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Contesting Imperial Feminisms: The Life of an Early Twentieth Century Egyptian Activist

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**Contesting Imperial
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Egyptian Activist**

by
BELLA RUHL

ABSTRACT

In “Contesting Imperial Feminisms: The Life of an Early Twentieth Century Egyptian Activist,” I make the argument that first-wave Egyptian feminism was inextricably bound to nationalist discourses, and was both produced whole-cloth and adapted from European models by Egyptian activists in response to changing economic and political conditions. Using the life and political work of Huda Sha'arawi, a women's rights activist and nationalist who lived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I complicate the euro-centric view that feminism in Egypt was the result of western intervention and was uncritically adopted by colonized women. Instead I try to draw attention to the ways in which Sha'arawi and her comrades formulated a feminism predicated on decolonial liberation and indigenous values, while navigating the political realities of British colonialism and industrialized modernity. A microhistorical study with far-reaching implications, this article analyzes Sha'arawi's rhetoric and actions, including her performative political unveiling, to gain a deeper understanding of the political contributions of early twentieth century Egyptian feminism. My objective is to return some agency to intersectional actors whose politics have been unjustly framed within the historiography as derivative of (white, European) feminist and (patriarchal) nationalist frameworks.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In support of her husband's declaration of retribution against the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks in New York City, then-First Lady of the United States Laura Bush made a speech on live radio. Framing the invasion of Afghanistan as a protection of human rights, she claimed that "[t]he fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."¹ The implication of this sentence, and the perspective it articulates, have been analyzed in depth by Islamic feminist scholars in the intervening years. The most notable example was an article published by the anthropologist and theorist Lila Abu-Lughod in 2002, where she posed the question, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"² In her sharply articulated analysis, Abu-Lughod situated Bush's seemingly humanitarian rhetoric within a long history of feminist discourse mobilized towards imperial domination in the Middle East.

The idea that it is in the best interest of Arab women to be rescued by a white savior from the reputedly

oppressive gender-segregated culture of the Islamic Middle East is a component of Orientalism—a system of representation that systematically depicts Eastern culture as hyper-sexualized, violent, and primitive.³ The particular gendered malignment of the Arabic world established a tradition of justifying colonial interventions into the cultural practices of Middle Eastern Muslims as a necessary humanitarian act.⁴ A potent example lies in the fact that the British controller-general Lord Cromwell, who acted as the head colonial agent in late nineteenth century Egypt, "opposed feminism in...England, [yet] espoused in the colonial context a rhetoric of feminism that attacked Egyptian men for upholding practices that degraded their women."⁵ The effects of this particular mobilization have had a lasting negative impact on the social perception of women's activism within the Middle East. As historian and theorist Leila Ahmed explains, the use of feminism by colonizers to enforce hegemonic cultural norms and undermine indigenous social structures "has...imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination."⁶

1 Laura Bush, "Radio Address by Mrs. Bush," *The White House Radio Address Archives*, November 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

2 Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>.

3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

4 Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?," 785.

5 Fadwa El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," *Fashion Theory* 3, no. 1 (1999): 67, DOI: 10.2752/136270499779165626.

6 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University

Historically, it was not only white Westerners who engaged with discourses that framed Eastern “backwardness” in gender relations and societal organization in contrast to the “progressive” West. Middle Easterners with a stake in the hegemonic colonial project participated in this endeavour as well. The upper middle class Egyptian social reformer Qasim Amin, for example, wrote a book in 1899 entitled *The Liberation of Women (Tahrir al mara’a)* that sparked controversy in Egypt over veiling practices and segregation. The book criticized Egyptian familial structures and, in particular, the system of segregation as contributing to its economic “backwardness” in comparison to Europe. In his effort to Europeanize Arab culture, Amin framed the veil as “a huge barrier between women and their elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its advancement.”⁷ Instead of seeking women’s liberation for the sake of equality and opportunity for women, he drew upon imperialist modernization discourses, which classified civilizations according to a racialized hierarchy and a linear model of development. Grounded in the epistemologically violent discourses of scientific rationality, the earliest calls for women’s rights were fundamentally misogynistic and

Press, 1992), 167.

7 Qasim Amin, *Tahrir Al Mara’a*. (1899) 45, cited in Guindi, “Veiling Resistance”, 61.

framed women in terms of nationalist motherhood, rather than as equals to men.

Today a radical effort is being made among Middle Eastern feminists to formulate an indigenous articulation of women’s rights and protections, grounded not in the post-Enlightenment ideologies of Western Europe, but in the particular cultural traditions and beliefs of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and surrounding regions. Islamic Feminism, which seeks to translate, interrogate, and reinterpret the holy Islamic texts apart from the influence of patriarchal norms, is one such intellectual initiative. Leila Ahmed and other scholars of Middle Eastern women’s history, such as Fatima Mernissi, have identified historical periods in which women enjoyed relative autonomy and legal protection.⁸ While there is no doubt that patriarchy has played just as dominant a role in social formation and the regulation of reproduction in the Middle East as in Europe, there is an effort underway to define the deconstruction or transformation

8 For two examples, see Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Huda Lutfi, “Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar’i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 99-121.

of these systems as a response to actual locations, situations, and historical contexts, rather than as a legacy of colonial intervention.

In the early twentieth century, however, this approach was in its infancy. It was not until the 1980s that postcolonial theory and second-wave feminism combined to produce the discursive resources foundational to its ascendancy. That is not to say that all aspects of Middle Eastern women's rights activism before the late twentieth century were intrinsically foreign, colonialist, and formulated with little regard to the actualities of women's lives. Indeed, women's rights discourses were highly contested, adapted, and rejected by indigenous feminists from the beginning. Even before Qasim Amin published his call for women's education, for example, salons, literary correspondence, and small-scale publications were exchanged among growing circles of educated middle- and upper-class Egyptian women.⁹ These platforms functioned as consciousness-raising initiatives, allowing women to critically analyze their position in relation to social structures and dominant discourses.¹⁰ While European

feminist activism, strategies, and principles were one resource to which Middle Eastern women's rights activists looked for inspiration, they were also nonetheless "committed to constructing an indigenous movement that would be both modern and authentic."¹¹ Rapidly changing social and economic conditions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries autonomously raised questions and produced solutions rooted in local beliefs and values.

