

Maro Youssef  
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THE ELLIOTT SCHOOL  
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THE INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

IMES CAPSTONE PAPER SERIES

EGYPTIAN STATE FEMINISM ON THE SILVER SCREEN:  
THE DEPICTION OF THE “NEW WOMAN” IN NASSERIST FILMS (1954-1967)

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THE INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES  
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This thesis is a study of the depiction of women in Egyptian films during the 1950s and 60s. I argue that the Nasser regime created a set of policies, which Mervat Hatem and others have called “state feminism” in order to alter the image of women in Egypt. “State feminism” was a selection of policies that included women’s free access to higher education in 1957, their integration and increase into the work force by 31.1% between 1961 and 1969, and women’s access to politics through suffrage in 1956.<sup>1</sup> This study integrates the state’s policies that aimed to change the status of women and the translation of such policies on the silver screen.

Filmmakers of this era came of age during the period of the First World War, which shaped their perspectives and contributed to their realist approaches in films. The four films I discuss here are a blend of melodrama and realism.<sup>2</sup> The filmmakers provide their audience with love stories that often have happy endings, yet portray realistic struggles of Egyptians. I argue that the films discussed throughout this thesis highlight state policies aimed at creating the “New Woman,”<sup>3</sup> who was a modern, educated, politically conscious and producer of the Egyptian state. However, the filmmakers convey the message that top-down policies did not completely penetrate Egyptian society and that there was some resistance to social change.

Furthermore, I draw on Laura Bier and Michele Foucault’s notions of power and citizenship control by the state. I argue that one explanation behind the emergence of the state’s policies, also known, as “state feminism” to scholars in academia, was the state’s desire to

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<sup>1</sup> Mervat Hatem. “Privatization and the Demise of State Feminism in Egypt,” in *Mortgaging Women’s Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment*, ed. Pamela Sparr. London: Zed Books Ltd (1994),

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of both genres, see Viola Shafik’s, Walter Armbrust’s and Joel Gordon’s work on genres of Egyptian films. However, I discuss some characteristics of both genres in the section titled “The History of The Egyptian Cinema.”

<sup>3</sup> Both Laura Bier and Lisa Pollard’s work on the status of women in Egypt and the debates that circulated around that by intellectuals inspired my understanding of the “New Woman.”

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control its citizens. The state developed these policies in order to make women depend on state support and become co-opted by the Nasser regime starting in 1954. Why did the state wish to control its citizens? I argue that the new state lacked confidence in its abilities to secure its position within power politics and therefore, used its tools to gain control over its citizens.

I examine the phenomena of “state feminism” in films using Lila Abu Lughod’s methodology of “multi-cited ethnographies,”<sup>4</sup> by treating each film as an ethnography of the Egyptian middle class. Although there have been debates concerning the relationship between films and reality, Abu Lughod argues that “people are both pedagogical objects and performative subjects [in visual media productions since] the industry seeks to shape, inform, and educate those who are the intended objects of this modeling.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, films become a site of struggle over identity and representation in Egypt. I chose film since it was widely accessible to the Egyptian masses, and as evidence of that, the cinema industry boomed during the 1950s and 60s.<sup>6</sup>

I argue that Nasserist policies that aimed to reform women and transform them into the “New Woman” can be identities throughout the four films I discuss in this thesis. Additionally, in this thesis I use film as a site of apparent struggle between accomplishing the image of the “New Woman” and the realities that women faced on the ground such as tradition, gender-based discrimination in the work force and family conservatism. The landscape of this thesis reflects these arguments. I will start by highlighting the reasoning behind my decision to use film as a category of analysis of the Nasser years. Next, I will trace the origins of Egyptian cinema and its main producers, which will be followed by subsections on the transformation of Egyptian cinema

<sup>4</sup> Lila Abu Lughod. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television In Egypt*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (2005), Introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Abu Lughod, 11.

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion on the production of films, see the section “The History of Egyptian Cinema.”

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during the 1930s and 40s, and later during the 1950s and 60s and the contrast between the two eras. Next, I will discuss the Egyptian state's connection to Egyptian women. I will discuss its relationship to power, its role in creating the "New Woman," and the establishment of policies that mirrored those in the Scandinavian nations, also known as "state feminism." Finally, I will delve into the analysis of films that I have chosen to include in this thesis. First, I will summarize the plot of *Mother of The Bride* (1963), and provide an analysis of the regime's attitude towards women of the older generation, next I will examine the plot of *A Film For Men Only* (1964), which highlights contradictions of the regime's policies regarding women's inclusion in the work force. For the two remaining films, *Diary of A Student* (1962) and *The Empty Pillow* (1957), I will draw attention to the state's application of its policies in the educational sphere and the hardships that young female and male students faced in their communities despite the de-segregation of the two genders.

### **Film as a Method of Analysis**

I began this study with the desire to examine how women were depicted in Egyptian films and why Egyptian film was important. I chose to conduct my research through film since Egyptian films have been notoriously known across the Arab world as well as inside Egypt. It is surprising that filmmakers did not take Egyptian film production seriously until 1927. However, what is even more astonishing is the popularity of Egyptian films across the Arab world and in the Arab Diaspora in the West via satellite despite the short history of Egyptian films.<sup>7</sup> There were 588 films produced between 1954 and 1967, which I consider the peak of Egyptian "state feminism," and many films focused on women's lives and attempted to depict reality.<sup>8</sup>

I was inspired by Lila Abu Lughod's work on Egyptian television series and their

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<sup>7</sup> The first full feature in American cinema appeared in 1894, which showcases that cinema developed much earlier in the West than in the Global South.

<sup>8</sup> M. Khan. *An Introduction To The Egyptian Cinema*. London: Informatics (1969), 92.

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contribution to national identity. Abu Lughod argues that Egyptian television series serve as "ethnography of a nation."<sup>9</sup> Although I will not discuss nationalism or national identity in depth in this thesis, Abu Lughod's theory regarding visual media allows me to examine the four films discussed in this thesis as "multi-sited ethnographies"<sup>10</sup> of Egyptians during the 1950s and 60s. These "ethnographies" allow me to examine the depiction of women on the silver screen.

The silver screen serves as an ethnographic site of struggle over the image of the "New Woman." The "New Woman" is a concept that surfaced around the British occupation, especially during the later period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It served as a "goal" for Egyptian independence. In other words, the British proposed that Egyptians were backward and could not achieve modernity or reform the status of the Arab woman without the aid of the British, which legitimized British control over all Egyptian resources.

In response to the colonialist rhetoric used by the British to maintain control over Egypt, the new regime after the 1952 *coup d'etat* created a series of policies that aimed to alter women's lives and transform them into the "New Woman." Mervat Hatem applied the concept of "state feminism" to the work of the Egyptian state during the 1950s and 60s. "State feminism" is a term that feminist scholars have applied to the Scandinavian welfare states where the government provided women with education, political participation and the vote, as well as employment in the economy. Egypt followed the model of the Scandinavian welfare states during the early 1950s and created policies that meant to advance women in Egyptian society. However, these policies were visions of what the state wished women to become, rather than realities of how women's lives were.

I argue that films became a site of struggle between "state feminism" and women's

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<sup>9</sup> Abu Lughod, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 34.

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realities in Egyptian society. I use four different films from the late 1950s and the early 1960s in order to show that despite the new laws created by the state, women continued to face struggles in Egyptian society. For example, despite the state's passing of Rule 53 and Rule 8, which required equal opportunities for all Egyptians and declared the fair treatment of all employees, women continued to face gender-based discrimination in the workforce.<sup>11</sup>

These contradictions confirm Abu Lughod's theory regarding Egyptians' realities and their depiction in films. Abu Lughod argues that "people are both pedagogical objects and performative subjects [in visual media productions since] the industry seeks to shape, inform, and educate those who are the intended objects of this modeling."<sup>12</sup> As pedagogical objects, agents are constructed into performative subjects that reproduce certain social norm and identities. We are conditioned by the social texts that are portrayed to us (e.g. films) to act by and recognize certain social norms and to operate within certain social identities.

However, the real question is why films are an important tool of analysis instead of more pedagogical devices such as literature or songs. Films reach a larger audience and are subtler in their messages, and more powerful than literature in a cultural sense.<sup>13</sup> According to Viola Shafik and Joel Gordon, many of the melodramatic films of the Nasserist era were based on Ihsan Abd Al-Quddus' (1919-1991) novels that aimed to "liberate women" and introduce concepts such as "freedom," "individualism," and "revolution" to the silver screen.<sup>14</sup> Among these films was *The Empty Pillow*, which will be discussed in this thesis. Furthermore,

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<sup>11</sup> Selma Botman. *Engendering Citizenship In Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press (1999), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Abu Lughod, 11.

