in the San Francisco Conference of World Power, for the founding of the United Nations.

<sup>98</sup> The British believed they had no other choice but to give this ultimatum, as they could not have their war effort undermined by an Egyptian government sympathetic to Germany and Italy.

<sup>99</sup> Botman, 42-45.

Churchill, in which she denounced the British interference in Egyptian affairs.<sup>100</sup> The British ultimatum to King Farouk mirrored the ultimatum given to Zaghlul in 1924 after the assassination of Sir Lee Stack. After almost two decades and the signing of the 1936 Treaty, the British still did not respect the status of Egypt as a sovereign nation in times of crisis, which angered Shaarawi and male nationalists.

At the end of the war, Shaarawi was inspired by the discussion of the creation of a League of Arab States, which would foster collaboration between Arab nations. As a result, Shaarawi hosted the Second Cairo Conference on December 12, 1944, which she hoped would reinforce Arab solidarity, particularly of women. The conference reflected both Arab nationalism and feminism, as delegations of women from Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, Palestine, and Lebanon met to discuss two issues: women's rights and the crisis in Palestine. Moreover, like the Eastern Women's Conference of 1938, the Second Cairo Conference was given royal patronage and government endorsement, pointing to another elite gathering of women.<sup>101</sup> This political support points to the continued emphasis on Arab nationalism, and the importance of Cairo as the center of Egyptian women's network.

Unfortunately, Shaarawi was too ill to give the opening and closing address, so her speech was read by Egyptian feminist Amina Said. In her addresses, Shaarawi uses the argument that women must be included in political decision-making because of the benefit it would bring to Arab nations. She also uses religious justification for political rights, stating that Islam does not deny women the right to vote. Shaarawi repeatedly

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<sup>100</sup> Lanfranchi, 256.

<sup>101</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 242.

invokes the image of women as mothers who give birth, raise, and guide the men that rule nations. As mothers, women have the right to make the political decisions that will bring “good and benefit to her nation and her children.”<sup>102</sup> Islam backs these rights, and Shaarawi accuses men of taking away women’s “share of rights.” She passionately writes, “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.”<sup>103</sup> Shaarawi explains that Islam gave the first Muslim women the right to vote for Prophet Muhammad’s successor, and this should translate into the right to vote for the nation’s government. But she attacks men for keeping the right to rule for themselves, as man is the one who distributes rights. By combining motherhood, nation-building, and Islam, Shaarawi creates an argument that has the potential to create guilt within men, as giving political rights to women would be an action that would honor himself, the nation, future generations, and God.<sup>104</sup> Her fearless and passionate argument reflects her strong character and the feminist ideology that has been developing since her years in the harem. At the end of the conference, the women adopted resolutions that included granting women full political, legal, cultural, and health rights. They also called on Arab nations to hear the voices of their women and pay attention to their needs. Finally, the conference resulted in the creation of an Arab Feminist Union (AFU), a feminist organization that would transcend borders and include all Arab women. This was a crucial step for Shaarawi, as “she would take the lead in a feminist organization that went beyond the

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<sup>102</sup> Shaarawi Shaarawi, “Pan-Arab Feminism Opening Speech,” in *Opening the Gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, trans. Ali Badran and Margot Badran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 338.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

frontiers of Egypt.”<sup>105</sup> As the new President of the AFU, Shaarawi was solidified her position as the face of the upper- and middle-class feminist movement not only in Egypt, but also throughout the Middle East.

As the President of the AFU, Shaarawi represented Arab women at the IAW conference in Switzerland in August 1946, as she was the only delegate from the Middle East. But this was her last IAW conference and final trip to Europe. The increasing pain in her chest and weak heart made it difficult to breathe, and upon her return to Egypt, Shaarawi had a mausoleum built for herself in Minya.<sup>106</sup> Despite her deteriorating health, Shaarawi made sure that the activities of the EFU and its magazines continued operating smoothly by delegating roles to members of the EFU. Moreover, she started another new magazine, *Al-Mara'a al-Arabia* (“the Arab Woman”), which addressed peace in the Middle East and informed Arab women about feminist activities around the world.<sup>107</sup> With the publication of this final magazine, it is clear that Shaarawi was further attempting to gain a broader, Arabic-speaking audience throughout the Middle East, representing a large shift since the publication of her first magazines. *L'Égyptienne* was published for upper-class Egyptian women who were fluent in French, and articles included Egyptian feminism and Egyptian politics. With *Al-Misria*, the audience broadened to include middle-class women, as the language of publication was Arabic. Along with feminism and Egyptian politics, *Al-Misria* included articles on regional politics. But the titles of both magazines mean the same thing: “the Egyptian Woman.”

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<sup>105</sup> Lanfranchi, 260.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 269-271.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 274.

*Al-Mara'a al-Arabia*, on the other hand, expanded upon the first two magazines, including articles on regional politics and on the activities of feminist both in the Middle East and around the world. Along with the articles detailing events outside of Egypt, the title of the magazine, “the Arab Woman” also suggests a shift from an Egypt-centered focus to a more Arab focus. These magazines represent the trajectory of Shaarawi’s activities as a feminist and nationalist: from Egyptian feminism and nationalism to Arab feminism and nationalism.

The final regional event that Shaarawi witnessed involved Palestine. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed the Resolution on the Partition of Palestine. Like others, Shaarawi “felt it literally as a shock.” For Shaarawi, the partition of Palestine was appalling, and “she could not simply stand by and watch an injustice take place.” Unfortunately, Shaarawi did not have enough time to use her pen or organize protests to fight back. She woke up on the morning of December 7, 1947, to severe chest pain, but refused to call a doctor. By noon, the pain escalated, and Shaarawi’s heart stopped.<sup>108</sup> She took her last breath in Bayt al-Shark—an appropriate place for the face of the Egyptian and Arab feminist movements.

The Medal of Highest Order of Perfection was awarded to Egyptians for services to their country. King Farouk awarded Shaarawi with this highest state decoration in 1942 as a way to convey his gratitude for her support when the British threatened him and his crown during World War II. Shaarawi receiving this award is symbolic of a number of truths and contradictions in Egypt. By giving her the award, King Farouk

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 276-278.

recognized the importance of women and their support for the nation. However, it was contradictory that the highest state decoration could be awarded to women, who were denied political rights in Egypt. What Shaarawi later did with the award is also telling of Shaarawi's attitude toward Egyptian laws and the patriarchal social customs she spent her life reforming. After King Farouk repudiated his wife, Queen Farida, in 1942, Shaarawi sent the medal the King gave her back to the Palace.<sup>109</sup> By returning the decoration, Shaarawi made a statement: she would not support unfair patriarchal behavior towards women, despite their legality.

The returning of the decoration was symbolic of the feminist behavior Shaarawi exhibited throughout her life. She fought for women's rights and nationalism—first in Egypt, then looked towards the rest of the Middle East—and expressed her opinions about social and political injustices, also despite their legality. Shaarawi used her social position to propel herself forward as the leader of the EFU and AFU. Because of her efforts, through both feminist organizations and personal endeavors, the social and political demands of upper-class women were publically heard. Shaarawi's commitment to feminism and nationalism resulted in a daily life that required her to remain constantly poised and on the public stage, and I argue that this resulted in the intentional intertwining of her public sphere and private sphere. She lived a life that blurred her public activism with her private space, with Bayt al-Shark as the most important location where public and private collided. But she also gave hope to elite Egyptian and Arab women: she demonstrated that social and legal changes to patriarchal customs were

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 271.

tangible. In the first half of the twentieth century, Shaarawi and Bayt al-Shark in Cairo were the face of these changes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THOSE WHO DEMAND MUCH MUST GIVE MUCH”: THE DYNAMIC LIFE OF DORIA SHAFIK

The rebellious nature of Doria Shafik propelled the middle-class activist to direct-action feminism. Unlike the elite, respectable Shaarawi, Shafik represented a sensational new generation of women that emerged on the scene of the feminist movement with bolder strategies for action. Not content with simply articulating the need for social change for Egyptian women, she directly challenged traditional Egyptian customs beginning in the 1920s. Armed with the highest level of foreign education attainable, Doria Shafik shattered social conventions by such acts as calling off her arranged marriage, participating as the first Muslim woman in the Miss Egypt beauty pageant, and leading thousands of women in the storming of Egyptian Parliament in order to demand women's political rights. In her two decades of feminist activism, Shafik time and again shocked the Egyptian public with her radical behavior and willingness to break various social conventions, particularly when juxtaposed with her feminine charm and maternity. Shafik's boldness led to highly publicized debates with Egypt's most respected religious scholars over the question of social and political rights for women. Like Shaarawi, her feminism was intertwined with nationalist activism against the British presence in Egypt, but true to form, she supported more radical policies, including the establishment of the first female military unit in 1951. Ironically, after being the leading feminist figure in Egypt of the late 1940s and early 1950s, she was silenced by the government after the revolution of 1952 secured Egypt's full independence. Condemned to house arrest by the

pan-Arab regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, after two decades of almost complete seclusion, she tragically took her own life in 1975.

Doria Shafik was part of a group of middle-class feminists—women who were well educated but were from families of limited means and no significant properties. Middle-class feminist activism came to the fore after the formation of the upper class dominated EFU, which led the way in feminist activism. Like her predecessors in the EFU, Shafik’s activities took place mainly in Cairo, and she often referred to Islamic teachings and traditions to justify her feminist agenda. However, unlike the upper-class activists, she was also engaged in efforts to reach out to women in rural areas. While elite feminists remained within the fold of social conventions through the activities of the EFU, Shafik and her fellow middle-class feminists pushed social boundaries through their activism, promoting a serious pushback and public criticism that upper-class feminists like Shaarawi did not face. In her private life too, Shafik pushed the boundaries of the cultural norms of patriarchal Egyptian society—from seeking higher education in Europe, to participating in a beauty pageant, to storming Egyptian Parliament. Pushing boundaries led to constant media attention and criticism, including attacks on her education, actions, appearance, and family life. This negative public attention inevitably impacted the private life of Shafik and her family. In this chapter, I argue that Shafik’s private life could not be disassociated from her public actions, and rather than being discouraged by constant public criticisms, Shafik used them as fuel for her energetic campaigns for women’s rights and national liberation.

The attainment of full independence after the revolution of 1952 forced Shafik to quit her feminism and political activism to pursue her literary talents for prose and poetry. With increased media censoring and state-controlled press after the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Shafik could no longer express her views through her magazines. Instead, she turned to writing prose, finding comfort in expressing her thoughts and emotions through pen. Specifically, she focused on writing a memoir of her entire life. Between 1955 and 1975, she wrote three separate autobiographies, detailing her life story, struggles, achievements, and disappointments.<sup>110</sup>

She wrote all three versions in French, her dominant language, which points to possible intended audience: upper class Egyptians, who were French speakers, and Western readers. Shafik's memoir reveals a woman who struggled to find her place in Egyptian society. Her writings suggest that the patriarchal society of Egypt, with the social customs she disapproved of and the unequal opportunities available to women, made Shafik feel alienated and unhappy, which only intensified after completing her Western education. As an antidote to her unhappiness because of women's inequality in Egypt, she involved herself in the feminist struggle, taking leadership of the movement by the late 1940s and early 1950s. Her public and private activities pushed social boundaries, in the attempt to transform Egypt into a society with more equality for women. Involvement in the feminist mission was the cure she sought for unhappiness. But there were personal consequences for Shafik's involvement in the feminist struggle: constant harsh public criticism of her actions, the exposure of her private life, and the ultimate sacrifice of time

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<sup>110</sup> Cynthia Nelson, *Doria Shafik: A Woman Apart* (Cairo, University of Cairo Press, 1996).

spent with her husband and daughters, and eventual confinement and silencing by the government.

### Early Life and Feelings of Alienation

Doria Shafik was born on December 14, 1908, in Tanta, a city 100 kilometers north of Cairo. She was the third child of her middle-class parents, Ahmad Shafik and Ratiba Nassif. Her father, an indigenous Egyptian, worked for the government as a civil engineer for the railways, while her mother was of elite Turco-Circassian background. Thus, Doria Shafik had mixed ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although not required to live in the harem, which was mostly reserved for the elite, Shafik grew up in a female-centered household, as she was always in the company of her mother, grandmother, unmarried aunt, and orphaned cousin. Shortly after Shafik was born, the family moved to Mansura, a city northeast of Cairo, in the Nile Delta region.<sup>111</sup>

Education became a very important part of Shafik's life from a young age. Emphasis on education likely stemmed from her father, who was a university graduate, instilling in his daughter the value of education. Education was particularly crucial for middle-class families, as they did not have property and were required to make their wealth through their occupations. In 1915, at the age of 7, she began attending Notre Dame des Apotres, a French school in Tanta<sup>112</sup>. French Catholic schools were established in Egypt as early as the eighteenth century, and they proliferated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of the system of Capitulations inherited from the

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<sup>111</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 3.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Ottomans that were still in place, foreign missionaries were legally protected.<sup>113</sup> Unlike their Protestant counterparts established by American and British missionaries, among others, French schools in Egypt focused on spreading French language and culture, rather than on efforts to convert students to Roman Catholicism.<sup>114</sup> Thus, Shafik received a Western education from a very young age, and French became her dominant language, both speaking and writing. The enrollment of Shafik in a French school reflects her parents' desire for their daughter to be well educated, and their decision created a space for Shafik to be exposed to the non-Muslim, Western culture that surrounded her in the classroom. It is probable that Shafik was influenced by her teachers and classmates—most of whom were Egyptian Copts and Jews—giving her a new idea for expected social customs for girls, undoubtedly conflicting with traditional Muslim customs.

As such, already in the first decade of her life, Doria observed social and gender inequality in her home and social environment, influencing the development of a nascent feminist consciousness. For example, she wondered why women weren't allowed to enter mosques and why she was punished for walking too close to the boys' school. She witnessed the grand circumcision ceremony of her brother, Ali, and asked herself if her own birth was as important, writing that she questioned, "Are boys truly better than girls?"<sup>115</sup> She listened to stories told by her mother's friends, who were devastated that their husbands married a second wife. From a young age, Shafik was exposed to polygamy and the emotions of women who endured the humiliation of having a co-wife

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<sup>113</sup> Beth Baron, *The Orphan Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslims Brotherhood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>114</sup> Mona Russell: *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 109.

<sup>115</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 9.

and the “whims of [a husband’s] tyranny.”<sup>116</sup> These types of observations led to internal questioning of inequality of social customs of Egypt. Shafik felt very uncomfortable in her grandmother’s stiff and traditional house in Tanta, where she lived throughout the school year. Tanta is the site of the most famous Muslim pilgrimage center in Egypt. Home to the tomb of Ahmad al-Badawi, a Sufi mystic, as well as thirty-six other Sufi saints, Tanta was buzzing with Muslim pilgrims, particularly during annual festivals for the saints.<sup>117</sup> This was in stark contrast to the Western character of Notre Dame de Apotres. Thus, Shafik experienced two polarized religious and social atmospheres during her daily life. Living in Tanta made Shafik feel lonely, as she did not like the rigid social customs, which she already questioned as unfair to girls.<sup>118</sup> Although these observations are retrospective for Shafik, as she may have viewed her early life in a new light while writing her memoir, they still shed light on her early experiences as a middle-class girl, exposed to both traditional social customs and foreign education.

Shafik’s sense of estrangement intensified with the sudden death of her mother, to whom she was very close. As a result of a worsening heart condition, Ratiba died after giving birth to her son Ali in 1920. This was a very traumatic time for Shafik, who was only 12 years old, and she writes that in her own home and own country, “I always had this unbearable sensation of feeling like a stranger.”<sup>119</sup> Through her grief, Shafik demonstrated the development of early signs of her feminist consciousness and rebelliousness. In the same year as her mother’s death, she broke off her own arranged

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>117</sup> Edward B. Reeves, “Power, Resistance, the Cult of Muslim Saints in a Northern Egyptian Town,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995): 310.