In order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which Middle Eastern women in the early twentieth century engaged with feminist discourses and responded to the increased pressures on traditional gender systems, I undertake here a contextualized microhistorical analysis of an individual woman – the Egyptian activist Huda Sha'arawi. As a member of the privileged elite classes of Cairo, Sha'arawi's experience was by no means representative. Her publications, however, offer a great deal of historical insight into the channels along which feminist ideas emerged and circulated, and the ways in which these ideas were integrated and reformulated within the particular context of local, national,

9 Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 188.

10 Nabila Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution: From Feminist Awakening to Nationalist Political Activism," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (March 2013): 40, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/>

vol14/iss2/5.

11 Mary Ann Fay, "Introduction," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies Special Issue: Early Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Feminisms, Nationalisms, and Transnationalisms* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 5, doi:10.2979/mew.2008.4.1.1.

and regional culture and politics. Sha'arawi's position as a leader in the struggle for women's rights under the British imperial protectorate and the newly formed Egyptian nation, as well as her reputation as a relatively liberal, Westernized figure, make her an interesting starting point in seeking to make sense of these dialectal conduits. Her life also offers insight into the lives and ideas of her more radical peers.

Through an analysis of Sha'arawi's published writings, it is possible to gain an understanding of early twentieth century feminist activism as it emerged in response to colonial and industrializing conditions, global discourses, and the individual experiences of influential figures. The sources reveal sites of resistance to the imposition of European hegemony, even among the more Western-oriented and socially sequestered, such as the elite Sha'arawi. Two of these sites, namely nationalist feminisms and politicized veiling practices, offer considerable insight into the dialectic exchange between indigenous and hegemonic modalities. It becomes clear through a close reading of Sha'arawi's rhetorical work that the formulation of early twentieth century Middle Eastern feminism was critical, contestory, and anticolonial in its engagement with liberatory politics, and was actively resistant to imperialist mobilizations of feminist discourses. Nonetheless, Middle Eastern feminists' experiences were situated within a colonial context, and they responded to their surroundings as pragmatic political strategists.

II. A TELLING EXAMPLE

The principal source on Sha'arawi's life is a memoir that she wrote in her later years, which was translated and published posthumously by the American historian Margot Badran in 1987. As part of her editing process, Badran arranged and abridged Sha'arawi's manuscript, included photographs alongside the text, and provided contextual information and explanations which make the text more accessible to a Western reader. Reading along the grain of these at times heavy-handed interventions requires a multilayered assessment of the text that acknowledged its position as a historiographical interjection into the late twentieth century debate over women's history in the Middle East. At the same time, it is necessary to approach the work as a detailed first-person account of Sha'arawi's childhood and a rhetorical document – a didactic and pathos-heavy articulation of feminist principles, written by Sha'arawi as a mature woman in her fifties. The memoir describes her childhood within the harem, as part of the last generation to be raised in this spatial and cultural context, and the particular observations and experiences which shaped her feminist consciousness. She very intentionally highlights the particular inequalities and limitations which marked her gendered experience, including her more limited access to education and her early marriage. Although she intended to publish her

memoir for an Egyptian audience, it was left incomplete at the time of her death.

Born in 1879 to a wealthy family in Cairo, Sha'arawi's childhood world was circumscribed by architectural and social constraints, yet characterized by a rich social and intellectual exchange.¹² Her father was a regional governor in the rural province of Mina, where he amassed so much land and political influence that he was referred to as "the king of upper Egypt."¹³ Like many increasingly powerful provincial administrators, he set up a household in the Egyptian capital as part of an influx of families to Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁴ At the same time, the modernization program initiated by Muhammad Ali in the early nineteenth century was encouraging rural to urban migration, and fostering a growing class of white-collar bureaucrats and an increasingly complex administrative mechanism. As in other regions worldwide, these changes created unprecedented opportunities for mobility, destabilizing deeply rooted social systems.

To a young Sha'arawi, growing up within the vestigial household structure of the Ottoman Empire, these shifts were peripheral to the realities of daily life. Her

memoirs describe a childhood fixated on the closed internal relations within her home; her competitive relationship with her brother, her education, and her relationships with family friends, many of them foreigners, dominate recollections of her youth. Unlike many young women at the time, Sha'arawi was encouraged to memorize the Quran alongside her brother, a feat she accomplished at the age of nine. Beyond this, however, she was not encouraged to venture into knowledge of Arabic, and despite her pleas to the eunuch who oversaw her care and education within the harem, Said Agha did not permit her to continue to study the language. In a typical metareferential passage, which returns the reader to an awareness of the text's rhetorical purpose, Sha'arawi recollects "hating being a girl because it kept [her] from the education [she] sought."¹⁵ Characterizing her privileged childhood from a distance of years, Sha'arawi emphasized the feelings of deprivation that arose from the limitations placed on her education, in an effort to promote equal access to education for girls and women. She grounded this argument not in colonialist civilizational terms, as Amin had, but rather by drawing on

12 Sania Sharawi Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi, Egypt's First Feminist* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 1.

13 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 1.

14 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 8.