<sup>13</sup> The Literacy rates in Egypt in the 1980s (after education reforms) remained low. Only 21% of Egyptian women were literate, while 51% of Egyptian men were literate in the 1980s according to The Population, Health and Wellbeing Report on Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Gordon. *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt*. Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center (2002), 133.

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filmmakers produced ten of Ihsan Abd al-Quddus's novels and introduced them to the big screen during the Nasser years.<sup>15</sup> Other major literary works such as *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* and *The Open Door* were adopted as major films that had a large audience. Therefore, the study of film serves as a great asset to scholars who wish to examine Egyptians' lives on the ground to an extent through their depiction on the silver screen.

I specifically focus on four popular Egyptian films that were produced in 1957, 1962, 1963 and 1964 since most films regarding women and gender relations were produced between 1957 and 1967. I chose to focus on *Memoirs of a Student/ zekrayat talebah* (1962), *The Empty Pillow/ el wasada al khalya* (1957), *Mother of The Bride/ umm al 'arusah* (1963), and *A Film For Men Only/ film lel rejal faqat* (1964) since scholars have not thoroughly analyzed any of the films in this study with the exception of *The Empty Pillow*. Furthermore, the filmmakers of *The Empty Pillow*, Salah Abu Seif and *A Film For Men Only's* director Mahmud Zulfikar produced over 80 films combined and remain some of the most popular names in Egyptian filmmaking today. Additionally, the films I chose for this study depict different issues relating to gender relations and women's lives as the "New woman" during the Nasser era.

## **The Egyptian Silver Screen**

### ***The History of Egyptian Cinema***

Egyptian filmmakers began to produce full-length films and open spaces for cinematic production during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1927, Aziza Amir, a well-known Egyptian stage actress produced the first full-length film *Laila*. An Egyptian actor, Istefan Rosti directed the film successfully based on his film studies in Paris.<sup>16</sup> The film cost 1,000 Egyptian pounds (L.E.) in production and attracted many cinemagoers since it was the first full-length film.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Khan, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Khan, 19.

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Investors and filmmakers soon realized that Egyptians craved Egyptian films that were produced in Egypt and reflected their society.

Starting in 1926, many film production companies emerged such as the Mina Cine-Club/ Condor Film (1926), Togo Studio (1928), and Studio Misr (1935).<sup>18</sup> The Mina Cine-Club, founded by the Lama Brothers who wished to take advantage of Egypt's lack of studios, had the potential to produce the first full-length Egyptian film. The Lama Brothers screened their first film, *Koubla Fil Sahara'a/ Kiss In The Desert* prior to the screening of *Layla*, however, *Layla* became known as the first full-length film in Egyptian history.<sup>19</sup> Studio Misr, founded by Talaat Harb, an opponent of British colonization and the founder of the first Egyptian bank became the most popular space for cinematic production during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Togo Studio, founded by Togo Mizrahi, an Italian-Jew from Alexandria was the home of popular comedies and musicals; it was in direct competition with Studio Misr and produced sixteen films between 1939 and 1944, which was two less than the number of productions at Studio Misr.<sup>20</sup>

The production of films continued to steadily increase between 1939 and 1967. According to M. Khan's statistics of feature films, the average number of films produced in Egypt increased from sixteen during the 1930s and 40s to fifty in 1950.<sup>21</sup> Filmmakers continued to produce an average of forty-five films between the 1952 *coup d'etat* and the 1967 Egyptian-Israeli War.<sup>22</sup> These films included farce and comedies, musicals, melodramas, realist films, Bedouin films, and thrillers as genres of Egyptian cinema.

Melodrama and realism emerged as two popular genres in Egyptian popular films

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Khan, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Viola Shafik. *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press (2007), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Khan, 92

<sup>22</sup> Khan, 92

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between the 1940s and the 1960s. In her article on Egyptian Cinema in the *Companion*

*Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, Viola Shafik argues that the melodrama's "cinematic heyday stretched from the 1940s to the 1960s, at a time when the audience joined in singing with the musical comedies and cried hot tears with the abandoned heroine." Melodramas often revolved around the struggle over love for a young Egyptian couple in a society that did not view non-marital relationships as valid; they often had a happy ending where the lovers would reunite and live happily ever after. Filmmakers of melodramas used a binary framework that placed family and tradition on one side and love on the other. Realist films on the other hand emerged after the 1952 *coup d'etat*; realist filmmakers wished to expose social problems, however, according to Viola Shafik, realist films were framed in a completely commercial way, similar to melodramas.

The films I examine in this thesis are a blend of realism and melodrama. Shafik flirts with the idea of "melodramatic realism" in her article on Egyptian Cinema in the *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, however she fails to explain it throughout the piece. Here I use this hybrid term to capture the genre of films of the 1950s and 60s that had both melodramatic and realist characteristics. The films examined here highlight social problems such as women's impurity, class tensions, and women's discrimination in the work force while they show the struggles of young Egyptian lovers. These themes were inspired by the filmmakers' own experiences with politics and the Egyptian state.

Filmmakers who adopted "melodramatic-realism" were influenced by the disillusionment associated with the interwar political climate and their professional training prior to 1952.

Filmmakers of this era were born around the time of World War I, and experienced the Great Depression as well as political distrust and disillusionment.<sup>23</sup> This caused them to become

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<sup>23</sup> Israel Gershoni, James P. Jankowski. *Redefining The Egyptian Nation: 1930-1945*.

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interested in portraying real issues that Egyptians faced rather than musicals that contained Egyptian tales, Arab tales, oriental songs and dances.<sup>24</sup> They were graduates of the High Institute of Commerce and the High Institute of Dramatic Arts, where they learned to produce serious films.<sup>25</sup> The producers of these “melodramatic realism” films were celebrated among their peers according to Farid El-Mazzaoui, “Happily, a great number of our younger directors resist this tradition [musicals inspired by Arab tales] and are making films of modern conceptions dealing with our social life and its problems.”<sup>26</sup>

Egyptian cinema changed during the 1950s and 60s as a response to the desires of the new leaders. The Nasser regime took special interest in improving Egyptian cinema since the generation of the Free Officers consisted of avid moviegoers. According to Joel Gordon, Anwar Sadat “nearly missed the operation [the 1952 *coup*] due to a family film outing the night the tanks rolled.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Nasser was also a visible cinemagoer who continued to make appearances at Cairo cinema houses throughout his tenure.<sup>28</sup> I am not suggesting that Nasser took an interest in reforming Egyptian cinema for the sake of his own entertainment alone, he viewed it as a space that would transform national identity through the state’s message. By July 1957, the Ministry of National Culture and Guidance created the National Organization for the Consolidation of the Cinema (NOCC).<sup>29</sup> The state granted the NOCC a budget of 150,000 Egyptian pounds in order to develop Egyptian cinema.<sup>30</sup> This new organization created annual awards for filmmakers, amounting to 40,000 L.E. in 1959, 60,000 L.E. in 1960 and 80,000 L.E.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1995), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Farid El-Mazzaoui. “Film in Egypt” in *The Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring, 1950), 246.

<sup>25</sup> El-Mazzaoui, 247-249.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Khalid, 38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

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in 1967 in order to inspire directors, producers, writers and cameramen to increase the quality of their films.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the organization created a number of laws that clearly defined the relationships between “producers and technicians, producers and distributors and distributors and cinema owners”<sup>32</sup> in order to professionalize the cinema industry. Furthermore, the Nasser regime nationalized the film industry circa 1961<sup>33</sup>, which showcased the regime’s true interest in co-opting the industry. However, it is crucial to examine the nature of Egyptian films prior to the Nasser regime in order to trace the changes that occurred under the regime.

### *Films of The 1930s and 1940s*

Films of the 1930s and 40s were the first generation of non-silent Egyptian films. This era was and still is considered the “Golden Era” of Egyptian cinema. However, it is difficult to categorize it as such since cinematic productions of the time were of lower quality than those films of the 1950s and 60s. This era is important since it reflects gender relations in Egyptian society during the Farouk years. According to most Egyptians, both male and female actors of the 1930s embodied many characteristics of the Victorian age. They dressed “modern,” as I will discuss later, however their body movements were restricted and bodies disciplined on screen. These films mainly depicted the upper and lower classes, rather than the middle class.

There is a particular class depiction in films of the 1930s and 40s that is not found in later Egyptian films. Egyptian films of the 1930s and 1940s embodied the essence of old Hollywood, which was glamorous, classic and focused on upper and lower class women and men. During the 1930s, filmmakers often characterized elite women’s roles as feminine and glamorous.