<sup>118</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shaijk*, 6-11.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 12.

marriage to her cousin, which was arranged by her family since birth. Shafik writes that she asked her grandmother to “announce to al-Said al-Qasabi that I renounce this marriage to his nephew.”<sup>120</sup> Shafik’s action was unprecedented for such a young teenage girl. The fact that it was acceptable points to the gradual transformation of Egyptian social customs, as it was an act that Shaarawi dared not commit when she was forced to marry Ali Shaarawi, thirty-eight years earlier. The success of Shafik’s refusal to marry may also be attributed to her humble social class, as there was not a large estate or family name to sustain economic and political power. Be that as it may, Shafik successfully took control of her own life by refusing to an arranged marriage.

Shafik found solace in school, where she excelled in her studies. In 1923, at age 15, she moved to the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria with her father to continue her French education at the mission school of St. Vincent de Paul. After passing the *Brevet Elémentaire* exam, she transferred to the more advanced French Lycée and began studying for her baccalaureate. The move to Alexandria was a new chapter in Shafik’s life. Alexandria was the largest and most diverse city she had lived in, and she was exposed to the tumultuous political events of the early 1920s, as well as the burgeoning intellectual ideas about women and feminism. It was in Alexandria that Shafik decided that she would have a “brilliant career,” which is another reason why she poured herself into studying for her statewide exams.<sup>121</sup> In 1924, Shafik was the youngest to pass the baccalaureate exam, earning the second highest score in all of Egypt.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 23.

Ambitious Shafik wished to continue her studies in France, in the hope that higher education in Europe would help alleviate her feelings of loneliness and detachment. Shafik's two brothers were already studying law in Europe—both of them in England. As a burgeoning feminist, it is possible that she felt entitled to the same educational opportunities as her brothers. Other Egyptian women already set an example for study abroad in the early 1920s, but Shafik's family could not afford the cost of her education in Europe in addition to her two brothers. If the financial aspect could be taken care of, Shafik did not expect any opposition from her father in light of his past support for her French education and for her cancelation of her arranged marriage. Shaifk thus decided to take a bold initiative and wrote to Huda Shaarawi in request for her assistance in obtaining a scholarship from Egypt's Ministry of Education.<sup>122</sup> The Egyptian government sponsored male students to study abroad beginning in 1890. Only recently, after the Constitution of 1923, which guaranteed women equal access to education, were Muslim women granted scholarships to study abroad. Shafik wanted to join this small group of select Egyptian women who studied in Europe under the Egyptian government's sponsorship.<sup>123</sup>

By the time that Shafik wrote to Shaarawi in 1928, the founder and leader of the EFU was a well-known figure. The celebrated feminist leader invited 19 year-old Shafik to visit her in her mansion in Cairo. With her father's consent, Shafik journeyed alone to Cairo to meet Shaarawi. Shafik was nervous and emotional during the meeting, but her

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>123</sup> Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34. During King Fuad's reign (1922-1936), the Ministry of Education sponsored 1,794 students in study abroad mission.

passion, academic achievements, and references convinced Shaarawi to request the Ministry of Education to award her a scholarship to study abroad. The celebrated feminist told Shafik, “I am happy to see you are so clever and I am pleased that a girl of your standard will represent Egypt abroad.”<sup>124</sup> Shafik was one of a number of female students who were awarded scholarships to study abroad or were admitted to King Fuad I University in Cairo thanks to Shaarawi’s backing.<sup>125</sup>

Shafik was enchanted by Shaarawi, and like quite a few young Egyptian feminists of her generation, she began looking to her as a mentor. Years later she explained her feelings after her meeting with the leader of the feminist movement:

Liberty was the profound goal of her “feminism.” I left her palace with an exalted sense of calm, convinced that nothing really worthwhile can be accomplished without suffering. She was an example of how the will of a woman can overcome the law. An example which would forever remain in my memory and my heart.<sup>126</sup>

Before she travelled to Shaarawi’s mansion, there was no indication that Shafik harbored the sense of a greater cause of feminism. After their meeting, however, Shafik believed she had a cause to fight for: the improvement of the lives of women. She also gained an understanding that in order to make a positive transformation of Egyptian society, which would, in turn, diminish her feelings of alienation, there may be a negative personal impact—including harsh public criticism and constant exposure of her private life to the public sphere. Shafik had the opportunity to publically articulate her feminist vision for the first time later that year, when she won the contest for the speech commemorating Qasim Amin. Amin was an Islamic modernist, whose 1899 work *Tahrir al-Mar’a*

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<sup>124</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 26.

<sup>125</sup> Lanfranchi, 126.

<sup>126</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 27.

(“liberation of women”) was instrumental in articulating the need to reform Muslim society through increasing educational and legal opportunities to women.<sup>127</sup> At age 19, she spoke to an audience made up of elite men at the theater of Ezbakiya gardens in Cairo, about the lack of education for girls, arguing that without education, women would grow up to be ignorant mothers of future generations. Like Shaarawi, she used Islam to legitimize her argument, urging men to “use religion as your support” and to “Give your daughters a good conscience and let them out into the world!”<sup>128</sup> In her first articulation of feminist thought, Shafik remained within the narrative of feminism as a service to the nation to raise good mothers and wives. She mirrored Shaarawi’s nationalist feminism, likely because she needed the continued patronage of Shaarawi and the Egyptian government. Shafik focuses on education and religious justification for education—two themes she would continue emphasizing throughout her feminist career, but the articulation and actualization of which would become increasingly radical.

### The Sorbonne: Education and Feminist Ideology

After the Ministry of Education awarded her a scholarship, Shafik travelled to France to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. Before leaving, she encountered difficulties with her grandmother, who believed it was “madness” for her granddaughter to leave and live in “exile,” all by herself. She asked Shafik, “Where is this man that would want her when she returns?”<sup>129</sup> suggesting that a young girl who leaves her home, let alone spend

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<sup>127</sup> Ahmed, 144.

<sup>128</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 28-29.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

years in Europe, would gain a bad reputation and would not be considered as proper marriage material. Unlike her more liberal father, Shafik's grandmother harbored traditional patriarchal views on women, while Shafik hoped to break away from these customs. However, Shafik did recognize that she may never be considered a proper woman to marry because of her travels to Europe: "I also saw the possibility of finding myself alone until the end of my days without a man to help me... *Tant pis!* I would go no matter what the price!"<sup>130</sup> From the start of her non-traditional educational path, Shafik knew that her personal life could be impacted negatively by her decision. But she believed that such concerns should not impede her quest for personal advancement and general gains for the women of Egypt.

Shafik arrived to Paris in 1928. France was a popular destination for many middle- and upper- class Egyptians seeking higher education. Already long-established French ties to Egypt gained strength in the eighteenth century, thanks to the Napoleonic invasion in 1798, as well as increasing Syrian Catholic immigration to Egypt since the mid-nineteenth century. French became the language of elites, and French culture was associated with high class. Moreover, France represented the benevolent counterpart to the unwanted British colonizers.<sup>131</sup> Shafik joined a number of Egyptians in Paris, and she was determined to obtain a degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne. She immediately faced a battle with the director of the Egyptian Education Office at the Sorbonne, who wanted her to study history or geography, the typical "branches of feminine education." Shafik cabled Dr. Taha Husayn, an Egyptian nationalist, promoter of women's education

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>131</sup> Russell, 109.

and Sorbonne graduate, to plead her case.<sup>132</sup> After speaking with Dr. Husayn, Shafik enrolled as a student of philosophy. This first encounter with Egyptian officials, even outside of Egypt, is indicative of the way in which Shafik would handle setbacks: “I didn’t come this far to give up! I shall study what I want and nothing else!”<sup>133</sup> She was determined to make her own choices, and she would not allow traditional practices to restrict her from reaching her goals.

The years she spent at the Sorbonne were instrumental to Shafik’s life. Through her studies, she was inspired to contemplate about her own conception of the “new woman” in Egypt. She believed that there was a new reality for women, who were transitioning from one era of history to a new reality of the day. She expanded upon her ideas in an essay, in which she writes that woman must take the intuitive qualities of her past life, and channel them into her new passion: the search for knowledge. She writes, “She is herself a work of art! In this work she is no longer placed as an object of contemplation. Her goal is knowledge,” stating that passion and the attainment of knowledge together are the synthesis between women of two different eras.<sup>134</sup> Studying at the Sorbonne allowed Shafik to use her educational training to develop her feminist ideology.

Moreover, the social environment that Shafik found herself in was critical to the realization that she felt like an outsider in her own country. After living with three Egyptian roommates in Paris, she left her apartment and rented a room at the

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<sup>132</sup> Reid, 64.

<sup>133</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 36.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

International House, which was a boarding house for women from all around the world. She felt uncomfortable living with Egyptian women, who reminded her of the traditions and customs of Egypt. Instead, she found friendship with non-Egyptian students from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Although they came from various backgrounds, the women shared common elements, namely that they felt misunderstood in their own countries. Shafik reasoned that each woman felt this way because they were “intellectually more ambitious than our countrymen.”<sup>135</sup> Despite her friendship with the women at the International House and her studies at the Sorbonne, Shafik still felt emotionally empty by the time she graduated with her degree in Philosophy in 1932.

As discussed, Shafik knew that studying in Paris could impact her desirability as a potential wife. However, as a beautiful woman in her twenties, Shafik inevitably received a number of marriage proposals. Even in the marriage arena, Shafik was not content to follow traditional Egyptian customs. When she returned to Egypt in 1932 after obtaining her first degree, she was engaged for a short time, but broke off the engagement, writing, “I tried to fall in love with him, but I couldn’t.” She only agreed to the engagement because she wanted to feel for once that she was not “an enigma to my surroundings,” and to find a “common denominator between me and my fellow countrywomen.”<sup>136</sup> She clearly could not consent to conforming to traditional customs and marry a man she did not love, despite his qualifications. In her first trial with a marriage that was not arranged by her family, Shafik once again demonstrated her feminism by making her own decision and choosing personal liberation over social acceptability

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 57.

In 1935, at age 27, Shafik got engaged again. Her engagement occurred immediately following her second place finish in the Miss Egypt beauty pageant. As the first Muslim woman to ever compete in the contest, Shafik pushed major social boundaries and risked her reputation as an honorable woman. But she hoped her decision would set an example for the loosening of traditional Egyptian social conventions. Moreover, participating in the pageant propelled Shafik into the public limelight for the first time—a position she would continue searching for when she returned to Egypt after earning her doctorate. Media attention brought her in contact with prominent journalist, Ahmad al-Sawi Muhammad. As the writer of a daily column on the front page of *al-Ahram*, Egypt’s “newspaper of record,” and as founder of a social magazine, *Magalati* (“my magazine”), many middle- and upper class Egyptians adored him. Like Shafik, al-Sawi also studied at the Sorbonne, and he was known for his progressive ideas about the advancement of women, which made the couple very compatible.<sup>137</sup>

Shafik and al-Sawi had a “sensational” engagement, and they were quickly married. They were the first couple that was ever featured on the front page of the Egyptian press—on the cover of *Al-Ahram*, one of the most prominent newspapers in Egypt.<sup>138</sup> Not even the wedding of King Fuad and Queen Nazli, who were married in 1919, was featured the front page of the Egyptian press.<sup>139</sup> The exquisite wedding party took place at Shaarawi’s summer mansion. Shafik and al-Sawi were described as a

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 62.

The fact that there was a woman—unveiled, and without a headscarf—featured on the front cover of the Egyptian press—on her wedding day, a private affair—demonstrates the great strides that women had accomplished since their debut in the public sphere in 1919.

<sup>139</sup> Hassan Hassan. *In the House of Muhammad Ali: A Family Album, 1805-1952* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000), 104.

“modern couple,” as they were considered to have equal status in the marriage contract. Shafik accepted very little money as *mahr* (dowry), and al-Sawi offered a large *muta’akhhir* (payment in case of divorce), which was considered an egalitarian agreement. And since Shaarawi blessed the marriage, she sent a message to Egyptian society that egalitarian marriages would be part of the transformation of Egyptian society. By this time, Shaarawi’s efforts through the EFU were successful in pushing for a legal minimum marriage, implemented in 1923, which already signaled the beginning of changes in marriage customs.<sup>140</sup> Shafik’s marriage represented another step in the transformation of Egyptian marriage customs. Even through her marriage, Shafik did not conform to traditional Egyptian customs, but rather pushed boundaries and social conventions by engaging in a new, equal marriage. Shafik’s marriage, which would traditionally be a private affair, occurred in the spotlight, as it was a big social event that was covered by the media. Her private relationship was exposed to the public, which points to the intertwining of public and private in Shafik’s life.

Unfortunately, Shafik realized that al-Sawi’s progressive ideas did not apply to her as his wife. Moreover, al-Sawi threatened to blackmail his wife by sending a picture to the press in which it looked like Shafik was not wearing any clothes.<sup>141</sup> After his threat, the marriage did not last. The *katb-il-kitab*, or marriage contract, had already been signed, but the marriage was not yet consummated. This meant that Shafik was considered married in society, but divorce would not be as difficult. Divorce was not as taboo as it

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<sup>140</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 124.

<sup>141</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 64.

Shafik was actually wearing a strapless dress, in a picture taken at the Miss Egypt pageant, but the angle at which the photograph was taken made it look like she was not wearing any clothes.

was during Shafik's childhood, but her father still worried about his daughter's reputation. On the part of Shafik, she was "terrified at the horror of what happened and wanted a divorce at any price."<sup>142</sup> Once again, Shafik's pushing of traditional boundaries resulted in public criticism and the exposure of her private relationship to the public sphere. Her two failed attempts at marriage reflect Shafik's feminist activism, as she attempted to walk the middle class path of marriage and children, but decided instead to continue her rebellious streak

After the fiasco of her engagement to al-Sawi, Shafik's already ambitious desires to continue her education outside of Egypt amplified. It wasn't until she returned to the Sorbonne to earn her doctorate that Shafik would sense more clarity about the direction of her life. The first Egyptian woman to receive a doctorate, Dr. Doria Fahmi, graduated from the Sorbonne in 1935—one year before Shafik began her graduate studies at the same institution. Like Shafik, Fahmi also pursued a degree in a "non-feminine" field, French Literature. Dr. Fahmi was the tenth woman in the world to earn her doctorate.<sup>143</sup> Thus, Shafik was one of the very first women to embark on the highest level of graduate studies. From 1936 until 1939, Shafik threw herself into research and writing. She decided that she should would, "arm myself to the teeth, with all the powerful weapons of knowledge! Then and only then would I be able to find the way to freedom."<sup>144</sup> Thus, her quest for higher education was linked to her feminist goals. She obtained another scholarship from the Egyptian Ministry of Education, which granted her tuition for three

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>143</sup> Judith Cochran, *Educational Roots of Political Crisis in Egypt* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 149.