15 Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986), 40. She further expresses an early awareness that "being a female became a barrier between [her] and the freedom for which [she] yearned."

her own lived experiences, framing the debate in terms of the emotional and internal experiences of a young woman kept from her desire to learn.¹⁶

Similarly, Sha'arawi mobilises her biographical experiences with marriage to support her mature political position. Married at age thirteen to a cousin twenty-six years her senior in order to retain familial control of her extensive inheritance, Sha'arawi became a strong advocate for a legally codified minimum marriage age for women and for limitations on polygyny. Her description of her lavish wedding and spousal responsibilities are contrasted with her childlike daydreams, love of reading, and playful activities, painting a dissonant picture of her youth. Rather than making the claim that such cultural practices were "backward" or indicative of a societal deprivation, as Orientalist commentators argued, Sha'arawi grounded her desire for social change in her lived experiences. She describes in detail her feelings of marginalization and

neglect caused by her husband's previous relationship with a concubine, to draw attention to the interpersonal challenges that her unwanted marriage had on her early life. When Sha'arawi's husband returned to his first wife after just two years, however, the teenager was elated to have the opportunity to continue her life and education undisturbed.¹⁷

Instead of Arabic, Sha'arawi studied French, piano, and other Europeanized skills considered necessary for a girl of her social class. Her companions were often Europeans, and these women also proved influential on her feminist thought as she grew. Among Sha'arawi's friends and ideological influences was Eugénie Le Brun, a Frenchwoman who had married an Egyptian politician. Le Brun's transnational experiences led her to write two books on the subject of women in Egyptian culture, for a predominantly Western audience. The first of these texts, entitled *Harem et les musulmanes* (*The Harem and Muslim Women*) was written "to describe the life of the Egyptian woman, as it really is, to enlighten Europeans."¹⁸ Her aim in writing it was to counter Orientalist presuppositions about the harem and the women among Europeans, and she was able to bring many European readers to the conclusion that "Egyptians seemed not unlike

16 To interpret her position as a proponent of education as an imported feminist principle is to render invisible the rich history of Islamic and Egyptian scholarship and knowledge production. Though these sectors had generally been inaccessible to women, there was also a precedent of female intellectuals and itinerant figures embedded in Egyptian, Islamic, and Ottoman traditions. See Mernessi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*.

17 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 21.

18 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 80.

themselves.”¹⁹ Despite this step towards cross-cultural understanding, some among Le Brun’s female readership in Egypt felt that she was criticizing their condition, and expressed this to her frankly.²⁰ Well-aware that through Western eyes they appeared powerless and exploited, Egyptian women resisted this characterization, asserting their active role within the household and their extensive reach into matters of social and political relevance. Their critical awareness of the ways in which they and their culture was represented thus reveals a contesting relationship between Egyptian women and European feminist discourse, even if the latter was well-meaning.

Despite these criticisms, Le Brun can be understood as having had a relatively nuanced view which contradicted many of the colonialist discourses on women that her fellow Europeans espoused. She was a convert to Islam, and defended the religion in feminist terms, arguing that “Islam...has granted women greater justice than previous religions.”²¹ This claim extended to Islamic law, which she identified as ultimately just, though corrupted by patriarchal tradition.²² While it is clear that she was in no way producing a radical alternative to colonial feminist discourses, it also appears that she was invested in moving

the conversation away from one-dimensional, Orientalist depictions. Le Brun’s more nuanced perspective left a lasting impression on Sha’arawi and was far more attractive to the young activist than the views of other European women she encountered, who bought fully into discourses which patronized and othered Middle Eastern women.²³

At the weekly salon for women which Le Brun hosted in the mid-1890s, Sha’arawi had the opportunity to discuss a variety of topics with both European and Arab women, including social practices such as veiling and seclusion.²⁴ It was in this context that she first encountered European anti-veiling rhetoric. A guest in the salon expressed the Orientalist perspective that “Egyptian women could camouflage disreputable deeds behind a mask,” and that the behaviour of European women was better because their faces were uncovered.²⁵ Le Brun defended Sha’arawi against this malignment, but later confessed to her younger friend that “although she admired the dress of Egyptian women, she thought the veil stood in the way of their advancement.”²⁶ The precise impacts of these statements

19 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 80.

20 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 80.

21 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 81.

22 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 81.

23 Leila Ahmed, “Between Two Worlds: The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Feminist,” in *Life/Lines: Theorising Women’s Autobiography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 171.

24 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 78.

25 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 78.

26 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 80.

on Sha'arawi's ideology was not immediately clear, but she continued to cover her face in public for more than a decade after, indicating that her later decision to unveil publicly was influenced by far more complex factors than solely Orientalist rhetoric.

Despite the fact that many of her friends were European, her social language was interspersed with French loan words, and the interior decor of her home was "a melange of oriental and western styles," Sha'arawi recounted many instances of staunch resistance to the Westernizing forces which surrounded her.²⁷ One such instance from a similar period of time involved an acquaintance inviting her to tea in a commercial shop "which accorded neither with [her] preferences nor [Egyptian] customary behavior" as the tea shop was patronized by both men and women.²⁸ She further refused to attend the same woman's mixed-sex parties as a married woman attending without her husband.²⁹ This selective and critical adoption of Westernizing mores remained a theme throughout Sha'arawi's life.

Clothing, in particular, proved demonstrative of this resistant stance. Though Sha'arawi loved European styles and, as a leading lady of Egypt, found it her duty to be consistently in the height of fashion, she balanced

these needs with an immutable sense of decorum grounded in Islamic morality. The veil (then and still a potent political symbol in struggles over female agency and national identity) was a key site of Sha'arawi's political action. In a profile of Sha'arawi written in 1927 for the American feminist periodical *The Woman Citizen*, journalist Anne Hard made a point of contrasting the Egyptian's modest and high-necked dress with the décolletage of her European guests.³⁰ The picture accompanying the profile depicted Sha'arawi in a chic head covering and long-sleeved black gown. Her adherence to Egyptian standards of moral rectitude was a reputation she leveraged throughout her life, both as part of her cultural identity and as a form of nationalist activism against the encroachment of European cultural hegemony.

III. NATIONALISM AS FEMINISM

Sha'arawi's nationalist activism extended far beyond her public appearance, however. Participation in the nationalist movement, precipitated by her husband's involvement in the newly formed Wafd party, became

27 Margot Badran, "Introduction," in *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*; El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 59.

28 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 79.

29 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 79.