Women were either portrayed as upper-class socialites or poor peasants. The actresses often

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> The actual year of the nationalization of the film industry differs from source to source. Some scholars claim that the film industry was nationalized in 1961, while others claim that it was nationalized in 1962.

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wore either pearls and Chanel-like black dresses or peasant-like outfits in order to highlight their social status to the viewer. Meanwhile, filmmakers designed men's roles that portrayed men as either fragile and poor as seen in *The White Rose/ Al-Warda al-Bayda'* (1933) and *Tears of Love/ Dumu' al-hubb* (1935) or ultra masculine (see Anwar Wagdy's films.)<sup>34</sup> Films of the 1930s and 40s portrayed gender roles in the way mentioned above in order to comment on social class and modernization in a melodramatic fashion.

Melodrama emerged as a popular genre of Egyptian films during the 1930s and 1940s. During the late 1920s, the film *Layla* (1927) became the first Egyptian melodrama.<sup>35</sup> Today we know most Egyptian films, especially those that were produced between 1930 and 1970 as melodramas. A melodramatic film is often characterized by the plot's exaggeration, the heightened emotions of the characters and the emotional reaction of the audience. Additionally, melodramas often had a happy ending where good overcame evil. *The White Rose* (1933) was the film melodramatic film of the 1930s. It was the ultimate melodrama since it portrayed Muhammad Abdel Wahab, as Galal Effendi who was a struggling youth who fell in love with an aristocratic young woman and had to give her up due to the class gap between them. This film is characterized as a melodrama since it captures the audience's emotions and portrays Galal Effendi's life and emotions in a highly sensationalized fashion. Filmmakers often had to turn characters into victims in order to appeal to the audiences and transform the film into a melodrama.

Characters in melodramas of the 1930s and 40s were often depicted as victims; they were often transformed into victims in a gendered way. Whenever a man was portrayed as the victim in the film, the actor had soft and feminine features in order to convey the weakness of the

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<sup>34</sup> Shafik, 137.

<sup>35</sup> Shafik, 139.

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character through passivity and powerlessness.<sup>36</sup> Filmmakers selected male stars who had a “feminine” aura in order to respond to the paradox around victimization and manhood.

Filmmakers continued to reinforce the gender binary that associated women and femininity with weakness and victimization by selecting more “feminine” men to play victim roles. Unlike Anwar Wagdy, the ultra-masculine melodramatic actor of the 1940s and 50s, Badr Lama, Muhammad ‘Abdel Wahab, Farid Al Atrash and Abd El Halim Hafiz did not possess toughness and ultra-masculinity.<sup>37</sup> Viola Shafik contributes the change in how Egyptian men were portrayed on the silver screen to the 1952 Revolution.<sup>38</sup> During the 1930s and 40s filmmakers portrayed Egyptian men as fragile colonized subjects, whereas, after the revolution ultra-masculine and muscular actors began to fill various roles on the silver screen.

The 1930s and 40s created a new meaning for the “effendiyya”. The effendiyya emerged as an organic group that rejected the fragmentation of politics, the severe economic problems that were associated with the Great Depression, and the repression and violence associated with politics.<sup>39</sup> An effendi during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered urban, educated, and middle class of native Egyptian blood.<sup>40</sup> His style of dress consisted of European style clothes, including trousers, a jacket and a fez.<sup>41</sup> This new class of educated men took on the image of The “New Man.”<sup>42</sup>

For the sake of this section, I will focus on the most common image of the “New Man”

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<sup>36</sup> Shafik, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Gershoni and Janowski, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Gershoni and Janowski, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Gershoni and Janowski, 11.

<sup>42</sup> I argue that the image of “New Man” came before that of the “New Woman” on the Egyptian silver screen. This image emerged during the 1930s based on my readings of earlier Egyptian films and those who played the “New Man” attempted to represent the effendiyas of the 1930s.

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and his characteristics.<sup>43</sup> The “New Man” embodied the ethos of the middle class and worked towards upward mobility through merit rather than influence. The “New Man” linked his Egyptian identity to indigenous Arab, Islamic and Eastern traditions rather than Western traditions.<sup>44</sup> He rejected western ideals because they were associated with the Great Depression, the British occupation and the interwar period in general. The creation of the “New Man” was both a top-down and bottom up invention. The state pushed for the creation of the “New Man” because it was interested in modernity and modernization. Such an image would aid Egypt in becoming more “modern” in the state’s eyes. Meanwhile, the “New Man” was created through a bottom-up process because he utilized his western education to change from the “subaltern subject” to a “modern citizen.”<sup>45</sup>

In *The White Rose/ Al Warda Al Bayda* (1933), Muhammad Abdel Wahab (1907-1991), represented the “New Man” of the 1930s and 40s. In *The White Rose*, he played Galal Effendi whose life resembled that of the sensational actor himself. Galal Effendi was a young, struggling effendi who initially worked as a clerk in order to make ends meet, but soon realized his talent and passion for singing and became a musical sensation. The story of *The White Rose* was specifically written for the young talented actor and singer of the 1930s.

Themes of class and gender inequality between men and women in these films focused on either lower class heroines or upper class villains. These class tensions serve as allegories for the frustration for Egyptian independence and the negative portrayal of women. When a film portrayed the woman as a heartbreaking socialite, the woman symbolized the foreign occupation

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<sup>43</sup> No scholars have coined the term “New Man” to my knowledge. I am simply drawing on similarities of the new type of man that emerged on the silver screen and the “New woman” that emerged on the silver screen.

<sup>44</sup> Gershoni and Jankowski, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Lucie Ryzova. “Egyptianizing Modernity through the ‘New Effendiya’ in *R-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*. Ed. Goldschmidt. Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press (2005), 126.

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and the monarchy and its corruption; when the opposing man played the role of the poor and weak Egyptian; he symbolized Egyptian impotency and frustration for independence against the foreign occupation (e.g., the socialite heartbreaker.) Meanwhile, when a woman was portrayed as a naïve, peasant who gets taken advantage of (often through rape or losing her virginity) to a rich man, the woman embodied the Egyptian nation and its vulnerability against the foreign occupation or the monarchy, which was symbolized through the man's class. This type of film increased nationalist support against the British and the monarchy since it provided Egyptians with a standard nationalist narrative.

### ***Films of the 1950s and 60s***

Films of the 1950s and 60s portrayed gender relations and class tensions differently than films in the 1930s and 40s. In terms of class, most films focused on the middle class exclusively. Films during this era presented women and men as the sons and daughters of the revolution rather than the protectors/ parents of Egypt (as seen during the 1930s and 1940s), implying that the regime saw itself as the parent of all Egyptians. These sons and daughters embodied the new ideas about nationalism and citizenship in Egypt, which ultimately led to the transformation of Egyptian gender roles. The state nationalist project allows us to begin to understand the complexity of power relations between the state and the masses in Egypt during this time. The state used rhetoric of modernization, gender equality and class equality in order to appeal to the masses and transform Egyptian identity. The depictions of modernization, gender relations and class tension in films during this era are different than those of the 1930s and 40s.

It is apparent in films of the 1950s and 60s that there are particular gender tensions and class tensions. Women's gender and class roles centered on being producers of the Egyptian socialist state. The conversion of women's roles from mothers to producers of the socialist state

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and the transformation of their gendered roles in society perplexed both men and women.

Women's status in society was previously based on their roles as mothers. Egyptian films during the 1950s and 60s captured this confusion. Film became a space where transforming gender roles played out; Egyptian films during the 1950s and 60s not only depicted women's new roles in society, but also illustrated the struggle between men and women to find a balanced solution for how to cope with these changes. For the first time, men began to encounter thousands of women in universities, at hospitals and in factories. The mixing of genders and the inclusion of women in the public sphere caused tension between both genders of society.

The Nasser regime also introduced state feminism as a part of this reform during the 1950s and 60s in order to further the modernization project as well as the socialist project. Modernization in the 1950s and 60s symbolized the state's desire to prove to the world, but mainly the West that Egypt was a modern nation. During the 1800s, the British justified their presence in Egypt through the claims that Egypt lacked modernization. The British claimed that they would help build institutions that would transform Egypt into a modern society. During the 1950s and 60s, the state used the rhetoric of gender equality in order to incorporate women into the socialist state.

The idea of women being producers of the Egyptian socialist state was promoted by the state through programs of "state feminism." "State feminism", according to Laura Bier was a constellation of programs by the Nasser regime that promoted reform of "The New woman". Films introduced common issues pertaining to the balance between progressive womanhood and traditional societal standards that the "New woman" faced during the 1950 and 60s. Women's issues such as marriage, education, and motherhood had always been private matters that women discussed in private; however, the discussion of such matters on public television and by the state

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further co-opted women into the nationalist movement.