<sup>144</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 66.

years of studies. Thus, Shafik had to complete her two theses and earn her doctorate in half the time that the average student required. These three years were crucial to shaping Shafik's feminist consciousness. Not only did she live in Paris in the 1930s, where she was exposed to a cosmopolitan city filled with diverse people of many different political and religious ideologies, but her research also led to the hardening of her feminist ideology. She threw herself into research at Bibliothèque Nationale. Her first thesis blended European aesthetic philosophy with the study of ancient Egyptian art, while her second thesis explored the conditions of "liberation" of Egyptian women. She hoped to reconcile women's rights and Islam. She writes, "I decided to concentrate on a topic that was close to my heart...the conditions under which Muslim women lived in my country and their sufferings, to which I had been witness as a child growing up," which demonstrates that her early observations of women's lives in Egypt impacted her decision to subject traditional Egyptian customs to intellectual and religious scrutiny.<sup>145</sup> Shafik's topic choices reflect her personal situation, as a woman living between Egypt and Paris—two very different cultural and intellectual worlds. Her thesis on women's rights became a "blueprint" for her feminist struggle in Egypt, as she would demand equal rights for women by bridging the gap between humanism, which stresses the individual over the collective, and the community of Islam.<sup>146</sup>

Shafik successfully defended her two theses in 1940 at age 32, and *L'Égyptienne* published her picture and congratulations, the "hope of the Egyptian University and the Egyptian feminist movement." *L'Égyptienne* also celebrated the first women who were

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 89.

earning their doctorates from universities in Egypt, including the American University in Cairo and Fuad I University, beginning in 1938.<sup>147</sup> Despite the support of the feminist organization, Shafik had a number of critics in the press, who questioned her scholarly merit. There was speculation that Shafik got her doctorate using her “feminine charm,” stating that she was too beautiful and fashionable to have really earned her degree. Even her own family, aside from her proud father, did not seem to care about her educational accomplishment.<sup>148</sup> For Shafik, the criticism was a blow to her years of hard work in Paris. She pushed boundaries by demanding to travel to Europe and study philosophy, and she believed her degrees and experience would result in a successful career and alleviate the alienation she felt in Egypt. To her surprise, her degrees brought harsh comments, “because of the jealousies that soon appeared. Instead of seeing the streets strewn with flowers and hearing the expected applause, I felt icy hostility and indeed hate, unleashed against me.”<sup>149</sup> Although she experienced personal intellectual growth, particularly with her feminist ideology, through her studies, she still felt lonely and unhappy in Egypt, and now faced new criticism. She would continue to struggle with what the press considered a disconnect between her looks and intellectual credentials.

In terms of marriage, Shafik would not be happily married until she was 30 year old, when she was writing her theses in Paris. During this time, she first turned down the marriage proposal of a French poet, who she had a previous romance with during her undergraduate studies, and with whom she again developed a relationship. Despite their

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<sup>147</sup> Cochran, 149.

<sup>148</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 97.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

love and happiness, Shafik refused his marriage proposal. First and foremost, she did not want to disappoint her father by marrying a non-Egyptian, with a different upbringing and religion. Islam forbids Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, and marriage to a non-Muslim man would be too much even for her liberal father and social circle. Furthermore, she felt that marriage was one of the only ways in which she could reconcile with Egypt, “to try to remedy the deep roots of the social apathy,” she felt towards her nation.<sup>150</sup> After she rejected her French lover, Shafik continued feeling lonely in Paris. Her feelings of loneliness subsided when her cousin, Nour al-Din Ragai, arrived to Paris to complete his doctorate at the University of Paris. Being around Ragai made Shafik feel “a new reconciliation between Egypt and myself.”<sup>151</sup> When Ragai asked Shafik for her hand in marriage, she was at first hesitant to accept marriage to a man with a vivacious, optimistic personality—the opposite of her own. But, she writes that she, “discovered that we had one point in common that drew us together: our crazy love for freedom.” Ragai’s freedom meant living life to the fullest, a reflection of his optimistic personality. For Shafik, she interpreted freedom in the most literal sense: “to be set free.”<sup>152</sup>

Ragai and Shafik married in France in 1938. Even though Shafik married her cousin, which follows traditional sensibilities rather than modern ones, they married without their families in attendance. Shafik reflects on the conditions of her marriage:

...an Egyptian woman can assume responsibility in choosing her own husband and thus seek freedom! To be married in Paris, without one’s family, alone,

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 81.

without dowry or jewels or material assets (which is the first condition of marriage in Egypt), was for me the ultimate symbol. It was freedom in my own eyes, freedom from all the outworn social conventions which had so enslaved Egyptian women. But I was also aware that to marry under such conditions would create a scandal in Egypt...and while I signed the contract without dowry (except for the symbolic twenty-five piasters), without diamonds, without trousseau, I felt I was engaging in an act of faith! A faith in a future of the liberation of the Egyptian woman from these outmoded customs. And I experienced a magnificent feeling of EQUALITY with my husband!<sup>153</sup>

For Shafik, her marriage was not just a step in her own personal journey to freedom and reconciliation with Egypt, but also an act of feminism. Although it was a feminism that still expected women to marry and establish families, even at an older age and after attaining a high education, through her marriage, she demonstrated that women could have the freedom to choose their own husbands. By accepting a marriage contract without a dowry and other material expectations that were typical in marriage, she felt a sense of equality with men. Moreover, she was hopeful that this was the first step towards the “liberation” of women and the end of the patriarchal social conventions that she disliked since childhood. Through her marriage, Shafik sought happiness and made a feminist statement, as she was hoping to reconcile with Egypt by breaking social conventions.

### Searching for Public Space

When Shafik and Ragai arrived to Egypt on the eve of World War II, she had high hopes that she would find happiness by reconciling with Egypt and pushing forward her feminist ideology. Although she lived in Egypt from 1932 to 1935, Shafik returned to a

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 82-84.

very different Egypt, economically, politically, and socially. Egypt witnessed economic difficulties in the 1930s due to the Great Depression, which translated into lower cotton prices, decreased trade, and a drop in the standard of living for Egyptians. Politically, the Sidqi regime brought repression and violence in the early 1930s. When the Wafd took over in 1936, they returned to a Parliament full of factions and rivalries, which the Palace took advantage of and tried to weaken. Because of the economic crisis and tumultuous political arena, Egyptians became disillusioned with the failure of the Egyptian government to reach its goals of complete independence and national progress. The ineffective government was critiqued for being elite-dominated and harboring corrupt and self-serving politicians, while political parties were arenas for factionalism and personal struggles. There was little productive national action since 1922 and the optimism of the 1919 Revolution. Despite the signing of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, Egyptians were disappointed by the limitations of the treaty. “Egyptian politics came to be viewed as lacking any meaningful content,” which prompted the rise of a new group of politically active men (and women) to the political scene.<sup>154</sup> The new effendiyya class consisted of urban, educated, middle-class native Egyptians, unlike the older generation of elite men with Turco-Circassian background. With sundry ideological orientations, varying from Islamic fundamentalism to Communism, the effendiyya propelled themselves towards radical political activism, believing the nation’s future was in their hands.<sup>155</sup> Despite their

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<sup>154</sup> Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, 6.

<sup>155</sup> Some of the most prominent groups include the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt, and the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation.

various orientations, the emerging political groups shared a similar desire: total national independence and the complete end of British influence.

Shafik was aware of the changing political scene and the fervor for full independence, and she believed that women had an important role to play in the national struggle. During World War II, she wrote a short treatise, *La Femme Nouvelle en Egypte* (“the new woman in Egypt”), in which she expressed her feminist philosophy about women’s role in the nationalist struggle. She directed her treatise to the elite, who she believed should lead the movement for social change. She writes that elite women need to mobilize resources to bridge the gap between the rich and poor, meaning to eliminate ignorance, disease, and poverty. Thus, philanthropic organizations were necessary to provide social welfare to both urban and rural poor, since the government was in a constant state of disarray. Moreover, women needed to transform social, cultural, and legal barriers that prevented women’s full participation in society. Using her expertise on women in Islam, she writes that Islam, properly understood, does not create a barrier to women’s freedom.<sup>156</sup> She also contemplates the life of the “new woman” in her treatise, writing that, “One finds equally that nearly all exceptional women whose names have come down in history, have been unhappy...One must believe that they preferred an unhappy and meaningful life to a complacent but stupid one. ‘Nothing renders us so great as great suffering,’ as the poet says.”<sup>157</sup> This statement points to the possibility that Shafik herself was living an unhappy life, thanks to constant public criticism, but believed that to agitate for social change would eventually bring her happiness. Although she tried to join

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<sup>156</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 113-115.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

the EFU after her return to Egypt in order to implement the ideas put forth in her treatise, she was rejected membership, because Shaarawi and Nabarawi were critical of Shafik after her failed marriage with al-Sawi.<sup>158</sup> This rejection by the EFU likely fueled Shafik's rebelliousness, as she was turned away from the feminist organization that operated within the bounds of social conventions. Instead, she would turn to a more radical approach to promote her feminist agenda. Moreover, Shafik's private relationship—her divorce—interrupted her professional public career, again demonstrating the irrevocable connection between her public and private life.

Even though Shafik was hurt that Shaarawi distanced herself, she did not dwell on her wounds, and she started working at the Ministry of Education as an inspector of French schools across Egypt during the war years. By working for a government ministry, Shafik challenged the notion that only lower-middle and low-class women work for a salary. Women from bourgeois families, such as Shafik, mostly involved themselves in charity work, not salaried work, particularly because their husbands generally earned enough income to support them. This was certainly the case for Shafik, whose husband established a successful law firm in Egypt, making it financially unnecessary for her to work. Again, Shafik was pushing cultural boundaries, and she increasingly became a public figure as she travelled around Egypt.<sup>159</sup> Her job with the Ministry of Education was also a strategy to make a name for herself in the public sphere.

The war years were a happy time in Doria's personal life. In 1942, at age 34, she gave birth to her first daughter, Aziza, which Shafik describes as finding "the brightness

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 103.

of the sun.”<sup>160</sup> She had another daughter in 1944, Jehane. In order to continue carving a space for herself in public life, Shafik hired an Irish governess to help take care of her daughters, and likely to help educate them with European sensibilities. Shafik sacrificed bonding time with her daughters for the purpose of creating a role in the public sphere to implement her feminist agenda, and by extension, find happiness. She enjoyed an active social life with her husband, and she believed that socializing was a way in which she could learn more about Egypt and thus find where she could find role to play in molding the future of Egypt. She and Ragai joined Cairo’s Automobile Club, a popular upper class and bourgeois social club. Elegantly dressed, Shafik attended social events at the club, and became a well-known socialite. Shafik believed that Cairo’s Automobile Club was, “the best place to learn what was going on” in Egypt, as she was exposed to many people with knowledge and information about news occurring throughout the country.<sup>161</sup> Despite her employment, Shafik’s life at this point was very bourgeois, as a mother and a socialite. Although she eased into a typical middle-class role, Shafik’s rebellious nature would soon emerge onto the public scene.

### Engaging in Popular Feminist Activity

World War II caused the temporary halting of feminist activity in Egypt. After the war ended, however, the feminist movement accelerated with new vigor and new focus. The women’s movement transformed in the post-World War II era, because there was a

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 112.

diversification in ideology, tactics, and goals of feminists.<sup>162</sup> No longer content with the philanthropic feminism of the EFU, particularly after the death of Shaarawi in 1947, the feminists that came of age after the war tackled social and political problems by engaging in direct-action campaigns. They believed the tactics of the EFU to be outdated—health clinics and charity work would not be enough to solve the social problems in Egyptian society, such as continued poverty and lack of healthcare and education, which became exaggerated after the war. Moreover, the movement transcended the elite-only membership of the EFU, which did not make initiatives to reach a broader base of women. Instead, these younger, more radical women began a widespread campaign for full political and legal rights for Egyptian women. Margot Badran calls these women populist feminists, as they attempted to involve and gain the support of women of all social classes throughout the country.<sup>163</sup> Populist feminists took actions towards poor urban and rural women, fighting for their economic and social liberation through the establishment of literacy campaigns and centers for hygiene in the provinces of Egypt.

Doria Shafik was one of these young, dynamic feminists, who had the ultimate goal of securing full political and legal rights for Egyptian women. In 1945, she was considering possible ways in which she could launch her feminist career in the form of daily activity. In the backdrop of an ineffective Egyptian government, continued struggles against the British, and the rise of new political groups, Shafik accepted a position in the Palace as editor-in-chief of a new cultural and literary magazine published

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<sup>162</sup> Cynthia Nelson, “Biography and Women’s History: On Interpreting Doria Shaifk” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 314.

<sup>163</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 126.

by Princess Chevikar, *La Femme Nouvelle*. Shafik accepted the position because she wanted to take on the challenge of journalism, with which she had no experience. Moreover, she believed the magazine was the means by which she could “launch my own mission later” of “helping my country.”<sup>164</sup> Having a position in the Palace exposed Shafik to a number of public criticisms. She was labeled an anti-nationalist, since she was using her French education to edit a French magazine, sported French clothing, and associated herself with foreigners. Therefore, she was accused of collaboration with Western powers. Shafik was deeply saddened by these rumors, writing that, “I felt a terrible abyss was opening between me and my country—perhaps deeper than before... But the rumors kept spreading—endangering my career. I was accused of being French!”<sup>165</sup> Shafik decided to take on the role of editor of *La Femme Nouvelle* in order to advance her feminist career and help transform Egyptian society. However, her decision was met with criticism and questions concerning her national identity, demonstrating the growing influence of radical Arab nationalism and anti-European sensibilities.

For a woman attempting to reconcile with Egypt, Shafik was hurt by the attacks on her national identity, continuing to feel alienated in her own country. She decided to counter these attacks by proving her patriotism: by founding an Arabic language journal. Shafik writes that she, “turned their arguments against me to my own advantage,” and she founded *Bint al-Nil* (“Daughter of the Nile”), an Arabic journal with the purpose of educating Egyptian and Arab women.<sup>166</sup> With the financial help and moral support of her

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<sup>164</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 123.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

husband, Shafik published *Bint al-Nil* from 1945 until 1957. The journals' readership was dominated by the educated middle class. Shafik hoped to awaken women's feminist consciousness by introducing feminine discourse to readers. The magazine included articles on women's issues, nutrition, parenting advice, fashion, as well as editorials on the political situation in Egypt. On recounting why she started *Bint al Nil*, Shafik writes:

I wanted a magazine exclusively for women, especially Egyptian and Arab women. One that would concentrate on their problems since so many erroneous interpretations of the Quran were causing great injustice towards Arab women. A women's magazine could be of great help to the progress of my country as well as of all Muslim countries through reaching women among the broader Arabic-speaking public with *Bint al-Nil's* message.<sup>167</sup>

Her statement reflects her goal of reconciling feminism and Islam, as well as her desire to reach a wide audience—not just in Egypt, but throughout the Arab world. She hoped to awaken educated Egyptian women to their responsibility of solving the nation's problems.

Through her magazines, Shafik communicated her feminist ideology to readers. Both magazines concentrated on the construction of identity: *La Femme Nouvelle* on the true image of Egypt, turned towards the occident, and *Bint al-Nil* on the rights and responsibility of Egyptian and Arab women. After the death of Princess Chevikar, *La Femme Nouvelle* was transferred to the office of *Bint al-Nil*, and Shafik was gaining a reputation as the editor of high-quality magazines.<sup>168</sup> With her entrance into journalism, first through *La Femme Nouvelle* then through her own *Bint al-Nil*, Shafik truly emerged into the public sphere, widely known to middle and upper classes as a feminist figure. By

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 132-134.

the late 1940s, Shafik's credentials as an editor and publisher were frequently cited in newspaper articles about feminist activity in Egypt. The *Palestine Post* published a 1947 article on Egyptian feminism, in which the writer, Andrew Roth, discussed the progress made by women in journalism. Roth writes that Doria Shafik was the editor of two magazines, but also refers to her education and physical appearance: "But the feminine publishing phenomenon is beautiful Doria Shafik, who looks like a showgirl, but is a mother, has a Doctorate in Letter from the Sorbonne."<sup>169</sup> In one sentence, Shafik's educational credentials and looks are considered, as well as her maternity—which suggests that Shafik possessed a unique combination of traits in 1940s Egypt. A similar statement was made in the *New York Times*, which covered Shafik's activity as a suffragette. Shafik was described as, "a publisher of several women's magazines, wife of a university professor, and mother of a family who was once barred from a post in the university because she was considered too beautiful and likely to disturb the studies of male students."<sup>170</sup> Thus, the article included information on Shafik's private life, as a mother and a wife. This is another example demonstrating that Shafik's private life could not be disassociated from her public life, as it was subject to public consideration through the press.

Because Shafik's husband also supported *Bint al-Nil*, the Ragai household was constantly buzzing with guests—many of whom would bring news worthy of publication. As a result, Shafik received news before other journalists. Even in her home, the very

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<sup>169</sup> Andrew Roth, "Egypt's Feminine Pyramid," *The Palestine Post* (Palestine), Feb. 07, 1947.