30 Anne Hard, "Madame Hoda Charaoui: A Modern Woman of Egypt," *The Woman Citizen*. 12, no. 4 (September 1927). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EHWNAL819703162/NCCO?u=uarizona_main&sid=NCCO&xid=3dae96b5.

Sha'arawi's first major experience with political activism. Among Egyptian feminists it was widely accepted that before women could assert their political agency within an Egyptian state, such a state had to be formed. Nationalism, itself a contested concept with origins in the West, became a "vehicle for feminist demands," in that it was understood as the only viable avenue towards political autonomy and potential political agency.³¹

For colonized women, the feminist fight was not against their own men, but alongside them, against Western oppression. Imperialist feminisms sought to insert a white savior between the colonized man and woman, working on the premise that Islam was inherently more sexist than Christianity, and that it was not possible for communities in the Global South to negotiate gender and modernity legibly within an indigenous cultural framework. By allying with their countrymen against Western oppression, colonized women exerted their political power and demanded enfranchisement on their own terms, not on terms set by white Western oppressors. This came with the understanding that alongside liberation from colonial control existed the potential for women's rights to be encoded in new government systems. It was through the anticolonial struggle that Egyptian women asserted their political voice and demanded autonomy. When

31 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 39.

historian Mary Ann Fay remarked that "[t]he women's groups that emerged in the early twentieth century were liberal reformist in their goals and strategies, that is, they were not revolutionary,"³² she entirely neglected the fact that these women were revolutionaries. They were actively involved as participants in the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, and their institutionally-aligned advocacy was premised on the fight for the formation of new national institutions. Women's rights movements grounded in nationalist liberation sought to break away from colonial imperatives and establish new and independent political structures in which feminist utopian ideals could be manifested.

Though both feminism and nationalism had ideological ties to the oppressor, nationalism as feminism was intrinsically resistant to imperialist discourses. It stood in opposition to colonial forces, which enabled a highly patriarchal order in which colonized men were incentivised to utilize European patriarchal tools to contribute to the further oppression of colonized women.³³ Unfortunately, despite women's active involvement in many global nationalist and anti-imperialist movements, they were frequently left out of newly established postcolonial governments.³⁴ Nevertheless, an

32 Fay, "Introduction," 2.

33 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 43.

34 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 40.

understanding of the connections that women in Egypt made between their oppression as colonized subjects and their oppression as women marks a critical point of departure from the hegemonic norms of imperialist feminisms.

More immediately, however, the nationalist movement gave Egyptian women an opportunity to establish themselves as political agents with influence and a direct relationship to the state. In 1919, following the rejection of the Wafdist petition for national liberation from the British, Sha'arawi and her compatriots organized a march in protest of the occupation.³⁵ The "Ladies March", as it came to be referred to in the press, was an unprecedented expression of women's collective political agency in modern Egypt, and marked an interesting turn in self-conception among its proponents. Women from all social classes and walks of life participated, from elite harem women in cars to unveiled prostitutes marching on foot.³⁶ In demonstrating publicly for an Egyptian state, these women were declaring a political influence on the governing body, as citizens and as individuals with bearing beyond that of their husbands and households. The march was, in short, both a nationalist and feminist demonstration, as women asserted their demands for

both a state and political agency in relation to that state. Among leaders of the nationalist movement, the action was praised for its symbolic potency. In the context of the anti-imperialist revolution, "[w]omen's unprecedented acts were welcomed and justified by national needs."³⁷

According to historian Fadwa El Guindi, "Egyptian women, Muslim and Christian, [positioned] their liberation vis-à-vis the simultaneously rising nationalism that grew up in response to colonial intervention."³⁸ The two movements were inextricably linked in both ideological and organizational terms. Unable to participate alongside her husband in the nationalist Wafd party, Sha'arawi founded a women's auxiliary, the Wafdist Women's Central Committee, in 1920.³⁹ Like the party itself, the WWCC was open to people of all faiths and social classes. Under Sha'arawi's leadership, the Committee "consciously set out to be if anything even more comprehensive" in its diverse participation than the Nationalist party was.⁴⁰ This diversity translated to the makeup of the Egyptian Feminist Union, which Sha'arawi formed in 1923 as a feminist splinter organization of the WWCC. The overlapping membership of the two organizations underscores the intrinsic interrelation between nationalism and feminist activism

35 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 45.

36 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 46.

37 Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 112.

38 El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 60.

39 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 73.

40 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 74.

that characterized women's early twentieth century political engagement in Egypt, as in other parts of the colonized world.⁴¹

Established in preparation for the 1923 conference of the International Women Suffrage Association in Rome, the EFU selectively and critically incorporated Western strategies into its agenda according to a discriminant ideological framework. Feminist Hanifa Khuri, "in recounting the work of the Egyptian Feminist Union, asserted that Huda Sha'arawi had always urged the adoption of European customs 'that are suitable for Muslims' and the rejection of those that are 'reprehensible.'"⁴² Reflecting principles "previously formulated by Malak Hifni Nasif," the EFU defined its goals as "social, political, legal and moral equality with men,...the right to higher education for girls, [the prohibition of] polygamy and divorce without the woman's consent, [an increase to] the age for marriage to sixteen, and [the promotion of] public health and hygiene in Egypt."⁴³ Of these, education and marriage reform emerged as the most immediate

priorities, and translated to activism in the form of petitions, protests, and editorial journalism.

The EFU also remained engaged in the nationalist fight, seeing political sovereignty as a precondition for the furthering of their agenda. The relevance of this connection became even more apparent when it was recognized that "the British [had] sought to limit the activity of Egyptians by actually closing down schools," stunting the possibility of free public education for girls, and putting new hurdles in the path of activists.⁴⁴ In fact, as Ahmed points out, "[t]he British occupation in fact retarded women's education in a number of ways."⁴⁵ Once again, the struggle against British imperialism was synonymous with advocacy for women's rights, and feminist nationalism marked a site of resistance to imperialist interventions.