### ***Films of The 1930s and Films of The 1950s Contrasted***

The portrayal of gender and class relations differed between the 1930s and 1950s in terms of gender segregation and the focus on a specific class in films. Gender relations between men and women directly reflect the image of the “New woman” during a specific historical period.

During the 1930s, upper class women were celebrated as the women of Egypt and were expected to remain at home and function as socialites who were an extension of their family names and husbands. They were often segregated from non-familial men since it was taboo to mix the two genders in public. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, middle class women were incorporated into the state and began to function as state bureaucrats in education, health care and blue-collar jobs. They experienced a great degree of gender desegregation since they were present in the public more often than during the 1930s. This transformation of the “New woman” by the state allowed middle class women to become more empowered socially, politically and economically, while it marginalized upper-class women and associated them with the British, corruption and the monarchy. Therefore, films during the Nasser era predominately focused on issues facing the middle class rather than the other classes and drew on new notions of modernity as interpreted by the state.

My analysis of films of the 1950s and 60s confirms that themes of gender relations, and class tensions do in fact highlight the change in the image of the Egyptian woman in films. Films during the 1950s and 60s depicted women as producers of the state who contributed to the nationalist project. They also focused on middle class struggles such as marriage, education, honor and shame and work. Finally, films of this era focused on new gender relations caused by state feminist policies. The remainder of this paper will examine the following films: *A Film*

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*For Men Only/ film lel rejal faqat* (1964), *Mother of The Bride/ umm al 'arusah* (1963),

*Memoirs of a Student/ zekrayat talebah* (1962) and *The Empty Pillow/ el wasada al khalya*

(1957) because they captured Egyptian attitudes of the 1950s and 60s toward class tensions, modernity and gender relations.

## **The State, State Feminism And The “New Woman” On The Silver Screen**

### ***The State’s Control Over Its Citizens***

I argue that the Nasser regime used many tactics to control its citizens based on my understanding of Michele Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power and Laura Bier’s understanding of “state feminism” and the state’s desire to control its citizens. Laura Bier argues throughout her doctoral dissertation that “state feminism” was in fact a tool used by the state to control its citizens. Based on Michele Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, states make citizens more visible as a way to control them more efficiently. The Nasser regime was known for its authoritarian nature which highlighted its desire to control its citizens both through their incorporation into the state and through their disenfranchisement from the state. For example, the state prohibited the formation of political parties, eliminated the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood, and marginalized elite members of society by taking away their wealth.<sup>46</sup> This showcases that the regime exercised its power to control its citizens, and in this case it used repression as a method of control. However, the regime also used gender politics through the

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<sup>46</sup> See Joel Gordon and P.J. Vakitiotis’ work on the history of the Nasser regime for detailed information regarding the authoritarian nature of the regime.

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implementation of “state feminism” in order to transform women into dependents of the state and by extension control them. One explanation for the regime’s authoritarian nature is its desire to build many constituencies and secure its position in Egyptian politics post *coup*.

### ***The “New Woman”***

Films of this era depicted images of the “New woman” that were created by the Egyptian state under “state feminism” during the 1950s and 60s. The “New woman” was modern, educated, a mother, a wife, a citizen and a producer of the socialist state. She was granted greater access to the public through reforms that encouraged her to work, become educated, and control her reproductive system, which would ultimately grant her citizenship based on her full participation in the state.<sup>47</sup> The reforms that took place under the Nasser regime were intended to construct a new civic identity for Egyptians by making them citizens of the new Egyptian socialist nation.<sup>48</sup> The political climate after the 1952 *coup d’etat* and revolution that followed created the need for the new state to promote civic identity in order to strength the state and co-opt its citizens. This civic identity according to Joel Gordon entailed voting, participating in the labor force and bearing young nationalist sons to Egyptians. For example, the regime promoted a socialist ideology that advocated for the involvement of all Egyptian citizens in production. The regime promoted that women become active in economic production and child bearing, which shaped their duties and responsibilities as citizens of a modern state. The regime advocated for women’s equality in order to make women’s participation in the economy more feasible.

Filmmakers utilized the silver screen to highlight the regime’s state policies and the resistance

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<sup>47</sup> According to Laura Bier and Mervat Hatem, the state launched campaigns that focused on women’s reproduction and birth control, as well as their education and inclusion in the work force. These programs were aimed at the middle class, however, the birth control campaign focused on rural women largely.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon. *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 8.

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that society had to them.

The clash between the regime's promotion of women's education and participation in the economic arena and the reality of such changes in society was apparent in Egyptian popular films of the 1950s and 60s. For example, *My Wife, The Director General/ Maraty Modeer 'Aam* (1966) directed by Fatin Abdel Wahab depicts a strong and independent woman who becomes the director general at her husband's governmental office but is obligated to hide her marriage since it is uncommon for married couples to work together or to supervise one another. The wife's superiority and demanding nature in the office creates many problems at home since her husband feels inferior to her based on societal norms regarding gender roles. He feels inferior to her since he is not used to interacting with powerful women in public nor is he used to his wife taking on new responsibilities that men traditionally took on. Prior to the reformist rhetoric that the Nasserist state adopted towards women, women were restricted to the home and housework, whereas men were expected to be the sole breadwinners of the household. During the 1950s and 60s however, women attempted to find a balance between their new roles outside the home and their old roles inside the home. The wife in the film continues to carry on her "natural" wifely duties at home and caters to her husband. For example, she wears lingerie to bed, sews her husband's clothes and makes dinner every night. Despite the woman's efforts to maintain a balance between her wifely duties and her supervisory role in the office, the couple's relationship struggles.

Abdel Wahab intended to highlight women's struggles in a time of legal changes and social pressures. He showcases that despite the multiple attempts by the state to pass decrees that increased women's participation in public, tradition and societal norms prevented women from altering the roles. Hence, in the end, the wife sacrifices her position at the office and

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transferred to another office when her marriage to her inferior is exposed among their co-workers. *My Wife The Director General* captures women's participation in the economic arena (including the bureaucracy) under the new regime, which is an example of how state policies directly influenced women's lives. This film and others like it were revolutionary and new to Egyptian cinema since films of the 1930s and 40s highlighted different roles that women had in Egyptian society. However, this film's message is that women must make sacrifices in public in order to have successful marriages, which highlights the flaws of the state's policies regarding women. Therefore, it is important to examine how state policies toward women were carried out in films that aimed to showcase women's struggles in Egyptian society during a time when top-down policies were not easily applied to society. This can be done through an analysis of "state feminism" in Egypt.

### ***State Feminism In Egypt (1954-1970)***

State feminism emerged because of middle class pressures placed on Nasser after his appointment as president in 1954; it surfaced after the death of Egyptian nationalism, which dominated Egyptian politics from the early 1900s to the 1940s.<sup>49</sup> The concept of state feminism was inspired by the Scandinavian welfare states.<sup>50</sup> However, state feminism in Egypt should not be categorized as merely "a formal state commitment to women's rights."<sup>51</sup> Rather, Egyptian state feminism was a constellation of normalizing discourses, practices, legal measures and state building programs inspired by socialism and included state planned economic development, a

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<sup>49</sup> Yvonne Haddad. "Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Arab Thought" in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Haddad and Findly. Albany: State University of New York Press (1985), 277.

<sup>50</sup> Mervat Hatem. "The Demise of Egyptian State Feminism and the Politics of Transition (1980-1991), working paper. Los Angeles: University of California Press (1991), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Mervat Hatem. "Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism," *The International Journal of the Middle East* 24, no. 2. (1992), 231.

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socialist ideology, and an expanding system of social services.<sup>52</sup> For example, it adopted pre-existing programs and it introduced important changes in the reproductive and productive roles of women as part of the state.<sup>53</sup> These changes showcased the state's implementation of normalizing discourses (women's reproduction as a national issues) and practices while using state building programs that predated the Nasser regime in order to legitimize the state's actions. The state used women's demands for liberation as an excuse to launch its state feminist policies.

“State feminism” developed as a “direct response to continued intense lobbying by numerous feminist organization and figures of the new state.”<sup>54</sup> Under the banner of state feminism, women were granted suffrage in 1956 and the state expanded social services like education, health care and employment to women in return for their contribution to nationalist development.<sup>55</sup> The political, economic and social accomplishments of the regime incorporated women into the public sphere as producers of the state and redefined feminism in Egypt. The state used pre-existing programs to implement its agenda and transform women's roles and the spatial meanings of these programs.