<sup>170</sup> Albion Ross, "Islamic Leader Riles Suffragette: Feminist Leader in Egypt Asks Action on a Ruling That Vote for Women is Degrading," *New York Times* (New York), Apr. 20, 1952.

symbol of private domesticity, Shafik was in position to receive news and further her feminist agenda. These constant visits from prominent guests, such as Princess Faiza, as well as her responsibilities for her magazines, caused Shafik to be preoccupied with her work, both in her office and in her home. Shafik increasingly felt the pressure of dividing her time between motherhood and her career.<sup>171</sup> Although she loved spending time with her daughters, Shafik chose her career over precious moments with her children, and she recognized this sacrifice in her memoir, writing, “The antagonism between my obligation toward this mission and my family, to which, in principle, I had to be everything became more definitive with each passing day.”<sup>172</sup> Shafik made this sacrifice in order to find happiness and further her mission of improving Egypt by gaining full social and legal rights for women. The feminist struggle and Shafik’s personal happiness were linked.

In 1948, Egypt suffered a humiliating loss in the Palestine War. Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, and Iraq jointly invaded the former British Mandate of Palestine, which was newly recognized as the state of Israel by both superpower leaders (Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin). Although the joint effort reflected the spirit of Arab nationalism, cooperation between the Arab nations was poor, contributing to their defeat. This was seen in Egypt as a huge debacle, which severely hurt national pride, resulting in severe criticism of the government and a renewed campaign against the remaining British military presence in Egypt. In the wake of the war, the government implemented undemocratic measures, including martial law and the imprisonment of political supporters of the left and right. Although the Wafd returned to power in the early 1950s

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<sup>171</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 138.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

and attempted to address some social issues, such as expanding education to rural areas, Egyptians were still unsatisfied. The increasingly disillusioned population roused to participate in popular activism, including political militancy in university campuses and worker strikes. Despite demonstrations and popular unrest, government corruption continued from the King and Parliament.<sup>173</sup>

As she observed the political turmoil occurring in Egypt, Shafik also turned her attention to the increasing social problems of her fellow Egyptians. Readers of *Bint al-Nil* submitted letters to the magazine about problems they were enduring, including unemployment, lack of money, clothes, and even food. As a result, Shafik decided it was time to renew and invigorate the Egyptian feminist movement. After Shaarawi's death in 1947, Shafik held two press conferences to announce the new offensive for liberation, which encompassed two goals for the movement: to achieve women's suffrage, and to change the socio-economic system of Egypt that was oppressing both men and women. These new goals were embodied in the formation of a new feminist organization in 1948, the Bint al-Nil Union (BNU). At the age of 40, Shafik founded her own feminist organization. Although the organization was directed towards the emerging middle class of university graduates and young radicals, Shafik "wanted the movement to be a bond, a hyphen between classes considered antagonistic," thus opening membership to women of all social levels.<sup>174</sup> She believed that change was not just about attaining suffrage, but also changing laws that were oppressive to women. These laws included civil laws that prevented women from running for elections, and the Islamic personal status law, which

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<sup>173</sup> Botman, 51.

<sup>174</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 150.

allowed polygamy and a man's right to divorce his wife and take custody of children. Shafik believed that Islam and modernity must be reconciled in order to eliminate oppression, writing that, "Islam stands with the cause of women because Islam is the religion of science, understanding, development and freedom."<sup>175</sup> Again, she uses her education and knowledge of Islam to justify her feminist agenda, and the press recognized this when speaking about the tactics of Shafik, stating that, "Mme. Shafik knows her Koran and can quote it at length."<sup>176</sup>

As the founder and president of the BNU, Shafik was becoming increasingly more militant in her feminist message for women's rights. According to Shafik, by denying women the right to vote, men did not want the best for their own country, as, "A country cannot be free if its women are not." She writes that men justified their decision using religion and tradition, but, "What tradition stands between women and their ability to do good?...In fact it is this inferiority complex from which some Egyptians suffer which makes them behave in this way... Gentleman make way for us and let the procession take its natural course."<sup>177</sup> Thus, Shafik begins using inflammatory language, and emphasizes the consequences to society and family when women are denied involvement in the legislative process. She writes that if women had the right to vote, they would be able to ensure that their family is safe against evils of society. She cites examples such as the elimination of easy access to divorce, deserted children, ignorance

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>176</sup> Ross, "Islamic Scholar Riles Suffragette."

<sup>177</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 152.

at home, and lack of knowledge about hygiene.<sup>178</sup> Although very similar to the first articulation of her feminist ideology during her speech at the commemoration of Qasim Amin in 1928—women’s rights in order to improve society—Shafik was beginning to use more inflammatory language in the dissemination of her feminist ideas, using words and phrases such as “inferiority complex” and “idiots” to describe Egyptian men.<sup>179</sup>

In terms of social issues, Shafik did not only want to liberate the educated woman, but also increase exposure to the issues of working-class and factory women. The BNU launched a social and economic agenda in 1950, which included delivering meals to working class women, opening an employment bureau for university students, and founding a club for cultural activities for the educated middle class. The most ambitious reform activity involved combatting illiteracy. Despite the law for compulsory education, 80% of the Egyptian population was still illiterate. Shafik believed that, “The first duty of every citizen is to fight illiteracy.”<sup>180</sup> Thus, the BNU launched a literacy campaign in Bulaq, a low class district of Cairo. The organization used elementary schools as the location for adult reading and writing lessons, after which public exams were administered. People were encouraged to participate in the three-month program through the distribution of gifts upon completion. The BNU also founded training centers for literacy, hygiene, and domestic trade in Cairo and throughout other major provincial capitals.<sup>181</sup> No longer simply articulating her feminist ideology in her newspapers,

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 164.

through the BNU, Doria Shafik implemented her feminist agenda through organized activity that reached women outside of Cairo.

With the BNU's campaign of social activity, the organization received increasing publicity, both positive and negative. This translated into greater exposure of Shafik, and she became very well known throughout Egypt, making the front pages of major newspapers and journals. Finally, Shafik ascended to the limelight. She even made press in non-Egyptian newspapers, as the leader of "a broad feminist front...seeking political and civil equality for women."<sup>182</sup> Once again, before explaining that she was the leader of the BNU, Shafik's appearance and motherhood was first stated: "Madame Doria Shafik, pretty, dynamic 32-year-old mother of two children, on the march for equal political rights with men."<sup>183</sup> Shafik was also criticized for her actions through accusations of thirst for publicity, falsely interpreting Islam, and destroying politics and tradition. Islamic fundamentalists especially attacked Shafik, calling her an agent of imperialists, undermining the values of Islam through modern ideas about women's roles. The public even questioned her private family life by attacking her femininity and questioning if she was happy in her marriage.<sup>184</sup> Shafik's activism resulted in constant attacks—from her personal motives, to her Egyptian identity, and even her marriage, which strained her efforts at personal reconciliation with Egypt. Her private life was not spared in the public's assault, reflecting the entanglement of her public and private life. In order to further her feminist mission, Shafik had to endure public criticism.

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<sup>182</sup> "Egyptian Feminists to Fight Polygamy," *The New York Times* (New York), Jan. 30, 1949.

<sup>183</sup> Gilbert Sedbon, "Women in Egypt are on the March," *Palestine Post* (Palestine), Dec. 26, 1949.

<sup>184</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 148.

Shafik was most impacted, however, by a new antagonism: the conflict between her feminist mission and her family. As her involvement in the BNU increased, she dedicated less time with her husband and daughters, since she was constantly travelling throughout Egypt. She recounts in her memoir the struggle between balancing her public and private life: “For me it is posed a problem not usually faced by men destined to public life: the tug-of-war between my obligations as a mother and wife...and the new responsibilities of this mission, no less intransigent and already profoundly woven into my destiny.”<sup>185</sup> She realized that in order to continue her feminist activity, she had to make sacrifices in her private family life, writing that, “Those who demand much must give much.”<sup>186</sup> Shafik’s public activism inevitably negatively impacted her private life. But she was willing to make this sacrifice for the feminist cause and her own personal happiness.

#### Direct Confrontation: Reaching the Height of her Career

In the early 1950s, Egypt witnessed increasing popular unrest, as the urban population continued demonstrations and strikes, demanding change to the social and political injustice in Egypt.<sup>187</sup> For her part, Shafik decided to “use violence towards those who understand only the language of violence.”<sup>188</sup> Using her rebellious nature, she turned to even greater militant feminism, showing her directly confrontational style of

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>187</sup> Botman, 51.

<sup>188</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 168.

feminism.<sup>189</sup> Shafik believed that the feminist struggle was not just about liberating women; the liberation of women was linked to the larger political struggle against the British and ineffective Egyptian government. Only true democracy would bring the social justice and social development of Egypt. For the first time, the women's movement, which included both middle-class organizations (the BNU) and upper-class organizations (EFU) turned to street protests. On February 19, 1951, 1500 women held a "women's congress" at the American University of Cairo.<sup>190</sup> At the meeting, Shafik told the women that the Egyptian Parliament could not be a reflection of the nation without women, as half of the population was excluded. As a result she proposed that the women, "go and give it to them straight. Let's go demand our rights. Forward to the Parliament!"<sup>191</sup> Led by Shafik, the women marched from Ewart Memorial Hall to the Parliament building, which was located a few blocks away, where the Deputies of Parliament were scheduled to convene that afternoon. The women protested outside of the building for a few hours before they entered the office of the vice president of the Chamber of Deputies, who was not in his office. From his office, Shafik called the president of the Senate, Ali Zaki al-Orabi Pasha, telling him that according to the constitution, women "should have the right to vote and sit in Parliament." The Pasha promised that he would "take the question personally in hand."<sup>192</sup>

The march to Parliament was a historic moment for the Egyptian women's movement. No longer content with ineffective lobbying for their rights, women united,

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<sup>189</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 127.

<sup>190</sup> Michael Clark, "Rising Feminism Bewilders Egypt: Demand Political Rights for Women in Egypt," *New York Times* (New York), Mar. 5, 1951.

<sup>191</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 170.

<sup>192</sup> Clark, "Rising Feminism Bewilders Egypt."

regardless of class and ideological differences to demand their political rights. The press closely followed the women's march, which took society and the rest of the world by surprise. The women even made headlines in the West, as the *New York Times* also published an article about the "unladylike behavior of the suffragettes" who brought "bewilderment" to the Deputies of Parliament. Again, Shafik was featured in this article, as the President of the BNU. Also included in the article was a photograph of Shafik with her two daughters, the caption stating, "Mme. Doria Shaifk, president of the Bint el-Nil Union, who led the demonstrations, reads to her daughters, Gehane, left, 7 years old, and Aziza, 9."<sup>193</sup> By juxtaposing news on Shafik's militant actions with her motherhood, the article demonstrates that the public was fascinated with Shafik's private life as well as her public activity. Her private life could not be severed from her rebellious public actions.

Shafik claimed responsibility for storming Parliament, and she even stated that she was "ready to go to jail" for her actions.<sup>194</sup> She pushed social boundaries with her idea to storm Parliament, and would accept the consequences for her actions. With a number of female lawyers ready to defend her, Shafik was set for trial in April 1951. However, the trial was postponed, and Egypt turned its attention to intensifying guerilla warfare against the British around the Suez Canal Zone.<sup>195</sup> After the Wafd abrogated the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, the British declared it null and void, and they took over full control of the Canal Zone. Thus, the Battle of the Canal Zone raged, from October 1951 until January 1952. Egyptian guerillas were made up of alliances between various

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 172.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 175.

organizations, including the Muslims Brotherhood, Communist parties, the Socialist party, and the left wing Wafd. Guerillas quickly struck British troops in the dark and retreated before the British could prepare retaliation.<sup>196</sup> With deteriorating Anglo-Egyptian relations, Egyptian workers left their jobs at British-affiliated companies, paralyzing the Suez Canal base. Huge protests ensued in Cairo, challenging both the Egyptian government and the British. On November 13, 1951, the anniversary of the 1919 Revolution, a demonstration raged in Cairo against British occupation, bringing together men and women of all ideological leanings. Despite the large demonstration, no Egyptian political party was able to channel to the disaffected masses and gain decisive power in Parliament, continuing the trend of a weak, disorganized government.<sup>197</sup>

Staying true to her belief that women should be involved in the political and nationalist struggle, Shafik called for women's participation in the unfolding events. The BNU organized the first female military unit in Egypt, made up of fifty women. The organization also trained fifty field nurses and administered first-aid training to 20,000 women. Moreover, the BNU voted to give financial aid to workers who lost their jobs in the Canal Zone.<sup>198</sup> These radical measures taken by the BNU and Shafik were unprecedented, demonstrating the belief of women's equal responsibility with men during times of national struggle. After a general strike in January 1952 led to the intentional burning of Cairo's foreign establishment, "Black Saturday," Shafik decided that resorting to violence was putting the women of the BNU in danger, as they were

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<sup>196</sup> Botman, 52.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>198</sup> "Women in Egypt Organize: First Military Unit in Country to Consist of 50 Girls," *New York Times* (New York), Oct. 30, 1951.

involved in protests on the same day. Therefore, she resorted to taking part in only peaceful protests.<sup>199</sup>

Because of the increased publicity of the women's movement, Egypt's religious authorities took a stand against feminist agitation. This came especially after Shafik submitted her name to run for office in a district of Cairo, pushing political and legal boundaries as a woman. Opposition from religious authorities exploded. The ulama of the city of Damietta issued a fatwa (formal opinion) about women's right to vote. They declared that votes for women were, "degrading to women and against their nature."<sup>200</sup> Shafik backfired by sending to the press a fatwa issued by the Chairman of the Association of Ulama in Pakistan, which supported women's right to vote, stating, "History reveals the diversity of roles which women undertook in times of war and peace and Islam acknowledges their role and accords to women all rights accorded to men."<sup>201</sup> As a result Grand Mufti Shaykh Hassanein Muhammad Makhluaf, the highest religious authority of Egypt, issued a fatwa condemning feminist agitation and Shafik. On women's demand for involvement in the political sphere, he stated, "No one can accept this nor Islam can approve it."<sup>202</sup> Shafik dared to respond to the well-respected Shaykh, pointing out that the Mufti did not use quotations from the Quran to support his fatwa. She writes that that Islam is a "generous religion," and that "when understood truly will not hinder the advancement of nations and the development of their people, men and

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<sup>199</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 179.

<sup>200</sup> Ross, "Islamic Scholar Riles Suffragette."

<sup>201</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 181.

<sup>202</sup> "Cairo Mufti Bars Votes for Women: Condemns Suffrage Agitation in Egypt and Rebukes Leader who won beauty contest," *New York Times* (New York), May 3, 1952.

women.”<sup>203</sup> With this statement, Shafik links women’s right to national progress. She writes that “enemies” such as the mufti imagine that they can stop time and revert back to patriarchal customs, but this will only succeed in ruining the reputation of both Egypt and Islam. She argues that Islam makes certain guarantees to women, such as the right to select her marriage partner, and this right should extend to selecting representatives in public matters.<sup>204</sup> The Mufti of Egypt directly attacked Shafik, demonstrating the greatly visible public role she played as a feminist. She was not deflated by these personal attacks, and she showed both her rebelliousness and confidence in her knowledge of Islam by responding to the greatest religious authority of Egypt.