Feminists campaigning on both fronts were quick to point out the ways in which colonialism and the economic developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought changes which negatively affected women's rights. Middle-class feminist Nabawiya Musa, in her address to the International Women Suffrage Alliance in 1923, made it very clear that a historical precedent for gender equality existed within the Islamic Middle East that equaled or surpassed that of Western Europe.⁴⁶

41 Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution," 40.

42 Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2008.4.1.83>.

43 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 104-105.

44 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 123.

45 Ahmed, "Between Two Worlds," 157.

46 International Women's Suffrage Alliance, *Report of the Ninth*

Yet foreign intervention, particularly the economic and social influence of Britain and France, had imposed a specific, Western-oriented version of modernity on the developing state. Economic and religious suppression, along with the suppression of education, had had lasting effects, and were inextricable from women's rights issues and the agenda of the EFU. Just as he had cut budgets for education and specifically limited the education of girls and women, the British controller-general Lord Cromer "had actively discouraged industry in Egypt" in order to maintain a trade imbalance and "preserve Egypt as a market" for processed British goods.⁴⁷

Grounded in the economic principle of mercantilism, and prototyped in British India, this strategic obstruction of economic development established imperial domains as a constant supply of raw materials and a market for finished products. This had had a massively detrimental impact on the Egyptian economy and on development, which had stagnated since British officials, following the Urabi Revolt of 1879, halted Muhammad Ali's industrialization plan. Production and consumption remained critical arenas in the anticolonial struggle,

Congress: Rome, Italy, May 12th to 19th 1923 (Dresden, Saxony: B. G. Teubner, 1923, accessed via Alexander Street "Women and Social Movements, International" database), 170. (hereafter IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress*).

47 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 123.

and nationalist agitation remained rhetorically and practically tied to the advancement of women's rights and political agency within the new state. In 1924, as part of a further push to dislodge British intervention in the Egyptian economy, Sha'arawi launched a nationalist boycott of British goods, patterned off the nonviolent resistance movement in India.⁴⁸ Since women in Egypt, as elsewhere, were the primary consumers for their households, a strike against British economic hegemony became simultaneously an exercise of Egyptian women's political and economic power.⁴⁹

Such expressions of women's political agency marked the nationalist struggle as a turning point in the women's rights movement in Egypt which effectively made it a public political movement, rather than a cultural debate taking place privately in harems and literary circles. It also meant that a coalition was formed of women from diverse backgrounds, who were involved in both nationalist and feminist activism. This coalition spanned generations, classes, and religious faiths, and found common ground in its hopes for an Egyptian nation designed to facilitate and protect the needs of women. Emphasis was placed on institutional reform, and the diversity of the movement required a certain inclusivity of language.

This became particularly apparent in the issue of secularism.

48 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 113.
49 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 114.

For Ahmed, “[t]he dominant voice of feminism,” which she equates with Sha’arawi, was secular in nature, and, by extension, the product of European cultural imperialism (secularist humanism being the underlying ideology on which European feminism was based).⁵⁰ An alternative interpretation of the relative absence of religious appeals in the publications of the Egyptian feminist movement mainstream, however, is taking into account the diversity and plurality of the movement itself. Egypt in the early twentieth century was a religiously diverse region, which had been incorporated repeatedly into multiethnic land-based empires. In 1919 the region was inhabited by indigenous, Arabic, and Turco-Circassian Muslims; Coptic and European Christians; and a small but politically active and long-established urban Jewish population.⁵¹

Among the earliest and most sustaining participants of both the nationalist and feminist movements in Egypt were Coptic Christians.⁵² One concrete example of this alliance is the flag flown at the 1919 women’s march and displayed by the delegation to the conference of

the International Women Suffrage Association in 1923. The flag consisted of a “white crescent and crosses against a green background, replacing the stars of the national flag,” symbolizing the unity of Christians and Muslims in pursuit of the nationalist cause.⁵³ While Sha’arawi was confessionally Muslim, her political rhetoric was largely free of appeals to Islamic thought or spirituality. This was likely as much a result of the multireligious makeup of her audience and fellow activists and a desire to appeal to a large constituency as it was an interest in secularism.

Despite her strategic rhetorical neutrality when addressing a mixed-faith audience, the nationalist-feminist vision Sha’arawi articulated was firmly grounded in Arab and Islamic tradition. According to her cousin and biographer, Sania Sharawi Lafranchi, the activist defended both cultural and religious Islam, as well as Islamic law. These assertions are affirmed by archival speeches and articles which Sha’arawi published in *l’Egyptienne*, the francophone journal of the EFU.⁵⁴ In these sources she is recorded arguing in support of the implementation of Islamic law (rather than a law code based on European models) in the new Egyptian state, seeing the *Sharia*, the corpus of Islamic religious law, as the only acceptable basis for productive legal and civil reform in Arab-majority

50 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 156.

51 The Jewish population of Egypt was almost completely eradicated in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of deportations and popular hostility in the wake of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War.

52 Ramdani, “Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution,” 46.

53 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 95.

54 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 102.

nations. In a 1944 speech to the Arab Feminist Conference, for example, in support of a burgeoning pan-Arab feminist movement, Sha'arawi demanded that Arab women have "restored her political rights, rights granted to her by the *Sharia*" and by the Quran.⁵⁵ Framing religious texts in terms of their utilization for the modern state, she pointed to the fact that "Islam [grants women] the right to vote for the ruler and has allowed [them] to give opinions on questions of jurisprudence and religion."⁵⁶ These claims illustrate her advocacy for a reinterpretation of Islam that returned to the original sources to address the needs of the present, a perspective resonant with the aims of the Islamic Modernism movement, or Salafism, which had emerged in the previous century. In framing both her anti-imperialist and feminist points, Sha'arawi drew on Egyptian traditions and genealogies, articulating a feminism which was not simply imported, but critical, globally informed, and locally situated.

