QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

Family Follies

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"The wife: I bet your friends envy you your domestic happiness!"[1] Reprinted with permission of Mohammed Elchamaa.

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This cartoon comes from a 1948 edition of the Egyptian periodical *Akhir Saʿa*.[2] I happened across it in Cairo, as part of some exploratory research into the fate of the female image of the Egyptian nation-state that was so central to the 1919 revolution.[3] In previous inquiries, I had noticed that "lady Egypt" or "mother Egypt" or "Egypt as a woman," to use historian Beth Baron's expression, lost pride of place in popular periodicals as 1919 gave way to nominal independence and nation building. By the late 1920s, cartoon and caricature space was more frequently dedicated to men engaged in laying the foundations of new political, legal, and educational systems, as well as erecting the buildings that would house them. Throughout the 1930s, political caricatures also frequently lampooned prominent Egyptian men for their behavior in the institutions that they had been active in creating. In the popular press, the reified female figure of the Egyptian nation was all but usurped by the men who built the state (and who seemed determined to keep Egyptian women out of the body politic).

By the 1940s, the female image had reemerged, full force, into the cartoons and caricatures that had become a staple of the Egyptian popular press.[4] What interests me here is that in this later period the female figure that had once embodied the Egyptian nationalist movement's virtues and aspirations had been replaced by much more common figures of wives, fiancées, and maids. At the same time, while earlier manifestations of Egyptian "womanhood" in the press promised Egyptian men the spoils of independence from Great Britain, her successor was frequently depicted as an adversary. It was most often in courtship, marriage, and domestic relations that women appeared to pose the greatest danger—in stark contrast to the 1919 era, in which the joys of companionate marriage promised men political enfranchisement.[5] The female figure who once offered domestic qua political success appeared to have been replaced by the elusive fiancée and the demanding and domineering wife.

Within this context, a number of readings of the above cartoon are certainly possible. Perhaps the most obvious is that domestic roles celebrated in the 1919 era had now been reversed. Here the domestic goddess and the scientifically trained mother have been replaced by a flustered househusband. The children squall and misbehave. The ordered household of the early 20th century appears here as chaotic space that has not been shaped by a "modern" wife. In fact, it is the wife—confident, poised, dressed in modern attire—who comes home to a clearly unhappy husband and children.

We might also ask: does this cartoon lampoon the husband, or does it critique the wife? The cartoonist might well be offering commentary on the "newest" of the "new" Egyptian women as they appeared in the 1930s and the 1940s, women who were as insistent about acquiring their own political representation as they were about achieving educational and legal parity with men. Indeed, Margot Badran, Cynthia Nelson, and, most recently, Laura Bier have painted vivid portraits of women whose political, educational, and professional pursuits clashed head-on with the domestic ideals of 1919, illustrating how women who resisted those ideals were subjected to all kinds of hardship and ridicule.[6] The

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new woman threatened not only the household's order and stability but also her husband's masculinity, shaped in 1919 and the decades leading up to it by a culture that insisted that men be family men but that they work outside the home.

If we see this woman as a stand-in for the Egyptian nation—as she had been in 1919—we might also read this cartoon as commentary on Egyptian politics. As the turbulent decades of the 1930s and the 1940s witnessed the failure of 1919 political ideals and the liberal state's inability to function in various arenas, I wonder, was it just potentially errant wives who threatened the marital–national contract? Or did failures of the nation-state itself dupe effendi men who had, at least symbolically, married into a contract with it? As the triumphs of 1919 gave way to constitutional crises, a second world war and its concomitant political and economic burdens, student demands for greater political participation and greater accountability from their politicians, and a general rethinking of Egypt's cultural identity, had marriage resurfaced as an object of cultural and political commentary?

Is it the wife here who left this man isolated from the public realm that was offered to him by the marital–political contract of 1919? Or had the floundering Egyptian body politic left him isolated from those ideals?

NOTES

[1]*Akhir Saʿa*, 7 January 1948, 8. The cartoonist is unnamed.

[2]Ami Ayalon calls *Akhir Saʿa* an unaligned political journal in his book *The Press in the Arab Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3]Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005).

[4]Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[5]Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*; Mona Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2004).

[6]Margot Badran, *Gender Islam and Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Cynthia Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1997); Laura Elizabeth Bier, "From Mothers of the Nation to Daughters of the State: Egyptian Women and the Gender Politics of Nasserist Rule" (PhD diss., New York University, 2005).

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