The debate on Islam and women’s constitutional rights raged in Egypt in 1952. Religious scholars even held a conference in 1952, attacking the feminist movement for disrupting society. The men wrote a ten-point manifesto against women’s rights, stating that women have been influenced and supported by British imperialists. They even blamed Shafik for the disruption the women’s movement was causing, again pointing to her publicity as the leader of feminist agitation in the 1940s and early 1950s. Male fundamentalists were alarmed, and they believed that, “the most serious threat facing our society is the oriental woman’s refusal to obey man.”<sup>205</sup> The Egyptian government, under pressure, took the side of the religious authorities. Since Islam was the religion of Egypt, as stated in the Constitution, they must accept the opinion of the religious authorities on women’s political rights. Therefore, they voted against introducing women’s suffrage in

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<sup>203</sup> Duriya Shafiq, “Islam and the Constitutional Rights of Women,” in *Opening the Gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, trans. Ali Badran and Margot Badran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 354.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>205</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 31.

the government's electoral reform. The livid Shafik believed the government was hiding behind religion, as the men were simply afraid of giving political rights to women.<sup>206</sup>

### The Beginning of the End

Political tensions reached a climax in mid-1952. On July 23, 1952, low level-military officers revolted and overthrew the monarchy in a bloodless coup d'état, signaling the end of liberalism in Egypt. Because of their anger at Egypt's inefficient leaders who were not finding solutions to the nation's social, political, and economic problems, the Free Officers demanded King Farouk's abdication, who fled to Italy with his family, and set up a military regime in Egypt. Their ultimate goal was to eliminate political corruption and negotiate with the British for the total end of British occupation.<sup>207</sup> Shafik supported the revolution, particularly because the new government officially recognized women's political parties as equal to men. As a result, Shafik reorganized the Bint al-Nil Union to a political party, the Bint al-Nil Party, with Shafik as its leader. Shafik and her political party supported the revolution through Shafik's magazines, and she was enthusiastic that women's demands would be met by the military government. In the meantime, Shafik turned her attention to a three-year project to combat illiteracy across Egypt, involving readers of *Bint al-Nil*, as well as the government, as, "It should be the duty of every person who can read and write, to teach a certain number of illiterate people."<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 184.

<sup>207</sup> Botman, 54.

<sup>208</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 187.

By 1954, women were still not granted suffrage. Shafik began feeling frustrated with the new government. She took drastic measures: 46 year-old Shafik declared a hunger strike until women were granted political rights. She was joined by a number of other women, and together, their rebelliousness made international headlines. Their strike ended after eight days, as President Naguib guaranteed the constitutional rights of women.<sup>209</sup> Shafik sacrificed food in order to attain political rights for women. However, she also sacrificed the happiness of her children and the stability of her marriage, as her daughters and husband were appalled by Shafik's actions. Aziza and Jehane were terrified by their mother's hunger strike, and the media repeatedly report that Doria Shafik was going to die because of her actions.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, her decision to declare a hunger strike put a great strain on her marriage, making the decision without consulting Ragai—a decision he disagreed with. Tension was building between Shafik and Ragai since Shafik became increasingly political and completely devoted to her feminist mission. They constantly argued at home, particularly about their varying views about the articles to be published in *Bint al-Nil*. Despite keeping public appearances that they were a happy couple, 1954 marked the beginning of the end of Shafik's marriage to Ragai.<sup>211</sup> Shafik's decision to undertake a very public hunger strike caused increased discontent in her private household, as she sacrificed the happiness of her children and the harmony of her marriage.

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<sup>209</sup> "Doria Shafik," *The Times* (London), Sept. 23, 1975.

<sup>210</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 203.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

When Nasser secured his full hold on power at the end of 1954, the government clamped down on freedom of expression. The end of British occupation, which was the goal of Egyptian nationalists, including Shafik, ironically resulted in the rise of an independent state that restricted the freedoms of its citizens. Political parties and press fell under state control, which was a blow to Shafik's BNU and Bint al-Nil Party. Therefore, using the publicity she received with her hunger strike, Shafik undertook a voyage around the world for the next year, giving speeches in Europe, the United States, and East and Southeast Asia. She redefined the fight for women's rights in the context of the struggle for democracy.<sup>212</sup> When she returned to Egypt, the state-controlled press increasingly believed Shafik was against the revolution. In an attempt to win the support of all classes, Nasser gave women the right to vote in 1956, just as he was moving into a single-party regime, which meant elections were mostly a charade. Nevertheless, the granting of women's suffrage effectively ended the dynamic women's movement of Shaarawi and Shafik. Nasser's regime did enlist the support of some women for its authoritarian state-feminism, but Shafik was unwilling to yield to this. Shafik called the new 1956 Constitution the "slow death of democracy."<sup>213</sup> As a result, in 1957, she held her final act of public defiance: a hunger strike, demanding the end of the dictatorship. This action led to the end of her social and political life, as Nasser ordered the house arrest of Shafik and the end to all of her publications.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 211.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

Because of her mission, which shifted to the preservation of democracy, Shafik was completely ousted from public life, marking the ultimate sense of alienation and unhappiness. Her dedication to fighting for what she believed in—women’s rights and a democratic Egypt—led to the abrupt end of a public life at age 48. For eighteen years, Shafik lived a private domestic life. She spent most of her private confinement writing, and she produced sixteen books, philosophical essays, poems, several versions of her memoir, and a novel. Also during this time, she and Ragai quietly divorced in 1968, and her daughters both married and had children of their own. The search for happiness through her feminism ultimately resulted in divorce and separation from her children and grandchildren, as Aziza immigrated to the United States with her husband, and she slowly chose isolation over spending time with Jehane and her daughters.<sup>215</sup> Although she was able to move around, she began preferring isolation. Doria Shafik, the socialite who made public headlines through her rebellious nature, chose to be alone during the last years of her life, as she suffered depression. She remained in near total seclusion for 18 years. After several nervous breakdowns, Shafik ended her own life on September 20, 1975, jumping off of the balcony of her sixth floor apartment building.<sup>216</sup>

The tragic suicide of Doria Shafik brought the feminist’s name back into the press, after a two-decade hiatus. Her obituary recounted the rebellious nature of Shafik, noting her radical actions as the leader of the BNU, as well as her opposition to Nasser’s regime. It also mentions Shafik’s beauty, which was particularly highlighted with her

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 256-267.

<sup>216</sup> “Doria Shafik.”

participation in the 1935 Miss Egypt beauty pageant.<sup>217</sup> Her decision to compete reflects Shafik's feminist ideology, and the public's reaction to her decision is representative of criticism she endured throughout her career. As the first Muslim woman to ever enter the contest, Shafik pushed rigid social boundaries. Although she knew that her decision could hurt her reputation as a Muslim woman, she placed her feminist ideology over her personal reputation. She entered the pageant in order to test her feminist idea, which she developed while at the Sorbonne, that the New Woman in Egypt combines beauty, a feminine trait, with intellect, considered a masculine trait.<sup>218</sup> By competing, Shafik chose to test her Western-inspired intellectual ideas, rather than adhering to the traditional boundaries that were the cause of the sense of alienation from her own country. Shafik won first runner-up, and her name appeared throughout the press. While French language magazines published positive articles about her title, the Arabic press in Egypt was very harsh. Shafik was criticized as, "a Muslim girl who acted against Islam."<sup>219</sup> Her teachers even wrote to their former student, explaining their disappointment.

Competing in the Miss Egypt pageant demonstrates the application of Shafik's Western-inspired ideology, although grounded in Islam, in Egyptian society. Despite constant public criticism of her public actions and private life during her career, Shafik continued her feminist mission and search for happiness and sense of place within her nation. She considered the women's struggle for social and political rights and the ultimate transformation of Egypt to be more important than personal attacks. Although

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 60.

<sup>219</sup> "Cairo Mufti Bars Votes for Women."

women were finally granted political rights during her lifetime, Shafik suffered the ultimate form of alienation under house arrest, leading to her suicide. But Shafik's dynamic, rebellious feminism, although ending with unhappiness and her tragic death, involved unprecedented acts for social change, and she has been remembered as a champion of women's rights in Egypt.

## CHAPTER THREE

### UMM KULTHUM: GIVING VOICE TO EGYPT

Throughout the Middle East, the name Umm Kulthum is synonymous with musical singing legend. Her powerful voice and authentically Egyptian songs propelled Umm Kulthum to fame in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. From the beginning of her career in 1910, at age six, singing alongside her father in the rural provinces around the Egyptian Delta, to her golden years in the 1940s and 1950s, until her death in 1975, Umm Kulthum carved a place for herself as a respected singer, professional, and ultimately a cultural symbol of Egypt and the Arab world. Her singing career not only resulted in fame and improved social status, but it also raised the level of respect given to female singers in a society that previously associated the entertainment industry with indecency and immorality. Umm Kulthum was the most successful example of female empowerment in Egypt's entertainment industry in the twentieth century, as she asserted agency over her own life and career. Although she was not a self-declared feminist, nor did she have the status and education of Shaarawi and Shafik, Umm Kulthum embodied one of the only options for empowerment open to low-class women, relying on her own business efforts, natural talent, and motivation. Through her self-discipline, Umm Kulthum rose through the social ranks from a rural peasant to an Egyptian celebrity and singing sensation throughout the Arab world.

Umm Kulthum has been identified as “the Voice of Egypt.” Virginia Danielson argues that Umm Kulthum's career exemplified a “political position,” as she cultivated indigenous values and a distinctly Egyptian persona, yet her performances were shared

across many Arab societies, who identified her as part of wider Arab culture.<sup>220</sup> I argue that Umm Kulthum is not only a cultural symbol, but also a feminist figure. Although she was not an educated, self-identified feminist, nor did she articulate a feminist agenda, her actions reflect an autonomous woman, firmly making her own musical and stylistic decisions, taking control of her career, and pushing traditional barriers as a female professional. Her lack of education prevented her from joining the formal Egyptian feminist movement, pointing to the limitations of the movement, which was not extended to the lower-class masses. Unlike invisible feminism, which took place in the private sphere, Umm Kulthum's practical feminism reached broad public audiences. From low-class peasants to the upper classes, Egyptian women were exposed to and identified with Umm Kulthum's authentically Egyptian music and lyrics. The voice of Egypt gave voice to millions of Egyptian women. She was able gain incredible fame through her singing career, while also maintaining her dignity. By means of her feminism, in which she was determined to direct her own career with an emphasis on modesty, Umm Kulthum transformed the respectability afforded to the singing profession.

Umm Kulthum's status as a feminist, national and regional symbol was a result of a new age in which well-known figures could reach stardom through new mediums, both technological and social. Recordings, radio, and films amplified Umm Kulthum's career and allowed her to position herself as a star in the entertainment industry and gain national and regional prestige. As a cultural symbol of Egypt and later a symbol of Arab

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<sup>220</sup> Virginia Danielson, *'The Voice of Egypt': Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

culture and the Arab world, her position reflects the trajectory of nationalist sentiment in Egypt: from a focus on Egyptian territorial nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, to a wider, pan-Arab nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s. However, this increasing spotlight inevitably impacted Umm Kulthum's career as she navigated through the entertainment industry, while also attempting to keep her personal life away from the public eye. Her successful career indicated natural talent, persistent hard work, and shrewd business acumen. At the same time, as a result of her success and determination to keep her privacy outside of the concert halls, many people perceived her public image as a cold and heartless personality. Umm Kulthum hardened the line between her public and private life, doing all that she could to deny the public access into her private affairs. The public/private balance that she established provides a contrast to Shaarawi and Shafik, who opted for a more fluid boundary between their public actions and private sphere as a way to promote their feminist activism. Umm Kulthum's hard line between public and private reflects the practical feminism of the singer, whose pious background made it necessary to block attempts at inquiries into her private life in order to maintain respectability and ultimately transform the way in which society viewed female entertainers.

#### The "Little Girl Who Sings": Early Life in the Countryside

Umm Kulthum was from a low-class family. Born in the village of Tammy in the central Delta of Egypt in 1904, her father, Ibrahim, was a shaykh, a scholar of Islam, thus resulting in a religious upbringing for his daughter. Unlike most feminist activists in

Egypt, because of her poor background, Umm Kulthum only attended a village primary level Qur'an school and was not educated in foreign languages by tutors. Nor was she required to live a segregated life in the harem. Lower-class Egyptian women were too poor to be secluded, as they needed to contribute to the economic viability of their families. Even though she came of age after the 1919 Revolution, when the women's movement became public, Umm Kulthum never joined a feminist organization, nor engaged in public debates about women's advancement. Despite these important differences in social class, education, and upbringing, Umm Kulthum displayed her own brand of feminist consciousness. Through her thoughts and actions, which are revealed in her short memoir, dictated to journalist Mahmud Awad, she relates her motivation, confidence, and awareness of the need for women to make their own decisions and determine the course of their careers and lives.

From a young age, Umm Kulthum demonstrated confidence to ask for what she desired, even if it presented challenges to traditional society. For example, she begged her father to allow her to go to kuttab with her brother to receive an education. Her father, however, only had "one extra kursh [currency] and that must go for my son's education."<sup>221</sup> This reflects a common practice in a patriarchal society, especially for the lower classes, who could only afford to educate their sons. Moreover, unlike the educated middle and upper classes, Umm Kulthum's father did not emphasize the importance of education. Rather, lack of education, particularly for girls, was due to financial reasons.

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<sup>221</sup> Umm Kulthum, "The Umm Kulthum Nobody Knows," in *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Berzingan, trans. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Berzingan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 139.

But because of her constant begging, Umm Kulthum's father allowed her to go to school, pointing to her early persistence in seeking out her desires. Shaykh Ibrahim also taught Umm Kulthum's brother chants and songs, which he and his father sang at mawlid (religious gatherings). Umm Kulthum listened to her brother's singing lessons, and she recited these chants to her dolls.<sup>222</sup> She also learned from phonograph records that she heard at her friend's home, the daughter of the village umda (chief). After hearing his daughter's singing abilities, Shaykh Ibrahim took Umm Kulthum to perform at a celebration in the home of the umda.<sup>223</sup> At only five years old, her strong voice was revealed, largely because of her persistence in learning songs on her own.

Initially, her father was torn on whether to allow her to perform in public in front of male audiences. Umm Kulthum's singing would help the family's financial struggles. However, allowing his daughter to sing in public was against the norms of society, since entertainers, who displayed themselves on a stage, were not considered respectable:

The idea that his daughter should be a singer was a difficult thing for him to accept. His son, yes, but daughter, ah, that was something else...So he began to dress me in boys' clothes...I realize now that my father wanted to deceive himself, to postpone in his mind what he was doing, letting his daughter sing in public. And he also wanted to deceive the audience and convince them that the singer was not a young girl but a young boy.<sup>224</sup>

Umm Kulthum continued to sing by reaching this compromise with her father, a very religious man, and her conservative milieu at large. By wearing boys' clothes as a young girl (and later, modest women's attire) while singing, Umm Kulthum went against conventional norms, yet did not push the limits of acceptability in a patriarchal society.

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>223</sup> Danielson, "The Voice of Egypt," 28.

<sup>224</sup> Umm Kulthum, 145-146.

Subsequently, young Umm Kulthum began traveling with her father on foot around the Egyptian Delta to perform. She was so popular that shortly thereafter her father felt comfortable enough to allow her to wear modest female attire. She quickly became known as “the little girl who sang,” and people in these rural regions would specifically ask to hear her perform.<sup>225</sup> Umm Kulthum became a village star, and she was showered with gifts such as silk, jewelry, and free transportation. Her earnings greatly helped ease her family’s poverty, which likely helped persuade her father to allow his daughter to continue singing throughout the countryside. Indeed the ten piastres she was paid for her first performance in 1910 was roughly half of her father’s monthly salary as a religious scholar at the mosque. By 1920, her rapid success allowed her to chart one Egyptian pound per performance, which was roughly five times her father’s monthly salary.<sup>226</sup> Thus, she became her family’s main breadwinner already as a teenager, and that responsibility produced a growing self-confidence and self-esteem.

As Umm Kulthum gained fame throughout the countryside, her family moved to Cairo in order to open for her greater and more profitable opportunities as a singer. Umm Kulthum, only a teenager, was in awe of “the big city called Cairo,” which points to her humble background from rural Egypt.<sup>227</sup> She reveals, “I began to realize that there was a world beyond the Delta railroad line,” which suggests that Umm Kulthum did not only gain monetary success from singing, but also exposure to many new areas in Egypt. Singing allowed her to learn about regions beyond her village—an opportunity not

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>226</sup> Danielson, “*The Voice of Egypt*,” 33.