The state integrated pre-existing programs such as women's health care into state feminism, which transformed the spatial meanings of both, places and services.<sup>56</sup> It expanded their reach, exposing more women to them, particularly, in Upper Egypt. In other words, these programs had new spatial meanings and manifestations due to their association with the state. These spaces were co-opted by the government, which became apparent through the rhetoric used by its employees to control women's bodies and educate them about nuclear families. In

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<sup>52</sup> Laura Bier. “Modernity and the other woman: Depictions of Foreign Women in the Egyptian Women's press, 1952- 1967” in *Gender and History* (2004), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Hatem. “Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism”, 231.

<sup>54</sup> Hatem, “Privatization and the Demise of State Feminism in Egypt,” 41.

<sup>55</sup> Botman, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Mervat Hatem and Laura Bier make this argument throughout their literature.

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addition to changing the roles of women in the realm of reproduction and labor, state feminism attempted to remove “the structural basis of gender inequality by making reproduction a public, not a private concern,”<sup>57</sup> and by increasing the employment of women in the state sector. The state placed motherhood and women’s bodies at the center of state politics and transformed women’s lives in the name of progress, making women’s private issues public issues. Greater access to social services such as health care allowed this radical encroachment on women’s private issues by the state and the public to take place. Taking control of women’s health signified the state’s complete control over women under state feminism.

Mervat Hatem, the pioneering scholar on Egyptian state feminism claims that the state expanded its health care institutions and placed birth control at the center of women’s health. The state stripped away some of women’s traditional “feminine” roles by making women’s bodies and reproduction public and by encouraging them to enter the labor force. The state made reproduction a state matter, which took away motherhood from women and placed it into the hands of policy-makers, who were men. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were committed to altering the status of Egyptian women in order to improve the lives of the nation’s sons. Their logic was that if women were more educated (and therefore similar to men), they would be more qualified to raise progressive sons who were receptive to modernity.<sup>58</sup> Hatem also argues that the regime implemented state feminism in order to strengthen itself. Hatem’s analysis of state feminism as part of the regime’s experiment in a “controlled liberalization” project exposes the ways in which the state used the rhetoric of women’s rights to expand its social control over

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<sup>57</sup> Hatem, “Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism,” 231.

<sup>58</sup> Progressive is used to describe Egyptians’ interpretation of modernity during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An Egyptian man was considered modern among his colleagues if he was an educated nationalist. See Lisa Pollard’s *Nurturing The Nation* and Beth Baron’s *Egypt As a Woman* for more on the modernity debate.

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Egyptian citizens and deny the legitimacy of political participation by Islamist and leftist groups.<sup>59</sup>

Nasser's commitment to women's welfare aimed to strengthen the state, as an authoritarian government, by incorporating marginalized groups into the state.<sup>60</sup> In order to control political activism, the Nasser regime attempted to address women's issues directly, thus marginalizing feminist groups. Al-Ali argues For example, that Nasser "prohibited all forms of independent political activism- including feminist organizations" in order to strengthen his regime.<sup>61</sup> This argument is congruent with Hatem's analysis of state feminism as a part of the regime's experiment in "controlled liberalization" that denied the legitimacy of all leftist and Islamist voices. The state's silencing of feminist voices while implementing initiatives regarding women's issues further highlights the active role of the state and its motives to include women in the nation-building process.

The state transformed the meaning of feminism in Egypt, which was an indication of its active role and its power. Through state feminism, the state created a homogenous definition for "feminism" and feminist activity in Egypt. Labeling state reform programs as "feminist" limited what "feminism" constituted and who was allowed to practice it. The state implemented programs for political and social reforms such as land redistribution, the nationalization of foreign companies and the creation of a socialist state.<sup>62</sup> These reforms had spatial manifestations that affected women's lives; land redistribution in rural areas allowed more opportunities for work on the farm, new employment opportunities were made available for

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<sup>59</sup> Hatem, Mervat. "Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist views really differ?" in *The Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (1994), 661.

<sup>60</sup> Nadji Al-Ali. *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (2000), 68.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Laura Bier. "From Mothers of the Nation to Daughters of the State: Gender and Politics of inclusion in Egypt: 1922-1967," Doctoral Dissertation (2006), 6.

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women after the nationalization of foreign companies and, finally, the creation of the socialist state allowed women, a new public space which provided labor protection laws and daycare facilities.

The state used legal measures under the banner of state feminism in order to transform Egyptian citizens. In 1956, women were granted political rights of citizenship that included the right to vote and the right to run for public office, expanding their presence in the public sphere. By granting them these rights, the state gained control over women as political subjects. In order to reflect the Egyptian socialist state<sup>63</sup>, the state aimed to mobilize previously marginalized groups such as women, peasants and workers through the transformation of pre-revolutionary families.<sup>64</sup> The transformation of the family also had spatial repercussions; it altered private spaces such as homes by making them more modern and nuclear. All of these reforms mobilized previously excluded groups in order to increase mass support for the Nasser regime. The drastic changes implemented through rhetoric, legal measures and programs by the state during the 1950s toward women's equality boosted the regime's power and legitimacy. The state however, did not stop there; it created laws that confirmed its (female) citizens' identities as socialists and producers of the state.

While the state used state feminist programs to transform women's gendered identities, it also used state feminism to transform women's socialist identities as producers of the state.

There were many rules of law in the 1956 post-revolutionary constitution that included women

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<sup>63</sup> Egyptian socialism is a system that allowed the state to advance its industrialization in efforts to match the West's economic and technological advancements. Egyptian socialism included an active state sector, a socialist ideology and an expanding system of social services. See Mervat Hatem's "The Demise of Egyptian State Feminism and the Politics of Transition" for more on Egyptian socialism.

<sup>64</sup> Mervat Hatem. "Modernization, the state and the family in Middle East Women's Studies," in *A Social History of Women and Gender in The Modern Middle East*, ed. Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker. Oxford: Westview Press (1999), 77.

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as part of state sponsored socialist legal reforms. Rule number 31 declared all Egyptians equal in the eyes of the law and granted citizenship to women.<sup>65</sup> Rule number 53 enabled the state to “commit itself to fair treatment of all employees” in regards to the number of hours worked, national wages and insurance and benefits.<sup>66</sup> Rule number 19 promised to facilitate women’s efforts to reconcile their public work with family obligations; this rule was aimed at mobilizing women towards integration in the economic global markets.<sup>67</sup> Rule 19 thus validates Al-Ali’s and Hatem’s claim that women’s roles were redesigned in order to make them (women) productive and reproductive citizens of the state. They were incorporated into the work force and had their roles as mothers reshaped through the implementation of birth control. Rule number 8, which later became integrated into rule number 14 of 1964, promised that the state would provide equal opportunities for all Egyptians.<sup>68</sup> Rule number 14 guaranteed jobs in the state sector for all holders of intermediate school diplomas and college degrees.<sup>69</sup> The creation of these rules further confirms that women’s gender roles and expectations changed during the Nasser era, which allowed them greater access to public spaces.

These new roles created for women by the state altered both women’s gender roles and spaces they had access to. Prior to Huda Sha’rawi’s removal of the veil and the creation of the Egyptian Feminist Union, most women were restricted to private spaces. In fact, Huda Sha’rawi’s removal of the veil at the train station marked the beginning of women’s provocative inclusion in the public sphere. Men alone, along with a few women accessed public spaces such as coffee houses, bureaucratic offices, streets, schools, hospitals, etc. Middle class employment

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> These rules were not widely enforced by all employers since their costs were too high; employers often refused to hire over one hundred women in order to avoid having to set up daycare for their employees.

<sup>69</sup> Bier, “From Mothers of the Nation to Daughters of the State,” 6.

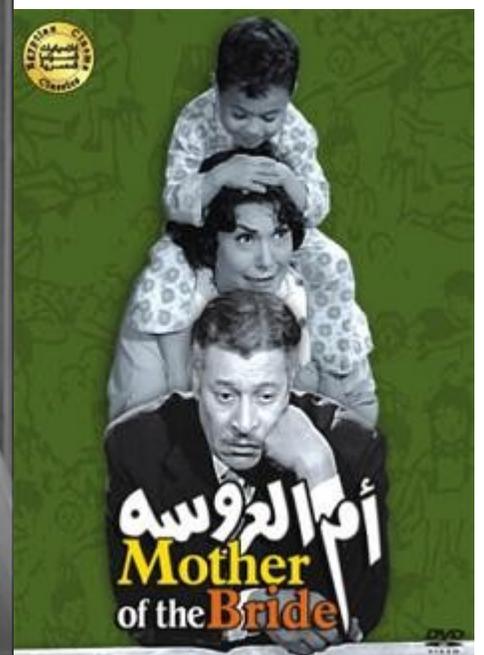
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and education in these spaces altered the meaning of public spaces and women's access to men's spaces. The transformation of public space changed gender roles and expectations under the banner of state feminism in Egypt. For the first time, almost all Egyptian women's roles were changing as liberated socialist citizens, which led filmmakers to make films that reflected these changes. Themes of women's changing roles in society and their access to new spaces became central to Egyptian films during the 1950s and 60s.