Yet Sha'arawi's politics remained marked by discursive relations of inequality. It would be remiss to neglect the fact that her speeches leveraged the colonial terminology of "backwardness" and expressed a desire to "[raise]

the level of the whole country" through women's education and a modernization of Islamic law.⁵⁷ The pervasiveness of this type of imperialist rhetoric, found mixed into much of the public literature produced by colonial and anticolonial agents alike, makes it nearly impossible to untangle the "indigenous" from the "imperialist." It reaffirms the impossibility of a clean distinction between the two in the conceptual history of anti- and post-colonialism. Despite attempts to return agency and generativity to the rhetoric of colonized peoples, there is no way to fully escape the fact that the discursive field in which these debates took place was already marked by the violent epistemologies of imperialism, articulated with a vocabulary circumscribed by the oppressor.

IV. DISCOURSES OF THE VEIL

The issue at hand—that is, the contested nature of feminist discourse in the colonial context—is a pertinent illustration of the complexity of this phenomenon of discursive inequality. Because industrial development in Egypt occurred in tandem with colonial intervention, distinguishing which calls for changes in women's status were caused by practical necessity in response to economic conditions and which were imported from Europe

55 Huda Shaarawi, "The Opening Speech," in *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Indianapolis, IL: Indiana University Press, 1990), 338.

56 Shaarawi, "The Opening Speech," 338.

57 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 102.

as a product of cultural hegemony is rife with difficulty. This is, however, an important distinction, and one that has a critical bearing on present debates. It is most clearly elucidated in the following passage from *Women in Islam*:

“The dominant voice of feminism, which affiliated itself, albeit discreetly, with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society...assured the desirability of progress towards western-style societies. The alternative...searched for a way to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse- typically in terms of a general social, cultural, and religious renovation.”⁵⁸

In this passage, Ahmed attempts to draw a clear line between the imported and the indigenous, claiming that twentieth-century feminism in Egypt could be empirically divided into camps which aligned themselves with each tendency. In subsequent paragraphs, she explicitly associates Sha’arawi with the former group, and compares her ideology extensively with the perspectives of a lesser-known contemporary, Malak Hifni Nassef, who, despite dying young, produced an extensive body of feminist work which was deeply rooted in Arab Islamic culture.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 156.

El Guindi summarizes Ahmed’s thesis succinctly: “[h]ad Nasif lived longer...it is very likely that two parallel (organized) feminisms would have developed—one grounded in Arabo-Islamic culture, the other in European culture and feminism.”⁵⁹ Instead, in Ahmed’s telling, the Arab-Islamic strand remained dormant after Nassef’s premature death, while the liberal Westernized strand dominated the subsequent half-century. The postcolonial turn in feminism, she claims, laid the groundwork for vital new intellectual approaches and a return to indigenous feminisms. Writing in the late 1990s, Ahmed had a strong stake in locating and uplifting indigenous feminisms, but in her effort to legitimize the budding field, she creates an overly binary and un-nuanced distinction. More strikingly, she fails to acknowledge the ways in which Sha’arawi utilized and adapted extant discourses to accomplish tangible assets for Egyptian women, including greater access to education and healthcare. Her assertion fails to take into account the complicated navigation of colonized power structures that characterized colonized Egypt and overdetermined the vectors of possible political action and utopian ideology available to early twentieth century feminists. Sha’arawi’s feminism did in fact arise from a particularly Egyptian context and did not buy into European feminist

⁵⁹ El Guindi, “Veiling Resistance,” 67.

ideology whole-cloth. However, she was limited by the fact that national liberation and anti-colonialism were necessary preconditions to feminist advancement.

As usual, it appears, the most potent heuristic remains the veil. Unlike Nassef, who remained publicly veiled until her premature death in 1918, Sha'arawi chose to publicly unveil as a performative political act in 1923. Upon her return from the Conference of the International Women Suffrage Alliance in Rome, she removed her face covering in the Cairo train station in front of a crowd of supporters, journalists, and onlookers. This action is one of her most enduring legacies, and one of the most controversial. It is used within the historiography as a shorthand for the depiction of Sha'arawi, along with most of the participants of the early twentieth century Egyptian feminist movement, as passively receptive to hegemonic European feminisms. In fact, the historiographical discussion has been influenced by an overly simplistic political logic which has pervaded the discourse of the veil and ties it back to imperialist mentalities.⁶⁰ This formulation equates veiling with Islam, conservatism, anticolonial nationalism, and Arab identity, and unveiling with Westernization, imperialism, and the violent cultural hegemony of humanist secularism. The reality is far more complex and deserves closer analysis.

60 El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 58.

To gain a broader understanding of the considerations at play in this debate, and to respectfully complicate Ahmed's strategic essentialism, some historical context is necessary. Veiling was a common practice throughout the Mediterranean world since ancient times. It communicated status and modesty, was principally reserved for free (non-enslaved) women, and was worn as a protection from the sun in many pre-Islamic cultures.⁶¹ Veiling and seclusion, though not unambiguously mandated by the Islamic holy texts, were, along with many other wide-ranging cultural practices, enshrined in religious law and codified, particularly during the intensely patriarchal Abbasid period, as a means of controlling reproduction.⁶² Gender segregation practices were used by the elite classes, in the Islamic world as in Europe, to ensure patrilineal bloodlines and to communicate a family's wealth and status. This was limited to the wealthy and privileged classes, while the majority of women were forced by necessity to work outside the home in the marketplace, as laborers, traders, or servants.

Until industrialization began to precipitate wide-ranging economic and social change, strict segregation remained accessible only to those who could afford the luxury and expense of maintaining a separate

61 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 56.