<sup>227</sup> Umm Kulthum, 142.

available to most peasants, particularly women.<sup>228</sup> Umm Kulthum's talents and ambition, which her family supported, provided her with the opportunity to first ride the train through the rural regions of the delta, then move to the big city itself. Cairo, as the capital of Egypt and its largest urban center, promised the possibility of exponentially much greater exposure, fame, and success because it could offer access to much larger and wealthier audiences at live concerts and in its burgeoning music and cinema industries. It is in Cairo where Umm Kulthum would launch her career as a national singing sensation. She gradually asserted her agency as a female entertainer and transformed into a professional in charge of her own career, making her deserving of the label feminist.

Umm Kulthum's stellar singing career benefitted from the success of earlier Egyptian singers and from developments in the Egyptian entertainment industry in the early 1900s. Cairo was the center of Arab musical life in the twentieth century, and Egypt witnessed the development of commercial entertainment in the early 1900s. Although female singers were active throughout Egypt historically, performing in special events such as holiday celebrations and weddings, commercial entertainment allowed women to establish themselves as successful professional singers who were in control of their own careers. The expansion of Cairo's theater district, which included the Opera House, theaters, and nightclubs, encouraged the participation of female singers. Along with live performances in these venues, women took advantage of commercial recordings. Therefore, women played a large role in entertainment in Cairo and throughout Egypt. They not only gained fame and fortune, but they also asserted their autonomy over their

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 146.

own lives in a largely patriarchal society. Indeed, female singers were feminist symbols who embodied female empowerment in twentieth century Egypt.

Before commercial entertainment, female singers in Egypt were traditionally part of professional guilds and performed in the private residences of patrons. However, with the rise of theatrical companies, theater management, and recording companies, women began negotiating their own contracts.<sup>229</sup> They developed business skills that propelled them into fame and fortune. Most women who became singers were Muslim and from lower-class families. They used singing as a means of social improvement, as they were able to carve a successful place for themselves in the entertainment industry. There were a number of successful female singers in Cairo who rose to prominence in the early 1900s through their own independent decision-making, not only performing in theaters and concerts, but also becoming owners and managers of musical troupes and nightclubs. Umm Kulthum's contemporaries demonstrate female empowerment among the lower class, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the entertainment industry.

As commercial entertainment in Egypt took off in the early twentieth century, women found their place as professionals in the industry.<sup>230</sup> Naima al-Massriyya, for example, supported herself after her divorce by singing at local weddings until she made it to the main theater districts in Cairo. By 1927, she purchased her own casino, the Alhambra, which she managed entirely by herself. Munira al-Mahdiyya was one of the singers at the Alhambra, before forming her own musical troupe. Management of her

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<sup>229</sup> Virginia Danielson, "Artists and Entrepreneurs: Female Singers in Cairo during the 1920s," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 292-295.

<sup>230</sup> Danielson, "Artists and Entrepreneurs," 292.

troupe included negotiations with theaters owners, composer, lyricists, and singers, as well as planning all schedules and payrolls. Al-Mahdiyya was a “pioneer among women in commercial recording and musical theater,” and her home became a gathering place for politicians and journalists. Finally, Fathiyya Ahmad was a regular star at a nightclub owned by Badia Masabani, a Syrian woman who moved to Cairo as a singer. Ahmad also managed this club when Masabani was on tour.<sup>231</sup> These women are only a few examples of female singers and entertainers in Cairo, most of whom were lower class Muslim Egyptians. The entertainment industry was the means by which they achieved success and social mobility, as they not only made their own money, but also married into higher social class after achieving financial success. They were very hard working and invested a lot of time and energy on their careers. Their determination to achieve success led them to assume the management of their own careers, and their talent and personal fame and fortune were recognized and celebrated by the Egyptian press. Danielson writes, “These women had a lasting impact on the role of women in the public eye of Egypt,” as they contributed to the loosening of the patriarchal holds of society.<sup>232</sup> They asserted not only the presence of women in the entertainment industry, but also proved that women could possess the ability to take control of their careers and manage their own affairs. Thus, they epitomize feminist qualities, as their actions illustrate female empowerment.

Umm Kulthum began her career in Cairo in alongside established female singers. Their fame, respectability, and financial success encouraged and quelled Shaykh Ibrahim’s doubts about supporting his daughter’s career as a female singer. Soon she

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 295-297.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 303.

made such a name for herself that by 1928, she cemented her place as “the best” singer in the industry. The swift and spectacular rise to fame and celebrity required her to overcome many initial prejudices against her rural and class background to set the stage for a singing career that earned her the recognition as “unquestionably the most important singer of the century.”

### Rise to Fame: Transforming into a Star

Cairo impacted the style, personality, and career of Umm Kulthum in the same way that Umm Kulthum took Cairo by storm. When she first moved to the center of Arab musical life, Umm Kulthum was not taken seriously, especially by men. Elite families in Cairo, such as the Abd al-Raziqs, were sponsors and supporters of the arts and other cultural activities.<sup>233</sup> As a young girl from the rural provinces, she was called a “country girl” or “Bedouin” when she first entered these homes, because of her headscarf, which was held by a cord to keep it in place. This type of dress was typically associated with Arab males in rural provinces, which reflects both the moral negotiation of her shaykh father, as well as her “Islamic modesty.”<sup>234</sup> She received the same reactions from the male audiences when she performed in the main theater district of Cairo. Even her choice of songs indicated her very modest rural background. Rather than sing light popular music, she mostly sang the religious songs that she grew up performing alongside her father. This close association with the culturally conservative countryside is one that Umm Kulthum continued to identify with throughout her career. From the beginning of her

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<sup>233</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 34.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

career in Cairo, Umm Kulthum maintained her modest dress and village association in order to gain respectability. Despite her appearance, Umm Kulthum's electrifying voice impressed all urban critics of her appearance and song choices, and she began acquiring widespread exposure and admirers throughout Cairo.

However, after some time in Cairo, Umm Kulthum reached the conclusion that her overly conservative garb might be limiting her popular appeal. She realized that in order to attain even more fame and fortune and develop a distinct personal identity, she needed to make some changes in her appearance and performance style. Her efforts to improve included both fashion tips from upper-class women, as well as vocal lessons from professional instructors. Because she was a promising young singer, she was invited into the homes of the wealthy, where she was given advice on her dress, manners, and language. Elite Muslim women of Cairo advised Umm Kulthum to replace her boys' coat and Bedouin headscarf with fashionable long dresses with long sleeves.<sup>235</sup> These dresses were both in style and did not require Umm Kulthum to sacrifice her modesty because of their length and sleeves. This advice did not only upgrade Umm Kulthum's style, which audiences found favorable, but it also reflects the opportunities available in Cairo to increase her social status, as she was associating with influential urban women.

Cairo also allowed Umm Kulthum to work with lyricist Shaykh Abu Ila Muhammad, who helped Umm Kulthum focus on her lyrical enunciation—a very important component of singing convincingly and emotionally. This vocal training

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 58-89.

allowed Umm Kulthum to effectively engage her audiences.<sup>236</sup> She also began integrating light popular music into the list of songs she performed. Although she preferred religious songs, she widened the variety to suit her audiences' taste and find a "combination that [would] work."<sup>237</sup> However, choice of song was still left to her discretion. Umm Kulthum displayed her strong will in making her own decisions publically. In her memoir, she reflects on instances in which drunken men at casinos yelled at her to sing vernacular songs, rather than the religious songs she preferred singing. Instead of giving in to these drunken confrontations, Umm Kulthum shouted insults back at the disrespectful men. Although her father slapped her afterwards because of her purported unseemly and rude conduct, Umm Kulthum did not budge.<sup>238</sup> Even when a drunken man with a pistol confronted her, she refused to sing the love song he demanded, explaining, "It was stubbornness and pride and a strong belief that I was doing the right thing."<sup>239</sup> Umm Kulthum clearly believed that it was her right to choose the songs she performed and would not appeal to the demands of men. Her very public actions were in line with feminist arguments that women should have agency in determining their choices in life and career.

In sum, even as her early years in Cairo led Umm Kulthum to make some changes in her style and performances, she did so without sacrificing her modesty and personal opinions. Umm Kulthum maintained her respectability in the singing profession, showing that it was possible to be a respectable female entertainer. At the same time, she began

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>238</sup> Umm Kulthum, 158.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 160.

publically displaying her feminist actions by taking control of her clothing and musical style. As Umm Kulthum gained increased exposure to audiences and therefore increased popularity, she quickly became a target of media attention, particularly newspapers and magazines focused on entertainment. Early experiences with the media in Cairo shaped Umm Kulthum's behavior in the public eye, which ultimately cast a perception of the singer as having a cold personality. In the 1920s, *The Theater* magazine published an article, at the instigation of rival singer Munira al-Mahdiyya, which questioned the morality of the new star. The magazine asserted that Umm Kulthum must be married to one of the men in her clique of supporters, since he was always present at every concert.<sup>240</sup> This suggests that she was hiding a personal relationship with a man that was not her husband, which is an attack on her respectability as a woman in a traditional society. Umm Kulthum explains that the purpose of this attack was to “destroy my reputation as a respectable person, to blemish my honor as a girl.”<sup>241</sup> Upon seeing the magazine, Umm Kulthum's father was enraged. Shaykh Ibrahim forced his family to pack their bags to move back to their village, but was persuaded to remain in Cairo by Shaykh Abu Ila Muhammad, reminding him of the great opportunities the city offered for his daughter. The media's first attack on Umm Kulthum not only demonstrates the difficulty of being a female singer in Egypt, but it also almost cost Umm Kulthum her career in Cairo. Moreover, media speculation was particularly dangerous for Umm Kulthum because of her pious father, who was furious about the media's attack on his daughter. Any sign of immorality, even untrue rumors, would lead him to end his

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<sup>240</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 64.

<sup>241</sup> Umm Kulthum, 153.

daughter's singing career. As a result, Umm Kulthum continued her career wary of the press.

The lack of trust in the media remained through Umm Kulthum's career. She wanted her public career and private affairs to be two separate entities—unassociated parts of her life that would not be intertwined. Despite her efforts, embarrassing episodes due to media speculation occurred during her years in Cairo. For example, Umm Kulthum was requested to sing a song entitled “You hurt me, my cousin” with the purpose of embarrassing her. This is because it was speculated in the media that she was betrothed to her cousin, one of her musical accompanists.<sup>242</sup> Thus, performing a love song about her cousin, with the knowledge that the media believed she was betrothed to a man that was playing the music, would clearly be embarrassing to Umm Kulthum. She reluctantly sang this song, despite the purpose of the request.

Although she could not stay out of the media, given her increasing fame, Umm Kulthum instead sought to control her public image. In the 1920s, she was described as naïve and unsophisticated in the media. But by the 1930s, she began being mindful of her words and actions and the way they were portrayed and represented in the press. She developed standard answers to media questions, and adhered to a strict rule of refusing to talk about her personal life. For many years after the emergence of the radio in Egypt in the 1930s, Umm Kulthum refused to broadcast her interviews. The first time she agreed to broadcast an interview, she demanded that it would be pre-recorded—she even forced a re-take of this interview, because she was not satisfied with releasing the first

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<sup>242</sup> Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 302.

interview.<sup>243</sup> This strategy reflects Umm Kulthum's strong personality and autonomy, as she "exerted herself to control her public image and carefully chose the persons who had access to her."<sup>244</sup> These actions are indicative of a feminist icon: a woman whose dignified actions and control of her exposure to the media maintained her position as a respectable singer and role model of women in the public eye.

It is likely that because of her refusal to divulge about her personal life, Umm Kulthum was portrayed to the public to be a somewhat cold character. The media, however, continued to speculate about the rising star's personal life, particularly her love life. Since the beginning of her career in Cairo, she was linked to a few men, including famous poet Ahmad Rami. Even when she established herself as the premier singer in Egypt, reporters continued to track her love life. When Umm Kulthum suddenly married Mahmud Sharif in 1946, a musician, commentators and some of her fans were disappointed in her choice of an entertainer. The marriage was dissolved within days, however, with both parties saying it was a mistake. Danielson writes, "Her apparent strong will, sharp tongue, and the absence of any lasting close personal involvements prompted the assessment that 'she has no heart.' Another suggestion was that she had been disappointed in love early in life and could not love another," which points to the public perception of Umm Kulthum's cold personality.<sup>245</sup> Another decade of speculation about Umm Kulthum's love life ensued, particularly since the star was no longer a young woman, but past the traditional marriage age. However, this changed in 1954. At age

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<sup>243</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 83-84.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

fifty, Umm Kulthum's marriage to Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi, one of her medical doctors, was met with positive reactions.<sup>246</sup> This is because, like Umm Kulthum, he was raised in a small, conservative rural village and harbored the same values and modest behaviors as Umm Kulthum. Unlike his wife, Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi was never in the public light. Her audience approved of this marriage because her husband came from an appropriate social status for Umm Kulthum. She was expected to marry a man from the upper echelons of society, rather than a low-class man, because it was the ultimate confirmation that her own talents and motivation elevated her into the elite class. With her marriage to al-Hifnawi, the star was finally perceived as a human with a personal life.<sup>247</sup> Although media attention impacted Umm Kulthum to shelter her personal life, the public continued to be fascinated with the country's biggest star.

From the beginning of her career in Cairo, Umm Kulthum demonstrated that she would be in charge of her career by making all business and artistic decisions. She proved to be a shrewd business negotiator, and she utilized the technological innovations available in the new age urban center to develop her business skills, gain widespread fame, and achieve monetary success. In the 1920s, Umm Kulthum found the greatest success in commercial recordings, which could be produced in Cairo. Recordings proved to be an effective method to spread Umm Kulthum's songs outside of concerts, particularly because she had a large rural following that could not travel to Cairo to watch her perform. Between 1924 and 1926, Umm Kulthum produced fourteen recordings

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<sup>246</sup> Umm Kulthum married Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi at age 50—much later than the typical woman in Egypt in the early twentieth century. Delaying marriage until a later age may suggest that Umm Kulthum placed her career over her love life, and perhaps harbored fear that marriage would inhibit her career. Her dedication to personal autonomy points to her feminist consciousness, and her actions demonstrate feminist ideology.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

through Odeon Records—more than any other singer during this time. Recordings allowed Umm Kulthum’s songs to spread throughout Egypt to anyone that could afford to buy a record. Even at this early stage of her career, Umm Kulthum asserted her business instincts while making contracts. She refused contracts based on percentage of sales, bluntly saying, “That would be a lot of trouble. Do I have time to run around inspecting your company’s account books?”<sup>248</sup> This is not only an example of her business negotiations and confident wit, but also of her autonomous actions as a professional.

In the 1930s, Umm Kulthum began performing in public concerts in Cairo. During concert season, she performed two times per week, on Thursday and Saturday, at the Opera House. Concerts were also another venue in which she was able to assert her independent decision-making. She produced her own concerts, without an intermediary agent, which was typical for a star who wanted to make a profit and “a sign of her accomplishments.”<sup>249</sup> The singer did not let anyone get in the way of her concert production or monetary success, as she demanded high fees for her performances. She was also notorious for arriving late to concerts, in order to show her autonomy. Danielson writes that Umm Kulthum, “manifested a strength of character, sometimes read as arrogance, that helped enable her to do what she wanted. In fact it is likely that she cultivated this attitude for the same reason that she demanded high fees: it helped her assert her primacy over other entertainers.”<sup>250</sup> Thus, in order to carve a place for herself at

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<sup>248</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>249</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>250</sup>Ibid., 79.

the top of the Egyptian entertainment world, Umm Kulthum acted with confidence and strength that, as a woman, was both effective and pioneering.