***Mother of The Bride/ Umm Al 'Arusah (1963): The Negative Depiction Of Mothers In Post-Revolutionary Films***



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Most Egyptian films of the era such as *Mother of the Bride/ Umm Al 'Arusah* (1963) and *The Empty Pillow* (1957) accurately portrayed state feminist policies in Egypt. The Nasser regime marketed these policies as the desire of the state to provide women with new freedoms, also known as negative freedom.<sup>70</sup> These freedoms are considered negative since a powerful agent granted them to women, rather than women obtaining them on their own. The films reflected the new policies' tensions with traditional gender roles in Egypt. A woman was now allowed to receive an education, but her first and most important duty was to be a housewife to an Egyptian man and a daughter of the state. This contradiction is crucial to understanding the transformation of women's roles in Egyptian society during the Nasser era. Interestingly enough, mothers (as representations of the pre-revolutionary thought) were attacked in new films such as *Mother of The Bride/ Umm Al 'Arusah* (1963).

Mothers became a key group that was marginalized for the first time since the nationalist movement. Women's positions and status in Egypt were directly tied to motherhood through raising young nationalist men of the state during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women's inclusion in the state's nationalist movement was directly tied to their status as mothers.<sup>71</sup> Laura Bier argues that women's status as mothers of the state transformed into daughters of the state and this was reflected in Egyptian film. *Mother of The Bride/ Umm Al 'Arusah* (1963) reflected both society's and the state's attitudes toward mothers as selfish, greedy, and capitalist women who caused their families grief.

*Mother of The Bride/ Umm Al 'Arusah* (1963) portrays the mother of the bride played by Tahiyya Carioca as a selfish, greedy, capitalist woman living beyond her means. The film

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<sup>70</sup>Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press (2005), 11.

<sup>71</sup>Lisa Pollard. *Nurturing The Nation The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2005).

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depicts an ugly and vicious image of the mother, while it portrays the father as a hardworking, naïve state employee who is constantly under pressure to please his ungrateful wife and eight children. This film depicts the two daughters as progressive daughters of the state who are excellent students and care takers; meanwhile, it depicts their mother as the ill of society. The mother in *Mother of The Bride* ultimately causes her husband to steal money from his employer (the state) because of her unapologetic greediness and desire to appear rich while preparing her oldest daughter for marriage. The mother symbolizes the pre-revolutionary bourgeois attitudes associated with the monarchy, and ultimately leads to the demise of her family.<sup>72</sup> This is crucial to understanding the state's efforts to transform women's roles from mothers to daughters through film and the depiction of both class and gender tensions.

The film industry repeatedly depicted older women as backward and uncivilized, whereas it portrayed young men and women as pioneering sons and daughters of a new socialist state. This depiction of women reiterates Bier's thesis about women's dependency on the state, since the state used state feminist discourses and policies as guidance for young, progressive and modern citizens. The negative depiction of mothers is the ultimate example of the intersection of class, gender and nationalism in Egyptian film of the Nasser era. This film is nationalist in that it marginalizes mothers in order to promote its policies to a younger group. It portrays class tensions by portraying older women as greedy, unrealistically capitalist women in order to reiterate the women's resistance to the socialist state. Finally, the film portrays gender tensions by examining the relationship between the father and the mother as well as the young women's relationships with their love interests. The following film, *A Film For Men Only* (1964) examines gender relations between men and women as well as nationalism in Egyptian films of the era.

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<sup>72</sup>Shafik, 100.

***A Film For Men Only // film lel rejal faqat (1964): Women's Discrimination In The Work Force***



This scene from *film lel rejal faqat* (1964) captures Salwa's conflict between pursuing a professional career in a male dominated field and romance with her co-worker.

<sup>73</sup> <http://i143.photobucket.com/albums/r148/hamid1975/snapshot20091018013822.jpg>

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In an effort to reflect some women's attitudes toward gender reform under the Nasser regime *A Film For Men Only* // *film lel rejal faqat* (1964) depicts gender-based discrimination toward women in the Sciences. The film opens with two young women in their mid-twenties named Salwa and Elham working in a Science lab analyzing petroleum samples. When an on site job opportunity presents itself, the young women apply to work in the desert where the oil fields are as on site lab technicians. To their disappointment, their male supervisor who is in charge of making such decisions claims that a woman can work, but only in specific environments. He goes on to claim that the desert designed for men to work it and makes distinctions between gendered positions.

This film reflects the typical mindset of employers during a time of gender reform and women's response in a new era. Despite the two women's excellent qualification, the supervisor hires two geologists for the job in the desert. Fortunately for the two aspiring women lab technicians, the geologists express their concern over working in the desert and claim that they wish to remain in Cairo instead. One of the two women gets the idea to impersonate the geologists in order to fulfill her dream by working as a "man" in the desert. The woman's inspiration reflects women's attitudes during a time of reform and their resistance to traditional "women's work". The women ask for a month-long vacation in order to work in the desert behind their supervisor's back under the names "Abu 'Ali" and "Abu Darsh." Despite their plan, the women encounter many hardships as men working in the desert.

The women soon realize that it is difficult to embody masculinity and act as men due to physical challenges. Upon arrival, the two girls (disguised as men) are greeted by many single men and are welcomed into the community. They begin to face obstacles when they are forced to sleep in the same room with other men since they must sleep in their male clothing. The

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filmmaker goes on to portray how difficult it is for a woman to live in the desert and perform masculine tasks. The women go out to the field for a day and complain about their feet and body aches and later proclaims, “this job is for men.” The struggles that they face as men trapped in women’s bodies lead to their embrace of femininity.

The filmmaker sends the message that women cannot embody masculine characteristics and remain happy or have successful romantic relationships. After just a few days, one of the two women lets her hair down and hugs her dress and says “I miss you” to her dress while she is alone in her room. She explains to her friend that it was necessary to perform these feminine acts since she was beginning to truly lose herself and feel like a man. The actions of this woman symbolize women’s rejections of the Nasser reforms toward gender equality, while her friend’s firm determination to succeed as a man symbolizes other women’s acceptance and embracement of such reforms. Meanwhile, Salwa, the woman determined to act feminine is decides to blow her cover since she is now falling in love with her male co-worker. Elham. The resistant woman refuses even though she has fallen in love with another co-worker as well. This aspect of the film is very intriguing since the message here is that love is incompatible with women’s new roles in society as equals. This is further confirmed when the two women quickly change their images into women when their male co-workers travel to Suez to find girls. This aspect of the film confirms that women’s first priority is love and not a professional life.

The women follow their loved ones to Suez in hopes of further developing their relationships with them as women. When the two co-workers see how beautiful the two women are, they quickly fall in love. Their interest was confirmed by the women’s beauty alone before they had a chance to speak to one another. The two couples spend three days together in Suez and quickly decide to get married. Unfortunately, the women had to return to work and put on

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their masculine masks once again after this honeymoon period.

Upon returning to work, the women become perplexed and begin to destroy their cover as men. First, the women exposed their identities to a Bedouin jealous fiancé since he was determined to kill Abu 'Ali for attracting his fiancée. Second, the women's lovers begin to figure out their true identities based on their actions and the similarities between their facial features and the women in Suez. Finally, the field supervisor exposes their identity and is determined to turn them in. He expresses his confusion as to why these women would take on men's roles and affirms that women fall in love and that they become distracted.

The initial goal of the women's presence in the desert was to discover oil. After their supervisor claims that they fell in love and did not achieve their goals, they were determined to discover oil in order to prove their worth and legitimacy. The supervisor forgives the women once they find black gold in the ground. The discovery of oil proves that their efforts were not in vein and that they managed to fulfill their national duty by taking on men's roles. The oil symbolizes Egypt's progress and prosperity. The message that the filmmaker presented was that it was acceptable for women to take on men's roles in hopes of furthering the nationalist cause. The filmmaker, however, does not ignore the complexities of new gender roles and expectations.

***A Diary of a Student/ Mozekarat Talebah, (1962): The Struggle Over Honor During The 1950s and 60s***



Nadia, the romantic student is lying in bed and thinking about the man of her dreams.