62 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 79-80.

architectural space in the home for women and children, who did not have to engage in productive labor, and who were served, guarded, and accompanied by specialized and often highly-educated enslaved individuals.⁶³ Despite its connotations to contemporary Western viewers, veiling is not a practice unique to Islam, and in Sha'arawi's youth was practiced by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Egyptians alike. Indeed, for most of its history, veiling "was an urban phenomenon associated mostly with the upper classes."⁶⁴ As urbanization and social mobility increased, however, so did the prevalence and visibility of segregation. Once accessible only to the most privileged, practices of segregation were increasingly utilized as a means of communicating an aspirational and upwardly mobile social status among the emerging urban bourgeois classes. It also became more common to see women from the upper and middle classes out on the streets, engaging in commerce, attending schools, and undertaking philanthropic or paid work.⁶⁵ Economic and social change

starting in the nineteenth century made the practice of segregation more accessible to a larger number of people, but at the same time persistently tested and eroded its boundaries and reformulated its cultural significance.

While veiling was not a strictly religious practice, for many it increasingly stood for a respected cultural identity, including religious and sexual values, threatened both by economic and demographic change and by European influence. The European attack on segregation practices, as well as other aspects of Islamic Egyptian culture, "strengthened the attachment to the veil as a national and cultural symbol and gave it a new vitality."⁶⁶ Veiling and segregation thus became nationalist issues, symbolic of Middle Eastern cultural norms, *in response to* European imperialism and industrialization. Among those invested in the future of the country – pundits, politicians, clergy, journalists, social commentators, and many others who contributed their thoughts to the public debate playing out in the newspapers, pulpits, lecterns, and around dinner tables – the veil became a symbol of progress versus tradition, or modernization versus cultural preservation. It was invested with religious and political meaning and stood, synecdochally, for the entirety of the nationalist struggle and the divisions within it.

Yet, by one estimation, only

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⁶⁶ El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance".

⁶³ Adult women in nineteenth-century harems were themselves often enslaved, concubines imported from the Caucasus to be the highly refined and well-educated mothers of the ruling class.

⁶⁴ El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 62.

⁶⁵ Beth Baron, "Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 25, no. 3 (July 1989), 378, <https://www.jstor.org/>

16% of Egyptian women veiled in 1919, and many of those who went about unveiled had never veiled to begin with.⁶⁷ Rural peasant women covered their heads but not their faces, as it would have been impracticable to do so given the hard labor that they performed on a daily basis.⁶⁸ In urban centers, “[p]oorer women had always been visible in the streets, often unveiled,” and historical accounts from as early as the sixteenth century attest to a persistent presence of unveiled women in the public spaces of Cairo and the infeasibility of enforcing veiling upon them.⁶⁹ The debate over veiling was largely symbolic, and a manifestation of larger ideological conflicts between conservative and progressive forces played out across women’s bodies. For most, it had little to do with women’s individual choices, but instead was a societal decision, to be enforced or allowed as it was perceived to be expeditious on a national and geopolitical level. Only a few feminists articulated a stance which emphasized choice and personal freedom, among them Nassef, who, despite her own choice to remain veiled, “[approved] of unveiling *for those who want it*.”⁷⁰

In contrast to the middle-class Nassef, for whom veiling

symbolized cultural identity, a recently achieved social status, and a reaffirmation of Egyptian nationalist norms, Sha’arawi’s personal and gendered agency came from an escape of the traditional boundaries placed upon upper class women by segregation. Nationalist political activism should be understood as an assertion of women’s political agency, a relationship to the state, and a disavowal of external (imperialist) intervention. Likewise, by exercising her right to unveil (as a parallel right to that of taking up the veil), a politically active woman in the context of an urbanizing, industrializing society should be understood as articulating a demand for individual political rights and representation, and for citizenship in relation to the newly-formed nationalist state.⁷¹ The act of unveiling also indicated a desire to move out of the cloistered harem space and engage with a changing economic landscape, one certainly marked by imperialism, but also one of contested modernity, and a desire for social change after centuries of Ottoman, and then British, imperial control. The emergent feminist consciousness had “evolved out of women’s changing everyday lives in a country that had experienced overwhelming socio-economic transformation.”⁷² Unveiling was,

67 Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt,” 382.

68 Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt,” 382.

69 Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt,” 376.

70 El Guindi, “Veiling Resistance,” 64. Italics mine.

71 Badran, “Introduction,” 20-21.

72 Margot Badran, “The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women,” *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern*

for many women, an expression of a desire for and commitment to “increased freedom of movement to go out to schools, shops, and other places,” in order to engage with the new opportunities that Egyptian modernity provided.⁷³

Furthermore, Sha’arawi, at least, saw the veil as a foreign innovation, “imposed on the women of the upper classes of Egypt under the Ottoman Empire,” and therefore never truly representative of indigenous cultural tradition.⁷⁴ While the veil had of course already existed in Egypt since before even the introduction of Islam, segregation ossified within Egyptian social practice as a tool of the Ottoman Turko-Cisserian elites to distinguish themselves from the Arab and indigenous Egyptian population.⁷⁵ The system of veiling and seclusion had always been as much about class as it was about gender, and served as a potent visual signifier which marked women from different classes as separate from each other. Classed dress also signified divisions in behaviour and respectability, as elite women were associated with virtue, modesty, and hygiene, while working class women, particularly sex workers or single mothers, faced stigmatization as unclean, immodest,

and sexually available.⁷⁶ As strict veiling was also impossible for these women, the garment served as a heuristic signifier of individual character.

The inherently classed nature of the veil proved prohibitive to direct engagement across socio-economic levels, as Sha’arawi discovered when attempting to provide aid to the peasants at her husband’s properties at Minya.⁷⁷ “As the lady of the manor, she was impeded by social tenets, and found it hard to approach...the rural poor,” whose lives she sought to improve.⁷⁸ On a less drastic level, presumptions of seclusion also complicated the unity of the women’s movement, which was represented both by elite and middle-class women. In fact, since the nineteenth century, “middle-class women... were at the forefront of the feminist cause.”⁷⁹ Many of Sha’arawi’s closest allies, including Nabawiya Musa, were highly educated middle-class women, some of whom had chosen to unveil on ideological grounds. By seeking to break down boundaries and create cross-class alliances in pursuit of nationalist and feminist aims, “[e]arly Egyptian feminism not only challenged the patriarchal order but...superseded class.”⁸⁰ In this context, unveiling was an act of class

Studies 15, no. 1/2 (1988): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/195212>.