Cairo in the 1930s also witnessed the rise of an incredibly important technological innovation: the radio. The Egyptian Radio was established in the 1930s, with one of Umm Kulthum's songs being the first song ever played on the radio. This is clearly indicative of the fame that she achieved by this time. The establishment of Egyptian Radio in Cairo amplified the star's already blossoming career, as her songs could be heard throughout Egypt by all social classes. She also sang live on the radio, along with Abd al-Wahab, a very successful male singer. She negotiated the same contract as Abd al-Wahab, and the two entertainers received the same pay from Egyptian Radio. Umm Kulthum's potent business negotiations broke patriarchal barriers between men and women, as she was able to successfully perform and receive the same pay as a man. Moreover, on the first Thursday of every month, her concerts at the Opera House were broadcast live over the radio.<sup>251</sup> She made \$506 for every concert on the radio, while Radio Egypt made no profit. Danielson writes, "The financial agreements for the broadcasts illustrates the tenacity and assurance she had learned to bring to business dealings," making Umm Kulthum a true trailblazer as a professional woman and deserving of the label feminist.<sup>252</sup>

Another new innovation in Cairo in which Umm Kulthum asserted her dominance was films. Unlike concerts, films involved marketing and advertisements that plastered the image of Umm Kulthum throughout the pages of Cairo's magazines, allowing even

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<sup>251</sup> These Thursday broadcasts continued until the end of her career in 1973.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

more public exposure. Beginning in 1935, Umm Kulthum starred in films produced by Studio Misr, playing the role of low-class singers with high moral standards.<sup>253</sup> These films featured romantic plots, settings from Arab history, and cultivated an image of sophistication, as Umm Kulthum declared that she was “inclined to modesty.”<sup>254</sup> Despite her lack of acting experience, she demanded and received a great deal of control in the production of films. Just like her concerts, Umm Kulthum negotiated a profitable contract, receiving a fixed salary along with forty percent of the film’s profit.<sup>255</sup> The star also continuously stressed that she was not an actress, as singers were regarded as more respectable than actresses. Once again, Umm Kulthum continued shaping her image with a large degree of modesty and dignity—which ultimately encouraged public perception of respectability towards female singers across Egypt.

Recordings, concerts, radio, and film amplified Umm Kulthum’s success—all of which were new mediums that allowed her to reach stardom, as they were disseminated across Egypt. By the end of the 1930s, Umm Kulthum was a very wealthy and well-established star. She demonstrated shrewd business ability and strength of character to gain fame and success, which pushed new limits as an Egyptian woman, particularly a woman from a humble rural background, yet continued maintaining modesty through her musical and clothing style. In 1926, Umm Kulthum bought a piece of land, which suggests that she wanted to use her success not only to be wealthy, but to improve her family’s

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<sup>253</sup> Umm Kulthum’s first film, *Widad*, was released in 1935. She helped to write the plot of *Widad*, a trend she continued through the development of her six films.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>255</sup> Ifdal Elsaket, “The Star of the East: Umm Kulthum and Egyptian Cinema,” in *Stars in World Cinema: Screen Icons and Star Systems Across Cultures*, ed. Andrea Bandhauer and Michelle Royer (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 39-40.

social position. Even in this endeavor, Umm Kulthum displayed her strong will. She refused to sign the contract for buying the land because it did not include a clause about the owner paying the taxes and debt on the land before it was sold. Umm Kulthum recalled that she would “never sign the contract unless the clause which I demand is added,” which is a rule she applied on her negotiations throughout her career.<sup>256</sup>

An early instance of Umm Kulthum’s authority came with the Egyptian Radio in 1935, when she joined the Listening Committee that selected the music that was considered appropriate to broadcast on the radio. In 1940, she became the chairman of the committee—an unprecedented accomplishment for a woman. To be the leader of an influential group that included both male and female members was a position of authority that few women in Egypt had reached. As the chairman, she also had the ability to guard her own interests as the premier voice on the radio, which points to her clever professional tactics.<sup>257</sup> Umm Kulthum continued her pioneering actions by nominating herself for President of the Musician’s Union in 1945. She was elected president, but was met with some attacks by disappointed men:

Khalil al-Masri, musician, union member, and artistic director of Odeon records, was incredulous: As long as men were available, men, should lead... Umm Kulthum replied, ‘I also am able to serve as a leader. I also have ideas and solutions to problems.’ ‘But men come first!’ said al-Masri. ‘A woman can be president,’ answered Umm Kulthum, and so she was.<sup>258</sup>

Despite this attack, the election of a woman as President of the Musician’s Union points to Umm Kulthum’s dominance in the entertainment industry, as well as the loosening of

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<sup>256</sup> Umm Kulthum, 163.

<sup>257</sup> Umm Kulthum also pushed the construction of a new recording studio, built to her specifications, which included the newest recording technology.

<sup>258</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 120.

traditional gender roles. Umm Kulthum's strong personality, wit, and pride, along with her incredible talent as an artist and businesswoman, propelled her to a leadership position in Cairo's entertainment industry and demonstrate her feminist actions.

### The Cultural Symbol of Egypt

As Umm Kulthum established herself as the premier and most powerful singer in Egypt, as well as a feminist figure, she clearly attained a huge audience. Thus, the final facet of Umm Kulthum that will be explored is her widespread appeal to Egyptians across the entire country and from all social classes—and eventually to people throughout the Arab world, making her a cultural symbol of Egypt and the Middle East.

Because of her rural background and training as a singer of religious songs, Umm Kulthum was viewed as a distinctly Egyptian singer, as many Egyptians found her singing to be familiar and authentic. Local authenticity was very important for singers in Egypt, who did not want to be viewed as emulating Western-style music.<sup>259</sup> This in large part was due to the prominence of Egyptian nationalism, as nationalist sentiment was in full force, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>260</sup> As a result, efforts to cultivate a uniquely Egyptian national image, permeated society. Music was no exception. Artists tried to find a balance between developing modern music, yet maintaining Egyptian musical heritage.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>260</sup> Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 43.

<sup>261</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 77.

Along with her preferred religious songs, Umm Kulthum developed a romantic style, emphasizing emotional struggles in life. Her songs were monologues based on love poems, which was viewed as a new “intercultural” style of song. However, these monologues were written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which emphasized “Egyptiannes.”<sup>262</sup> In this way, Umm Kulthum represented the balance between modern and indigenous. By the 1940s, Umm Kulthum had large control over the process of the composition of songs, and she began to move away from the romanticism of the 1920s and 30s. She asked for and edited texts of poets or found texts in literary volumes, then chose a composer to set the poem to music. Umm Kulthum used symbols of local identity in her songs, such as the Nile River and the setting sun on date and palm trees, which reinforced her image as purely Egyptian.<sup>263</sup> As a result, she made texts of songs familiar, yet created a new and distinct song. During the political and global tensions of World War II, Umm Kulthum turned her attention to the struggles facing societies, as many singers did. She developed a new patriotic song, largely written by the great composer Zakariyya Ahmad. However, Umm Kulthum still utilized colloquial Arabic, as she represented the working population of Egypt.<sup>264</sup> Thus, throughout her career before the 1952 Revolution, Umm Kulthum combined traditional music with new modern aspects, creating familiar yet innovative music that people across Egypt could easily identify with and appreciate. At the same time, these songs maintained Umm Kulthum’s position as a respectable entertainer.

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 70-78.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 101.

Like her music, Umm Kulthum's films emphasized populist themes that reflected the values of Egyptian society. Themes included the importance of friends and neighbors, and the value of virtuous women who resist temptation. She played characters that epitomized these distinctly Egyptian values. For example, in her last film, *Fatma* (1947), Umm Kulthum played the role of a working-class nurse, Fatma, who falls in love with a wealthy man, Fathi, who wants to take advantage of Fatma sexually. Fatma refuses to have premarital relations with Fathi. Thus, Fatma represented female virtuousness, an important value of Egyptian society.<sup>265</sup> Because Umm Kulthum played the role of both working class and virtuous characters, she identified herself with a large segment of Egypt's population, as well as personified the important values of her society, thereby gaining large appeal throughout Egypt. By clearly evoking indigenous Egyptian values through songs and film, Umm Kulthum gained widespread appeal. Like her choice of songs, her films contributed to her image as a dignified entertainer—an image that reached Egyptians throughout the country, regardless of social class. Moreover, her music and characters adhered to the importance placed on Egyptian nationalism, and, combined with her remarkable success, made her the cultural symbol of Egypt.

However, appealing to an audience was not limited to radio and film. Umm Kulthum placed a large importance on satisfying her live audience, and she carefully prepared for her concerts in order to connect with each unique audience. The process of preparation began with each new composition, which she regularly made changes to, approved, or rejected. She frequently rejected compositions, which again points to her

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<sup>265</sup> Elsaket, 49.

strength of character and autonomy. Composers greatly appreciated and respected her singing skills, with a strong voice that ranged from lower to upper registers, but they often clashed with Umm Kulthum's strong personality, as she wanted to control the process of developing the composition.<sup>266</sup> When Umm Kulthum committed to a new composition, she learned it by ear—a testament to her natural talent. However, she engaged in long, tiring practice sessions, in which she would go all day with no food because of her intense determination to perfect the song. According to composer Ahmad Rami, “‘She was the first to arrive and the last to leave’ these sessions...She had the tirelessness of the peasant [fallah] and exerted the effort of a fallah if the case required it.’”<sup>267</sup> This description of Umm Kulthum reflects not only her association with the working class, but also her passion for music and dedication to make sure all aspects of a composition were mastered before ever being recorded or performed.

Before her concerts, particularly the “first Thursday” of every month concert that was broadcast on the radio, Umm Kulthum would peer at the audience from behind the curtain and decided which songs to sing by looking at the faces of audience members.<sup>268</sup> She walked out on stage wearing a bejeweled modest dress and hair styled in a bun, with her hallmark silk scarf in hand, and began a performance that would last three to six hours. Long performances were an Egyptian tradition, as only a good singer could deliver a successful performance that lasted all night. Umm Kulthum improvised throughout her concerts, and she never sang a line the same way twice. Each performance was unique,

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<sup>266</sup> Zakariyya Ahmad was among one of the composers who felt that Umm Kulthum was too demanding, and their collaboration quickly ended in 1947.

<sup>267</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 131.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

because Umm Kulthum personalized each performance for each unique audience. She believed that, “The singer who does not articulate cannot reach the heart of the listener,” and Umm Kulthum’s diction, along with her powerful voice, and long and unique performances, won the heart of her audience and the Egyptian people.<sup>269</sup> Not just pure talent alone, but her own tireless efforts at improving, connecting with audiences, and representing Egyptian traditions made Umm Kulthum the cultural symbol of Egypt.

By the 1940s, however, there was also a new emphasis on Arab nationalism, and Umm Kulthum, aware and supportive of Arab nationalism, also produced songs that followed the identification with Arab culture. This not only points to her adept awareness of cultural changes, but also her ability to sense shifts in the taste of audiences and adapt her music accordingly. In 1946, she introduced *qasaid* songs. The *qasaid* genre used lines from classical Arabic poetry and alluded to Islamic and Arab history. These songs drew historical, political, and religious themes—all-encompassing themes for the Arab world.<sup>270</sup> *Qasaid* songs were part of her Thursday concerts, which, thanks to the radio, were broadcast throughout the Middle East. From Cairo, Umm Kulthum was able to connect with Egyptians of all social levels, as well as the larger Arab world. With the *qasaid*, Umm Kulthum reaffirmed her respectability and demonstrated that her music represented the character of the Arab world and, by extension, Arab nationalism. Reaching and appealing to audiences throughout the region, Umm Kulthum represented not only Egypt, but she also became the cultural symbol of the Arab world.

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 133.

Umm Kulthum’s voice was so powerful, she stood three feet away from microphones.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 117.

After the 1952 coup d'état by the Egyptian Free Officers, Arab nationalism continued to be the unifying factor within Egypt and throughout the Arab world. Like most Egyptians, Umm Kulthum welcomed the new regime and was hopeful for the future of Egypt as a regional power. She was closely associated with the regime and President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came to power in 1954 and was a big supporter of his nation's star. Umm Kulthum recorded a number of patriotic songs following the revolution, one of which was adopted as Egypt's national anthem, which points to the incredible impact of Umm Kulthum as a symbol of Egypt.<sup>271</sup> She also continued supporting Arab nationalism. Her most unprecedented act in support of Arab cooperation followed Egypt's 1967 defeat in the Six Day War against Israel. After a number of fundraising concerts within Egypt, Umm Kulthum offered international concerts to her regional audiences. Her concerts generated additional funds—two million dollars—for rebuilding the armed forces. More importantly, her presence on an international stage also helped counter the psychological effects of the quick defeat, which served as a blow to the Arab world.<sup>272</sup> Umm Kulthum's actions point to her position of a cultural symbol who not only represented the Arab people and provided entertainment, but found a way to help her nation and neighbors heal after a devastating defeat.

Umm Kulthum is the most successful example of female empowerment in Egypt's entertainment industry. She was not only an autonomous, confident professional who deserves to be called a feminist, but through her own meticulous hard work and

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>272</sup> Laura Lohman, "'The Artist of the People in Battle': Umm Kulthum's Concerts for Egypt in Political Context," in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2009), 33-34.

awareness, she propelled herself to the top of the entertainment industry in Egypt and the Arab world. Her practical feminism, though not articulated through ideology, had the ability to reach all women, regardless of social class. The new age innovations of recordings, radio, and film, provided Umm Kulthum with opportunities to amplify her career and make possible her success and status as a celebrity and cultural symbol. She demonstrated her strong will and business capabilities that allowed her to become a powerful figure, while also keeping her personal life away from media attention. Umm Kulthum propelled her public career to the top of the entertainment industry, while still maintaining a private personal life. Thus, she kept her public life and private affairs separate. Rather than identifying as a feminist, through her unprecedented fame and success, she continued characterizing herself as the daughter of the countryside, linking herself to fallahim (peasants) with a strong religious background.<sup>273</sup> Umm Kulthum credited her father for instilling these values that she adhered to during her life: “He gave me confidence in myself, the will to succeed. He taught me also that success is good, but not if it is achieved at the price of one’s ideals and self-respect.”<sup>274</sup> Umm Kulthum was successful in marrying celebrity and dignity through her clothing style, choice of songs and film, and avoidance of media gossip, and she ultimately occupied the role of cultural symbol of the Middle East. Umm Kulthum’s dignified actions throughout her career raised the level of respectability given to female singers in Egypt and throughout the Arab world.

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<sup>273</sup> Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 187.

<sup>274</sup> Umm Kulthum, 163.

Although Umm Kulthum had health problems beginning in the 1930s, they increasingly worsened in the 1960s and early 1970s. Chronic inflammation of her eyes due to bright lights, gallbladder, and kidney problems eventually culminated in heart failure. Umm Kulthum, the “daughter of the countryside,” the “voice of Egypt,” cultural symbol of Egypt and the Arab world, and a pioneering feminist died on February 3, 1975, at age seventy-six. Four million people gathered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to watch her funeral procession—epitomizing the strong bond she made with Egyptians during her forty-year career.<sup>275</sup> Egyptians bade farewell to their nation’s cultural symbol, but her legacy continues to live on into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>275</sup> Deborah Horan, “Middle East-Culture: the Legend of Umm Kulthum, *Inter-Press Service* (Jerusalem), Jul. 16, 1997.

## CONCLUSION

The liberal age in Egypt was a period of new political and social possibilities. With opportunities for political independence and social progress, middle- and upper-class Egyptians were both optimistic and anxious about the future of their nation. Women of different social classes explored the new opportunities available to them under the new political conditions in Egypt. Upper- and middle- class women such as Huda Shaarawi and Doria Shafik trailblazed as leaders of the institutionalized feminist movement, aiming their feminist agenda towards the upper classes. Umm Kulthum represented feminist empowerment of the lower class, who had limited options and therefore engaged in practical feminism. Each woman pushed social boundaries through her individual career. The media exposed their public activities, as well as some of their private affairs, in the Egyptian press. The examination of their careers reveals the opportunities and the persisting challenges that Muslim women of various social classes faced in their pursuit of personal fulfillment and success, as well as their contribution to the liberation of Egyptian women from many of the traditional restrictions of patriarchal society. In particular, it is possible to discern the degree to which each woman's career and private affairs were intertwined and exposed to the public.