*A Diary of a Student/ Mozekarat Talebah, (1962)* showcases the problems that arise from women's new status and greater access to the public sphere. In summary, the film revolves around the lives of five young students- two males and three females, but focuses on the body of one female. Nadia, the main character, played by actress Nadia Lutfy, has always dreamed about

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the day the love of her life would take her away in his glamorous car. Nadia is a high school student at a private all girls school. She forms a relationship with a rich man in his twenties or thirties, while she is in her teens and gradually goes to his apartment where he strips away her honor by taking away her virginity. The remainder of the film focuses on the shame that the victim/sinner has brought upon her family. This film began as an innocent film that depicted young men and women and their experiences and interactions in the new era post gender segregation in order to promote Egypt's progress and confirm its commitment to modernity; however, by the end of the film Nadia's body and the shame that she has committed become the main focus of the filmmaker. The discourse pertaining to the control of women's bodies through the vehicle of honor and shame resurfaces once again, as it has done in older films. This film serves as a great example of gender relations during the 1950s and 60s and the struggle over gender norms and women's rights.

The film begins with the introduction of two male secondary school students who are infatuated with two girls at the New Cairo Secondary School. The introduction of men first in this film is not unique since many other films of the period open with young male students. The introduction of adolescent boys first in films that are meant to be about women confirms that these films were meant to depict the lives of young men more than the lives of young women. Furthermore, despite the fact that these films often focus on an issue related to the woman (in this case the loss of virginity), the filmmakers appear to be more interested in how these dilemmas affect the men in these women's lives. The boys encountered two girls they had feelings for on a daily basis when they were going to school and coming back on the metro.

The filmmaker chose to film the metro and the metro station in order to showcase Egypt's technological advancement. The metro portrayed progress and modernity in Egypt under the

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Nasser regime. They shared the same metro compartment and hardly talked, but often sat next to each other. Sharing the same metro compartment is significant since it further reiterates Egypt's progress and desegregation of the sexes. One of the young men had outgoing and daring characteristics, yet he was seen as a failing student with a beautiful sister, harsh rich father, and caring mother. The filmmaker depicted this young man as a playful, girl chasing boy who neglected his studies. This character did not appeal to the viewers, which satisfied the filmmaker since Egyptian filmmakers did not wish to shed light on useless members of society. This corresponded with the state's rhetoric and messages toward the younger generation since the state urged the youth to become productive members of society and serve their country through the education that they receive. The other male student was dedicated to school and his parents, especially his father were always hard on him; his father insulted him and called him stupid when he woke up late for school one day. It is apparent in the film that the dedicated student was not financially well off. There is often a correlation between poverty and dedication in films during the Nasser era, which enhances the changes in class focus during this period.<sup>74</sup> This clearly reflects the state's attitude toward poor serious and dedicated young men much like Nasser and other officers who entered the military after 1936 when it began to include soldiers from the non-elites. It also focuses on the new middle class and their problems.

One day while the girls were waiting for the metro, they saw two attractive older men driving around in a convertible car. This attraction is automatically based on class since the girls come from a middle class and are forced to ride the metro daily. According to Joel Gordon, "Rich boys have cars, rich girls have drivers; poor boys take public transportation and ride bikes."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> For more examples, see many of Abd El Halim's films including *Girls of Summer* and *The Empty Pillow*.

<sup>75</sup> Gordon. *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 124.

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Therefore, the appearance of the convertible car in the film symbolized the high social and economic status of the man who was riding it. The girls are attracted to the convertible car, which symbolizes the older men's class and social status. The male student's sister, who was the blond of the group was attracted and chased by the main older rich man, who is also the villain. The schoolboys noticed that the older men were following "their" girls and decided to scare them off when they arrived in the neighborhood. However, the main villain manipulated the younger boys by befriending them and took them out in his convertible car in order to gain access to the sister. He introduced them to staying up late, drinking, women, dancing and smoking. His ultimate plan was to get revenge on them by sleeping with the sister. In other words, he would bring shame to their family by taking the sister's virginity before marriage. The boys continued to associate with the older villains and eventually the sister began to join them at outings, including a football match. The two girls whom the young boys were interested in got into a car with a stranger and drove off after the football match. This left the dedicated student devastated and led to many problems. This is an important marker of women's movement in public and gender relations during the 1950s and 60s. It was very new for young women to attend football matches unsupervised, which confirms that state policies under state feminism truly altered some aspects of women's lives during the Nasser years.

Despite new gender relations and women's increased movement in the public sphere, the young boys were angered by their lovers' decision to drive away from the football match with a stranger. Afterwards, the main villain convinced the high school boys that driving by their crushes with other girls on their arms was the best way to get revenge. These tactics were meant to develop jealousy, but instead drove their lovers away completely. As a reaction to the rejection of their lovers, the boys partied and stayed out late which ultimately led to their

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expulsion. Meanwhile, the main villain took advantage of the sister and by manipulating her to have sexual relations with him after he convinced her that they were engaged.

It is important to note that despite the fact that women were granted more freedom during the Nasser era, the concepts of marriage and sexual relations remained intertwined, and that is how the villain was able to reassure the girl that having sexual relations would eventually lead to marriage since he claimed that they were engaged in the first place. The brother walked in on the couple after the girl's virginity was taken by the villain and in response, the brother chased them both. The young girl realized her mistake immediately after she lost her virginity to her "fiancé" and begged him to ask for her hand in marriage. The "fiancé" laughed and informed her that his family would not accept an easy woman who is no longer a virgin as his bride. This was a crucial moment in the film since there is a mentality in Egypt that women who are no longer pure (non-virgins) are not suitable wives. They are seen as unfit for marriage since they could not hold on to their virginity and remain pure. This image of impure women was often associated with inadequacy as wives and mothers since society assumed that women who were not virgins when they met their husbands would easily commit adultery and ignore their duties as mothers and wives. There is a double standard between men and women and sexual experience. Men in Egyptian society are often celebrated among their peers for their sexual experiences outside of marriage, while women are often ashamed and marginalized by society after a sexual experience outside of marriage. Families often marginalized and disowned women after their non-marital sexual relationships since women's honor was considered to be the family's honor, and once that was stripped away, the family no longer wished to be associated with an outcast of society who brought them shame and misery. More importantly, the scenario described above became more common in films about the manipulation of women during films in the 1970s, 80s

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and 90s, where the woman was often blamed for her promiscuity. The young girl in the film refused to return home due to the societal pressures explained above and the loss of her family honor. She sought shelter with a poor family that lived in the building where her honor was taken away after she begged her lover to marry her. She knew that her body did not belong to her and that she could not return to her family after she had shamed them. She eventually married a man who took her in with all of her shame. The woman was forced to settle for an older man who was less handsome and not financially well off after her honor was taken away. This is a common scenario in Egyptian film and society since women's value decreases as they lose their most valued possession, their virginity. The young girl was forced to lower her standards despite her beauty since she was no longer whole or suitable for marriage to many men. This solution however was only temporary to such a great dishonor/ shame.

The following chain of events in the film portrays gender relations between men and women during 1960s film. The following events confirm the importance of the surveillance of a women's body and protection of family honor. Surveillance of a woman's body is an act that reinforces gender inequality since men use their status in society to control women's bodies and their actions. Both the state and the family and more specifically, the male figures in the family attempt to control women's bodies. After the brother found out that his sister had lost her virginity to his older friend, he went to look for the main villain after the family was shamed and found him at a night club. This is an example of how the male heir of the family exercised his right to control his sister's body and the family honor. The villain was frustrated at the nightclub since he did not have any money left. He asked the waiter to bring him a drink and when the waiter refused, the villain threatened him with a gun and ended up accidentally killing someone. The brother found the villain inside the club after the violence took place. The brother too had a

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gun that he intended to use for revenge and accidentally ended up killing his sister's new husband at the club and chased after the villain. In the end, both men went to jail for "planned robbery" at the club and the dedicated student also went to jail since he refused to tell the real reason behind his friend's violent behavior, which was family shame. Ironically, the man who invited the two girls to get into the car and caused this snowball effect turned out to be the girl's brother in the end, which meant all of the their lovers' teasing and jealousy attempts were in vain. All four men (the two high schoolers and the older villain and his friend) went to jail. Meanwhile, the sister went insane.

As we can see the fates of all those involved in the dishonoring of the girl, and by extension her family either ended up in prison, insane or ashamed for the rest of their lives. The fate of these characters suggests that new gender relations during the Nasser years were dangerous to society since they broke many traditional rules regarding women's freedom. The female student was given the freedom to attend school and receive an education, as a citizen of the Egyptian state. Instead, she pursued a relationship with an older man who distracted her from her education and stripped her away from her honor. This film specifically focused on issues regarding gender relations and slightly touched on class tensions. My analysis of the next film, *The Empty Pillow* will further dissect class tensions and gender relations in Egyptian films of the late 1950s.