73 Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt,” 382.

74 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 102.

75 Badran, “Introduction,” 17.

76 Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt,” 380.

77 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 33.

78 Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil*, 33.

79 Ramdani, “Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution,” 41.

80 Badran, “Introduction,” 21.

solidarity, defying the distinctions that had for so long vertically divided women from coming together to advocate for their rights.

The implications of class, culture, and nation were elaborated on by Musa in a speech to the IWSA conference, which she attended as a delegate alongside Sha'arawi. In this speech Musa argued that, rather than looking to European women as a model for desirable gender relations, Egyptian women should look to the peasant classes of Egypt, who "[go] out with [their faces] uncovered, [participate in their] husband's purchases and sales, [and have a clear] idea of agricultural affairs."⁸¹ Musa's framework was more than just a particular vision for the future of Egyptian feminism – it was an intentional effort to produce an indigenous model for Egyptian gender relations. It was also noteworthy in that it explicitly transcended class and reversed the structurally defined order which placed the secluded, veiled woman at the pinnacle of aspiration.

In her speech, Musa was careful to distinguish patriarchal "custom" from religious "law" in an effort to establish both a field for viable reform and one of fundamental cultural significance. The perspective articulated here is one which has been mentioned previously: that Islam and the original laws derived from the Quran and Hadith afforded women extensive rights and

protections which patriarchal custom had denied them. Addressing the IWSA audience, Musa argued that the Egyptian feminists' "struggle is only aimed at the customs which nothing sanctions or justifies, and [claims] a right sanctioned by religion and our social law."⁸² Likewise, in an address to the Arab Feminist Conference in 1944, Sha'arawi explained that patriarchal interpretations and innovative customs (*bid'ah*) had taken from women the rights that Islam had granted them. She went on to connect feminism and nationalism yet again, arguing that "the Arab man who demands that the others give him back his usurped rights would... give the woman back her own lawful rights, all the more so since he himself has tasted the bitterness of deprivation and usurped rights."⁸³

This distinction was an important component in understanding the rhetorical significance of Sha'arawi's historic unveiling. El Guindi further offers a critical piece of information: "[i]n her speech at the Feminist conference in Rome, Sha'arawi specified the face veil [a garment referred to as the *burqu'* at the time, contemporarily referred to as a *niqāb*,] not the head covering, as a barrier to women's advancement."⁸⁴ These traditional veils were often made of a long rectangular panel of white fabric

⁸¹ IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress*, 171.

⁸² IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress*, 169.

⁸³ Shaarawi, "The Opening Speech," 339.

⁸⁴ El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 63.

which was pinned to the head covering and concealed the wearer's face below the eyes. It was this garment that Sha'arawi removed, retaining the *hijab* "in the manner that finds support in Islamic sources."⁸⁵ Sha'arawi's unveiling (*al-sufur*) fit into a larger effort to strip back the elements of "custom" which limited women's ability to engage actively in daily life, while retaining and upholding Islamic law and practice.

Within the historiography, particularly among those theorists who seek to establish an Islamic feminist tradition purified of imperialist influence, there is a tendency to interpret Sha'arawi's actions as an act of compliance with imperialist imperatives, as rooted fundamentally in a desire to modernize and Westernize Egypt at the expense of Egyptian culture. While her ideological perspective was certainly the product of many convergent influences, including the hegemonic and imperialist, Sha'arawi's unveiling was not a blind, European-oriented rejection of Arab-Egyptian cultural tradition. It was, if the evidence offered above is accepted, an act of religious revisionism, of cross-class solidarity, and of progressivist nationalism. It was representative of her efforts to navigate the conflictual political field of the colonized nation, and to retain both individual and cultural agency in the formation of a specific vision of modernity.

85 El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 64.

Debates over ideology and ownership, and agency and innovation, are not simply ink-bound wranglings over technicalities of the past. They are political, activist claims which take on a life of their own and can be wielded with powerful influence. Without a doubt, Sha'arawi's performative unveiling "has entered the lore on women's liberation and, as lore, is alive and is continually embellished."⁸⁶

V. CONCLUSION

As questions of cultural imperialism, feminist ideology, and veiling practices remain politically salient, the histories of these debates become both critically relevant and politically useful. Identifying the origins of native Middle Eastern feminisms has high stakes in issues of geopolitical policy and individual, national, ethnic, cultural, and religious self-determination. By looking back at the histories of these contemporary debates, and the ways in which they evolved and ossified in the modern period, it may be possible to devise new strategies for the future. More importantly, such a historical perspective helps to undermine assumptions upon which structural power hierarchies such as patriarchy and colonialism have been naturalized.

The initial inquiry that this text sought to unravel was the question

86 El Guindi, "Veiling Resistance," 64.

of how colonized women, with Sha'arawi as a key point of reference, were able to articulate an indigenous perspective while navigating a complex and interconnected discursive field in which the indigenous and the colonial are not only inextricable, but also mutually constitutive. Above, I have tried to complicate the perception that ideology formation was a process of intellectual transfer from north to south, indicating that the existence of this perception robs early twentieth-century feminists of their agency and reinforces imperialist worldviews. The adaptation, contestation, and selective incorporation of certain elements of European ideology is presented as a form of anticolonial resistance, as well as a measured and realistic response to actual social and economic conditions. A primary objective of this reading, which belongs to a larger trend in global conceptual history, is to emphasize the agency of non-Western women's rights activists. At the same time, I attempt to complicate a binary and politicized construction of imperialist and indigenous feminist potentialities, articulated in the context of contemporary debates, which makes claims to a purified historical Islamic feminism while erasing the multiconfessional and transnational history of the Middle East. Instead, I traced the dynamic interchange of ideas and the highly selective formulation of independent ideologies, influenced both by the conceptions of Westerners and by a complicated matrix of preexisting

ideologies, cultural propensities, regional interests, localized conditions, and personal concerns.