The differences between upper- and middle- class women as opposed to lower-class women were very stark, as exemplified by the very different circumstances and choices of Umm Kulthum in comparison with Shaarawi and Shafik. Because of her low-class background, Umm Kulthum had limited educational and cultural opportunities. The feminist activism of the upper classes did not reach women in the Egyptian countryside,

and there were few attempts to expand the institutional feminist movement to include low-class women. Umm Kulthum used her own natural talent and self-determination as a singer to build her career and engage in a practical form of feminism. As an entertainer who continually connected herself to her early life as a peasant, even when she reached the peak of fame and success as the cultural symbol of the Arab world, Umm Kulthum did not want expose any aspects of her private affairs to the media. Unlike Shaarawi and Shafik, whose private residences functioned, to varying degrees, as meeting places for feminist dialogues, Umm Kulthum attempted to close possible inlets into her private life. Her refusal to accept interviews, unless pre-recorded and personally approved, is one such way that the singer avoided public inquiries into her private life. She hoped to avoid all speculation about her personal life, as she was concerned with her reputation. Social class played a major role in this concern. Although she achieved remarkable financial success throughout her career, her background was starkly different. Coming from a low class, religiously conservative family, Umm Kulthum was instilled with values of modesty and piety, demonstrated by her clothing style and choice of songs. Her father's presence during her early years in Cairo also contributed Umm Kulthum's avoidance of media attention, because, as a shaykh, he reinforced the need for religious modesty. Unlike Shafik's middle class, educated father, who opened spaces for his daughter's flourishing feminist ideas through her foreign education and acceptance of her rebelliousness, Umm Kulthum's father did not allow his daughter to be exposed to ideas that shattered social conventions. Moreover, he could not afford to educate his daughter beyond a basic religious education. Therefore, Umm Kulthum did not have the means

through which to learn about non-traditional female behavior. Shaykh Ibrahim's concern with Umm Kulthum's reputation almost resulted in the end of her career in Cairo, when *The Theater* magazine published an article speculating about the singer's private relationship. This desire to close her private affairs to public attention reinforced the public's perception of Umm Kulthum's cold character. Nevertheless, the public still weighed in on Umm Kulthum's private affairs when possible, particularly when she married first Mahmud Sharif, whom the public disliked, and then Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi, who received the public's approval.

Umm Kulthum's position on the exposure of private affairs was very much unlike feminist activists. For example, Shafik made decisions about her private life that she knew could impact her reputation as a respectable Muslim woman, such as studying in Paris and participating in a beauty pageant. But she made these radical decisions nevertheless, both for the fulfillment of her personal goals and as her personal contribution to the larger cause of the feminist struggle, in hopes of contributing to the transformation of Egyptian society. Umm Kulthum, on the other hand, did not articulate an interest in making changes in society. But her actions—taking control of her career by making her own business and creative decisions—did transform the way in which the Egyptian public viewed female singers. Umm Kulthum's career raised the level of respect afforded to female entertainers, as she continued behaving, dressing, and singing with modesty and dignity. She continued identifying herself with her low-class background of the religious peasant in the countryside, thereby pointing to her respectability and clean reputation. Umm Kulthum was successful in bringing dignity to

the position of celebrity. Because of this success, Umm Kulthum's efforts contributed to the transformation of Egyptian society. Although she was not a feminist activist, Umm Kulthum's music and films appealed to Egyptians and Arabs throughout the Arab world. She was able to connect with the masses through her authentically Egyptian and Arab music. For women, this meant Umm Kulthum's brand of practical feminism reached a large number of women in ways that the upper class, formal feminist movement could not. As the voice of Egypt, she also gave voice to millions of low-class Egyptian women. Umm Kulthum's autonomous musical decisions and shrewd business negotiations were instrumental to her success, making her the embodiment of female empowerment in the entertainment industry of twentieth-century Egypt.

In contrast to Umm Kulthum, as leaders of the feminist movement, Shaarawi and Shafik placed themselves in the public spotlight in an effort to advocate for women's social and political rights and transform Egyptian society. As members of the upper and middle class, both women used their education and wealth to take advantage of the new opportunities opened during Egypt's liberal age to advance a feminist agenda. They fostered similar feminist ideologies, both placing women's access to education, professional opportunities, healthcare, and political rights at the top of their agendas. In terms of their backgrounds, they also shared some similarities. Their childhood experiences partly sparked and molded their feminist consciousness, as shown through their memoirs. They were educated in French, making it their dominant language, and they continued to be connected to the West, either through travels (Shaarawi) or education (Shafik). Both women established strong feminist organizations, the EFU and

the BNU, and a number of newspapers, Shaarawi's *al-Misria* and *al-Arabia*, and Shafik's *Bint al-Nil*, as they hoped to reach Egyptian women and larger Arab audiences. They used Islam as part of the justification for the social and political advancement of women, citing the Quran for support in their speeches and writings. Shaarawi and Shafik connected women's rights to national progress, and they were both highly involved in the nationalist struggle against the British. Finally, both women wrote memoirs. But each woman chose to write her memoir in a different language—Shaarawi in Arabic, Shafik in French—pointing to a different target audience. Moreover, Shaarawi's memoir reflected on her years in the harem, before she engaged in the formal feminist movement, while Shafik's memoir was a retrospective reflection of her entire life.

These leading feminist figures also had a number of differences, particularly in their feminist tactics. Because of Shaarawi's elite family, she was already well known among upper-class Egyptians, using her wealth and connections to establish the EFU and push her feminist agenda. Middle class Shafik, by contrast, did not have the capital or connections at the start of her career. She searched for openings in the public space to gain publicity and make a name for herself in the feminist movement, first by participating in Miss Egypt, then by taking on the job of editor of *La Femme Nouvelle*. Although they had some similar approaches for advocating for women's rights, such as pushing for education and improved healthcare, they used different techniques to actualize their demands. Shafik pushed social boundaries further than her predecessor, behaving more radically in the public sphere. For example, while Shaarawi pushed for legislative reform for women's education and opened a new secondary school for girls,

Shafik established a literacy campaign that spread throughout the country. Shaarawi and the EFU concentrated on upper-class women in Cairo. Shafik, on the other hand, created programs through the BNU that were more hands-on and widespread, reaching provinces in the countryside.<sup>276</sup> Both women's feminist careers also involved moments of direct confrontation. In 1919, Shaarawi led the first elite women's demonstration in Cairo, but it was in the context of a larger nationalist struggle alongside men. The more radical Shafik, while also participating in the wider struggle against the British, held her own women's confrontation independent of men in the storming of Parliament in 1951. Shafik went so far as to turn militant, demonstrated through the army unit of the BNU during the Battle of the Canal Zone in 1951 and hunger strikes for political rights in 1954 and 1957. Aside from her overall rebelliousness, Shafik was able to push boundaries further than Shaarawi, particularly in the late 1940s and early 1950s, because of the increasingly tumultuous political climate in Egypt, as well as the great strides women made since the start of the women's movement in 1919, during which Shaarawi operated.

As a result of their leading roles in the Egyptian feminist movement, both Shaarawi and Shafik embraced opportunities and faced challenges. The public actions and private lives of both women were exposed to the public and enmeshed together, and they maintained a fluid line between their public and private lives. However, this fluidity was not the same for both women, and this was likely due to their different backgrounds and social class. As the godmother of the Egyptian feminist movement, Shaarawi was an

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<sup>276</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 126.

Shaarawi's did attempt to expand the EFU's initiative to involve a broad base of women, but the non-responsive, elitist attitudes of the members of the organization prevented the actualization of her ideas.

elite, well-respected widow. Her high social status impacted her education (through tutors), as well as gave her access to politicians (through her male family members) and the Palace. Moreover, she had the funds for constant travels to Europe and the United States. Shafik, by contrast, came from a middle-class family, who was not well known nor involved in politics. Shafik needed to obtain a scholarship in order to afford to go to the Sorbonne for higher education. She sought patronage from Shaarawi and the Egyptian government in order to further her education. But unlike Shaarawi, it was more socially acceptable for Shafik to attend university, since Shaarawi's elite background and childhood in the harem prevented her from being educated in an academic institution.

As they became involved in feminist activity, they opened their homes to guests, and by extension, their private domestic space, in order to further their feminist agenda. Shaarawi founded the EFU and constantly received guests in Bayt al-Shark. She pushed boundaries by dramatically unveiling in 1923, and by attacking political leaders of Egypt and Britain. But Shaarawi was largely not attacked for her actions, nor was her reputation questioned, as she remained within the realm of acceptable social conventions. On the contrary, Shaarawi was looked up to as the leader of the women's movement in Egypt, the "godmother" of the movement. Shafik, however, pushed boundaries and was attacked for her actions, as she broke social conventions. When she started the BNU in 1948, the public questioned her motives, asking if Shafik started the organization for anything other than for increased attention, publicity, and money. She was not well respected by the masses like Shaarawi, nor was she a millionaire. The public constantly speculated that

Shafik was only searching for public attention—speculation that the media would not dare make about Shaarawi.

Moreover, the connection between public and private ran deeper for Shafik, as she was a dynamic, fashionable socialite. Even Shafik's personal relationships were exposed, and this was exemplified by the picture of Shafik and al-Sawi on the cover of *al-Ahram* after their marriage in 1935. Shafik's wedding day, a private affair, was captured in a photograph and published on the front cover of Egypt's most important newspaper. Her personal relationship was intentionally exposed to the media in order to make a statement to Egyptian society about a "modern" marriage, demonstrating the connection between Shafik's public activism and private life. As Shafik's career intensified in the late 1940s, the media continued to involve the public in her personal relationships, as they questioned Shafik's happiness in her marriage to Ragai, as well as her relationship with her two daughters—all remarks that would not be made about a rich widow. Even though Shaarawi opened the doors of her private space to a number of guests in order to further the feminist cause, the media did not expose or speculate about her private relationships with her family. Thus, there was a stark difference in the connection and fluidity between the public and private lives of Shaarawi and Shafik.

Despite their differences in ideology, actions, and the line between public and private, these three leading ladies crossed paths a number of times. Most clearly, Shaarawi and Shafik maintained a cordial relationship. Shafik looked up to Shaarawi as a mentor, from the first time that Shafik met the millionaire leader in 1928 to discuss the possibility of an academic scholarship. Although Shaarawi distanced herself from Shafik

after Shafik's divorce, the women fostered mutual respect towards one another, and Shafik vowed to continue leading the feminist movement after Shaarawi's death in 1947. Similarly, Shaarawi also encountered Umm Kulthum several times. There is little information on their relationship, other than Shaarawi's invitation to Umm Kulthum to be the guest singer at annual EFU charity events. Since Shaarawi encouraged the proliferation of Egyptian art, Umm Kulthum was the perfect embodiment Egyptian authenticity musically. The Egyptian nationalism of the two women intersected at EFU charity events.

Social class is one of the most critical factors that impacted the experience of each feminist during her individual career. Socioeconomic background was influential in determining the opportunities and challenges faced by each woman. While Shaarawi possessed the wealth and name of her elite family to support all her feminist and nationalist endeavors, Shafik's middle-class background made it necessary for her to seek financial support for her education, as well as search for public space before she was able to make a name for herself as a feminist activist. Umm Kulthum's lower class background limited her access to education and denied her the opportunity to be a part of the organized feminist movement. But she was able to use her peasant background and success as a woman who elevated herself into the upper classes as a way to appeal to the masses—making it possible to determine that the organized feminist movement was truly a movement of the upper classes, with little opportunity for the lower classes to become part and parcel of the movement.

Marriage, which is closely tied to social class, was also an important component that differentiated these three women. For Shaarawi, matrimony meant an arranged marriage with a relative that effectively maintained the Shaarawi fortune and capital. This translated into a marriage at age thirteen to a man forty years her senior. After a seven-year separation at the beginning of their marriage, Shaarawi remained married to Ali until his death in 1922. His death marked the point of liberation for Shaarawi, as she became the head of the household. No longer held back by any male relative, she was able to use her wealth to promote her feminist and nationalist agenda. Shafik's marriage to Ragai in 1938 represented both a traditional middle-class marriage as well as an attempt to rebel. Shafik and Ragai married in Paris with no family members in attendance, and she accepted the minimum dowry, pointing to Shafik's rebellious nature. Although she married at age thirty, older than the traditional marriage age, Shafik adhered to traditional middle-class marriage customs by marrying her cousin, who was of the same social status, and returning to Egypt to start a family and a social life. Despite her rebelliousness, Shafik's marriage represented a typical bourgeois match. Umm Kulthum also resisted traditional marriage customs by refusing to marry until the age of fifty. This is likely because she was working towards establishing herself as a successful singer through her own self-discipline and did not want marriage to stall her ascendance into fame. By marrying later in life, when she was already a well-established star, Umm Kulthum was sure to maintain her autonomy.

Despite their differences, all three feminist figures were tied together by the political situation in Egypt and by religion. Each woman was impacted by Egyptian

nationalism: Shaarawi and Shafik participated in the nationalist struggle against the British through demonstrations, as well as advocated the transformation of Egyptian society, and Umm Kulthum represented distinctly Egyptian culture through her carefully selected music. Shaarawi and Umm Kulthum were also engaged in Arab nationalism, as Shaarawi led conferences to unite Arab women (through the AFU), and Umm Kulthum united people all over the Arab world through her songs. Each individual woman's decisions—whether deciding to start a newspaper targeted at Egyptian women, or singing songs that invoke the image of the setting sun on the Nile—may have been partly impacted by the political backdrop. In this example, the women were cognizant of the emphasis on Egyptian nationalism, and their decision to appeal to Egyptian culture and masses was a reflection of the political backdrop of the first half of the twentieth century.

Moreover, Islam figured prominently in the lives of all three women. Shaarawi and Shafik grounded their feminist ideology in Islam, and their writings reflect a belief that Islam did not deny women social and political rights. The public viewed Shaarawi as a dignified, pious widow, while the press recognized that Shafik's education gave her thorough knowledge about Islam. Similarly, Umm Kulthum was a daughter of a shaykh whose religious modesty was clear through her behavior and modest dress. Islam connects all three women, which suggests the importance of religion to the careers of feminist figures. Shaarawi, Shafik, and Umm Kulthum all pushed social boundaries with their careers, behaving in unprecedented ways in the public sphere. Islam was crucial for the women to legitimize their actions, pushing social acceptability without being considered taboo. Using Islam as justification for their actions rendered the public

incapable of only scrutinizing the feminists negatively, and it created space for dialogue about the transformation of society—which was the ultimate goal of the Egyptian feminist movement.

On the fortieth day after Shaarawi’s death in 1947, Shafik gave the eulogy in memory of the godmother of the Egyptian women’s movement: “All of us are part of her. Our struggle would have faded away and its effect would have been lost if it hadn’t been for her inspiration, her light. We were in the harem until our leader took us out of its darkness! And here we are, pioneers, surrendering to God’s will, counting her glorious actions and following her footsteps.”<sup>277</sup> Shafik promised to take over leadership of the struggle for women’s rights, and together, women continued fighting and serving Shaarawi’s memory. Shafik articulated the great debt that women owed Shaarawi for her leadership and bravery, and she vowed to continue the fight for women’s rights to make Shaarawi proud. In the same decade, Umm Kulthum had risen to the top of the Egyptian entertainment industry and became a star throughout the Arab world, as she continued demonstrating female empowerment with her unprecedented career. Individually these three women maintained a large presence in the public sphere. Together, they attained success and experienced failure, and the actions of these pioneering feminists were instrumental in demonstrating the opportunities and challenges facing women of different social classes in Egypt during the liberal age. Egyptian feminism during this period, though usually associated with a few women from the upper classes, had a variety of manifestations—“faces”—based on social status, class, and education. Shaarawi, Shafik,

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<sup>277</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik*, 141.

and Umm Kulthum were all faces of feminism in Egypt, and they each contributed in reshaping women's social and political opportunities in the Arab world.

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