***The Empty Pillow / Al wasada Al Khalya (1957): The Struggles Young Lovers Faced During  
The 1950s and 1960s***



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Abd El Halim Hafez, the star of *The Empty Pillow* was depicted as the son of the Egyptian revolution through his nationalist, and common folk cinematic roles. Abd El Halim Hafez's films of the 1950s and 60s tackle common issues that young couples face in the post-revolutionary, socialist Egyptian society. His films display the integration of women in universities, the work force and other public spaces and the tensions between young men and women that occurred. The young talented actor and singer Abd al-Halim Hafez was depicted as the "son of the Egyptian Revolution." He represented a "young modern generation grasping for a different life under a new revolutionary leadership."<sup>76</sup> Abd al-Halim's films all represent heterosexual young love in a new Egyptian society. These films mainly spoke to young, middle-class women and men since they were the main beneficiaries of state feminism. Abd al-Halim and his co-stars portray young Egyptians with common problems representing class and gender role conflicts in these popular films. Abd al-Halim along with Suad Hosni embody the new Egypt as her nationalist son and daughter. These films portray gender relations, nationalism and class tensions. *The Empty Pillow* (1957) specifically focuses on class tensions during the late 1950s and gender relations between young men and women.

Salah Abu Seif, the Filmmaker of *The Empty Pillow/ Al Wasada Al Khalya* (1957) expresses the frustration of the common middle class Egyptian through the film's depiction of love, class tensions and gender relations. Abu Seif introduces the viewer to three poor and literally starving young men who attend a food convention run by women in the hope of receiving free food. The portrayal of women as workers at a food convention reflects women's new integration into the economy. The three young women who serve the food immediately adopt a nurturing role by giving their lunches to the three young men. This scene in the film reiterates women's social responsibility to society and portrays women as self-less and caring.

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<sup>76</sup>Shafik,100.

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We see women challenging traditional concepts of gender segregation by sitting with the young men outside in the park during their lunch break; meanwhile, we witness the main heroine, Samiha, admitting to Abd El Halim's character, Salah, that this was the first time that she spent time alone with a man in public. Here we see through the dialogue that women were not previously allowed to mingle with the opposite sex in public, let alone be in public without male supervision. Samiha and Salah use the phone as a tool of modernity and a symbol of progress in order to nurture their relationship. The symbolism in the telephone represents the hardships that young Egyptian couples must face despite their new gender roles and freedoms since it allows them to be together freely. Regardless of the success of their telephone dates, class tensions come between the two lovers when a well-off doctor asks for Samiha's hand in marriage. The appearance of the potential groom who is a doctor highlights common class issues that young Egyptians faced when they are in love. Women often felt financially trapped and submitted to love-less marriages during this era.

Love-less marriages based on financial incentives are common in Egyptian films because they capture young couples' frustration and hardship in terms of class. When Salah discovers that Samiha was proposed to by a well-off doctor, he suggests that they run away together in order to escape her fatal future. In response, Samiha suggests that Salah asks for her hand in marriage. Salah refuses to speak to her father since Salah is only a student, which reflects the attitude of young working class men in Egypt during the 1950s and 60s. Salah's friend advises him to rape Samiha in order to force her into marrying him. He claims that Salah would be "raping/ reclaiming what is his". Salah is terrified to lose Samiha to another man and follows his friend's advice by attempting to rape her in order to re-claim what is his. This is very problematic since it depicts women as objects of men once again. The concept of rape reinforces

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power relations between the two sexes and confirms men's socialization to control women. In response, Samiha broke off her relationship to Salah and married the doctor since Salah was losing his mind.

Samiha's marriage to a well-off doctor instead of Salah symbolizes the problems facing young heterosexual couples in Egypt during this era as well as class tensions through the depiction of women's desire for financial security. The marriage shocks the couple and the audience since it is well known that Salah is a poor college student who could not compete with a doctor's prestige or financial stability. This issue appears repeatedly in the films of this era. Furthermore, this film is truly about Salah's experiences; he represents the poor, college student who is in search of young heterosexual love and is betrayed by Samiha when she favors a doctor over him. In the end, Samiha, the young progressive student, ends up choosing a well-off doctor instead of her true love and accompanies him for the rest of her life. This demonstrates a great contradiction between the state's rhetoric and policies toward women and real societal expectations for women. I argue that this film is not truly about women, but about young men's experiences. As evidence, we watch the filmmaker build up Salah financially in order to prove his worth. However, one can argue that Salah Abu Seif wished to depict the harsh realities that young couples face when they wish to start a life together, which highlights the film's realist aspects.

Abu Seif does not shy away from a melodramatic storyline by revitalizing Salah's hopes and dreams despite Salah's initial impotency caused by his financial instability and granting him a great wealth. After Samiha's marriage, Salah's life spirals out of control and becomes filled with alcohol, nightclubs and women. One day, after many nights of partying and drinking, Salah's liver malfunctions and he is rushed to surgery. Ironically, Samiha's new husband

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operates on Salah. This is a turning point for Salah since it is the root of his motivation to succeed in school and become financially well off. Here the Abu Seif once again sends the message to the sons and daughters of the state: anything is possible with the appropriate amount of dedication, which showcases his attraction to melodrama. Although Abu Seif portrays Salah's motivation as positive, it is in fact quite negative. The only reason Salah succeeds is because of his undying spite for Samiha and her new husband. He becomes a supervisor, which drives his mother to provide him with pictures of many brides because of his status, and he chooses his supervisor's daughter. The attainability of this prize (a beautiful and rich woman) proves his success to the world and to himself, which confirms Abu Seif's dedication to melodrama once again. However, the following chain of events highlights Abu Seif's fondness of realism.

Despite his attainability of a beautiful wife, Salah remains unsatisfied since he did not possess Samiha. Salah rejects the idea of sharing the same bedroom with his new wife (Doria). He claims that he saw in a magazine that women and men should sleep separately after marriage for two years first in order to nurture their relationship and she agrees to have separate rooms. Salah continues to wear his engagement ring with Samiha even after his wedding to Doria, which symbolizes his inability to let go of a lost treasure (Samiha). One day Salah leaves both rings at home and his wife finds them. His wife confesses that she knows everything about his love for Samiha and despite that, she was happy. The film ends with Salah's surrender to his wife after Samiha continually rejected him despite his success. The message of the film is for young men to ignore the unrealistic expectations of women and to view women as distractions to young men's success. This film further proves that class tensions and gender relations dominated Egyptian film during the 1950s and 60s. These films often portrayed young women in a negative way and highlighted the hardships of men. Films of the era did not do as much damage to the

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image of young women as they did for older women. The following film, *Mother of The Bride*

(1963) depicts mothers as greedy in a time of socialist reform. This sheds light on society's

attitudes toward older women through the lens of gender relations and class tensions.

## **Conclusion**

We are exposed to state policies regarding women; the struggles women faced when laws are not effective or when they clash with Egyptian social norms through the examination of the four films discussed in this thesis. It is unclear whether the state directly funded the films in question, however, the state invested in training young Egyptian filmmakers at its institutes. Despite state influenced training, the filmmakers whose films I examined here such as Salah Abu Seif, Mahmud Zulfikar, 'Atef Salem and Ahmed Deya'a El Din highlighted criticisms of the state's policies towards women. They directed many films that were inspired by realism, yet marketed in a commercial manner. These films entered international film festivals such as the Berlin International Film Festival and others.

The success of these films suggests that these were widely watched and resonated with the audience. I argued throughout this thesis that the audience related to "melodramatic-realist" films since they reflected their lives. It is impossible to know to what extent their lives were portrayed in these films; yet, I argue that since these films had critiques of state policies, they must have reflected at least some of the attitudes of the masses.

Egyptian melodramatic- realist films of the 1950s and 60s proved that the state was never

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able to establish a real image of the “New Woman.” The films examined here portray young, progressive, successful, driven, and beautiful women who wished to partake in programs that the state offered to women under “state feminism.” For example, Samiha enrolled in culinary school in *The Empty Pillow*, while Nadia in *Memoirs of A Student* and Ilham in *Mother of The Bride* took advantage of education that was only accessible to women after the state made it so. Additionally, Ilham and Salwa enrolled in university and majored in Science in *A Film For Men Only*, which was the ultimate sign of women’s success under “state feminism.” However, all five heroines faced problems either in the workplace or in their communities that showcased the incompatibility of “tradition” and “progress” in Egypt during that specific historical moment. I am not suggesting that Egypt was not “ready” for “progress”; rather, I am suggesting that foreign policies that are instituted from above on the population in a short period never completely succeed. Therefore, the Egyptian state under Nasser never witnessed the full emergence of the “New Woman.”

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